

# Battle for the Plateau

Nine hectares of green space in Brussels are due to be swept aside for social housing. **Peter Philp** talks to locals who want to save it

**T**omatoes, pumpkins, grapes, raspberries, basil, rosemary, rocket; Luigi Mammone – known as ‘Mister Luigi’ – has tended his vegetable plot for 36 years and it’s a garden of Eden, right in the middle of Uccle.

But maybe not for long. The commune wants to bulldoze Luigi’s vegetable garden as well as fields, forest and the rich ecology that has grown on the nine-hectare Avijl plateau. Used for vegetable plots for over 150 years, the plateau is a green sanctuary for residents of the Saint-Job neighbourhood. Uccle bought the land in the 1970s to build council houses, but that project and several others since have stalled because of local opposition. Now the council is at it again, and residents have dug in once more.

“An entire social life has developed around the plateau,” says André Dubois, head of the Protection of Plateau Avijl citizens’ group. “It’s the heart of the neighbourhood.” Dubois leads me through a maze of narrow paths, kept lovingly neat and trim by locals. There’s a couple of years’ waiting list to rent a 200- to 300-square-metre plot from the commune for less than €80 a year. Some are little gardens with swings and barbecues, others have sheep and chicken. Many, like Luigi’s, bulge with fruit and vegetables.

Dubois points out the horses in a field that a local farmer rents. “We used to have a couple of donkeys as well,” he says. “The kids loved playing with them. The field used to be cultivated out of necessity but now it’s more for leisure.”

The Brussels Environment Agency (IBGE/BIM) has praised the area as “ecologically interesting”, meaning that its plant and animal diversity is notable; it is home to some 160 bird species.

The commune’s plan is to build 200 low- and medium-income housing units across the plateau, up to four stories high.



PETER PHILP

**Saint-Job homegrown: Luigi Mammone’s vegetable garden faces the bulldozer**

The aim is to attract young people who can’t afford the expensive commune and to counter the ageing population. Uccle has one of the Region’s lowest proportions of affordable housing.

“Increasing the housing for low- and middle-income was recognised as a priority in 2000,” says Chantal de Laveye, alderman for urbanism. The current

urbanisation plan from 1980 allows for 300 units, a third more than what is on the table now. “The new plans reflect changes in technical, ecological and social attitudes.” She points out the emphasis on social diversity, urban integration, the environment and green space, and more vegetable patches, albeit smaller. “It was never a question

of chasing the gardeners away.”

The plans, now subject to approval by the Region, leaves three quarters of the land untouched and emphasises the need to preserve the area's character as much possible. However, Dubois points out the limited access for heavy machinery and the inevitable increase in traffic, particularly down the listed Montagne de Saint-Job road. “They'll destroy everything,” he says. De Laveleye, on the other hand, insists that by using wood and small machinery, the disruption would be minimal.

In a legal fudge, claims Dubois, the housing is not being classed as social housing but as social-like housing. By law, social housing must meet stringent criteria and in Uccle be built and managed by the non-profit Société Uccloise du Logement (SUL). By classing it as social-like housing, the commune can run it and also mix in medium-income housing, about half according to the current plan. The SUL does not have the means to take on the project.

Uccle's burgomaster and every one of the commune's eight aldermen are in favour of the new plans, with only 13 of the 38-strong council opposing it. Dubois' preservation group have their own alternative plans, which suggests 80 units on the outskirts of the plateau, replacing rundown areas, and filling in gaps between existing housing. “It's an expensive commune,” says Dubois. “It's hard for young people, we know that. But green space is important too.”

Alderman De Laveleye says the alternative plan isn't viable, mainly because 80 units aren't enough and the commune has few other properties and therefore options. “It's always popular to defend green spaces,” she says. “Fighting for good public housing is much more arduous.”

With local elections looming, the plateau could become a hot issue. “This is a chance to keep some greenery in the city,” says local Christian Democrat politician Stéphane de Lobkowicz (cdH).

Meanwhile, Mister Luigi, a healthy 66 (due to the vegetables, he says), stoically nurtures his prized tomatoes. With a heavy Italian accent and a broad smile, he shrugs at the commune's intentions and turns to his plants: “I don't know,” he says. “We'll just wait and see.” ■

**Open day with guided nature walks, art exhibitions, children's activities, food market and drinks on Sunday, September 24, 10.00 to 18.00, Plateau Avijl, Rue Montagne de Saint-Job (at the basketball court). See [www.avijl.org](http://www.avijl.org).**