

# Revisiting the Flemish Modern Project

## SOCIAL HOUSING



INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL  
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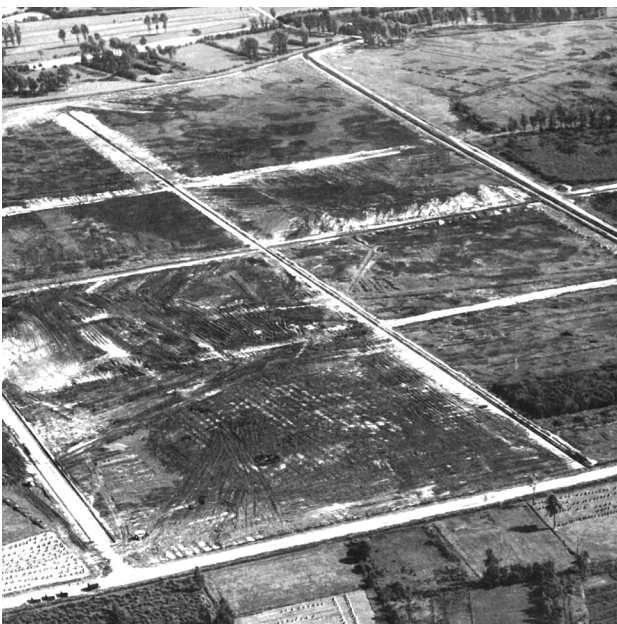


FLANDERS KNOWLEDGE AREA

## THE 'SOCIAL HOUSING' PROJECT

Post-war reconstruction in Belgium is often discussed as a totalizing process of proliferation of private property and as the democratization of the single-family house. The years following to the second World War were characterized by strong ideological opposition between Socialist and Christian Democrats. This led to a divide in the forms of planning and housing realizations that were to be built to face war destructions. Housing itself achieved an unprecedented political and cultural role. Being recognized as a fundamental pillar in the development of the country's economy and as the base of a strong social pact between institutions, entrepreneurs and citizens, housing was a particularly hot topic in public debates and cultural circles. What was at stake was the definition of the socio-spatial framework to accommodate a new social bond and support the fast-pace of the growing economy.

In 1948, the De Taeye Act was approved. The law worked as a powerful lever to promote the construction of single-family housing. The government guaranteed loans, premiums and incentives to individuals who wanted to buy allotments and build their own house. Affordable housing was granted through financial allowances. Strongly promoted by the Catholic party, Liberals and religious associations, the law promoted an idea of living based on family bonds, private property and wealth accumulation, where the house played an active disciplinary and institutional mean of control. The whole Belgian territory was thus made available for a process of rural colonization, with the goal to keep land prices low, avoid urban density and allow everyone to access homeownership.



Plot subdivision in rural areas, Flanders



Suburban single-family houses, Flanders

While it is hard to look away from such a hegemonic trajectory, another story runs parallel to it. In the period between 1945 and the '70s, the necessity to grant socially affordable living units and promote a different form of dwellings was a pressing issue on the political agenda of left-wing administrations. This, together with the approval of the Brunfaut law in 1949 became the main drive that led to the realization of large scale modern social housing estates. The construction of these kind of larger estates remained a sporadic episode in Belgium and Flanders particularly: at first linked to the ideological beliefs of Socialist administrators and their agendas in local political contexts, the new social housing realizations were developed without an overall plan. These fragments of modernity represented the strenuous activity of single public personalities (mayors,

party leaders, administrators) able to impose an alternative political agenda in their municipalities, and of modernist architects who imagined an architecture for the 'greatest number' opposed to the liberal individualizing trend. This experiment was the attempt to use architecture as an active tool to design a framework able to accommodate and promote a 'socialist' idea of life, countering the merely financial approach foreseen by De Taeye act.

Being situated within or in proximity to urban agglomerations (see the noticeable cases of Luchtbal and Kiel in Antwerp, or .. in Gent), big social housing estates embodied a concrete alternative to the trend of suburban living. They were built manifestos, advancing an urban idea that opposes mass territorial privatization and sprawl: following to the CIAM experiments, high-rise slabs were used to utterly free the ground for social activities, green spaces and the enhancement of well-being.

These projects envisioned also alternative and emancipatory forms of domestic spaces, reflecting on the spatial qualities of the living unit, on the qualities offered by high-density structures in park like setting, on the role of intermediate spaces in bridging between private household units and communal spaces as well as on the integration of areas destined to socialization and common uses. The case of 'Ieder zijn Huis', the social housing designed and built by W. van der Meeren in Evere (completed in 1960) is a telling example of such project and the peak of an architectural socio/political critique to the spatial consequences of the De Taeye act.

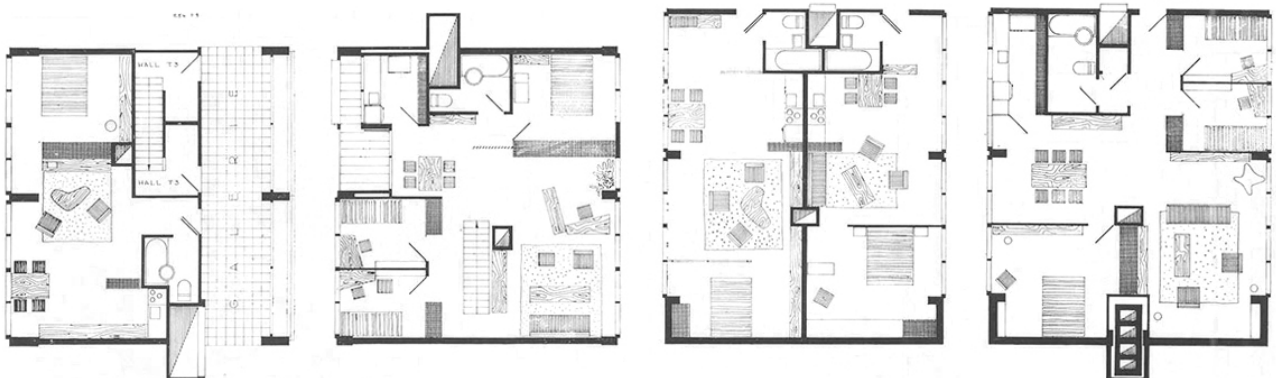
The Brussels Expo '58 represented a turning point for modern progressive thinking, with relevant consequences in the field of housing culture. The first post-war Expo intended to be a world-wide event to showcase the rebirth of democracy, humanism and faith in future and progress.



W. van der Meeren, Ieder zijn Huis housing estate, 1960



Apartment interior, W. van der Meeren, Ieder zijn Huis housing estate, 1960



Apartment typologies. W. van der Meeren, Ieder zijn Huis housing estate, 1960

In the housing area of the Belgian section, family housing and the promotion of an idea of dwelling based on technological innovations was promoted.

The exhibition brought in also new ideas in relation to urban design and planning. The case of Brussels is telling: the occasion of hosting the international exhibition was used by the government and private developers to initiate a process of urban renewal through which residential neighborhoods and slums were removed and an administrative and cultural ensemble realized. The city was pragmatically envisioned as a place for administrative functions and cultural venues. Residential buildings had to be moved away from the city center, thus endorsing the dynamics of mass suburbanization previously encouraged at the end of the '40s.

It is not by chance that progressive architectural reflections on social housing stopped at that moment. Political and ideological conflict was drained by the rhetoric of progress and prosperity, which recognized the single-family house as its leading social and architectural device: from that moment, architectural domestic thinking focused on the never-ending reassessment of interior spaces and the outer expression of private houses. The cultural role of furniture and electronic devices design became one of the major fields of architectural research.

Social housing construction continued during the '70s and '80s, even though without the strength that characterized the two previous decades. Grand social housing schemes were still developed, of which the most relevant remains the Linkeroever in Antwerp.

The system experienced a low but continuous crisis that led to a substantial stagnation in social housing production in the '80s, caused by the overlapping of economic, social and political issues: the world crisis and the process of federalization in Belgium represented the end for any affordable housing programs.

Only in recent years, social housing estates have once again attracted the attention of administrators and architects. This has been caused by the often-precarious conditions of constructions, the difficult social conditions of people living there (caused by ghettoizing policies and lack of proper social housing policies), and the growing need for affordable living unit for low/no-income groups.

The necessity to deal with the shortcomings of cheap and often low quality construction of housing estates have forced renovation to focus mostly on strategies for material upgrading such as cleaning of the building, substitution of decaying materials, facades re-cladding, normalization of electric and heating systems. In some cases, minor changes to internal typological arrangements have been performed to comply to new standards.



Peterbos housing estate renovation (BCR)



Kiel Silvertoren housing estate renovation (Antwerp)

Nevertheless, social housing companies (owners of the housing stock) and architects have hardly questioned the spatial conformations of living units or the unfulfilled qualities of communal and of green open spaces as an opportunity to thoroughly reassess the qualities of affordable housing. Dimensional features and constructive logics (concrete generic plans and prefab technologies) would enable more structural reinterpretations of the buildings, allowing to target a wider spectrum of household population, to implement areas for common activities, to integrate living and micro scale inclusive productive activities and to test practices of shared management of collective and green spaces. On the contrary, these have remained widely unanswered or even unconsidered questions, in many cases justified by the alibis of ‘heritage protection’ or budget restrictions. Since the early 2000s, regional policies and studies have endorsed processes of urban densification and, in the same time frame, Brussels has witnessed an increase of its population and skyrocketing housing prices. The renovation of modern social housing estate could therefore be a valuable test ground to face the current Flemish housing shortage.



View of an apartment block in the park. R. Braem, 'Project for a linear city', 1933-34

## PROJECT SITES

The Summer school will focus on 4 selected social housing projects in Flanders (Antwerp and Ghent) and in the Brussels Capital Region. Each participating team will be asked to analyze, interpret and speculate on the future transformation of one social housing estate, eventually developing a coherent urban and architectural scenario. The 4 selected social housing estates are:

- 1) La Cité Modèle Heysel, 1955-74 (Brussels);
- 2) The social housing estate in Rue Rempart des Moines (Bruxelles);
- 3) A selected Linkeroever urban block (Antwerp);
- 4) The social housing estate 'Nationale Watersportbaan Georges Nachez' (Ghent).

These case studies have been selected for being exemplary housing realizations in post-war Flanders and for offering stimulating conditions to imagine architectural /urban transformations able to impact future urban development. Each of them offers a wide array of architectural and constructive specificities that need to be considered in the design process as well as a series of different and complementary urban conditions.



La Cité Modèle Heysel à Bruxelles, 1955-74



Rue Rempart des Moines public housing estate (BCR), 1962-1965



Linkeroever neighborhood (Antwerp), 1970s



Nationale Watersportbaan G. Nachez public housing estate  
(Gent), 1959-65

## BRIEF

Participants will work in groups. Each group will be asked to advance innovative strategies for one of the selected case studies, focusing on transformative design proposals such as: renovation of the existing buildings and upgrade/transformation of the existing living units, densification of housing neighborhood, integration of dense urban fabric with quality open-air amenities, diversification of housing typologies, reflection on innovative forms of ownership and management to grant affordability, integration of living and productive activities in urban and peri-urban environments. The Summer school aims at bringing further the debate on the future transformation of social housing estates in Flanders, offering an excellent opportunity for architecture students to engage with a real case study currently at the center of the planning and architectural debate.

## DETAILS

The summer school is intended both as an intense design workshop and as a moment of exchange, debate and confrontation.

The event is organized by the Faculty of Architecture/KU Leuven (Belgium). Participating universities are the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile), Politecnico di Torino (Italy) and Technische Universität Wien (Austria). We will collaborate with local social housing agencies in Antwerp, Gent and Brussels, related to the selected case studies.

The Summer school is open to 20 students from the four participating academic institutions, of which 6 places are available for KU Leuven students. Applicant must be in their final year of the Bachelor program in Architecture or enrolled in the Master of Architecture/Architectuur at the Faculty of Architecture/KU Leuven (including Erasmus or exchange students). Selected students will work together in four mixed teams.

Each team will be tutored by the teaching staff of one of the participating schools. The expected design outcomes will encompass different scales and problems, from the definition of an urban strategy to the design of housing typologies, public spaces and interiors. KU Leuven participants will receive 5 ECTS credits.



Workshop session - the KU Leuven team.  
'Over de Ring' Summerschool 2018



Final jury with Christian Rapp (*Antwerps stadsbouwmeester*), Tara Op de Beeck (*Vlaamse overheid-Departement Omgeving*), Alexander d'Hooghe (*ORG, MIT*), Tom Janssens (*Mobility department, Flemish government*) and Pier Vittorio Aureli (*AA, Dogma*). 'Over de Ring' Summerschool 2018