

BELGIUM

MECHELEN

THE BASTION OF AN
OPEN EUROPE

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parallelozero



IN THE RANKING FOR IDENTIFYING THE BEST LABORATORY OF INTEGRATION IN EUROPE, MECHELEN HAS ALL THE RIGHT CARDS FOR ASPIRING TO FIRST PLACE.

UNLIKE OTHER BELGIAN CITIES WITH AN OUTBREAK OF ALMOST 500 FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND THE SCENES OF MULTIPLE TERRORIST ATTACKS, THE HEART OF FLANDERS GOVERNED BY MAYOR BART SOMERS IS MUCH MORE THAN A POSTCARD DESTINATION: UNDER ITS GOTHIC BELFRIES, AMONG PERFECTLY ALIGNED HOUSES AND BEYOND THE ARTISTIC INSTALLATIONS OF ITS PARKS, A LIVELY NETWORK OF AGGREGATION AND DIALOGUE CENTRES IS REWRITING THE HISTORY OF THE OLD CONTINENT.

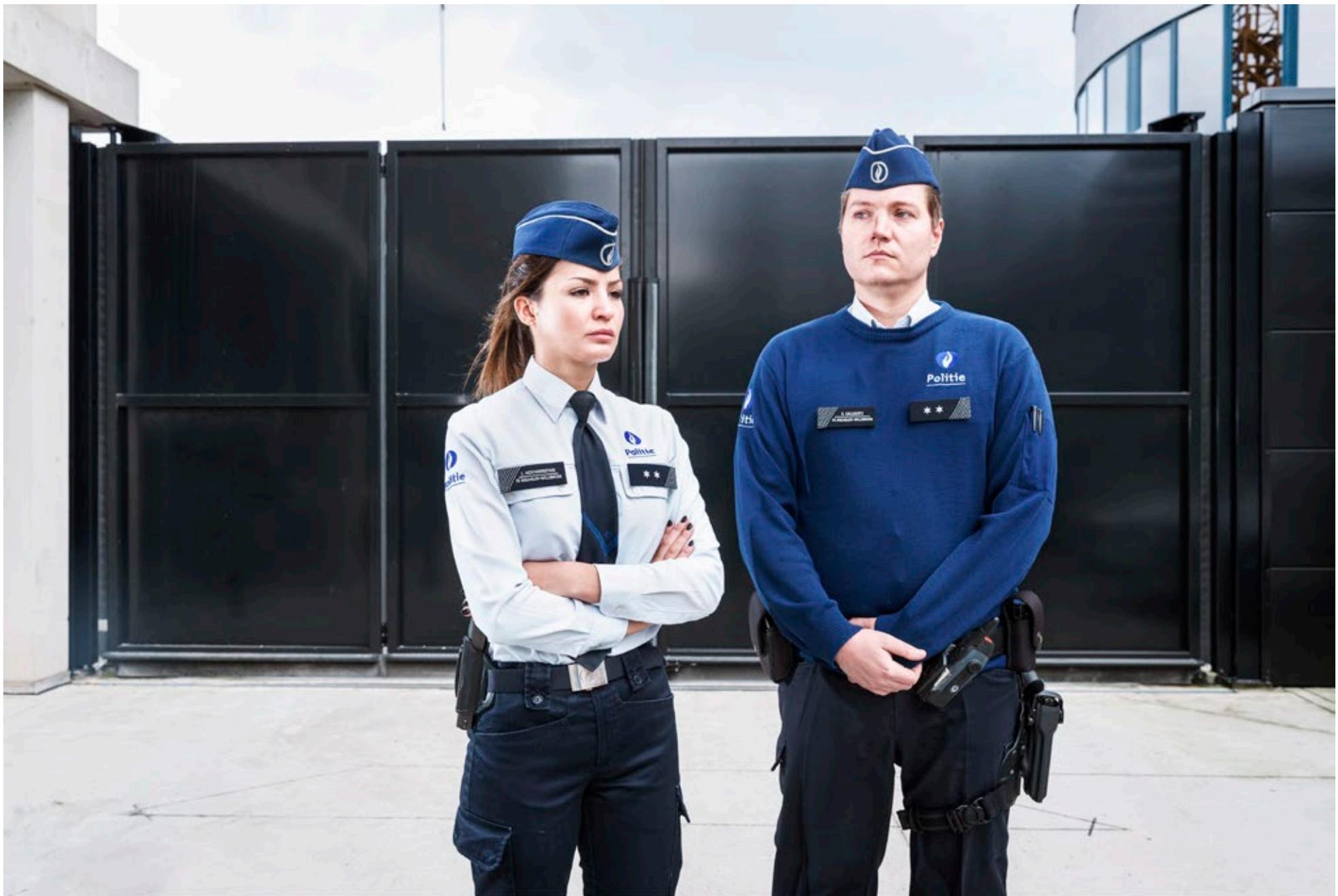
AT THE ROJM CENTRE, YOUTH OF FOREIGN ORIGIN INVENT THE FUTURE THROUGH COOKING CLASSES, PROFESSIONAL START-UPS AND IN RECORDING STUDIOS, FINDING STIMULI AND RESOURCES IN A SPIRIT OF MUTUAL COLLABORATION.

MIGRANTS AND LOCALS DISCOVER UNEXPLORED PATHS BY PARTICIPATING IN CONVERSATION CLASS PROGRAMS AT DE ROOSTER OR THE SOCIAL HOUSE OF LANGE SCHIPSTRAAT; IN THE ARSENAAL THEATRE, UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF TOM KESTENS, BELGIAN AND MOROCCAN GIRLS HAVE EMBARKED ON A PATH TO STAGE A SHOW ABOUT BEING A WOMAN TODAY.

AT THE ROYAL GYM SPORTS CENTRE THERE IS ALWAYS A THAI OR KICK BOXING COURSE FOR CHALLENGING ONESELF AND UNLOADING SOME STRESS WHILE RESPECTING RULES, AND THE NEIGHBOURLY SPIRIT IS STRENGTHENED EVERY DAY WITH ORIGINAL NEIGHBOURHOOD PARTIES HELD WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY THE MUNICIPALITY.

THE INHABITANTS RESPOND TO CAMERA POLICIES AND THE GENDARMERIE ON THE STREET WITH INNOVATIVE INCLUSION INITIATIVES: STREET ART, SHOWS AND EVERY FORM OF PERSONAL SKILL ENHANCEMENT MAKE MECHELEN A CITY THAT NO ONE EVER WANTS TO LEAVE.

AN AUTHENTIC CITY OF PEACE, WHERE EUROPE HAS NOT YET FORGOTTEN WHAT THE PILLARS OF ITS CULTURE ARE.



MECHELEN POLICE FORCE. THE LOCAL BELGIAN POLICE OFFERS SEVEN BASIC FUNCTIONS TO GUARANTEE ITS SERVICE TO THE POPULATION: COMMUNITY POLICE, ACTION AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS, SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS, LOCAL CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS, THE MAINTENANCE OF PUBLIC ORDER AND TRAFFIC POLICE.



VIEW OF MECHELEN FROM THE HIGHEST POINT OF THE SAN ROMBALDO BELFRY, A SYMBOL OF MECHELEN AND A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE.



ARWEN DURING TRAINING AT THE ROYAL GYM, A SOCIAL GYM WHERE YOUTH FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD TRAIN. ONE OF MAYOR SOMERS'S MAJOR INVESTMENTS TO PREVENT RADICALISATION IS PRECISELY SPORT. BOYS AND GIRLS OF ALL AGES AND RACES TRAIN TOGETHER IN THE GYM TO COUNTER ANGER AND NURTURE HOPE. THEIR DAY FOLLOWS A SIMPLE, BUT SAFE, ROUTINE: SCHOOL, SNACK, HOMEWORK, GYM AND IN BED AT NINE. "THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE TIME TO WANDER THE STREETS", SAYS MAYOR SOMERS.



BS LYCEUM. THERE IS AN ORGANISATION WITHIN THE MUNICIPALITY THAT WORKS WITH PARENTS TO CREATE SCHOOLS WITH STUDENTS OF MORE AND MORE MIXED SOCIAL AND ETHNIC ORIGINS. "I REALLY LIKE MECHELEN" - SAYS RAFIG, 15, WHO FLED TO BELGIUM FROM AFGHANISTAN 18 MONTHS AGO. "THE ONLY THING THAT BOTHERS ME IS THAT I STILL CAN'T GO TO NORMAL LESSONS". IN THE PAST, RAFIG WOULD PROBABLY HAVE BEEN SENT TO ONE OF MECHELEN'S "GHETTO SCHOOLS" AS SOON AS HIS FLEMISH HAD IMPROVED. THESE DAYS THERE ARE NO MORE "GHETTO SCHOOLS" BECAUSE MAYOR SOMERS HAS FOUGHT TO ENSURE A BETTER DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS. "AT FIRST PARENTS WERE WORRIED BECAUSE OFTEN THE CHILDREN OF THESE SCHOOLS DID NOT SPEAK FLEMISH VERY WELL AND, CONSEQUENTLY, THE QUALITY OF LESSONS WAS NOT VERY HIGH", HE SAYS. "WE HAVE CONVINCED A FEW HUNDRED MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO ONE OF THESE SCHOOLS AND IN RETURN WE, THE MUNICIPALITY, HAVE GUARANTEED THAT INSTRUCTION AT THE SCHOOLS WOULD BE IMPROVED, ALSO FOR THE CHILDREN, OBVIOUSLY, BECAUSE THEY ARE ALREADY LIVING THE REALITY OF TOMORROW: DIVERSITY".



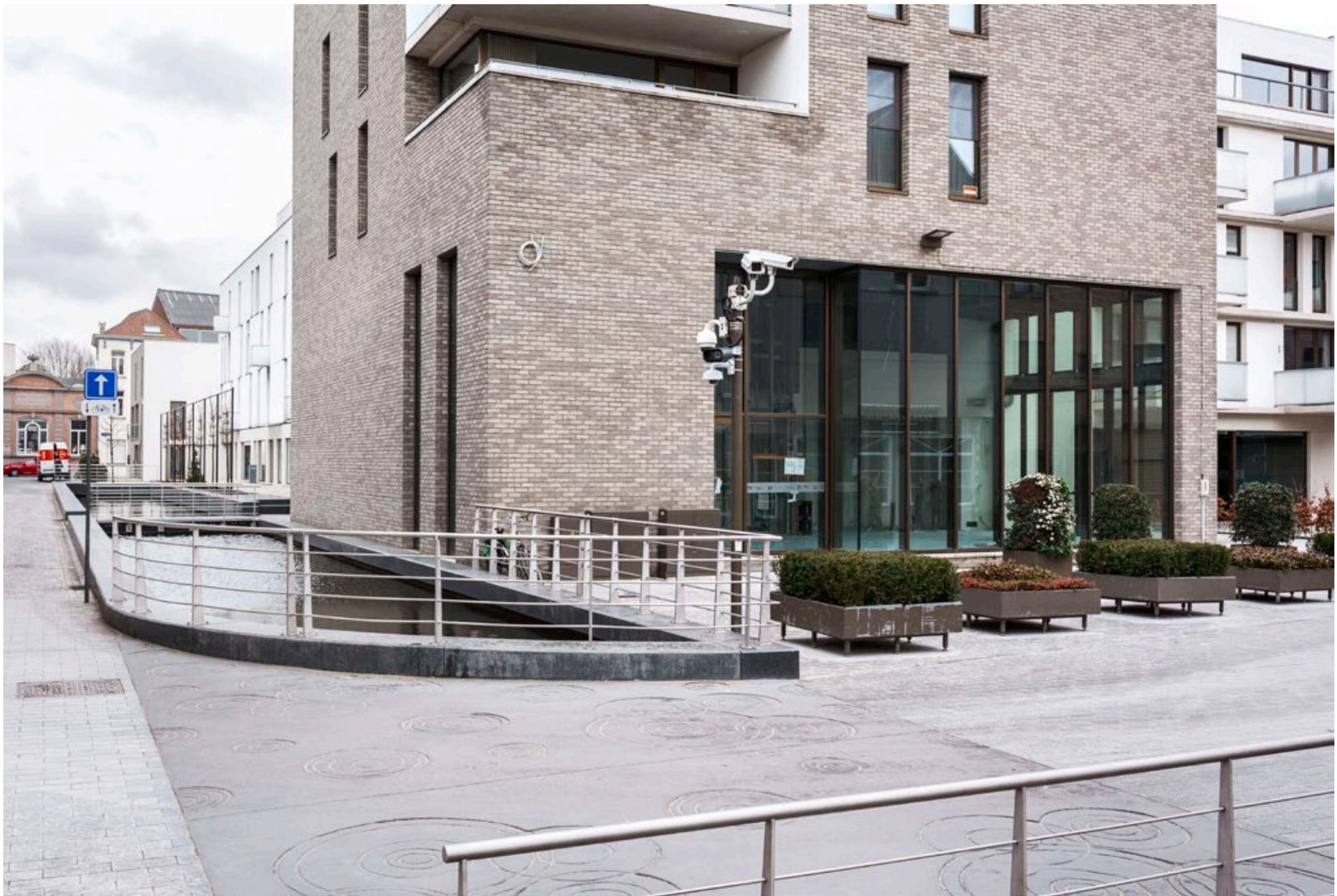
H30, CULTURAL CENTRE WHERE FREE ACTIVITIES ARE OFFERED FOR YOUTH (ART, PAINTING, SEWING, DANCING).



THE DYLE RIVER CROSSES THE CITY CENTRE. MAYOR SOMERS JOINED THE WIHCC INITIATIVE (WATER IN THE HISTORICAL CENTRES OF CITIES), WHICH PROVIDES FOR THE REVITALISATION OF WATERWAYS IN HISTORIC CENTRES, RECONSIDERING THEIR ROLE IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND SPATIAL INTENSIFICATION OF URBAN SITES. THANKS TO THE BENEFITS OF WATER COURSES IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS (ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, CULTURAL),MECHELEN'S PROJECT'S PARTNERS OFTEN USE WATER FOR THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THEIR CITIES OF ORIGIN.



STUDENTS DURING THE FLEMISH LESSON AT THE CBE OPEN SCHOOL, A LANGUAGE LEARNING CENTRE. THE CBE HAS A WIDE RANGE OF FREE COURSES AT MULTIPLE LEVELS AND WITH SPECIFIC CONTENT.



CAMERA FOR MONITORING ACTIVITIES IN THE CITY CENTRE. MECHELEN HAS USED AN ANPR SYSTEM SINCE SEPTEMBER 2011 TO CONTROL ALL THE CARS THAT CROSS THE CITY BOUNDARIES (INCOMING AND OUTGOING). CARS LISTED ON "BLACK LISTS" (NO INSURANCE, STOLEN, ETC.) GENERATE AN ALARM IN THE DISPATCH ROOM SO THEY CAN BE INTERCEPTED BY A PATROL UNIT. MECHELEN POLICE OFFICERS CAN MONITOR THE CITY AND ITS SHOPPING STREETS FROM THEIR DESKTOPS USING CAMERA CONTROL CENTER. TO COMPLETE THE EXISTING CCTV SYSTEM, THE MECHELEN POLICE DEPARTMENT INSTALLED HD CAMERAS TO MONITOR OUTDOOR SHOPPING AREAS WITHIN THE CITY CENTRE, AS WELL AS THE EXTERIOR AND CAR PARK AREA OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM OF DEPORTATION AND RESISTANCE. THE CAMERA SYSTEM HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN ACCURATELY ASSESSING VARIOUS SITUATIONS AND EFFECTIVELY RESOLVING POLICE INVESTIGATIONS.



SPECTATORS AT THE STADIUM DURING THE KV MECHELEN - ROYAL EXCEL MOUSCRON MATCH. THANKS TO THE INTEGRATION POLICY ADOPTED BY MAYOR SOMERS, THE MECHELEN RESIDENTS OF FOREIGN ORIGIN FEEL LIKE THEY ARE AN ACTUAL PART OF THE COMMUNITY AND ARE TOTALLY INTEGRATED INTO ITS ACTIVITIES.



ITALIAN-THAI COUPLE LIVING IN ONE OF THE HOUSES IN THE KREITENBORGSTRAAT DISTRICT IN NORTH MECHELEN: THE MULTICULTURAL DISTRICT.



TYPICAL NEW YEAR'S FESTIVAL OF A MECHELEN NEIGHBOURHOOD. THE CITY IS INHABITED BY PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS. SOCIO-CULTURAL INITIATIVES ARE ORGANISED IN EVERY NEIGHBOURHOOD YEAR-ROUND FOR PASSING TIME TOGETHER AND GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER (MANY OF THESE THANKS TO MUNICIPALITY FUNDS). "THE MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION HELPS MIDDLE CLASS FAMILIES. FOR EXAMPLE, WE OFFER 250 EUROS TO ANYONE WHO WANTS TO ORGANISE A BARBECUE ON THEIR OWN STREET; 130 HAVE ALREADY TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF THE OFFER. OR WITH SIGNATURES FROM 50 PERCENT OF THE FAMILIES ON A STREET, WE ALLOW THEM TO CLOSE IT OFF TO TRAFFIC FOR A FEW HOURS TO ALLOW ALL THE CHILDREN TO GO DOWN TO THE STREET TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER AND PLAY", SAYS MAYOR SOMERS.



REHEARSALS FOR THE MULTICULTURAL THEATRE SHOW CURATED BY TOM KESTENS. THE PARTICIPATING GIRLS ARE FROM BELGIUM AND MOROCCO. THE BOOK "HET VERBODEN DAKTERRAS" INSPIRED THE ENTIRE COMEDY, AND IS ABOUT FRIENDSHIP, FANTASIES AND SECRET MEETINGS OF A SMALL GROUP OF FRIENDS IN MECHELEN: IMANE, SAFIA, DINA, ANNA AND MAHA. ITS THEMES FOCUS ON BEING YOUNG AND WOMEN IN A COMPLEX SOCIETY, BUT ALSO THE PURSUIT OF THEIR IDENTITY AND FREEDOM.



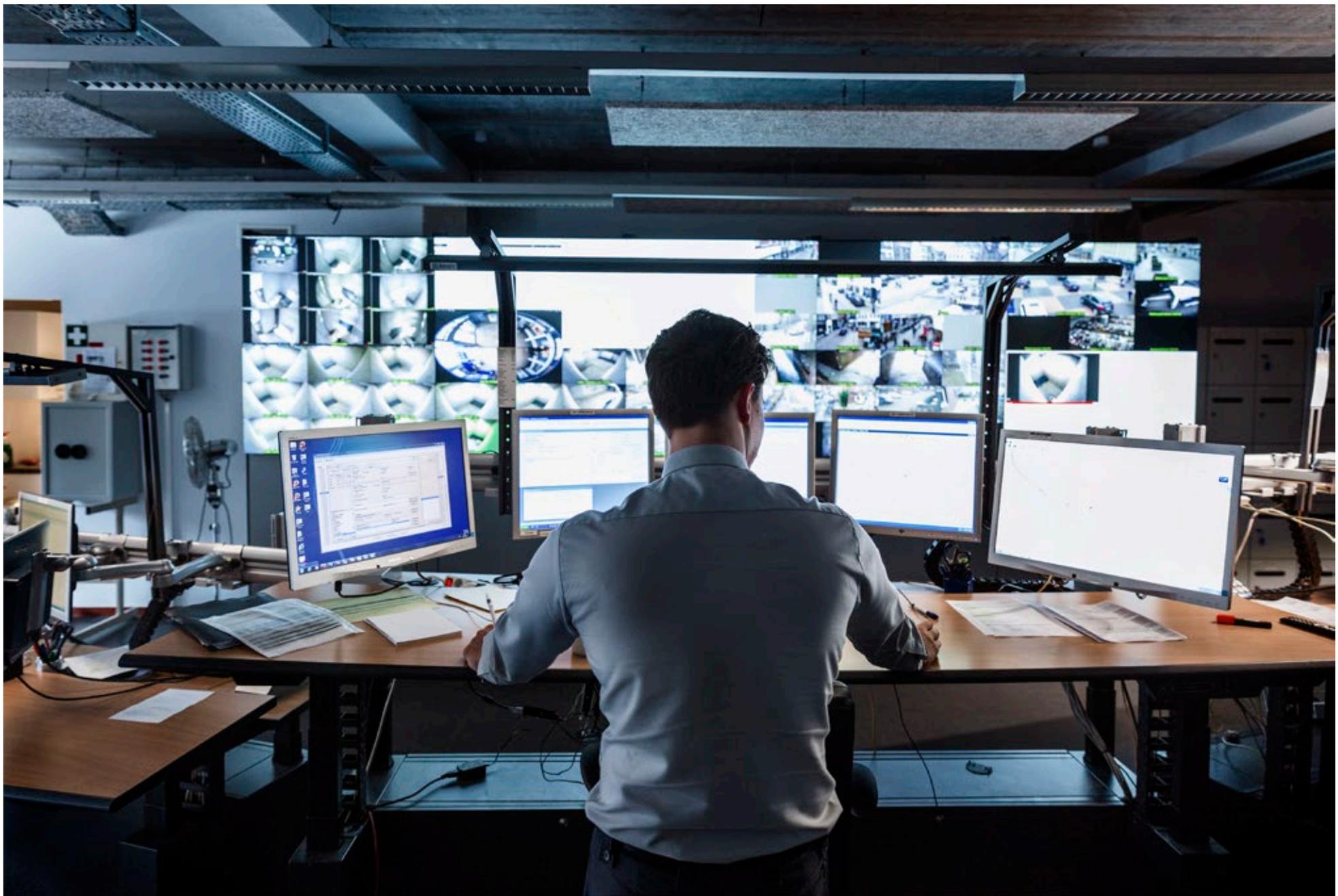
CAMPUS STASSART YOUTH RELAX ON AN INSTALLATION IN THE GARDENS OF THE CATHEDRAL OF SAN ROMBALDO. THE CAMPUS IS OPEN TO CITIZENS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD AND PROVIDES YOUTH WITH PRACTICAL SKILLS TRAINING THAT IS USEFUL FOR ENTERING THE LABOUR MARKET.



PASTOR AND CHORISTERS OF THE CONGOLESE MASS, IN THE COURTYARD OF THE WIJKHUIS ARSENAAL,
A MEETING PLACE WHERE THE CEREMONY TAKES PLACE EVERY SUNDAY.



CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC CENTRE H30, WHERE GIRLS AND BOYS OF DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS AND ORIGINS CAN PARTICIPATE IN ACTIVITIES SUCH AS DANCE, PAINTING, SEWING AND RAP CLASSES FOR FREE.



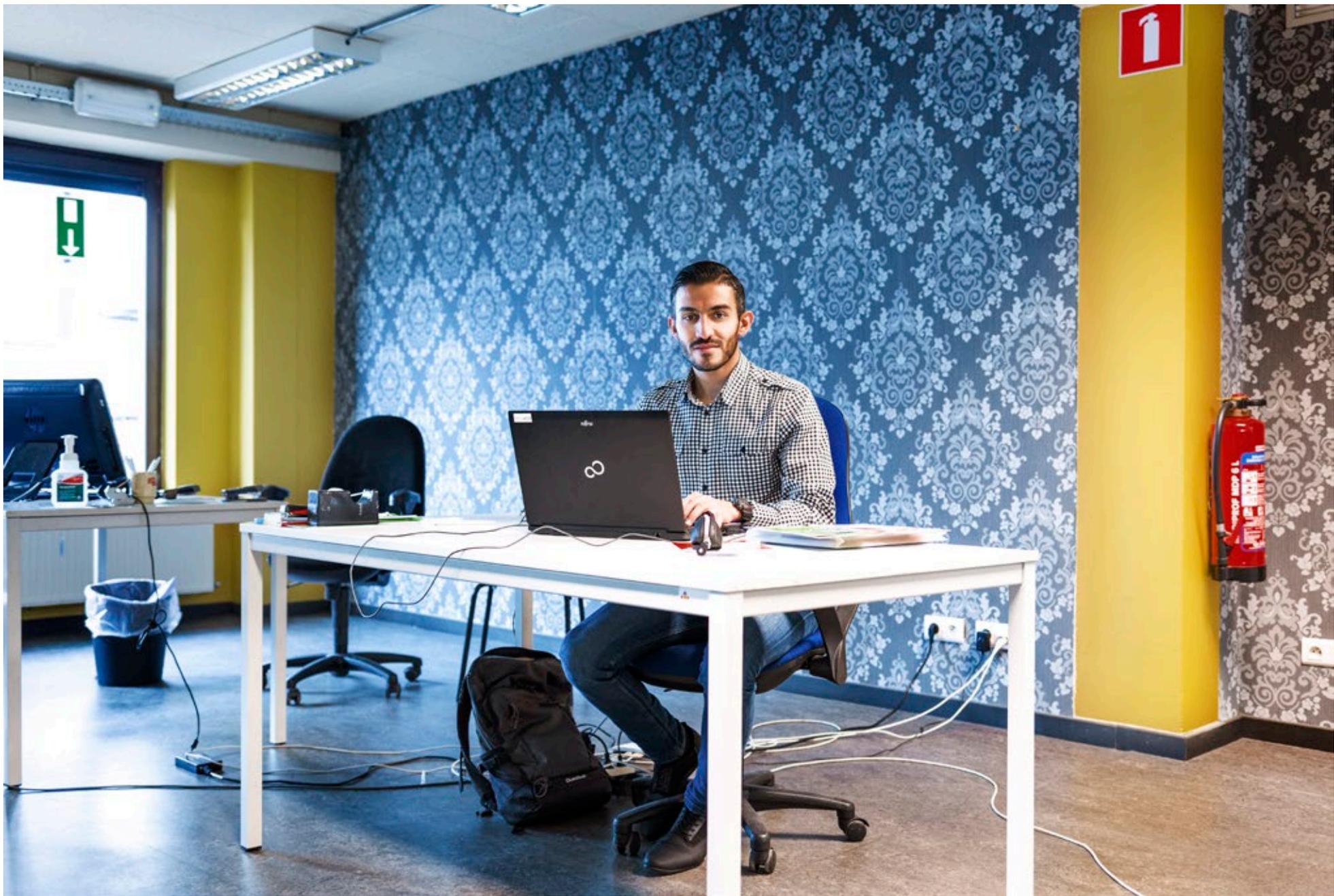
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RAGAZZO DI ORIGINI AFRICANE DURANTE UN ALLENAMENTO PRESSO IL CENTRO ROJM, SPAZIO CON FUNZIONI PEDAGOGICHE PER GIOVANI SOCIALMENTE VULNERABILI. E' STATO INAUGURATO NEL 1978, QUANDO ALCUNI CITTADINI DI DIVERSA NAZIONALITÀ SI UNIRONO A ME CHELEN E COSTITUIRONO UN'ASSOCIAZIONE PER GIOVANI.



BAMBINE DI ORIGINE SIRIANA GIOCANO DURANTE L'INCONTRO DEL CARDINALE JOSEF DE KESEL CON NUOVI ARRIVATI, RIFUGIATI E VOLONTARI, NELL'AMBITO DELLA "GIORNATA INTERNAZIONALE DEI MIGRANTI E DEI RIFUGIATI NELLA CHIESA CATTOLICA". WELCOME IN MECHELEN È UN'ORGANIZZAZIONE NO-PROFIT COSTITUITA NEL 2016. OGGI È UNA RETE DI CITTADINI IMPEGNATI NELLA REALIZZAZIONE DI ATTIVITÀ DI ACCOGLIENZA PER RICHIEDENTI ASILO E RIFUGIATI.



MUHAMMAD JARKAS, 32, WAS ONE OF THE BEST REFEREES IN HIS CITY, ALEPPO. "DESPITE THE WAR, THE FOOTBALL LEAGUE CONTINUED IN SYRIA. HOWEVER, THE MOST WELL-KNOWN PLAYERS LEFT THE COUNTRY AND SOME STADIUMS HAVE BEEN DESTROYED. IN THE END, GAMES WERE ONLY PLAYED IN THE CAPITAL DAMASCUS AND ON THE COAST, BUT DRIVING THERE WAS VERY DANGEROUS". WITH THE ESCALATION OF THE CONFLICT, MUHAMMAD RECEIVED A LETTER TO ENLIST IN THE FIGHTING. "I DID NOT WANT WAR, BUT THERE WERE ONLY TWO OPTIONS: EITHER FIGHT, OR LEAVE THE COUNTRY. I CHOSE THE LATTER". IN BELGIUM, MUHAMMAD MET BAVO VERSTRAETEN, PRESIDENT OF THE MECHELEN REFEREES ASSOCIATION. "I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A REFEREE AND I ESPECIALLY WANTED TO BE ONE IN BELGIUM. I WAS GIVEN PERMISSION TO BEGIN TRAINING AND IT WENT SO WELL THAT FOR MY FIRST OFFICIAL GAME, I WAS ASSIGNED THE ROLE OF ASSISTANT REFEREE".



THE GROTE MARKT, THE MAIN SQUARE OF THE OLD TOWN DOMINATED BY THE SAN ROMBALDO BELFRY. THE HOUSES SURROUNDING IT DATE BACK TO DIFFERENT STYLES AND PERIODS, INCLUDING THE 16TH-CENTURY RENAISSANCE AND 18TH-CENTURY ROCOCO. A CAR PARK WAS BUILT BELOW THE SQUARE IN 2004 TO MAKE THE AREA ENTIRELY PEDESTRIAN AND ACCESSIBLE TO TOURISTS. EVERY WEEKEND THERE IS A VERY LIVELY MARKET HERE WITH PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES.



THE MECHELEN SKATE PARK BUILT IN 2008 BY BRUNO VAN WILDERODE AND SERGE GOOSKENS TO ALLOW YOUTH TO PRACTICE.



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THE MAYOR OF MECHELEN, BART SOMERS, IS HEAD OF THE PARLIAMENTARY PARTY OF FLEMISH LIBERALS, AS WELL AS THE FORMER PREMIER OF THE FLANDERS REGION. HE DEFINES HIS POLICY AS "TWO-LEGGED": THE RIGHT REPRESENTS SECURITY, THE LEFT INTEGRATION. "WE HAVE HEAVILY INVESTED IN THE POLICE", HE SAYS. "THERE IS NO OTHER CITY IN BELGIUM WITH AS MUCH CCTV SURVEILLANCE. WE CANNOT ALLOW A SOCIAL GROUP TO ISOLATE ITSELF: ALL THOSE WHO LIVE HERE ARE INHABITANTS OF MECHELEN, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER THEY WERE BORN IN BELGIUM OR MOROCCO".



FATIHA LAMARA, COLLABORATRICE PER LE ATTIVITÀ FEMMINILI PRESSO IL CENTRO ROJM. LE ATTIVITÀ DELLE ROJM LADIES SONO MOLTO VASTE. AD ESEMPIO, SI OCCUPANO DELLA SUPERVISIONE DEI COMPITI A CASA, MA ANCHE DI ATTIVITÀ CULINARIE E SPORTIVE (HANNO FONDATA LA LORO SQUADRA DI CALCIO AL FEMMINILE).



YOUTH OF VARYING NATIONALITIES IN THE COURTYARD OF THE ROJM CENTRE, A PEDAGOGICAL SPACE FOR SOCIALLY VULNERABLE YOUTH.



POLICE STATION. AN OFFICER IS PRESENT 24 HOURS A DAY.

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