Local Geographies of Global Players: International Law Firms in Brussels

MATHIEU VAN CRIEKINGEN*, JEAN-MICHEL DECROLY**, MORITZ LENNERT†, PIERRE CORNUT† & CHRISTIAN VANDERMOTTEN**†

*Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) Laboratoire de Géographie Humaine, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium, **Laboratoire de Géographie Humaine, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium, †Institut de Gestion de l’Environnement et d’Aménagement du Territoire (IGEAT), Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

Abstract Literature on world cities has repeatedly argued that major agents of globalization, i.e. ‘global players’ such as advanced producer service firms, transnational corporations and international organisations, play a determining role in interlocking cities into networks of control centres of the contemporary world economy. It is very rare however that analyses cover the spatial distribution of these global players within urban settings. We argue here that local geographies of global players shed a new light on how globalization is territorialised in cities. Following an outline of Brussels’ position in European and world city networks, this contribution analyses the transnational linkages, local strategies and intra-urban spatial distribution of international law firms in Brussels as a case study. Empirical evidence highlights the play of agglomeration economies down to micro-local scales (i.e. the street, the office building) and the influence of past layers of organisation of urban space on present-day territorialisation of international law firms in the city. We argue that these results are indicative of how further analyses of local geographies of global players could foster a deeper understanding of world cities as global-local nexuses within contemporary globalization, hence combining insights from the two main existing research orientations on world cities today – focused respectively on inter-urban or intra-urban analyses.

Introduction

The interactions between globalisation and cities have generated extensive interest in geographical and urban studies literature during the last decades. Following on from major studies by Friedmann and Wolff (1982), Castells (1989) and Sassen (1991), world cities have been conceptualised as critical global-local nexuses within contemporary globalisation (Knox & Taylor, 1995; Short & Kim, 1999). Within this series of works, a division of tasks is apparent between two main research orientations, focused on distinct geographical scales.

The first approach analyses how world cities organise global space, hence focusing on the inter-urban scale. Within this framework, a shift has been initiated in recent years from
studies based upon measures of city attributes (e.g., Friedmann, 1986) to analyses based upon measures of the linkages and flows between world cities, their relational geographies and patterns of global network connectivity within the broader context of Castells’ space of flows (Taylor, 1997; Beaverstock et al., 2000a). These relational studies provide much evidence for the determining role of some major agents of globalisation or ‘global players’ (e.g., advanced producer service firms, transnational corporations, international organisations) in interlocking cities into networks of control centres of the world economy through their corporate networking activities and office location strategies.

The second research orientation focuses on socio-spatial configurations and processes of urban change within world cities, analysing how economic, political and cultural globalisation reshapes intra-urban space. Within this framework, a prominent emphasis has been put upon patterns of socio-spatial fragmentation in urban settings (e.g., Hamnett, 1994; Marcuse & van Kempen, 2000), bringing out the highly uneven impacts of globalisation at the local scale.

In line with the conceptualisation of world cities as global–local nexuses, this contribution will combine insights from both above-mentioned research agendas. It focuses on the geographies of global players at the intra-urban scale. Although the spatial distribution of advanced producer service firms, transnational corporations, international organisations and the like are basically grounded in locational strategies at inter-urban and international scales, the intra-urban geographies of these global players’ offices, headquarters, representations or secretariats can hardly be thought of as being neutral. Yet the analysis of the spatial distribution of global players within urban settings as an empirical approach of ‘glocalization’ (Swyngedouw, 1997) has been left very much unexplored in literature so far (but see Gerhard, 2003). Using the intra-urban distribution of international law firms in Brussels as a case study, this contribution shows that analysing local geographies of global players sheds a new light on how globalisation is territorialized in world cities, stressing most notably the play of agglomeration economies at multiple geographical scales and the role of past layers of socio-spatial organisation of urban space.

In the first part of this paper, Brussels’ position in European and global world city networks is outlined, stressing the specific link of the city’s transnational capacity with the presence of the main political bodies of the European Union (EU). The focus is set in the second part on the role of Brussels in the globalisation of legal services, emphasizing the presence, activities, transnational linkages and local strategies of international law firms which have established offices in the city. In the third part, territorialisation patterns of international law firms in Brussels are made empirically tangible by mapping the intra-urban spatial distribution of these firms. Hence, by looking both at the transnational relations of the international law firms having a presence in Brussels and their intra-urban distribution, we aim at contributing at a better understanding of Brussels as a global–local nexus. In conclusion, we comment on the potential benefits of further analyses of local geographies of global players for a closer articulation of inter-urban and intra-urban research on world cities.

**Brussels in the World City Network**

Brussels is classically categorised within international urban hierarchies as a second-tier world city, well below London and Paris and on a similar footing with—depending on the
particular combination of measures used—Amsterdam, Madrid, Milan, Vienna or Zurich in the European context (Beaverstock et al., 1999a; Vandermotten, 1999; Rozenblat & Cicille, 2003). This aggregate picture says actually little on the city’s highly ambivalent profile as, on the one hand, a dominated corporate world city with limited control over international economic capital and, on the other hand, a leading political world city with a mainly European scope.

Brussels as a Dominated Corporate World City

Despite its prominent visibility in international media, Brussels has received relatively little attention in world city research (Swyngedouw & Baeten, 2001). This apparently paradoxical situation reflects a broader bias in literature towards economic actors and the business-oriented functions of world cities (see Beaverstock et al., 1999a) while political actors and the political control and co-ordination functions of world cities have been comparatively neglected (Taylor, 1997). Referring to classical—economic—attributes of world cities, Brussels is characterised by a very limited control capacity over international capital. Only four among Europe’s leading groups (turnover over 5 billion euros) are headquartered in Brussels—compared to 43 in Paris or 60 in London (Rozenblat & Cicille, 2003). These characteristics reflect the withdrawal of Belgian capital from industrial investment from the 1960s onwards and the weaknesses of the Belgian state in supporting the development of nationally-based transnational corporations—unlike in other small-sized European economies (e.g., Switzerland, The Netherlands, Sweden) (Vandermotten & Marissal, 1998).

In contrast, the Belgian economy has been largely penetrated by foreign-based transnational corporations from the late 1950s onwards. US corporations have played a major role in this inflow of international capital, first with the opening of large production units during the 1960s (e.g., Ford plant in Limburg), then with the establishment of European headquarters since the mid-1980s whose main function is to co-ordinate and maintain control over transnational production processes in Europe. The increasing economic integration of the EU market as well as successive initiatives by the Belgian government to attract foreign investments with targeted policies and special tax arrangements have been key determinants in sustaining this attractiveness, while proximity to the EU and NATO headquarters allows for intense lobbying activities (Vandermotten & Marissal, 1998). By the early 2000s, about 300 European headquarters of US transnational corporations were located in Belgium, with more than 60% of them in the Brussels metropolitan area (American Chamber of Commerce in Belgium, 2003—own calculations). In sum, although Brussels is home to international business activities, most of them are subsidiaries or regional headquarters controlled by foreign-based transnational corporations.

Brussels as a Leading Political World City

Though not a prime international financial and business centre, Brussels is nonetheless extensively connected into the world city network (Derudder & Taylor, 2003) primarily because of the development of the EU political apparatus that has turned the city into a major locus of transnational political centrality (van der Wusten, 2004). Brussels hosts the core executive and administrative bodies of the European Union (Table 1), with about two
As a result of Brussels’ transnational political role, international organisations, lobbyists, legal and consultancy firms, international media, region and city representation offices, etc., have increasingly clustered in the city over the last decades. In this respect, Brussels is now the undisputed prime concentration of secretariats of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) worldwide (van der Wusten, 2004). Moreover, the position of Brussels as a centre for international meetings is firmly asserted. Together with Paris and London, Brussels tops the Union of International Associations’ (UIA) ranking of cities according to the number of—strictly—international conferences (van de Wusten, 2004).

To put it briefly, Brussels has become a political world city (Vandermotten, 1999; Kesteloot, 2000; Baeten, 2001; Elmhorn, 2001). Together with the EU institutions, transnational activities hosted in the city account today for about 55,000 jobs (i.e. 8% of the city’s labour market) and 13% of the city GDP (Mens en Ruimte, 1994; Iris Consulting 1998, 2001) (Table 2).

The rationale behind the concentration of these transnational agents in Brussels has been insightfully analysed by C. Elmhorn (2001) who has built upon M. Storper’s (1997)
concept of ‘economic reflexivity’. The main argument is that transnational agents are attracted—and maintained—in Brussels because of a tissue of intense transactional activities between specialised protagonists in EU matters that generate specific knowledge which is vital for these transnational agents to gain access to and exploit for their own profit. Elmhorn has labelled this cohesive set of localised relations between specialised service activities under the expression ‘European agglomeration economy’ (1998: 82).

Brussels is conceptualised in this way as ‘the place to be’ for specialist knowledge firms—such as law firms—to access strategic information, take advantage of high-level knowledge-transfer externalities and provide elaborated services to transnational clients. Since such transfers basically operate through dense and complex inter-personal relationships between a wide range of individuals and organisations—with the European Commission (EC) as the key component in this ensemble, they can only be sustained in a context of direct proximity between these multiple protagonists (Storper, 1997).

Brussels in the Globalisation of the Legal Sector

Over the last two decades, major legal firms have increasingly turned into key agents of globalisation. Brussels holds a prominent yet highly specific position within the context of globalisation of the legal profession. Within the hierarchy of world cities drawn up by the Globalization and World Cities Group and Network, Brussels is identified as a ‘prime centre’ for global legal services—while being among ‘major centres’ for global accountancy and advertising services and among ‘minor centres’ for global banking services (Beaverstock et al., 1999a). All other prime global legal service centres except Washington, DC, are transnational corporate and financial command centres (i.e. Chicago, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, Moscow, New York, Paris, Singapore, Tokyo). Unlike functions that are mostly specific to centres of political power (e.g., embassies, NGOs), international law firms have thus a significant presence in both major corporate and political world cities. Moreover, Brussels now tops the ranking of world cities by number of London’s major law firm foreign branch offices (Beaverstock et al., 1999b) and the city is among the few major European cities together with Paris, Moscow and Frankfurt to have a significant presence of US law firms, although far below London (Beaverstock et al., 2000b).

A survey of international law firms’ directories conducted in July 2003 shows 197 offices of international law firms in Brussels. This figure is slightly higher than the 152 international law firms’ offices listed in 1997 in the city (Iris Consulting, 1998). The vast majority of international law firms’ presences in Brussels are in branch-offices of foreign-based companies (153 firms, 77%—compared to only 38 Belgian firms, 19%). The remainder (eight firms, 4%) can hardly be categorised neither as foreign-based nor as Belgian law firms. Rather, they are single-office niche-practice firms that act as EU-specialist office in diverse international networks of independent legal firms. Hence many national or regional law firms in Europe have indirect presence in Brussels through them.

About three quarters of the 153 foreign-based law firms in Brussels are headquartered in Europe, with London law firms (39) as the indisputable leaders on the Brussels’ international legal market, well above Paris law firms (19) (Fig. 1). In addition, Brussels hosts international law firms originating from all EU countries, except Portugal and some Central- and Eastern-European new member states. Moreover, all non-European foreign-based law firms in Brussels are headquartered in the USA, mostly in New York and
Washington (12 firms each). While the rank of New York echoes the city’s position as USA’s prime world city in the globalisation of law (see Beaverstock et al., 2000b, Fig. 2), the fact that Washington appears here on an equal footing with New York—and far above Chicago and Los Angeles—suggests a specific link between Brussels and Washington, DC rooted in their role as transnational political command centres.

Most foreign law firms in Brussels hold offices with low staff numbers, 65% of them employing less than 10 lawyers, while more than half of Belgian firms has staff numbers between 11 and 40 (Table 3).

Table 3. Number of lawyers in international law firms in Brussels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of lawyers</th>
<th>Belgians</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Foreign-based</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Independent EU-focused</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 to 5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 40</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 to 80</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>No data</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Authors’ survey, July 2003.
The predominance of small-sized offices shows that most foreign law firms in Brussels hold EU-focused ‘satellite offices’. Some firms even have non-permanent direct presence in Brussels, with domestically-based partners visiting the Brussels office periodically. As an official of an Austrian law firm stated: ‘we do not have any permanent lawyer at our Brussels location anymore, but we used to have up to 2 lawyers and one secretary from 1996 until the end of 2000. Since then we changed to a ‘Regus offices solution’ with the possibility to use office, conference and secretary facilities whenever we need to come to Brussels—what we do two times a month I would say’ (personal communication, July 1st 2003).

These satellite offices are niche-marketed on EU-related issues in commercial law (e.g., competition, trade law). This legal market has been booming in Brussels since the early 1990s when the EC acquired the jurisdiction over a wide range of financial and commercial affairs with the advent of the Single European Act (1987) and of the Merger Regulation (1990). These legislative developments have produced a blossoming of regulations generating in turn a new mass of legal and advisory work. The bulk of this new EU-related work was taken over by foreign law firms while Belgian firms, historically ill-equipped to offer commercial advisory work rather than litigation, were unable to capitalise on their geographical advantage to gain control over this new market (Parnham, 2001).

International law firms in Brussels draw much of their work from referrals from the firms’ foreign-located head office (Crossman, 1995). In other words, globalisation of law in Brussels has been client-led not in the sense that law firms have followed their main corporate clients in the city (compare Beaverstock et al., 1999b) but rather that clients urged law firms to provide them with specialised legal knowledge and expertise about EU regulations as the latter increasingly affected their national and transnational businesses. As in other specialist legal centres (e.g., Piraeus and Antwerp for shipping law), Brussels houses highly-focused small-sized branch offices, while the largest offices are housed in the international financial centres where international law firms service their core financial clientele (Beaverstock, 2004). The situation in Brussels highlights in this sense a qualitative difference between international financial centres and political world cities in the globalisation of the legal sector.

Close contact with and direct access to the EU main legislative and executive bodies is of vital importance for international law firms’ daily work in Brussels, i.e. representing clients before the EC (e.g., transnational companies wishing to merge, non-European governments negotiating a free trade agreement with the EU), monitoring EU legislative developments and lobbying EU decision-makers (Crossman, 1995; Ferguson, 1998; Evans, 2004). This rationale permeates in many comments made by international law firms in Brussels. For instance, Ferguson (1998: 39) reports the sayings of the partner in charge of the Brussels office at Allen & Overy, a major London law firm with an office in Brussels: ‘People who say you can do this (EU-related competition and antitrust work) in London, well of course you can, you can do it in Timbuktu, but you don’t have the same information, you don’t have the same connection with the institutions and the rapport with the Commission services. This isn’t something you can walk into’. Accordingly, the main motivation for international law firms to concentrate in the city is to gain access to and control flows of strategic information and knowledge about EU legislations, regulations and policies (Mens en Ruimte, 1994). The aforementioned predominance of London law firms on the Brussels legal market echoes in this respect the assumption of Brussels...
playing for London law firms a comparable role to the one played by Washington, DC for New York law firms as dedicated location for the firms’ political lobbying practices (Beaverstock et al., 2000b). As Flood (1995: 150 cited in Beaverstock et al., 2000b) stated, Brussels ‘(has) become the Washington, DC of the east, where it is necessary to have a presence in order to lobby the Commission’.

All but four UK top 30 international law firms have a direct presence in Brussels (Table 4)—with three out of these four exceptions being national firms without any office in the EU outside the UK. This finding strongly suggests that the costs of holding an office

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (by 2003 turnover)</th>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Permanent office in Brussels (x yes/- no)</th>
<th>Number of lawyers at Brussels office(s)</th>
<th>Number of lawyers at other office in Belgium</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Clifford Chance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Freshfields Bruckhaus</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Linklaters</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Allen &amp; Overy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lovells</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Eversheds</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Slaughter and May</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Herbert Smith</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>DLA</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Norton Rose</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ashurst Morris Crisp</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Denton Wilde Sapte</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Simmons &amp; Simoons</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>CMS Cameron</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>McKenna</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hammonds</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Addelesh Goddard</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Pinsents</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>SJBerwin</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Berwin Leighton</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Clyde &amp; Co</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Baker &amp; McKenzie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>57</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Nabarro Nathanson</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Beachcroft</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Wansbroughs</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Irwin Mitchell</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Wragge &amp; Co</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Barlow Lyde &amp; Gilbert</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Macfarlanes</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Taylor Wessing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Masons</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Authors’ survey, ranking of firms from The Legal Business 100, top 100 by turnover, ed. 2003 (available at www.legal500.com/l500/lb100-03.pdf).

a All these firms are headquartered or have a direct presence in London.

b All these firms’ other offices in Belgium are in Antwerp.
in Brussels are overcompensated by the specific benefits drawn from a direct presence in close contact with the EU legislative and executive centre—also in terms of public relations strategy to show a real commitment to EU practice (Budden, 1993a, 1993b).

The distribution of offices by number of lawyers reflects the aforementioned predominance of small-sized EU-focused satellite office in Brussels, with 14 out of the 30 major UK law firms having 10 lawyers or less in the city. Nevertheless, the largest UK law firms in Brussels have now significantly diversified into Belgian commercial law practice in order to make their local presence more profitable. This trend has been significantly encouraged during the 1990s by numerous takeovers of Belgian enterprises by foreign companies and privatisation procedures of state-owned companies, which generated substantial cross-border commercial legal work (Crossman, 1995; Maiden, 1999; Parnham, 2001). Establishing a local law practice has been typically achieved through the incorporation of an existing Belgian firm (e.g., Belgian firm Loeff Claeys Verbeke joined Allen & Overy in 2001), resulting in the creation of hybrid offices with large staff numbers. However, merged offices keep a clear division between their two areas of practice, typically with more staff attached to the Belgian law department (e.g., Linklaters De Bandt for Belgian practices has 160 lawyers while Linklaters EU has 30).

This trend has consequently put strong pressure on independent Belgian firms practising local law. In response, many of the latter have pursued diverse strategies to enter the international market, by merging or forging alliances with other European firms or by negotiating affiliations to international networks of independent law firms (Budden, 1993b; Ferguson, 1998; Maiden, 1999; Parham, 2001). In sum, ‘localisation’ of international law firms and ‘globalization’ of local firms go hand in hand on the Brussels’ legal market.

Mapping the International Legal Sector in Brussels

Local geographies of global players shed a new light on how globalisation is territorialized in cities. Analysing the localisation of international law firms in Brussels stresses both the play of agglomeration forces at the intra-urban scale and the influence of past layers of socio-spatial organisation of urban space.

Figure 2 displays the intra-urban distribution of foreign-based law firms in Brussels. The distribution shows a highly central and concentrated spatial pattern. Fifty-six foreign law firms (37% of the survey) have an address on Avenue Louise, that is, a prestigious nineteenth-century avenue bordered with bourgeois houses and close to the Brussels’ Law Courts. The EU district (quartier Léopold) is the second prominent location with 49 firms (32%). The map also shows some small concentrations along large nineteenth-century avenues in affluent south and eastern neighbourhoods. Hence a focus on the sole EU district appears to be a too narrow window to fully grasp patterns of territorialisation of global players in Brussels (compare Papadopoulos, 1996). Moreover, the absence of any foreign law firm in the western and northern neighbourhoods is striking.

Agglomeration Economies at the Intra-Urban Scale

It has been stressed earlier in this paper that the main motivation for international law firms to concentrate in Brussels lies in agglomeration economies associated with the presence of the EU institutions and specialist service providers. This rationale is made empirically tangible here at the intra-urban scale with most foreign law firms being located close to the
main location of the EU institutions. Such locations enable those firms to sustain frequent inter-personal contacts with officials in the EU institutions for accessing strategic information and implementing lobbying activities. Such a highly central and concentrated spatial pattern makes the parallel with the clustering of law firms in places such as the City of London very tempting (see Corporation of London, 2003: 101). Nevertheless, as we previously argued, agglomeration economies and the need for face-to-face contacts refer here first to the EU institutions rather than to the clients of international law firms.

Moreover, the importance of proximity between different international law firms is striking. This materialises the play of Elmhorn’s ‘European agglomeration economy’ in Brussels, that is, the production and consumption of specific knowledge through intense (in)formal interactions and networking practices between highly specialised protagonists, which generate specific conditions of economic reflexivity. Indicative in this respect are the many occurrences in our survey of several law firms sharing the same address, frequently reflecting practices of office pooling. These strategies not only offer savings on office costs but more importantly enable these firms to take direct advantage of other lawyers’ practices and knowledge for the co-production of highly specialised legal services (Budden, 1993a). Agglomeration economies for
international law firms in Brussels are here at play at micro-scales, i.e. the street and the office building.

Additionally, the key role of agglomeration economies is persuasively illustrated by the geography of the region representation offices to the EU (e.g., Lancashire Brussels Office, North Sweden European Office) which have been multiplying in the city since the early 1990s in parallel to the increasing significance of EU regional policies and investments programmes (e.g., Interreg, European Structural Funds Programmes) (Mamadouh, 2001). With only one exception, all the about 200 region representation offices now listed in Brussels are located within a 3-km radius centred on the main EC building—with three-quarters of them within a 1-km radius (Van Criekingen & Kesteloot, 2005).

Reproduction of Past Layers of Socio-Spatial Organisation

Unlike the above-mentioned geography of region representation offices, the spatial distribution of foreign law firms highlights the importance of the historical location of the legal sector in the city, showing that proximity to EU institutions is not the only decisive factor. Many Belgian lawyers’ offices have been located along Avenue Louise since the early twentieth century. Hence, the present-day location of many international law firms close to (or in place of) existing local law firms along this avenue reproduce this inherited spatial pattern (Fig. 2b).

Moreover, the distribution of international law firms in Brussels shows a clear East–West spatial divide, with none but one firm located in the western part of the city. This sole exception, a Belgian firm, is located in a newly-built fortress-like office complex on the western bank of the canal. This sharp contrast reflects a long-standing fracture within the urban fabric, with mostly working-class and immigrant neighbourhoods in the West and upper-middle class neighbourhoods in the East (De Lannoy, 1978). In this context, firms looking for prestigious locations in a bourgeois and green urban environment and/or for the proximity to a pool of highly skilled labour will invariably be directed towards the eastern part of the city.

In sum, these trends indicate that territorialisation of global players in Brussels reproduces past layers and inherited structures of socio-spatial organisation and reinforces existing forms of spatial unevenness in the city. Other indicators have been looked at in this respect in Brussels, notably the residential pattern of the European expatriates and their spaces of social or leisure activities (Kesteloot, 2000; Bastin, 2001). These works are very insightful in showing the highly selective character of the residential patterns and urban experiences of expatriates in Brussels, with most of the latter living, working, socializing, shopping and entertaining in the wealthy south-eastern axis of the agglomeration—including some gentrified spots in the inner city, while the city’s lower-middle- and working-class western neighbourhoods typically compose a ‘terra incognita’ for them (Caillez, 2004). This indicates in sum that only certain types of local urban structures are admitted within the ‘sense of place’ (Massey, 1994) of the actors of the global space of flows. Accordingly, the global and EU-related economy remains spatially and culturally isolated from the urban experience of many Brussels’ inhabitants.

Conclusions

Despite tremendous progress in information and telecommunication technologies over the last decades, the command and control functions of the global economy have increasingly
concentrated in a limited number of major cities (Hall, 1999). World cities have become strategic nodes in the transnational economy of flows, i.e. the advanced service centre of global capitalism. Through an empirical assessment of the intra-urban geographies of international law firms in Brussels, this paper has shown that these agglomeration forces materialise down to micro-local scales, i.e. the street, the office building. For international law firms in Brussels, physical proximity to the EU institutions and to other legal firms is of vital importance. Their localisation patterns are also heavily influenced by past layers of social and physical organisation of urban space. As a result, international law firms in Brussels display a highly selective pattern of territorialisation. This echoes other findings on global players building their own territories within cities, i.e. composing transnational urban spaces (Smith, 2001) which tend to be more connected with similar spaces in other world cities than with large sections of the city itself. This is exemplified here through the networked corporate activities of international law firms, with the EU district or Avenue Louise being very much related to the City of London while appearing largely disconnected from the rest of Brussels’ urban space.

In our view, findings brought to the fore in this paper suggest that further analyses of local geographies of global players could foster a deeper understanding of world cities as global–local nexuses within contemporary globalisation, hence combining the two main existing research orientations on world cities today—focused respectively on the inter-urban (or network) or intra-urban (or place) level. Most notably, the play of agglomeration economies can be seen as an element linking these two research orientations. While agglomeration economies are quintessential in network formation in the global space of flows, it is through the play of these agglomeration economies at very local scales that globalisation impacts effectively on the urban environment. In Brussels, while the city has gained a major nodal role in transnational urban networks as a leading political world city, the presence and spatial agglomeration of international law firms—as well as other global players—within certain parts of the inner city has large impacts on the urban environment. These impacts are particularly striking in the physical and functional metamorphosis of the EU district and in the profound restructuring of the social and consumption landscape of neighbourhoods adjacent to Avenue Louise.

Firstly, the creative destruction of this late-nineteenth-century upper-middle-class residential neighbourhood into the ‘EU central executive district’ (Papadopoulos, 1996) has resulted from the progressive agglomeration of international institutions, companies and organisations in the neighbourhood. This took place in a context of very loose urban planning, with urban policies mainly emphasizing reactive measures committed to the accommodation of the EU—and whatever clients attracted to Brussels because of the city’s international status. Hence most large-scale urban interventions in the EU district—and in other parts of the city—have been—and still largely are—motivated first by existing real-estate opportunities for office development and led to speculative developments and displacement of many inhabitants (Vandermotten, 2000; Baeten, 2001).

Secondly, the case of the Avenue Louise stresses the role of the agglomeration of a large number of expatriates’ workspaces in the transformation of adjacent neighbourhoods. The residential upgrading of the Châtelain neighbourhood (see Figure 2) is highly significant in this respect. Since the late 1980s, the housing market of this late-nineteenth-century upper-middle-class district has been increasingly taken over by EU nationals at the expense of Belgian households. The retail supply has been changed accordingly, with
small industrial workshops and old-fashioned local cafes being replaced by Irish pubs, English food stores or trendy restaurants whose clientele is vastly Europeanised (Unikowski, 1998). It still remains to be tested to what extent such development affects other parts of the city through displacement of poor households from Europeanised neighbourhoods towards distant deprived working-class areas. Such an uneven intra-urban migratory pattern has been brought out for a gentrifying adjacent district (Van Crierekingen, 2003).

In sum, we think that further empirical work on local geographies of globalisation agents—for different types of global players and in different urban contexts—would make relevant contribution to a deeper understanding of world cities as global–local nexuses within contemporary globalisation.

Notes
1 A significant part of the empirical material used in this paper has been gathered in the summer and autumn of 2003 as part of the research project ‘Planning in Brussels within a world city development framework’ (S3/11/004) of the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office. The project was jointly directed by Prof. Françoise Noël (Centre de Recherches Urbaines, Institut de Sociologie, Université Libre de Bruxelles) and Prof. Christian Vandermotten (IGEAT, Université Libre de Bruxelles).
2 UIA’s tables do not include most of the internal meetings held by the EU institutions or by the NATO headquarters.
3 Our survey has been based on the Legal 500 Belgian law directory (available on www.Legal500.com). Checks and complementary information have been derived from two other directories, i.e. the International Law Office Directory (available on www.internationallawoffice.com) and l’Annuaire des cabinets d’avocats français à l’étranger (available on www.avocats-francais.com), as well as from visiting the law firms’ websites.
4 Criteria for incorporation of Belgian firms in the survey have been membership in international networks of independent law firms (e.g., Lawrope, IUS Laboris), significant international activity (as informed by the firms’ websites), active sponsorship by a Big-Four international accountancy firm or office presence abroad (only four reported cases).

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