



MONS



THE IDEAL CITY?

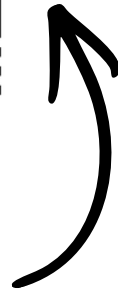
Ideas that shaped the city and their limits



A guided tour enriched with digital experiences
to help you discover the city differently



Scan this QR code to
get access to the audio
version of the tour.



Practical Information!

Starting Point

Place du Bastion Vert, Mons, Belgium
(50°26'50.6"N 3°57'01.4"E)



Distance & Duration

Around 2h30 for a route of 3,5 km on foot



Material Needed

At least one phone with internet connection per 2 people, headphones and good shoes.



Solutions

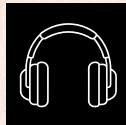
The solutions are either included in the digital activity or in the support material

Safety

Always pay attention to the traffic around you, especially when the sidewalks are narrow



Follow the indications in green all along the tour to find your way.



At each stop, choose if you prefer reading the text or listening to the audio.



You can also scan this QR code to see the map of the tour, but only if you really need it!



A New Look at the City



Have you ever wondered what your ideal city would look like? Not just aesthetically, but also how it would feel to live there. Would it be buzzing with energy, or calm and green? Who would it be built for? And who might it leave behind?

Cities are never accidents. Every street, building, public space is the result of a choice: political, economic, social... Someone decided, and someone else had to live with that decision.

Throughout history, thinkers, architects, leaders and citizens have all dreamed of the "perfect city." Some of those dreams gave us beautiful public squares and vibrant neighbourhoods. Others gave us... well, disasters. Because the line between utopia and dystopia is thinner than you would think.

Today, you are not here as a tourist. You are here as an **urban detective**. Over the next two and a half hours, **Mons will be your living laboratory**. At each stop, you will discover a different facet of what makes (or breaks) a city. Architecture, inclusion, power, nature, culture... Nothing is neutral here.

So as you walk, ask yourself:
What ideal is being shown to us?
Who is it for and what realities does it tend to hide?
Your ideal city starts here. Let's go!



Stop 1: Place du Bastion Vert



Which type of housing?

Before being a tourist destination, a collection of beautiful buildings, or an economic centre, a city is first a place where people live. Housing is then one of its essential foundations.

Now imagine standing here in the 1970s. Instead of homes, you would mostly see abandoned buildings. Garages and storage spaces had gradually replaced everyday life. Mons was facing a fundamental urban question: how to bring residents back, and make a neighbourhood livable again?

With architect Pierre Farla, the city proposed a concrete answer. The entire block was demolished and rebuilt, forming almost a “village within the city”. Rather than constructing large anonymous housing blocks, planners chose a different vision: one designed at a human scale.



Take a look around. What characteristics or features do you notice in this neighbourhood?



Brick was selected for its affordability and warmth, but also because it conveyed a sense of conviviality. Buildings were limited to ten metres in height, roofs followed a shared reverse-V form, housing units kept similar proportions, and passageways were created in each building.



In the middle, just behind these buildings, you can find the “Place de la Grande Pêcheurie”. It was created as a small urban agora, a square intended to encourage encounters, and everyday social life. This small square called “Bastion Vert” follows the same spirit. After more than twenty years of work, around 600 public housing units welcomed residents back to the neighbourhood.

Today, this project is rather unanimously considered as a success by the locals. It did more than simply create new affordable housing. It brought back a soul to the neighbourhood.

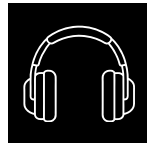
This “îlot de Messine” reminds us that the way we design housing shapes how people meet, move and feel at home. Today, cities and individuals continue to explore new housing models, from cooperative housing to eco-villages, all asking the same question: what kind of housing makes a place not only functional, but truly enjoyable to live in?



Our next stop is not far. Simply turn towards the big red wall with the stairs on the other side of the road.

Stop 2: The Hanging Garden

A green city



Before you do anything, close your eyes 20 seconds and share what you hear.

Did you hear cars? Voices? Or something else? A bird, maybe? Now look up. Do you see those trees spilling over the top of the red wall? That's a hidden garden up there, suspended above the street, above the noise, and the hustles and bustles of urban life. Just there, on the roof of a military building that's been standing since the early 1800s.

And do you smell it? The smell of bread coming from this old military bakery, built to feed soldiers? Functional, unadorned, the kind of building nobody was supposed to notice. It served the army for over a century and in May 1940, German troops swept into Belgium, the military left, and the ovens went cold. Marguerite, who has lived in this neighbourhood since 1971, heard the stories from her in-laws: during the war, people were already growing vegetables up there. Later, in 1998, the rooftop became a playground, but the equipment got too old and too unstable. So the gates just closed.



It might have stayed that way, hidden, forgotten. But Mons became European Capital of Culture in 2015 and on this occasion, it was decided that the “Hanging garden” would be rehabilitated. The place was open every day, and people were very enthusiastic about it. A genuine hit. Except it was only planned for one year...



But this “magical green corner” had become too important to the locals for it to disappear.

Hence citizens stepped up and took over the management of the garden themselves. That is why if you tried the door just now, you probably didn’t succeed in entering as the garden only opens on Sundays, run entirely by volunteers.

But no worries, we know someone who has the key.

If you find it, they will let you sneak peek inside.



Scan the QR code to look for the key with the flashlight. Once you find it, tap on it to get access to the garden (and wait a bit to let it load).



This hidden rooftop is a window into a much bigger challenge: making a dense, historic city genuinely green. There is no room to just plant a forest or make a gigantic parc in the centre. So Mons is trying several approaches.



Before going to the next stop, scan the QR code if you are curious to discover how Mons tries to get greener.



When facing the hanging garden, follow the road on your right. Walk until the end of the Nervienne square and turn left. You will see a yellow building on your right.



Stop 3: The Baths and Showers



A clean city

When did you last think about cleanliness? Stinky streets, litter on the floor, dog poops, we have all had these unpleasant encounters in some cities. And what about people's hygiene? Has it always been a private matter?

In front of you, a building from 1908 brings you an answer. It was once Mons' public baths and showers. A place where working-class families came to wash. Was this an act of generosity from the city? Well... not really. A calculation was made: a clean worker is a healthy and productive worker. And a clean neighbourhood protects the wealthy people around.

This was the age of hygienism, a movement that went through European cities at the end of the 19th century with one core belief: you can control society by controlling its cleanliness. Not just physical cleanliness, but also social and urban cleanliness. Mons even built a whole Provincial Institute of Hygiene and Bacteriology nearby. You can see it a bit further, on the other side of the boulevard (the other yellow building).





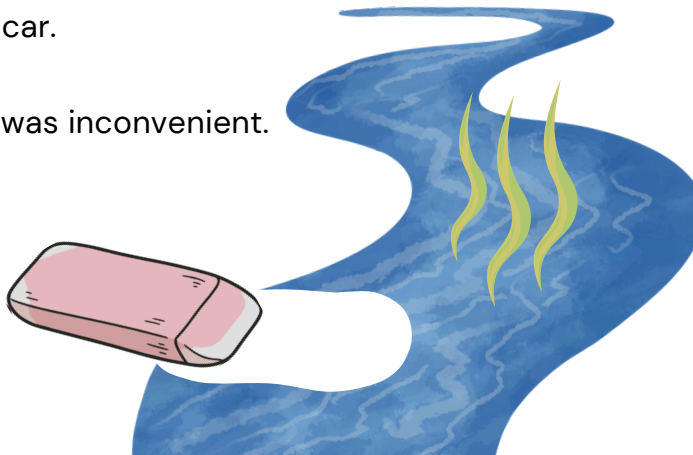
Riddle: On the facade of that building, you can read different names of scientists. Their common point? They all became famous for something paradoxical: the more successful they were, the less people noticed. What kind of medicine were they practicing?

Actually, did you know that the city's most radical clean-up act went much further than soap...?

If you look carefully at a map of Mons, you will find a "Rue du Rivage" (Riverbank Street). Why this name? Because "La Trouille" used to run straight through the heart of Mons. It powered mills, fed gardens, shaped entire neighbourhoods. Monasteries, hospitals, noble residences, all built around it. La Trouille was this part of the city.

But it also flooded. It smelled. People, including the military hospital on "Rue de Bouzanton", used it to dump their waste. Hence in 1872, the city's elites decided to redirect the entire river south of the city. La Trouille vanished from Mons. Only some street names like "Rue de la Trouille" stayed behind, like a scar.

A city decided a river was inconvenient.
So it erased it.



And do you remember the empty houses from our first stop? They were not abandoned by accident. When the river was pushed out of the city center, the craftsmen whose lives depended on its waters were pushed out as well...

This story isn't only about the past. Cities still reshape themselves by removing what feels messy, dirty, inconvenient, or simply uncomfortable to see.

This leads us to an important question: **when a city decides to "clean things up," who is it really for?**

Because cleanliness has never been only about dirt.



The Urban Detective Challenge

Keep your eyes open as you walk through Mons today. Tucked into the corners of buildings, you'll find one of the 19th century's most creative solutions to street hygiene: the "empêche-pipi". Literally, the "pee preventer", a small angled structure with one very specific purpose: to make sure that whatever you aim at the wall comes straight back at you. Effective. Mons has between 40 and 50 of them, still quietly doing their job after more than a century.



Come back on your steps and stop at the Nervienne square that you have crossed just before.

Stop 4: Place Nervienne

Which place for poverty? (1)



You are standing in the southern part of Mons.
Look around. What kind of neighbourhood does this feel like to you? Wealthy, modest?
And this big red building, what do you think it is?

Well you might get surprised... We are still in the Messines neighbourhood, the 'lower town' in every sense of the word. It lies below the hilltop where the beautiful neighbourhoods and places of power are located. It was once crossed by the river La Trouille and it was here that the bad-smelling trades and the less well-off population were concentrated.

This place has also long been tied to care and charity. Nearby, the Congregation of the Poor Sisters has supported elderly and vulnerable people for generations. And the building in front of us? It was successively an orphanage, a hospice, and since 2024, it became the CPAS, the Public Centre for Social Welfare, where people in need come to ask for help.



In the past, part of these services were known as the "Bureau de la bienfaisance", the city's Charity Office that was located closer to the historic centre. Officially, the move in these beautiful buildings was meant to "offer greater dignity to both workers and beneficiaries." But what do you think? Increased dignity or hidden poverty?

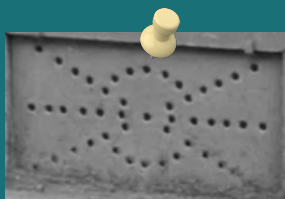


Before leaving, look carefully at this recently renovated square. Take a mental picture of it, you will need it later on. Does it feel welcoming? Would you stop here to sit, talk, spend time or lay down to enjoy the Belgian sun?



The Urban Detective Challenge

As you walk to the next stop, keep your eyes open and try to be the first one to spot this.

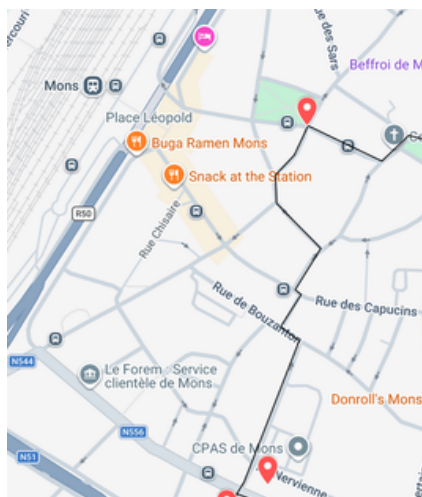


What color is it?

Once you have found it, it means you are walking exactly where the river “La Trouille” used to pass in the city.



The way to the next stop is a bit longer. Take the street that goes along the red building (CPAS), on its left side when facing it. Then, follow this map.



Stop 4': Place Franklin Roosevelt



Which place for poverty? (2)

Down this street, you can see the new train station built by the famous Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. The construction started in 2010 and was supposed to be done in 2015, but it took way longer than expected, and the inauguration was in... 2025.



First, look at the building from the outside.

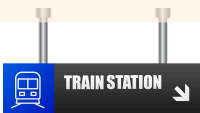


Then scan the QR code to get an idea of how the previous train stations looked like and how the current one looks inside.

Maybe you have been there before, but have you ever really taken the time to look when running after your train?



What do you think of it?
Share your first impressions with the group.



Opinions on this station are very divided. Modern, harmonious, architecturally striking, or completely out of place in a medieval city, expensive, delayed and impractical?

There is no objective answer to this question, but what is certain, is that this train station “divides” in many ways...



Let's do a short exercise and put on a different pair of glasses. Imagine you are a homeless person. It is cold and rainy and you have nowhere to go tonight. The first place that comes to your mind is the train station. You step into the main hall and look around. How does it feel?



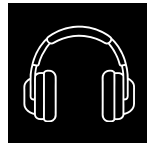
This is probably not an accident. It even has a name: hostile architecture. Some urban designs specifically intend to make certain people (homeless people, mostly) as uncomfortable as possible, so they move on.

And this doesn't stop at the station doors. Keep those glasses on as you walk through the centre of Mons and you'll start seeing it everywhere. The curved, short benches that are (sometimes) on the Grand Place. The sparse benches near shops and right where you are, in front of the collegiate church. The anti-homeless structures on buildings, sometimes even installed by individual citizens themselves, as is the case in front of the art gallery, rue d'Havré.

This is quite different from what you saw on “Place Nervienne”, outside of the city centre, isn't it?



To go further.. (optional)



And this goes beyond furniture and buildings. All these details are part of a broader dynamic that has been shaping Mons for the past years.

In the city, the feeling of insecurity is often discussed in public debates, and many local politicians link this issue to the presence of homeless people in the city centre.

As a result, several measures have been introduced over the years to regulate public space and improve the sense of safety. In practice, this can lead to homeless people being encouraged to move away from central areas.

THE "DISTURBING BEHAVIOURS" ORDINANCE

2014: A designated zone is created in the city centre of Mons where the police can intervene at any time, remove troublemakers, and make administrative arrests.

Officially targeting "aggressive begging."

SURPRISING QUESTIONS

2017: The prevention service of the city of Mons conducted a survey about safety in shops from the city centre.

The shopkeepers were surprised by some of these questions:

- Does the presence of homeless people make you feel unsafe?
- Have you ever been bothered by homeless people?

And you...

If you could design an ideal city, which parts of urban life would you place at the centre... and which ones would you move out of sight? Can an ideal city exist without hiding anything?



Now go behind the Saint Waltrude Collegiate Church and go up the street. Stop when you see both the church and the belfry.



Stop 5: The Skyline of Power

Building the Ideal City from Above – Symbols of Power and conflicting ideals

Look up. From here, you can see three structures that have shaped the identity of Mons for centuries: the Collegiate Church of Saint Waltrude, the Belfry, and the hill where the Counts' Castle once stood. Three landmarks, built across different eras, all reaching for the same thing: the sky, and none of them doing it by accident.



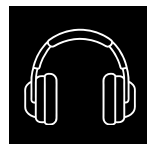
Scan the QR code to discover the story behind these landmarks of Mons. Uncover how they embody competing visions of the ideal city. Unlock each new chapter answering a question.



Walk a bit along the park, in “Rue de la Poterie”.
Take the first small street on your right and turn left at the end of it. Continue straight until you see the colourful pavement

Stop 6: Rue des Fripiers

A city made by the citizens



A few minutes ago, we were looking up. Now, take some time to look down. 30,000 cobblestones, each one painted by hand. This street made the cover of a book about the most Instagrammable places in Belgium. You might assume it was a smart city initiative, carefully planned, approved by committees, funded by city budgets and made by subcontractors... Not at all.

It started with one woman and a problem. In 2019, a building across the street had just been reconstructed, leaving the “Rue des Fripiers” narrow, dirty, and muddy. Françoise Charlier, former teacher, artist, and owner of the Art Gallery “Les sentiers de Charly” (that you can see a bit further), looked at that ghost street with a creative eye. What about acting to improve the situation? What about... spreading joy with art?

She didn't wait for the city to act. Her only request to the Municipality: to clean the cobblestones. A company donated the paint, and a sponsor came through her personal network. And... there she was, on a morning of spring, with four friends and brushes in hand, ready to paint a street.

Within days, something unexpected happened. The word spread. Neighbours showed up. Strangers asked for a brush. What was supposed to be a small project among friends became a neighbourhood movement. They painted for three months, including night sessions.

It wasn't always easy. Some shopkeepers from the street were first reluctant. Others had very specific demands: "only parallel lines to the façades!". Integrating everyone's vision while keeping the street coherent was a project in itself.

But look at it now. Locals came back to a street they had abandoned. Tourists started appearing, phones out. Other streets wanted to copy the model. And people who picked up a brush that spring still come back, to show "their cobblestone".



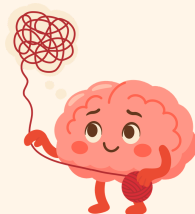
A single idea turned a forgotten backstreet into a place people feel attached to. A place that is, in a small but real way, theirs. Because a city isn't only built by architects and elected officials. Sometimes, all it takes is one person who looked at something broken, and decided to improve it.



Curious to see how it looked like when the citizens were painting the street? **Then scan the QR code and have a look at the image gallery.**

Food for thought

30,000 cobblestones were painted... a number that nobody knew when they started. Françoise herself admits it: if they had known from the start, the project might have never happened.



Sometimes the greatest things get done precisely because nobody stopped to count first. Because someone simply dared to dream about what a street or a city could be. And once you start moving, you realise the obstacles you feared were never as big as they seemed. The city is more open to change than you think. All it takes is someone willing to imagine it differently.



If you could start an initiative to improve your city, what would it be and why? **Scan the QR code to share your answer on the digital wall.**



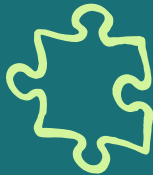


Come back on the main street (rue de la Chaussée) and go straight. Until you have to turn. They take the street on your left. You will reach the main square.



The Urban Detective Challenge – Mobility

Are you curious to see how the Grand Place used to look like in the past? Then try to finish this puzzle in less than one minute. Tap first on the piece you want to move and then on the spot where it needs to go. Good luck!



Mobility in the city center has changed a lot over time, with many streets now reserved for pedestrians.

As you can see, the Grand Place is no longer a car park, yet a road still cuts across it. The idea of making the square fully pedestrian is often put on the table though. One day, today's picture of the Grand Place with its road will maybe become an archive of the past!



Cross the Grand Place and take the street on your right (Rue du Miroir). Turn left at the end of the street and stop in front of the statue, next to the church.

Stop 7: Statue Leopold II



Which relationship to the past?

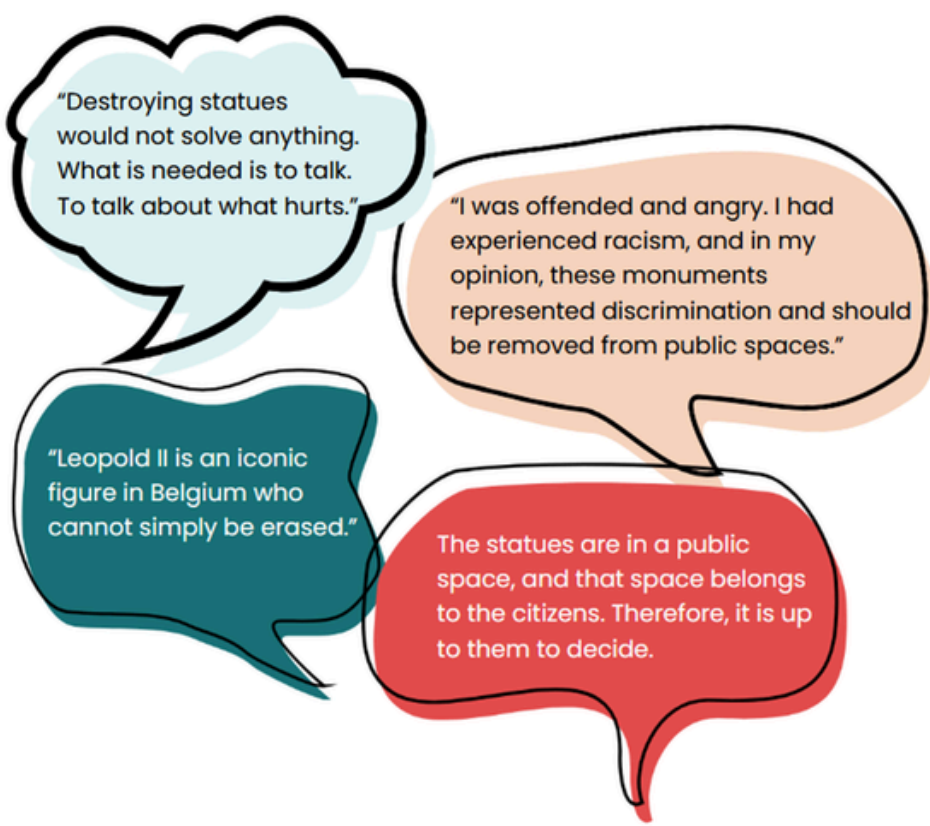
Standing before you is a man in stone. He stands tall, facing forward, almost casual, as if he has always belonged here. Leopold II. King of the Belgians (1865 to 1909), and for decades, the personal “proprietor” (as he called himself) of the “Congo Free State”. An African territory, around eighty times the size of Belgium, with millions of human living beings whose land was exploited, whose bodies were mutilated, whose lives were destroyed in the name of profit. As many as 10 million people are estimated to have died in the Congo Free State under his rule. It is one of the darkest chapters in European colonial history.

And yet, this statue is still here.
Right in the centre of Mons.



Not everyone agrees on what to do with it. Read the (real) testimonies of different locals and share your opinion with the group.





"Destroying statues would not solve anything. What is needed is to talk. To talk about what hurts."

"I was offended and angry. I had experienced racism, and in my opinion, these monuments represented discrimination and should be removed from public spaces."

"Leopold II is an iconic figure in Belgium who cannot simply be erased."

The statues are in a public space, and that space belongs to the citizens. Therefore, it is up to them to decide.

Elsewhere in the city, things have already shifted. Just a few hundred metres away, at UMONS, a student, spokesperson for students of African descent at the University, launched a petition in 2020 to remove Leopold's bust from one of the University buildings and... she succeeded. A few people, one idea, one civic act, and public space changed.



➡ To go further.. (optional)



January 1st, 1972, the Terre Colliery (a coal mine) closes. The Borinage era ends. In 2006, the Tour Vedette (the chimney stack of the former mine in Boussu in the bigger area around Mons) is brought down by the army. Cheaper, they said, than maintaining it. But for the people who lived in the region, it meant much more. Discover their testimony.

"It represented my father, who worked at the mine."

Two objects. Two very different fates.
One painful to keep. One painful to lose.

"This is no longer the life we had here. No more activity, no more shops, and now, no more chimney. It was my landmark." Angelo who lived 37 years there.

"It is sad not to keep this privilege. We had the opportunity to keep a memory that we will never have again."

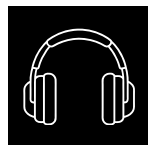
So here's the real question: who decides what a city chooses to remember? And for whom?



Go up the street that is along the church and turn right on "Rue de Nimy". Stop a few meters further, when you are in front of the building with a U shape on your left.

Stop 8: The Courts

Which place for justice?



You are now standing in front of the Courthouse of Mons. You probably guessed it: justice is going to be at the heart of this stop. On your left, the actual courthouse, built in 1848. On the other side of the street, its extension from 2005. The styles of these two buildings are quite different, aren't they?

Look on your right. "A skin of glass over a steel structure", as it is often described. This glass skin both extends the heritage-listed façade and stands out from it.



Scan the QR code, have a look at the question on Card n°1 and share your answer.



This stop is in two parts. Continue straight and take the second street on your right. At the end of the street, turn left and immediately right. Walk a few meters more and stop in front of the gate on your left.

This new justice complex, built between 2003 and 2007, brought most of Mons' legal institutions together under one roof within the city center. Look at the details. The main façade faces the “Rue des Droits de l'Homme” (the Street of Human Rights). Two red-brick entrance pavilions are the remains of former military barracks. The Assize Court sits inside a tower designed to echo the nearby Tour Valenciennoise. Inside, the main courtroom receives natural light through a clever system of mirrors reflecting it from the ceiling, an elegant symbol of truth and clarity.



Tap on the right side of card 1 – or swipe – to have a look at card n°2 and answer the questions.

Another symbol of justice is Mons' jail. Once on top of the hill, in the former Counts' Castle (and we saw earlier how symbolic it was to be placed there), it was then moved to the north of the city within the city walls. Nowadays, due to prison overcrowding, and the bad state of the old building, they officially plan to move the jail further, to the outskirts of the city, in Obourg. Remember that on the contrary, all Justice Courts were gathered and brought back to the city centre.

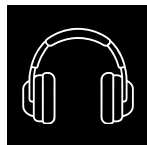


Explore card n°3 and answer the questions. Once you are done, gather in small groups and answer the questions from card 4.



**At the next crossroad, turn left.
Stop in front of the mural.**

Stop 9: Rue des Arbalestriers, street art by Ufocinque



An open city



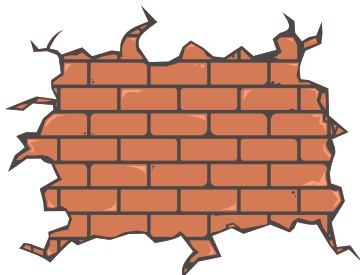
Look at this mural. What was standing here in the past in your opinion? The artist, Ufocinque, left a clue for you... And what is around you now?

You are standing, right now, on the exact line where Mons once ended. Where once, the city decided: “beyond here, you don't belong”. Because for most of its history, Mons was a city of walls.

Imagine it for a moment. A massive wall. Gates closing at night. Guards deciding who could enter and who had to stay outside. For centuries, Mons was a fortified city. Safety meant separation. The ideal city was a protected city.

But by the 18th century, Mons was suffocating. Too many people inside the walls, poor sanitation, limited circulation. The walls that once kept danger out were now trapping the city in. Emperor Joseph II ordered their demolition. Not because the city felt safer, but because the idea of “ideal city” had changed. Health, mobility and expansion became more important than defense.

The walls disappeared, but their trace never truly left. The boulevards surrounding Mons today follow almost exactly the old ramparts. The boundary remained, only transformed.



Mons suddenly had room to breathe. New schools, hospitals, infrastructures and elegant houses appeared along the boulevards. The city stepped into modernity.

And the opening continued with the creation of the “Grand Prés” area, “a city outside of the city”, with the train station serving as a bridge between the historical centre and the new urban area with a mall, conference spaces, laboratories...

Scan the QR code, to have a look at a timeline to get a better idea of the evolution of the city and test your knowledge after!



Despite its positive sides, this evolution also raises questions and concerns. Because opening a city also changes its balance. As activities move outward, the historic centre transforms. Small local shops gradually disappear, often replaced by larger brands and big chains. In Mons, many locals still talk with nostalgia about the “Passage du Centre”, once a lively gallery filled with cinemas, cafés, restaurants and shops, which closed its doors in 2020. The city continues to grow, yet sometimes its heart seems a little quieter.



And this idea of an “open” city goes beyond its physical aspect. Mons also attracts an increasing number of visitors, especially since it became European Capital of Culture in 2015. But this success comes with a question raised by some locals...

The Doudou (local folklore), once something you experienced as a child with your family, surrounded by neighbours and familiar faces, has slowly turned into a must-see event for tourists (despite the role it is still playing in shaping local identity).

Hence a city opens itself to breathe, to welcome, to evolve, yet each opening changes its identity a little. Mons, like many cities today, is learning to live between memory and transformation. Every street you cross was once a border, every tradition constantly evolves. So maybe an ideal city is not one that is closed or fully open, but one that keeps reinventing itself while remembering where it comes from.



When the mural is in front of you, turn towards the right and continue on the Arbalestriers street. Turn in front of the “Tour Valencienne” and cross the square. Turn left, take the first street on your right and then turn left.



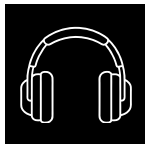
The Urban Detective Challenge

As you walk to the next stop, find two other people in the group to talk about these questions:

- 1) In your ideal city, is there a boundary at all? If so, what form does it take? A wall, a park, a boulevard, nothing? Why this choice?
- 2) What do the differences reveal about how each person thinks about safety, freedom, and belonging?

Stop 10: The Mundaneum

A city of shared knowledge



Throughout this tour, you've been asked to imagine your ideal city. More than a century ago, Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine, co-founders of the Mundaneum standing right in front of you, had already a very clear idea of their answer to this question.

Their Dream

Collect, classify and share all of humanity's knowledge to build mutual understanding and, ultimately, world peace. It can sound ambitious, but it led them to the creation of a classification system still used in libraries today. They also assembled the world's first "Paper Internet": millions of archive cards gathering knowledge from across the globe.



Otlet dreamed of achieving global peace through knowledge, and one of the essential steps toward this was creating a city for it. A "Cité Mondiale" (World City). In his mind, this city could be anywhere in the world but would be extraterritorial and apolitical. It would also serve as a hub for exchange and international cooperation.

The idea became an obsession for him. He seized every opportunity to try to make it real, joining multiple competitions in Geneva, in Antwerp, in Italy, and even in the United States. He also collaborated with several architects, including Le Corbusier, because whatever the ideal that drives you, creating a city is always occupying the space. Creating buildings. It is, as Otlet used to say it:

“Putting stones around ideas”.

Unfortunately, this idea never came to life. War got in the way. Reality got in the way. And perhaps the dream was simply too big for that time.

The Cité Mondiale was never built, but knowledge is a key component of the city. UMONS (the University) is literally everywhere. Faculties, labs, libraries, institutes woven into the streets, especially around the Place du Parc. Ask any local what they love about Mons and "student city" comes up every time. A vibrant city where knowledge circulates freely, where young people from different backgrounds share the same space. It is not exactly the Cité Mondiale. But maybe, just maybe, a small piece of its spirit survived here...



Next stop: To find your where you have to go for your last stop, solve this enigma:

UMONS – 81327// *** – 203262319**



Continue straight until you
see this logo on your left.



Stop 11: The “P’tite maison folie”

An inclusive city



We arrive at La P'tite Maison Folie (or The Little Crazy House). Strange name right? It is the kind of place you either stumble into by accident or get told about by someone who can't stop talking about it.

Step inside (yes, you can if it is open!) and you will discover the “46” or the “46 rue de Nimy” as people often call it here. Why this nickname? Because this is not a simple venue or facility. For the people of Mons who know it, it's an entity with its own soul.

A former townhouse, right in the heart of the city. Inside, you may find a laugh yoga session in one room, a theatre rehearsal in another, a feminist workshop next to the bar and someone taking care of the community garden at the back.

Welcome to a place made **BY** the citizens and **FOR** the citizens.

Rooms are free to book. Activities are open to all. And the bar? You serve yourself and leave the money in the box. No receipt, no transaction. Just trust. Moreover, the crowd is as diverse as the activities: people of all ages, all backgrounds, all walks of life end up here, and most of them say the same thing...

“It feels like home”

The “46” is also a meeting point for associations. Many regular visitors admit having discovered initiatives they never knew existed in their own city, simply by walking through this door. One of “La Maison Folie”'s most emblematic residents is L'Accorderie montoise, an association based on a simple idea: exchanging skills instead of money. One hour of your time for one hour of someone else's. A plumber with a piano teacher, a graphic designer with a cook... No cash needed, no hierarchy, just people helping each other.

But “le 46” is just the temporary version. The real project (La Maison Folie) is currently being renovated. A former school transformed into a vast cultural and civic space of 4000 m², owned by the city and managed by Mars – Mons arts de la scène. The ambition? Create an “alternative space”, as the place where the utopia of citizenship has been realised.

But some of the regulars at “Le 46” are quietly worried. The new Maison Folie will be renovated, designed, and polished and it sits outside the city centre. What made “Le 46” so special was precisely its rougher edges: an actual house, in the middle of everything, where the door was simply open. Is this “at home” feeling going to survive the move to a bigger, shinier, more official space? Nobody knows yet...





The Final Urban Detective Challenge

An economic system without money (optional, 6 participants or more)

At this stop, you have discovered l'Accorderie Montoise and the alternative economic system it promotes.

Now it is your turn!

Think of two skills you have (try to think of something that could be useful to other people) and one skill you would love to learn. Then, go talk to other people to see if any matches emerge. A live demonstration of what an exchange economy actually feels like!



Pssst

Did you know that Mons also had its own local money until 2025 (the "Ropi") and its local gift vouchers (the "Dragon d'Or")? Impossible to pay outside of the city with them. Another way to promote alternative economic systems!

Last words



And this is where our tour ends, in a place that once began as a daring idea, a small utopia imagined... and eventually made real. In the end, isn't a place where people feel at home the best definition of an ideal city?

Through Mons, we have explored not only how the ideal city can look like or feel, but also the tensions that can lie behind this idea. There is no universal definition of the ideal city. It holds a different meaning at different periods for different people.

And today, we have only scratched the surface of this world of possibilities. In the case of Mons, we could also explore the strong local identity rooted in folklore, or the growing role of culture in recent years: other ways the city continues to reinvent itself.

But cities don't change on their own. They change when people begin to see them differently and decide to act. So as you leave, imagine your own ideal city. Not only the one you would like to live in, but the one you could help shape. Maybe a full city, a neighbourhood, or simply a street. Because the ideal city is not only the one we dream about, it is the one we begin to build, together, from where we stand.





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