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Contemporary cohousing experiments in the Brussels-Capital Region

Les expériences contemporaines de co-habitat en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale

Hedendaagse cohousingexperimenten in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

- 1 Since the beginning of the 2000s, as in many European cities, cohousing experiments have generated enthusiasm in Brussels. The term “cohousing” covers housing forms with the following two characteristics: a participatory dimension which is more or less assumed and supervised, depending on whether they are the result of a project led by citizens or whether they are the result of a public or associative desire to make cohousing a tool for social integration; and the sharing of certain living spaces.¹ These projects also propose a specific architectural vocabulary, intended to favour the creation of community life. Examples include solidarity-based housing², self-promoted cluster housing, rental cluster housing and Community Land Trust³ projects.
- 2 Presented in political or media discourse as being innovative, these experiments are in fact based on old models. This is illustrated by the Abreuvoir community in Watermael-

Boitsfort created in 1973 as part of the Abbeyfield movement. On the other hand, their promotion by associations such as Habitat et Participation and by political stakeholders is a more recent phenomenon. This is evidenced by the existence of new public funding which allows the development of partnerships between associations, private entrepreneurs, citizen groups and sometimes public operators. Intended to offer responses to the Brussels affordable housing crisis [Dessouroux *et al.* 2016] and alternatives to the traditional housing model, these policies target households and individuals living in precarious conditions, as well as more affluent profiles.

- 3 After an examination of the extent of the phenomenon and a clarification of the socio-political context illuminating the current success of cohousing, this article aims to characterise both the architectural typologies which are often attached to them, and the ideological principles underlying them. It then analyses their reception by the public concerned, showing that these typologies do not always meet the expectations and customs of the Brussels residents concerned, in particular the underprivileged who are specifically targeted by the associative and institutional stakeholders. The article is based on empirical material collected during a two-year field survey of nine recent cohousing projects occupied or under construction in the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR)⁴. Interviews with promoters, designers and residents of these projects, as well as in situ observations of the spaces and their uses, were carried out in order to grasp both their design logic and architectural forms as well as their perception and appropriation by the public concerned.

1. Status of cohousing projects in BCR

- 4 Whether they are developed by associations, public stakeholders, citizen groups or private developers, most of the recent cohousing projects listed in BCR on 1 October 2018⁵ (49 projects, comprising nearly 1 000 dwellings) are located in the north-western part of the canal area (see map). We can see two reasons for this. On the one hand, this area is home to dense working-class neighbourhoods where the affordable housing crisis is particularly acute: although population growth is strong, the supply of new facilities, especially social ones, is still lagging behind [Dessouroux *et al.* 2016]. To respond to this, the local associative fabric is developing alternative responses, mainly cohousing. On the other hand, these are neighbourhoods where the price of land is more affordable than elsewhere, allowing citizens' groups and associations such as the Community Land Trust Brussels (CLTB) to purchase land and housing. It is also a factor in attracting private developers who can speculate on the future development of these neighbourhoods, which are heavily invested by the public authorities, to ensure the economic profitability of their projects. However, the canal area is not reserved for cohousing. It also attracts public housing for social and middle income earners initiated under the BCR Housing Plan (2004) and the Alliance Habitat (2013) programme.

Figure 1. Distribution of BCR cohousing projects listed on 1 October 2018.

AUTHOR: PIERRE MARISSAL, ULB

- 5 The vast majority of these projects target underprivileged households. They are generally selected on the basis of criteria related to income and personal situation,⁶ but also on the basis of adherence to the community project. This often involves rental cluster housing of less than 15 units initiated by associations, generally in partnership with a social housing agency and sometimes with a municipality for specific groups such as single-parent families, single seniors and homeless people. Other projects offering up to 30 units are being developed in social housing managed by the Société du Logement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale (SLRB). Finally, cohousing projects which can exceed 30 units are initiated by CLTB.
- 6 The other projects listed are aimed at middle-income and even affluent households, generally recruited through a mechanism of co-option by the residents. These are mainly “self-promoted” cluster housing units, initiated and managed by the residents themselves, and Abbeyfield houses, rental cluster housing for seniors. Private commercial stakeholders are also beginning to invest in rental cluster housing, especially in Urbani.
- 7 Regardless of the target public or the initiator, half of the projects listed are aimed at senior citizens. This segment of the Brussels population, whose current cohort is bigger, healthier and more autonomous than the previous one [Detilleux, 2015], represents a major population issue for BCR. Having understood this, associations, public centres for social welfare (CPAS), housing companies and municipalities are developing cohousing projects for senior citizens as an alternative to nursing homes. These are usually intergenerational projects: “kangaroo” housing, intergenerational solidarity-based housing or intergenerational buildings with a “pairing up” of senior citizens and younger residents.⁷

2. Reasons for success

- 8 Cohousing is often presented as a new way of living which is more convivial, supportive, economic and ecological, and thus partially responds to various “crises of modernity” perceived as significant at the beginning of the 21st century [Iorio, 2015]. It also highlights the possibility of combining community life with respect for autonomy [Demonty, 2015]. Other factors may also explain the interest in it.

2.1 Difficulties in accessing housing

- 9 In Brussels, as elsewhere, the difficulties of access to housing now concern the middle classes [Chauvel, 2006; Cusin, 2012]. They are confronted with sharply rising prices on the Brussels housing market, which is itself very contrasted, with the comfortable and expensive south-eastern neighbourhoods, and the central neighbourhoods where housing is often of lower quality and sometimes less expensive. Moreover, affordable housing is lacking in Brussels [Dessouroux *et al.* 2016] due in part to an increase in supply which is slower than the population growth. In this context, cohousing has the advantage of offering more living space at a cost similar to that offered by the conventional residential market. Some cohousing projects emerging from private and public initiatives are part of this primarily economic logic.
- 10 Moreover, in the post-Fordist society marked by an increase in professional, economic and social uncertainties [Castel, 2009], this form of housing seems to be able to establish a reassuring community and constitutes a tool which promotes social cohesion. According to some authors, it is supposed to create a neighbourhood community providing the residents “with a reassuring framework which has become necessary in a society where working life and public life in general are perceived as more complicated, more uncertain and more threatening” [Loudier-Malgouyres, 2013: 35]. The dual objective of both facilitating access to housing and promoting social integration by creating a community is notably present in solidarity-based housing.

2.2 Variable-geometry family pathways

- 11 Cohousing also offers responses to contemporary family changes. The isolation of the elderly, the delayed autonomy of children, an increase in rates of divorce and separation leading to an increase in single-parent families and blended families [Bonvalet, 2005], contribute to modifying the historical link between family and property, favoured by the public authorities through policies of access to property ownership since the end of World War II [Zimmer, 2002; Genestier, 2007; Bernard and Sohier, 2015]. This link refers to the idea of a “promotional” residential pathway, with access to home ownership as the accomplishment [Lévy, 1998]. Yet the “appearance of new family sequences [...] results in different residential trajectories, so that at present the housing pathway can no longer be represented in a linear fashion and involves numerous comings and goings between the rental and property sectors, in connection with periods of single or couple life” [Bonvalet, 2005: 59]. During life events such as a divorce, cohousing appears to provide an opportunity to avoid isolation and to create a “springboard” to new biographical and residential stabilisation. This is the case in the rental sector in particular. Jacques,⁸ 54 years old, who after his divorce, the resale of his

home and a first flatshare experience, settled in a flat in Ilot Picard, a rental cluster housing project in Molenbeek led by the property company Urbani: “I did not see myself living in a flat alone. Today, I’m still alone in a flat, but I don’t feel lonely”

- 12 Moreover, thanks to the common spaces it offers, cohousing seems to provide a certain flexibility in its uses, allowing one “to adapt to changes in family life” [Genestier, 2007: 29]. In some projects, such as the Tivoli-EPOC cohousing project in Laeken, the architecture of the building itself is designed to allow a transformation of spaces and their functions. This seems to have been understood in the new call for projects launched by the Brussels government in 2019, which aims to promote nuclear housing, supposedly better adapted to the different stages of life, to combat the phenomena of over- and under-population.

2.3 Attentive public action

- 13 As the examples mentioned show, the BCR government is not insensitive to these projects. When the ecology party came to power in 2004, it undoubtedly gave an impetus to the search and support for alternative models alongside the “traditional” housing policy which, since 1989, has aimed above all at increasing the supply of public housing, particularly in the working-class neighbourhoods of the inner ring.⁹ When he was given responsibility for housing in 2009, the ecology party State Secretary Christos Doukeridis gave it new directions. Although it still encourages the production of new housing, it aims to facilitate the use and sometimes the conversion of existing buildings and supports a number of legal innovations to combat property vacancy. Moreover, still under its impetus, the revision of the Brussels Housing Code in 2013 allowed the legal recognition of several alternative forms of community housing initiated by the associative movement, thus providing them with the legitimacy necessary for their development and access to grants [Bernard and Sohier, 2015]. We are referring in particular to solidarity-based housing, CLTB and intergenerational housing, as mentioned above. A first call for “solidarity-based housing” projects was launched in 2012, followed by others under the new legislature and the leadership of Minister Frémault (cdH): the two calls for projects in 2015 and 2016 concerned intergenerational housing; the call for projects in 2017 concerned empty floors above shops; and the call for projects in 2018 applied to modular and light housing. The latest call launched at the beginning of 2019 addresses the “innovative concept of nuclear housing”.¹⁰ This financing for specific projects, with an annual budget of around 1 million euros, encourages schemes with a community and participatory dimension. The selected operators constitute partnerships made up of associations, social housing agencies and, more recently, municipalities.
- 14 How should this political attention to these alternatives to traditional housing be understood? Firstly, the public authorities are aware of the delays in the implementation of the various public housing construction plans, including the 2004 Regional Housing Plan and the 2013 Alliance-Habitat.¹¹ As Marie-Laurence De Keersmaecker and Pol Zimmer [2019: 376] point out, the Region is struggling to meet the social demand in this area, which mainly concerns the population in a disadvantaged socio-economic situation. Alternatives must therefore be found. Another observation is that the public housing created so far has been created proportionally more by the Housing Fund and the social housing agencies. The greater efficiency of these two

operators in terms of housing production can be explained by several elements: they support smaller projects on the existing housing market; they are entrusted with smaller missions than those entrusted to the traditional stakeholder, i.e. the Société de Logements de la RBC, so rather than producing new housing, they grant loans or mediate between owners and tenants; and finally, their operating logic is more flexible.

¹² One of the lessons learned from the past is that more flexible projects, stakeholders and structures should be relied upon in order to move forward on the housing issue.

- ¹⁵ There are other reasons why public authorities support these innovative initiatives. The permeability between the associative world and the political world linked to the pillarisation which structures the organisation of Belgian society [Faniel *et al.*, 2017] has undoubtedly increased with the arrival of ministers, firstly ecologists and then humanists,¹³ who are probably more sensitive to supporting this type of initiative. This attention should also be understood as the expression of a shift in public action, which is increasingly eager to team up with other stakeholders such as associations as well as those from the commercial world, and to test new instruments which are lighter and less engaging for the public authorities as they challenge the traditional mechanisms and test new ideas and ways of doing things [Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2005]. This would strengthen a new, less vertical and more flexible form of urban governance [Pinson, 2009].¹⁴ Moreover, governance through the project is not devoid of an incentive or even an educational objective: that of inspiring and giving ideas to other public stakeholders, such as municipalities or CPASs (public social welfare centres) and of “shifting the lines”. This last ambition is very much in evidence among the initiators of the Housing Minister Céline Frémault’s calls for innovative projects: by supporting them, the aim is to “cultivate ideas”, to encourage associative/public partnerships and to question the effectiveness and openness to innovation of existing public action instruments such as the regional urban planning regulations.

3. A specific architectural vocabulary

- ¹⁶ The observation of these projects reveals similar architectural elements. They are aimed at a strong connection between three aspects of housing: the private space, the collective space and the immediate environment. This relative architectural standardisation seems to be the spatial imprint of a way of living encouraged by the designers and developers who, in reaction to the contemporary “individualist withdrawal”, place renewed value on living together. Collective spaces are of particular importance because they are supposed to allow the emergence of an intermediary community between the family, the neighbourhood and the wider environment, made up of neighbouring households. But the private spaces dedicated to the family and the individual – far from being neglected – are also considered carefully: they must be able to be opened or closed according to the needs, projects and moods of the individuals who live there. This part of the article attempts to describe these different types of space and the links between them.

3.1 Between the living space and its environment: controlled permeability

- 17 Recent projects have often been designed as closed blocks. This physical closure of the residential space allows access to be controlled, thus serving a classic function of fencing off the living space [Raymond, 1961]. It also allows it to be clearly delineated within the neighbourhood. According to Loudier-Malgouyres, the closure “is more important in terms of what it achieves, namely a distinction with respect to the immediate environment” [2013: 20]: the residential space is distinguished materially and symbolically from the environment of the neighbourhood. This arrangement in a closed block therefore seems to testify to an approach to architecture which favours a community of neighbours.

Figure 2. Ilot Picard rental cluster housing developed by the private company Urbani

SOURCE: URBANI

- 18 Intermediate or transitional spaces such as gates, lobbies and stairwells marking the passage from the street to the dwelling [Flamand, 2010] are usually designed from the perspective of controlled permeability. They should not be confused with nearby public spaces in order to clearly mark the boundaries of the living space and, in some cases, to keep noise, visual and social nuisances in the neighbourhood at a certain distance. But designers are generally unwilling to cut them off from their residential environment. On the contrary, they seek to create a certain degree of openness, at least visually, due to a desire to be part of the dynamics of the neighbourhood or out of fear that the project will be perceived as a “ghetto of the rich” in an often more working-class environment.
- 19 At the architectural level, this desire for controlled permeability is translated by the use of certain elements aimed at producing a feeling of transparency: fences, double doors, door windows and bay windows which allow residents to see what is going on

outside, as well as allow passers-by to have a view of the interior of the building. This may also be reflected in the choice of materials. Thus, in the same way that the research team led by Henri Raymond in the 1960s said of the marking practices used in suburban housing that “hedges provide maximum ritual defence of the home, but their natural character prevents them from being an aggressive assertion of one's desire to be isolated” [Raymond, 2001]: 60], the designers of the Echappée cohousing project in Laeken, for example, opted for an entrance gate made of wood, considering that this natural material made the interior/exterior separation “softer” than an equivalent element made of metal.

Figure 3. L'Échappée self-promoted cluster housing

SOURCE: F. DEMONTY

- 20 Finally, many projects provide access to a multi-purpose room from the street, often through a door on the street front. The multi-purpose rooms can be used for festive or formal occasions such as meals and meetings, or can be lent/leased to associations or residents for the organisation of meetings (family gatherings, etc.) or birthday parties. This direct access symbolises and materialises the desire to create links with the neighbourhood, facilitating the entry of outside visitors and their participation in activities organised in the space.

“[...] Really, our idea is not at all to be closed – just among ourselves, but really to be open to the neighbourhood. This is why there are two entrances: there is the entrance from the hall, the lift and the stairs, and there is an entrance just on the street front [...] Before the wooden fence, there is a door. So people can ring the bell directly in the room. That's why we left it here. There's access to the road. So people can see us.” (Resident at L'Échappée).

“The link to the outside was there from the start. For example, we have made use of the architectural possibility of opening up to the neighbourhood. [...] An intercom was installed from the outset to give access to the common room. This way, the residents are able to use it with the outside or with external users.” (Director of Urbani, regarding Ilot Picard).

3.2 Common spaces and traffic areas to encourage use by residents and the establishment and maintenance of the community

- 21 The common spaces are designed to encourage exchanges between people, participation in community life and the opening up of the private sphere. They are therefore often given a strategic location. The garden, courtyard or terrace is usually placed in the centre of the block in order to facilitate access from the individual dwellings. This arrangement also makes it possible to establish a visual link between the individual dwellings which surround them (see image 1). Indoor common areas, such as the multi-purpose room or laundry room, are usually located on the ground floor, in areas along the main traffic areas. In addition, they are often designed to promote transparency, for example through the use of windows, so as to increase the feeling of co-presence and visual contact between residents as they go about their activities.

Figure 4. Casa Viva solidarity-based housing project **SOURCE: E. LENEL**

- 22 In addition, traffic areas such as halls, landings or walkways, are generally designed so that they also constitute living spaces for community life. They have large spatial dimensions in order to favour use by the residents, which manifests itself in the conversations between neighbours, decorations, and the arrangement of personal or shared objects. Thus the passageway is a common architectural element. It is an arrangement particularly cherished by modernist architects and the subject of debate as to its capacity to play this role as a quality spatial medium for appropriation by residents and close social relationships [Le Corbusier, 1957; Hertzberger, 1991; Marchadour, 2015; Moley 2006; Schaut, 2018]. The designers of these projects expect the passageway to constitute a unique in-between space, conducive to real or figurative sociability, between the private sphere of housing and traffic areas, as well as between housing and the residential environment as a sign of openness to the neighbourhood.

“The general architecture of the building is intended to promote communication and contact with the neighbourhood. The preliminary architectural project therefore provides for passageways instead of interior corridors. Beyond their obvious ecological added value, these passageways open the building to its environment. They constitute a smooth transition between the street and the private space, and promote the feeling of belonging to the neighbourhood among Brutopia residents” (excerpt from the presentation text of the Brutopia self-promoted cohousing project in its blog available at the address: <https://utopiabrussels.wordpress.com/the-project/>).

- 23 The use of the passageways in fact allows residents to mark a form of extension of their private space in this in-between space, as well as their desire for it to be a convivial common space” [Legrand, 2013: 77] where neighbours are welcome.

Figure 5. Brutopia cohousing project

Source: A.-L. Wibrin

Figure 6. Lemmens solidarity-based housing project.

SOURCE: E. LENEL

3.3 The private space: a controlled opening

- 24 Finally, in most cases, the design of private spaces and their material, visual and auditory connection to common spaces is aimed at maintaining a balance between this opening of the private sphere and the preservation of family and individual privacy. Private life is also valued by the designers of these projects and the architectural vocabulary they use is intended to develop “a form of community [...] which is not obligatory and leaves room for withdrawal into the private sphere of the domestic space” [Loudier-Malgouyres 2013: 47].

“I think that here, when we close the door, we close the door. It seemed pretty clear to everyone in the group from the start. There was the cooperative and then the individual and the family. It's not a ‘community’ in that sense. It's really about being able to move from one to the other according to one's mood.” (Resident at L'Échappée)

- 25 A great deal of attention is generally paid to the quality of the insulating properties of the private units in terms of acoustics, which makes it possible to have a dwelling which acts as a refuge from the other residents when the need arises. Sometimes the individual dwellings are also built around the garden or the shared courtyard with private terraces. In this case, special attention is paid to the separation of these private spaces and the common space of the garden or courtyard, respecting certain distances between the terraces. These spatial typologies therefore do not replace the figure of privacy with group living, but associate the two.

4. A model for living which stands up to a diverse population

- 26 This architecture is strongly linked to the ideology it manifests. It is based on the idea that materiality must not only express the project for a way of living which is at its origin and is founded on the importance of living together, but that it must also maintain, enliven and even create it if it is not the primary motivation of the residents. As the survey shows, this spatialist postulate whereby the space controls the nature of the social relations within it [Baudin, 2001; Schaut, 2018] does not always stand up to the test. The space is used differently according to the socio-economic profiles of the residents and their reasons for living there. These differences are expressed in their residential expectations, lifestyles, daily routines and their view of the cohousing project.

4.1 Self-promoted cluster housing: a shared ideal of a way of living

- 27 To put it somewhat schematically, cohousing projects initiated and managed by groups of individuals attract a certain fringe of the intellectual middle classes. They are designed and joined by individuals who are socially similar in terms of their financial resources, their high level of education and their professions in the socio-cultural, teaching and research sectors. More than economic necessity, these projects are the result of a gathering of individuals and households around an ideal of a shared way of living. Moreover, as owners of their own homes, they generally consider cohousing as a sustainable project. They are willing to invest time and energy in the collective

realisation of a housing ideal with additional functions: these individuals value the often chosen neighbourhood community which provides a broader sense of belonging than the family unit, and constitutes a place of psychological, social and material resources which is not regulated by the institutions of global society. This community is mainly built in the common areas, through group activities dedicated to the fitting out or decoration of the multi-purpose room, the maintenance of the garden, overall management, monthly group meals or projects such as the reception of migrants. These residents also often share values related to tolerance, ecology and citizen participation, and certain local actions outside the family, which translates into involvement in the neighbourhood's associative fabric [Bidou, 1984]. For example, L'Echappée was formed by a group of people involved in Groupes d'Achat Solidaire de l'Agriculture Paysanne (GASAP). In addition, several of them were already involved in projects run by local associations and others became involved in local community life once they had moved into their cohousing unit. The typical population of self-promoted cluster housing is therefore particularly in line with the principle of opening up private housing spaces and positive interaction with the community commonly associated with cohousing projects [Bacqué and Vermeersch, 2007; Tummers, 2016].

4.2 Cohousing for disadvantaged populations: often a forced choice

- 28 The projects initiated by associations or public operators (municipalities, CPASs, SLRB) such as Versailles Senior or Industrie79 target individuals and households which are much less well off economically and more culturally diverse, and which encounter difficulties in finding good housing with good material conditions. In addition, the precariousness of the target groups is often due to several different problems: long-term unemployment, disruptions in personal life, mental health problems, exile, periods of vagrancy, poor command of French, etc. Strong constraints often weigh heavily on these individuals and may constitute obstacles to their participation in cohousing, intergenerational housing or CLT projects. Tenant status, which concerns most of these projects with the exception of those organised by CLTB, and the anticipation of a possible move to another dwelling also seem to limit their commitment [Dal *et al.*, 2016]. There is often a gap between the initial expectations of the initiators of these projects, who want to instil a community way of living which would be less expensive and more likely to create social ties, and those of the residents who see these projects above all as an opportunity to have access to affordable, decent and spacious housing, in particular thanks to common spaces. On the one hand, the project leaders hope to create a community of neighbours, which constitutes a place of material and social resources enabling them to respond to certain everyday challenges; on the other hand, these individuals who have become part of a cohousing project, often after an unstable or even chaotic residential and biographical series of events, seem to attach more importance to the need to “have a break” or to “rebuild” in the privacy of a comfortable dwelling than to building a community and developing shared projects.

“After all we had been through, I needed everyone to have their own room and for us to have a home of our own. [...] It was important to be alone when I closed my door, to be independent, to be at home and to manage things myself. And above all, when you don't know the people, when you're having a bad day, it can cause tensions and conflicts. When you've had a difficult experience before, you know

what you want. I wanted to create common projects, but I wanted to be at home in my flat” (former resident of Lemmens).

- 29 The garden and the common living areas are therefore under-used or used for private activities. Sometimes residents are reluctant to enter the common room, as experienced by Maria, 62, a resident of a solidarity-based housing project who says she is “afraid to bother the girls when they eat there with friends”. Even more so, some seek to protect their privacy by clearly separating their private space from the common areas. Others, however, are interested in the community dimension and use common spaces with this in mind, for example by creating a library corner, a study room for children or by organising cultural activities open to other residents. But the many constraints which weigh on their daily lives or those of their neighbours, certain communication or even relational difficulties linked to generational and cultural diversity in these projects, or other residents' lack of interest may end up wearing away this commitment to the community.
- 30 Faced with such difficulties, in addition to the low level of financial resources made available for the social support of the residents, the associations sometimes lower their ambitions. In a solidarity-based housing project in Anderlecht, for example, the partner associations rented the flat which was initially intended to be a common space after two years and decided to give priority to solving individual problems rather than to community dynamics. As a result, they came to a less appealing conception of what a “good community” should be, as explained by one of the project's leaders:
- “Initially it was thought that they should all agree with each other. So we organised meetings. That wasn't easy either, because they often had their children with them, or they were at training sessions, etc. It was complicated to find the right time with them. [...] We decided not to give up altogether, and to have at least one meeting a year. But when you set someone up, you introduce them to the neighbours.”

Conclusion: Considering the diversity of ways of living

- 31 Recent experiments in cohousing are based on a spatial vocabulary which their initiators hope will promote a new way of living whereby housing is a place of social and psychological resources¹⁵. It is reflected in the design of central common spaces, with quality private spaces around them as well as intermediate spaces promoting exchanges between neighbours and with the neighbourhood. These spatial forms and this way of living correspond to the ideas of housing and neighbourhood practices of the majority of the initiators of these projects, whether they come from the associative world, the public sector or the private commercial world, or are individual citizens. Beyond different logics of action, these stakeholders seem to share the same idea of the “good life”, perhaps inherited from the urban struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, promoting a convivial living environment and restoring use value instead of a technical vision of urban planning [Pattaroni, 2011]. The methods of circulating, importing and exporting this idea among the stakeholders concerned still need to be studied in greater detail. However, as we have seen, these projects do not necessarily meet the expectations and needs of all of the Brussels populations concerned. One may therefore wonder whether the economic and human resources invested in the creation of common spaces and the development of common projects in cohousing in particular would not be more useful elsewhere, for example in the social support of the residents. The associative stakeholders themselves often express their disappointment or even

discouragement in the face of projects which “do not work out” and sometimes question their relevance with respect to their public. Taking into account the specificity of the latter groups and the diversity of their living arrangements seems in any case necessary in order to develop a housing offer which meets needs of a more individual nature. This is achieved through their involvement from the very beginning of the projects and by refusing to link architectural vocabulary and social projects in a mechanical way.

- 32 More broadly, the observations made in this article also raise questions about the public action taken in Brussels in the area of housing, more specifically regarding the role played by innovations, their relationship with more central and traditional instruments such as the social housing supply in particular, and their fragility, since they currently only exist with the help of one-off subsidies. It remains to be seen whether the new Brussels government will be keen to make it a subject for debate and action.

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NOTES

1. Cohousing differs from coliving, which defines a form of housing whereby all living spaces (living room, kitchen, etc.) except the bedroom and sometimes the bathroom are shared by the inhabitants. The category of *coliving* includes, in particular, flatshare, which is a growing phenomenon in Brussels as in other major European cities, but is therefore not dealt with here.
2. Solidarity-based housing is defined in the Housing Code (2013) as “housing underpinned by a solidarity-based life project, whether or not initiated by an institution but organised in a written commitment, an agreement, an internal regulation or another instrument of this type, in which several households reside, at least one of which satisfies the income conditions [allowing access to social housing] and each of which has one or more private spaces for exclusive use and at least one common living space”.
3. The Community Land Trust is a model of non-market organisation from English-speaking countries, which owns, develops and manages property for the benefit of and in cooperation with members of a local group with limited economic means. The organisation purchases land and/or real estate with a view to keeping it under lasting ownership in order to maintain its social vocation over the long term.
4. These are the solidarity-based housing projects Lemmens (Anderlecht), Casa Viva (Brussels-City), Maison Biloba Huis (Schaerbeek) and Palais 36 (Schaerbeek), the self-promoted cluster housing projects Tivoli-Epoc (Laeken), L'échappée (Laeken) and Brutopia (Forest), the rental cluster housing project Ilot Picard (Molenbeek) and the CLT Arc-en-ciel (Molenbeek) project.
5. In order to establish this (non-exhaustive) directory, we have selected projects which refer to concrete housing projects (not squats, for example) with common spaces and a participatory dimension. Projects referring to specific groups such as the disabled or young people without a fixed home are not included.
6. Composition of the household, isolation, marital difficulties, etc.
7. 1Toit2Ages non-profit association specialises in this type of project.
8. As in the rest of the article, we use an assumed name.
9. “In terms of spatialisation, the vast majority of public housing projects are concentrated in the north and west sections of the Region and the dynamics of the canal territory are clearly visible.” This concerns public housing under the Regional Housing Plan initiated in 2004 and the Alliance Habitat programme which came into being in 2013. Public housing includes social housing as well as housing supported by the Housing Fund, Citydev, SFAR and the Community Land Trust (*Monitoring des logements publics*, No. 2, January 2019, available at the address: <https://perspective.brussels/fr/actualites/2eme-monitoring-des-projets-de-logements-publics>).
10. See <https://logement.brussels>.
11. The latest monitoring of public housing published in January 2019 notes that, fifteen years later, the PRL has reached 52 % of its objective (p. 3) while, five years later, the Alliance-Habitat programme has reached 21 % of its objective (p. 4).
12. A final observation can also be made: the realisation rate of purchased public housing is better than that of rental public housing [De Keersmaecker, Zimmer, 2019: 376].
13. There seems to be greater sensitivity to associations targeting populations with specific needs, such as seniors and the very elderly, under the last legislature. Moreover, some of the stakeholders we met believe that as early as 1992 the Socialist Minister in charge of housing, Alain Hutchison, had already shown his openness to the associative movement with the granting of subsidies to associations working for integration through housing (AIPL).

14. This is not the place to criticise these developments, particularly as regards associations. Some authors have worked on this, including J. Moriau [2016] who criticises their loss of autonomy.

15. For property developers, there is also a commercial element, since this form of housing is supposed to appeal to a population with high cultural and economic capital.

ABSTRACTS

In recent years, cohousing projects have flourished in Brussels, particularly in the central working-class neighbourhoods, with the support of associations and certain political stakeholders. This article takes a closer look at the reasons for their success. Based on a two-year field survey of nine cohousing projects, it also analyses the architectural typologies associated with them and the ideological principles underlying them, as well as the uses made of them by the residents. In particular, the article highlights the discrepancies which may exist between a spatial vocabulary based on the desire to promote the creation of community life, and the uses and expectations of the targeted disadvantaged population.

Depuis quelques années, les projets de co-habitat fleurissent à Bruxelles, en particulier dans les quartiers centraux populaires, avec le soutien du milieu associatif et de certains acteurs politiques. Cet article interroge tout d'abord les raisons de leur succès. S'appuyant ensuite sur une enquête de terrain de deux ans auprès de 9 projets de co-habitat, il analyse également d'une part, les typologies architecturales qui leur sont attachées et les principes idéologiques qui les sous-tendent, et d'autre part, les usages qui en sont faits par les habitants. L'article met notamment en lumière les décalages qui peuvent exister entre les espoirs fondés dans un vocabulaire spatial supposé favoriser la création d'une vie communautaire et les usages et attentes des publics précaires particulièrement ciblés.

Sinds enkele jaren hebben de cohousingprojecten in Brussel, vooral in de centrale volkswijken, veel succes dankzij de steun van de verenigingswereld en bepaalde politieke actoren. Dit artikel gaat eerst dieper in op de redenen van het succes. Vervolgens analyseert het artikel op basis van een veldonderzoek van twee jaar in 9 cohousingprojecten enerzijds de eraan verbonden architecturale typologieën en de achterliggende ideologische principes en anderzijds het gebruik dat de bewoners ervan maken. Het artikel licht onder meer de verschillen toe die kunnen bestaan tussen de verwachtingen die opgewekt worden door een architecturaal vocabularium dat geacht wordt de totstandkoming van een gemeenschapsleven te bevorderen, en de gebruikswijzen en verwachtingen van de kwetsbare doelgroepen waarvoor bepaalde projecten specifiek bestemd zijn.

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