

BEYOND THE “DIS-ENCLAVING” THE ENCLAVE DISCOURSE: AN URBAN DESIGN PROPOSAL BASED ON ETHNOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Problems of livability in modernist social housing estates are often tackled from an architectural point of view. In Wallonia (BE), for instance, the policies and budgets allocated to social housing estates are directly related to the concern of reducing carbon emissions and fulfilling energetic performances. As such, livability is reduced to architecture and technics, while the uses of the estate by (future) inhabitants are ignored. This paper will look at a modernist social housing complex from a different point of view. It will start from existing social dynamics in the estate to see how these sites are or have the potential to become a “lively” neighborhood.

Moreover, this paper will try to give an answer to following questions. How can the high-rise social housing estates recovery be elaborated beyond the discourses of ‘dis-enclaving’ the enclave, of refurbishing architecture as to achieve sustainable building envelopes, of demolishing un-manageable density of precariousness, thereby destroying the last personal links or collective identity? Can modernist social housing complexes of the postindustrial city of today break free from an enduring stigmatization and become sites for socio-spatial intensification and for alternative development scenarios?

By zooming in on a case study, this paper will present the ethnographical methodology applied on design research.

1. SOCIAL HOUSING: A SOCIO-INCLUSIVE TOOL?

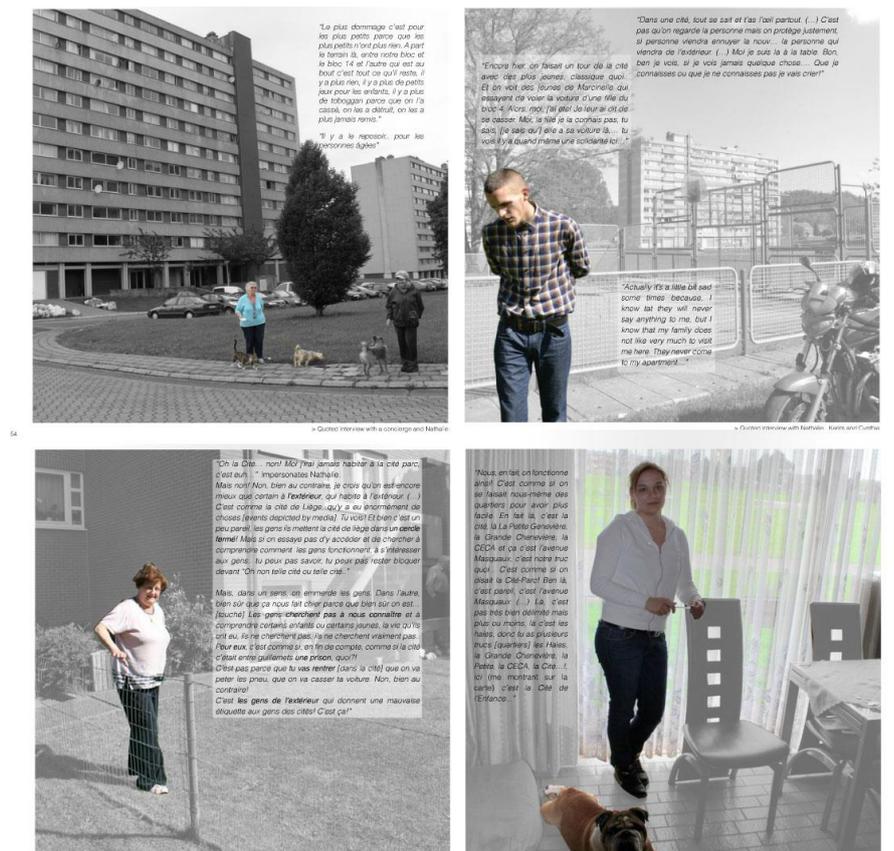
From a positive resource that salubriously accommodates workers near mines and industries, social housing complexes in Charleroi (BE) have today rather become places that assemble the “excluded”. Industrialization opened up cities to urban immigration, bringing workers near to production sites. The dwellings were supposed to be a step of inclusion into society. However, today in the Walloon media, the modernist social housings are depicted as spatially and socially excluded, as ghettos, no –right spaces...

Today, in Belgium, the problem revealed in many social housings neighborhood is directly related to the deindustrialization and the unemployment’s crisis. Through time, the relation between settlements, their implementation and their inhabitants evolved together: from the industrial period with the workers struggles to today’s postindustrial issues of exclusion. *“In the 50’s and the 60’s, the French working class suburbs constituted real social communities: “a community logic built around a popular culture, a class-conscious and a logic of social participation.”* Today, with the decline of the traditional organization of these communities and the weakening of the working class, inhabitants of

these modern social housings are identified more frequently to urban violence, to revolt without hope, without project. The welfare state does not adjust the old system sources of social inequity. *Worse, the poverty does not disappear but rather changes in nature. Poverty becomes exclusion: relegating part of the population out of the labor market and drifting entire neighborhood*²¹. As such the socio-economical question (unemployment, education, health...) becomes also a spatial question and vice versa.

Another contemporary issue of the modernist social housing is related to the occupancy of its inhabitants: spaces that were imagined to be in use a third of the day²² do not correspond anymore with the current usages. The occupancy of this same housing by a population who, for a majority, is unemployed becomes a real issue.

Furthermore, observation learned²³ that the spatial context of housing has a negative impact on participation in the neighborhood: the resemblance, the other being the mirror of oneself and the proximity and the “promiscuity” (lack of privacy) of modernist social housing, isolate instead of gather. To what extent does then, the eternal discussion on mixity, diversity, “living together” and “citizen involvement” fit the current social housing condition?



Four personalities followed during the fieldwork

2. POLITICS TOWARDS MODERN HIGH RISE SOCIAL HOUSING ESTATE IN BELGIUM

Nowadays, in Charleroi (Belgium), the “common discourse” on spatial exclusion is to fight against the context brought by modernist ideas such as densification, collective space, the idea of a

mono-functional residential zone, etc. Arguing that the high density of unemployed population produces troubles that the landlords cannot face anymore, the collective space arise the issue of its maintenance, etc....

Beside this, policies and budget allocated to social housing companies to improve their properties tackle different actions: the refurbishing of buildings, in the worst cases, their demolition, and the access rights. In this situation there is no time, neither budget to think further on these neighborhoods, going beyond valid ideas that landlord arise or police and social worker denounce.

These policies have deep impact on the life of social housing inhabitants. I argue that by processing deeper site research we could diminish the perverse effect of these mean well policies.

For instance, with the refurbishing policy, this improvement of the housing condition by working on the dwellings, destroys solidarities and deconstructs identities, by isolating families and individuals. *“The defense of the population and their identities is not only about increasing their living standards. Numbers of fragile population have sometimes more to lose than to gain in this process. The abandonment of their living environment, the sacrifice of personal links or of a collective identity are not justified by the improvement of relative living conditions.”*^{iv}

In the same idea, the opportunity of demolishing existing buildings is sometimes seen as the unique solution; the landlord argues the necessity to renew his amortized real estate, and to solve the recurrent neighborhood, security and deterioration issues, finding enough financial arguments to invest public money in demolishing public housing, but not considering then a quantity of uses^v. The relocation of the tenants remains an important issue. Since generally the re-building cannot be afforded by the landlord, he usually ends the contract sending his tenants to other social agencies and destroying the last solidarities that they may have been relying on.

The access rights (housing allocation) have also an important impact on tenants, even if they have been voted following social and equality concerns. They regulate the type of dwellings that people can require. The dwelling is supposed to be adapted to each change of the household composition and the rent, to the incomes^{vi}.

According to these conditions, the tenants are affected, pressed and attentive to each change in the legislation, feeling that each of them could impact their life, re-editing their socio-economic situation or forcing them to move... As such, to keep the stability offered by the dwelling, tenants start developing many strategies.

Nowadays, the policies and programs in Wallonia are slowly changing, beyond the “simple” visible investments on building and refurbishing. They are opening the reflection on less visible actions such as involving citizen in urban redevelopment processes, focusing on social aspects of sustainable neighborhoods...

Quartier durable, Quartier en transition, Quartiers nouveaux,... are a few of these recent programs launched to create “mixed” neighborhoods, to create social cohesion and sustainable areas. Does these terms make sense? Could we project and build pieces of city on an ideal “living together” neighborhood, where public space would become places of citizen engagement, of social cohesion and sharing?

What’s diversity? What’s “living together”?

Shouldn’t we take some distance from this discourse toward an ideal city, where we would “live together”, enjoy with our neighborhood, share gardens, and mutualize spaces?

Isn’t it a simple and idyllic way to look at urban design? Isn’t it also an ethno centric discourse far from the realities of the city which erase the subtlety of urban life and, in a way, give to urban design the responsibility/faculty to solve social issue?

In opposition, looking at modernist social housing, the metaphor often used refers to enclaves, fragments, detaches, ghettos,... Can we speak about one reality appearing in the social housing, as being a ghetto? Is there any adaptation or bricolage of the population defining a more refined life condition than these expressions suggest? These territories can be seen as other realities than “enclaved”, isn’t there tension and complexity than this stereotype?

What’s (citizen) participation?

Co-construct or let participate inhabitant in the processes of designing and governance, is a very valuable posture, but often not realized/accomplished intention. Some points to reflect on:

Firstly defining the goals and objectives of the approach: a participation to inform, to strengthen, for democracy or to decide?

Then the public issue comes up. In fact, the public of social housing estate is particular. If a part of the population has the financial, psychologic and health means to participate, it’s not the case for all. Trying the participation and in a sense the engagement of a population with weak economic and social resources needs to be deeply reflected. This population, who, for a part is involved in professional insertion programs, socio-economic integration program, withdrawal into isolation... can be difficult to mobilize on a neighborhood improvement project.

For these reasons, and with the single objective to propose an anchored and adapted urban design strategy, I proposed an ethnographic approach.

3. ETHNOGRAPHY FOR ANOTHER URBAN PRACTICE?

The methodology I used for this case study will open up another way of approaching the social housing issues presented so far.

The ethnographical analysis of the site led to a first design strategy and then re-questions the impact of the design on the social logics of the site. The methodology went continuously back and forth between analysis/description – design proposition – impact on the site – bringing more ambitions and details to the design proposition.

I started the ethnographic fieldwork on La Cité Parc in Marcinelle (Charleroi, BE) to have an understanding of the site, the social relations, issues and logics that compose the life of the neighborhood.

Social housing stigma, a negative identity

From the ethnographic fieldwork, I highlighted main logics of belonging to the social housing estate, which I defined as: “the negative identity”. This identity can be expressed as the result of a vicious circle: if “insiders” belong to Cité Parc it’s only due to the “outsiders” that have stigmatized them as such. The negative identity refers to criteria given by default to social housing inhabitants, a negative stigma^{vii} imposed by a hegemonic and dominant population on a fragile one. This subjective belonging is a feeling defined and imposed by “outsiders”. Those from outside point the Cité out as being a ghetto.^{viii}

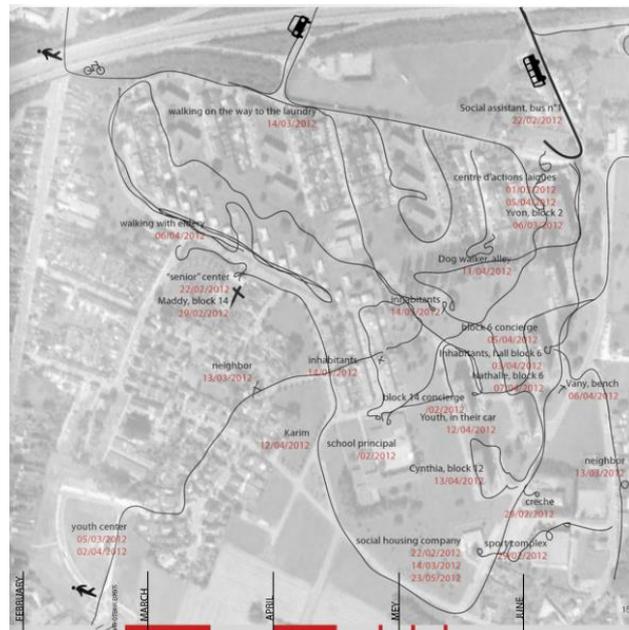


Illustration of the ethnographical fieldwork

The creation of this negative identity is more related to status than a real shared identity. People in poverty do not have any link among them. However, they are marked by a unique disqualified social status that deeply influences their identity.^{ix}

The inhabitants contribute also in the construction of a negative image of their Cité, reinforcing the downgraded features by applying the judgment of others on themselves.

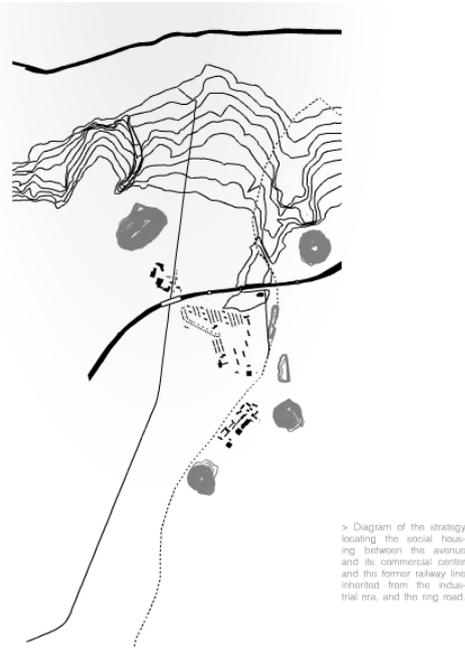
This belonging is also related to daily practices. The places of meeting of “outsiders” are meaningful places, in many cases displaying inequalities: such as school, hospital, supermarket... All express one’s economic condition. Urban design can play a role to modify these first images.

The places of interaction play a main role in the construction of the stereotypes. Where we shop, where we live, where we study... all define to which economic class we belong to. Could we imagine a place that softens this relation? And “positivize” the first socialization place?

Reaction to the negative identity

The first design strategy deals with this negative identity, by remodeling the place of interaction between insiders and outsiders and opening up the housing to the rest of the society and the city.

Combining the spatial condition and the will of transforming the context of insiders/outside meeting, the project provides a path that links the housing with different “non-displaying inequalities”^x elements (football-fields, park, forest,...) and improves soft mobility.



*Diagram of the design strategy:
reconnecting the social housing through a former railway line*

As many anthropologists ‘scholars argue in favor of a non-intervention posture on the field, the urban design can also have negative or unconsidered effects on site.

If each project has its own scale, the intervention has much wider impact. By attaching the Cité Parc to the valley, the social housing would no longer be an exception cut off from the rest, but part of new system. However, it similarly poses some questions. Would the valley path not vanish into the mass the Cité Parc? What needs to be preserved? Does not opening up the social housing destroy the inside balance?

Inside equilibrium

Through ethnography, unclaimed behaviors and particular uses were revealed and participate to the socio-economic balance of the social estate.

Many scientists^{xi} have shown poverty as a situation in which people are constrained to develop creative solutions. The different uses of “unclaimed” and claimed spaces reveal the bricolage of the inhabitants. Some informal, socially acceptable economic activities are displayed in public, such as car tuning, taxi driver or gardener... Being socially accepted or not, these informal creative activities are known by everybody inhabiting the housing and give different meanings to space.

I identified elements (e.g. mobility and creative activities) that have an impact on public space and therefore are part of an equilibrium that could be impacted by the new urban design project.

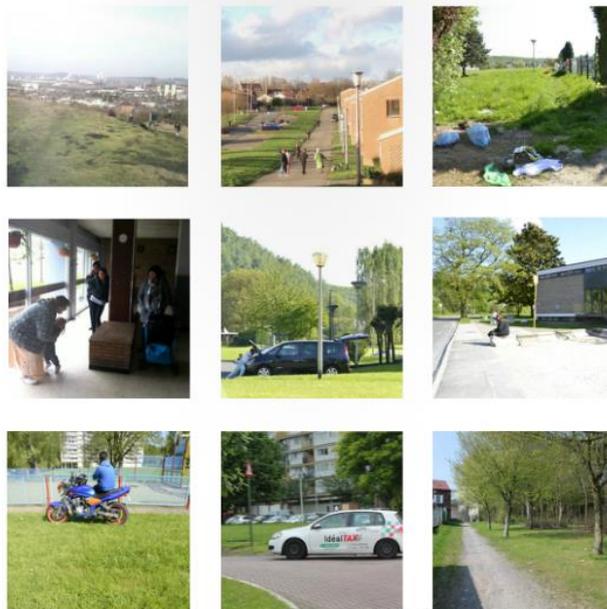
Their narrow economic possibilities restrict their social life: The inhabitants have a bigger propensity to participate in the informal economy, the children to play in the collective spaces, the adults to increase their socialization through activities revolving around dogs, for example. The “dog walk” is an anecdotic leisure but very much an extended activity that has been observed and meant a lot for isolated population.

The economic condition influences mobility. Mobility has an impact on permanent spaces of sociability: buses, taxis, and cars all have dedicated spaces, creating interactions.

The bus stops are used as a place of meeting and socializing, and become a spatial reference for everyone.

The taxi also becomes an interesting means of transport for a population that can't afford to buy a car and their use also affects public space. Like the bus, the taxi has to be waited and create temporary meeting space.

Even if the majority of inhabitants does not work and if the daily need to leave the dwelling decrease, the car occupies an important visible place in the estate. Even if spatial/social disqualification research argues for a proportional link between income and mobility, here an inverse phenomenon appears, mainly regarding youth^{xii}. Even more, the parking lots incarnate the perfect “blurred”, “interstitial” space, combining mobility and creative activities^{xiii}.



Different “creative” activities related to the social housing

Through this analysis, I identified different usages of interstitial space that would need a specific attention. They play an important role in the relation between inhabitants, providing “inside rules and inside relations”.

The first design strategy was attempting to bring more sociability and exchange between people that do not meet normally and to change the condition of these meetings displaying less inequality, the second part of the proposition dealt with the upholding of the inside equilibrium revealed through “blurred spaces” analysis and proposing the program and the design that would as such as possible not disturb existing uses.

The urban design shouldn't be just about bringing diversity and mixity to the neighborhood, but rather about giving inhabitants back the choice of their interactions, since it was (for the majority) a choice by default to inhabit the Cité Parc. If “opening up” of the housing estate is an attempt (from the designer) for more diversity, the design should also fit to the realities of the current interactions.



Design proposal: anchoring social housing estate to the new path

4. CONCLUSION

To try to keep the balance and to open up the life perspective of the inhabitants were the attempts of the design. Through these new path and new interfaces created between insiders/outside, the project had an impact on the population. By improving the perception of others on them, by giving them “self-confidence” and a positive sense of belonging to the social housing, the inhabitant will position themselves in a more “equal relationship” with the rest of the society. I assume that they will start bit by bit to get the benefit of “the commonly used mixity/diversity” by widening their socialization.

The idea is not to solve the social problems of a region (unemployment, education...) through urban design, by changing the urban and build environment but it is rather to try to give to the “outsiders” a more real image of the social housing reality.

This paper presented another way to approach a site, with all its physical issues together with its social, politics realities. As an architect has to learn a lot about its client to propose the most adapted dwelling, an urban designer has to question and understand its “beneficiary” to propose the best intervention. The difficulties start when the designer has to project a piece of city and have only some official representatives to exchange with. The ethnography methodology is in a sense a proposition to integrate the will or the common good of inhabitants.

The method can be re-questioned, according to the limit of the time needed, the objectivity and the possible populist posture of the researcher, but it gives some tracks for a reasoned urban project.

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ⁱⁱ The density and the accommodation had been imagined on the grounds that people leaving their house two-third of their daily time (meeting and creating a union power to articulate their needs and demands and keeping up a worker culture). René De Cooman, Victor Bourgeois and Herman Vos, *Charleroi: terre d'urbanisme*, (Bruxelles :1946).

ⁱⁱⁱ Rene Schoonbrodt made the first and the only socio-analysis of the social housing in Brussels and Wallonia. One of his main conclusions intrigued me. He argues that the social housing spatial context (inhabitant living near to each other and sharing the same socio-economic profile) has a negative impact on their participation/involvement in the neighborhood. René Schoonbrodt, *Sociologie de l'habitat social: comportement des habitants et architectures des cites*, (Bruxelles: Archives d'architecture modern, 1979)

^{iv} François Dubet and Didier Lapeyronnie, *Les quartiers d'exil*, (Paris: Seuil,1992) translated by the author

^v Nicolas Michelin discusses the current discourse supporting the transformation of towers into urban block/tissue (de la barre à l'îlots). "Nothing idyllic but a great quality in the uses and a respect between different territories. These places were not qualified and neither recognized, but they were waiting to be taken into consideration. Even if some uses could be considered as fragile ("precarious") or not well defined, we should admit their potentiality. The inhabitants have made something else out of their "cite". They have contaminated it bit by bit and reversed it from its prevision". Nicolas Michelin, « Comment passer de la barre à l'îlot », *AMC* (2002): 127. translated by the author

^{vi} Calculated following diverse dimensions: a percentage of the dwelling's value, a part evaluated on the household incomes, the renting costs (e.g. concierge – public space – lift – insurance – clean of common part – garbage..) and an extra rent if the dwelling has got an extra bedroom according to the household composition. A maximum of rent being 20% of the incomes. Société Wallonne du Logement, *Habiter un logement social*, (Namur, 2014).

^{vii} Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman,...

^{viii} Pierre Bourdieu, *La misère du monde*, (Paris: Seuil, 1993). My first interactions with inhabitant, as well as with social workers, were always tinged with a defense mechanism related to this stigma.

^{ix} Serge Paugam, *La disqualification sociale. Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1991)

^x That does not refer directly to economy, social status...

^{xi} Serge Paugam, *La disqualification sociale. Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1991)

Dominique Lefrançois, *Le parking dans les grands ensembles*, (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2014)

^{xii} The car becomes, in their case, a home. Since the majority of them are still living with their parents, when they can afford to purchase a car, this object becomes more of a roof than a transport. "We are not gonna go downtown. We don't have money for gasoil to get there!!! (Laughing)".

^{xiii} Many logics and relations are attached to that space; Dominique Lefrançois did an entire thesis analyzing parking lots in the grand ensemble in France.