

INHABITATION AS IMPLICIT URBAN PROJECT: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF SPATIAL INTERSTICES

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ABSTRACT

While public participation has become essential in informing public renovation projects in 21st century Brussels, the lived experience of place is rarely used as leverage. Interested in the residents' (un)conscious contribution to the (de)construction of public housing environments, this research combines ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation with spatial drawings. The paper is a commented graphic reflection on a three-month living experience in *Héliport* social housing estate managed by *Le Foyer Laekenois*, in Brussels. Advocating for an architecture of maintenance formulated on the residents' lived experience, the study investigates the over-defined and interstitial spaces in and around the modernist housing site. It interrogates everyday relations to the shared (common, collective, and public) spaces, meaningful scenes of inequality and oppression, as well as repression through urban interventions, though open to design investigations. It interrogates the multiple spatial translations of cultural, gender and age differences, border issues of tolerance and illegitimacy, and the simultaneous possibilities of meeting and avoiding. It illustrates the controvert but implicit urban projects of inhabitation as mutual relationships between users and their built environment. Eventually, by illustrating the potential of a space to host subversive uses, the project pleads to open the production of architecture and urbanism beyond the middle-class standard vision, integrating other perspectives in urban life evaluation.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN URBAN REGENERATION

The municipality of Brussels launched a design competition entitled "*Héliport: vers un socle plus ouvert*" (*Héliport: toward a more open plinth*), inviting design teams to reflect on the future of the *Héliport* plinth, a four- to six-meter-high modernist concrete platform supporting an elevated public space, erected between six social housing buildings in the Northern Quarter of Brussels.¹ Questioning the morphology of the ensemble, the city called for scenarios to reconnect ("ouvrir") public spaces through the plinth ("barrière") renovation or demolition. First, this initiative aligned with the growing attention given to high-rise housing estates in Brussels, lifting modernist features to overcome stigmatization. Second, the *Héliport's* brief came from a larger vision: the "*Plan d'Aménagement Directeur Maximilien-Vergote*" (PAD), a regional strategic and regulatory tool projecting the urban regeneration of the Northern Quarter.² The political imperative of residents' participation infiltrates public architecture and urban projects in Brussels, so is the PAD ongoing elaboration through workshops and public surveys. However, participatory processes and results are questionable: superficially designed to first and foremost fulfil design commission requirements, the absence of successful examples to take inspiration from, difficult stakeholders' mobilization, versatile data collection, and poor translation into clear project definition elements or design desiderata. To the contrary, the lived experience of place is rarely used as leverage. At the crossroads between several burning agendas (urban regeneration of the Northern Quarter, renovation of Brussels' high-rise housing estates, *Héliport* plinth competition), this article investigates which spatial scenarios can be identified from resident's spatial practices and support the present maintenance and future transformation of *Héliport* plinth. It develops a focus on the shared

spaces in and around the modernist housing estate, and more specifically on the mutual relationship between users and built environment—given and taken space, regulated and rule-less, claimed and vacated. Ethnography is mobilized to encounter these happenings and unravel the social production of space in the Northern Quarter. Observations are graphically reported in and interpreted through drawings.

ENCOUNTERING LOOSE SPACES: FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

My knowledge of the place is built upon a three-month immersive living experience from February to May 2019, during which I inhabited a flat in the social housing estate *Héliport* managed by *Le Foyer Laekenois* in Brussels. Along with mapping, this personal and



Figure 1(a-d): Avenue de l'Héliport, Social Housing and Plinth. Courtesy: The author, October 2018–August 2019

daily engagement with the site developed a street perspective, informing a cross-disciplinary sense of place, moving back and forth from anthropology to urbanism.³ Participant observation requires ignoring (as far as one is able) personal background and assumptions, and in the theatrical performance of a stage, playing the game of the place—simultaneously audience (researcher) and actor (inhabitant), continually crossing the invisible fourth wall. This dual situation confronts the lived reality of a site and suggests reflecting on it as well: tirelessly discussing, drawing the obvious, and questioning the mundane to eventually unravel hidden stories.

"What are you doing here?", two teenagers shouted at me the first time I stepped on the *Héliport* plinth. Confused by being labelled as stranger on a site inhabited by around 2000 people, I forgot to return the question. One evening, when I reached the seventh-floor corridor by the outdoor stairs, I frightened a neighbor waiting for the elevator who "did not expect a woman coming from there." On another day in the corridor, while I was chatting with my neighbor emptying her trolley to show me all the clothes she just bought at the market, another woman joined us, and looking through the open door of my flat, asked if I needed help to

make curtains. Opportunistic encounters challenged my subjective perception with other versions of home, confirming my interest in grasping local, everyday stories in addressing the urban project. Along the way, each of these happenings rendered a new set of invisible borders, contested and negotiated territories, diversifying the apparent looseness of modernist open spaces while recalling my personal condition as an outsider in my own city.

EVERYDAY BALLET ON AVENUE DE L'HÉLIPORT: STREET LIFE (DE)CONSTRUCTION.

At the bottom of *Héliport* plinth, a chain of triangles is squeezed between the roadway and the blind walls of the building's ground floor. A pattern of (hilly) grass beds and asphalted paths aligned with the constructions further fragments the space. The oversized measure of the walkway emphasizes the early impression of emptiness. Nevertheless, a multitude of ephemeral activities take place here: all together or successively, the street turns into the kids' playground, women's short meetings, elderly people walking dogs, etc. The endless back and forth of groups and individuals on the public space reveal an everyday ballet for the outsider; commuter, homeless, doorkeeper, and resident hiding



Figure 2: Avenue de l'Héliport. Courtesy: The author, March 2019

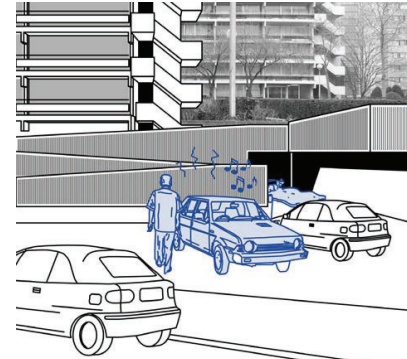


Figure 3: Along Avenue de l'Héliport: (a) Wild parking, young men hanging out and homeless resting on the walkway. Courtesy: Drawing by author, August 2019

behind curtains, who have joined the stage in turn. Isolated, they are like scenes of a play, but read as a succession, they react to each other and give sense to the place.

A few uses stand out, either for their disruptive character or longer-term occurrence. A herd of (unregistered) cars and utilitarian vehicles parked on the pedestrian open space at the bottom of the housing blocks seems to indicate an improvised solution to the local parking issue. In this still-life tableau, two men repair a vehicle. On another day, rap lyrics sung on a thrumming motor betray a volatile presence: piled up in and around a purring car stopped down the block they live in, young men just opened an ephemeral "urban living room" on the public space, but off its influence. These driving reunions on the walkway, the concentration of fancy sportive engines in a central neighborhood highly

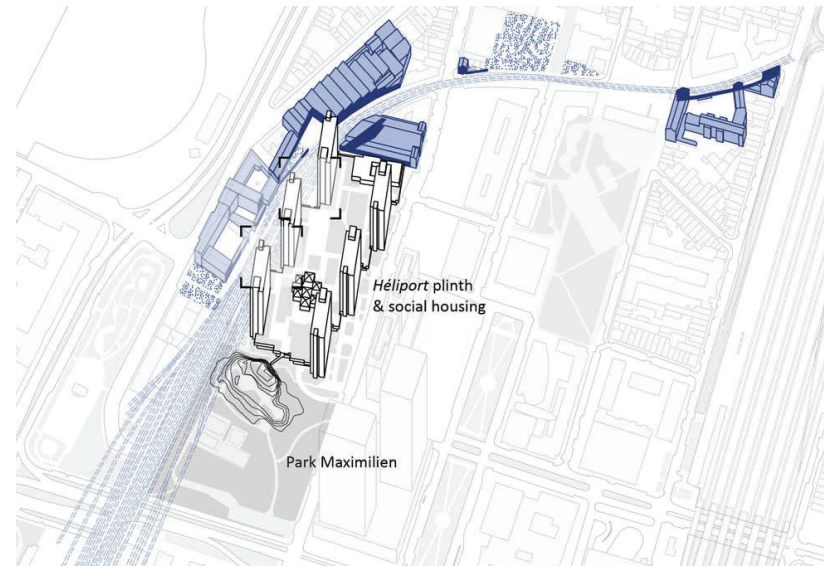


Figure 4: Avenue de l'Héliport: Allée Verte railway & inherited industrial backside. Courtesy: Drawing by author, August 2019

connected to public transportation, and the nearby popular open-air hand carwash that employs tens of young people demonstrate a local, tight entanglement between cars and public space.

Avenue de l'Héliport is the shapeless negative of a disjunctive assemblage between an obsolete and long disappeared infrastructure (*Allée Verte* railway, 1835-1954) and the modernist north-south orientation of the housing blocks and plinth (1970s). The curvy paved road offers a rare and fascinating urban décor (an inhabitant affirms that a high-speed car chase involving French actor Jean Dujardin was filmed here a few years ago), between an alignment of backside entrances and industrial warehouses. The impressive width contrasts with its emptiness, rarely disrupted by local traffic. Alternative driveway (for the school across) or (wild) parking, the misnamed *avenue de l'Héliport* accumulates contradictions. Being unclear as an urban figure, it implicitly invites to resignifications.

Bordering this *tableau vivant*, the blind walls of the plinth covered by overhanging railings frame less legible spaces: homeless people share them with occasional wild deposits (furniture, clothes, building materials, etc.) or flash (illicit) dealings. The grass tartan down the block, littered with trash and dog's droppings, is endlessly cleaned by the municipal maintenance team. In front of a housing block, a few elderly people join forces to turn a monotonous grass tray into flowerbed, playing the role of public space's beneficiaries and caretakers.

A multitude of other stories similarly unfold on the parallel *chaussée d'Anvers*—the former medieval *chemin* then *route d'Anvers* historically linking Brussels to Antwerp, later cut off and bypassed by new infrastructures. Downscaled to a local commercial road with construction wholesalers and entertainments shops, it is partly closed off on Wednesdays for market purposes. Here again, the infrastructure breakdown highlights the space's failure as signifier and simultaneously points out the potential for reinterpretation. A local youth group identifies itself as "CDA," an acronym representing the mutilated figure of *chaussée d'Anvers*, where young people gather in front of popular snack shops, bars, car washes, barbershops and Ladbroke's entrances. In that disputed multi-ethnic

territory, old men count on one hand the last cafés (serving alcohol) in the neighborhood.

Next to an old abandoned refrigerator, or a ripped-open couch, all these street manifestations could appear anecdotal; however, challenging mainstream discourses on social housing inhabitants' desolation or passivity, it rather displays an active engagement with space, turning social housing residents into creative dwellers. Discretely, it invites architects to learn from them.

THE PLINTH INSIDE OUT

In *Héliport* social housing, strategies to disseminate "good behaviors of inhabitation" among tenants are multiplying, teaching them how to manage a home with diligence on topics like ecology (hot water restriction and intermittent heating), hygiene (forced ventilation through the cooker hood on a 7am-10pm timer), co-habitation (the corridor shared maintenance organization displayed on the walls, cameras to control behaviors in the common spaces), etc. In turn, inhabitants develop tactics to perform their own way of living, as many alternatives mediate between rules and personal constraints: installing

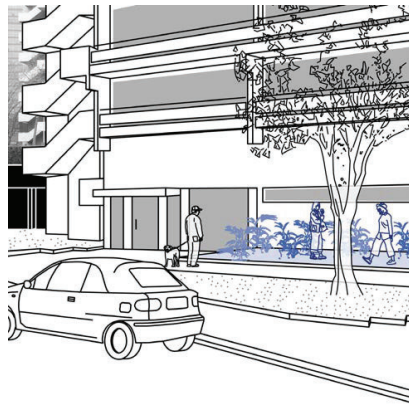


Figure 5: Along Avenue de l'Héliport: (b) Elderlies gardening in front of blind ground floor. Courtesy: Drawing by author, August 2019

wall-like curtains, reusing water from the laundry to clean shared corridors, etc.

Whether in the public space or inner courtyard, the ambiguous status of the *Héliport* plinth raises other tensions; the housing buildings are managed and ruled by *Le Foyer Laekenois*, while the public garden is owned and maintained by the City of Brussels. The municipality and housing company have installed local antennas on the plinth (*ASBL Cité Modèle*, *PCS Quartier Nord*, *MQ Millénaire*, *MJ l'Avenir*)⁶ and organized the daily maintenance, implicitly regulating uses. In contrast, despite most housing units enjoying a view on the plinth, none of them has an address on it. In parallel, controlling devices proliferate around the blocks: cameras in the hallways, electronic badges to open front doors, curfew, fences around green spaces, etc. The growing culture of security alters the perception of public space, seemingly shrinking it to the strict necessity of passage.

The plinth is an in-between figure: morphologically "inside" (inner garden of a building block) but officially "outside" (public space), it presents a rather unnatural composition. Ground and building (parking rooftop), the difference in levels isolates the garden. Local destination more than shortcut, the plinth is

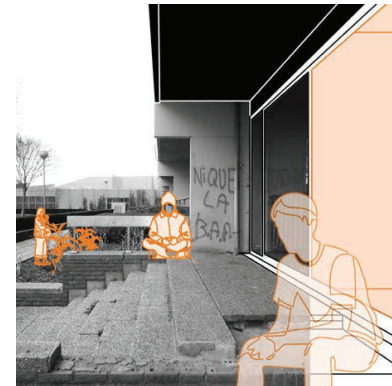
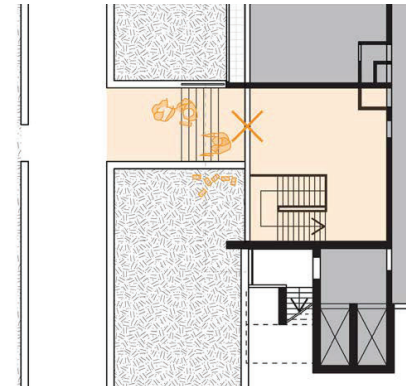


Figure 6: Héliport plinth. A few steps leading to a closed vitrine formerly connected to the building's inner distribution: (a) collage & (b) plan. Courtesy: Drawing by author, August 2019

not crossed by any commuter and is rarely visited by any outsider. It is an exception in the local street life, animated by the continuous drilling of the construction sites around. The set of stairs and slopes linking street to the elevated plateau are narrow, tortuous, and poorly maintained. While comfortless, they do help preserve the garden's quietness. In the original 1970s modernist project, a vitrine opened on an indoor staircase connecting each building to the plinth. Today, these accesses are closed, generating inside (inaccessible) and outside (re-signified) dead-end spaces. As a third ambivalent urban figure, the platform generates feelings of problematic disconnection (among outsiders, designers⁷), late-night unsafety (elderlies), demonstrations of deep attachment (young men), etc.

Overdesigned but weakly defined, the plinth attracts spontaneous reinterpretations. Every day after school, teenagers meet on the platform, walking, sitting on the slopes and stairs, and standing on the footbridge connecting the plinth to the adjacent Maximilian Park, on the balconies overlooking the street and the police school across *chaussée d'Anvers*, etc. The slab becomes alternately a noisy playground, soccer field, motorbike track in the evening, drug dealing platform, etc. Some groups spray graffiti on walls and pavements; in leaving marks, they turn public space into personal



territory, opportunistically [ab]using spatial qualities [programmatic, access, control] of underdefined interstices.

However, the manifold expressions of this deep attachment are controversial. As shared space, the inner garden articulates the co-presence of differences, challenged by the subjective appreciation of “right distance.”⁸ One isolated senior living on the plinth level got his window broken at night, shortly after he recorded young men riding motorbikes. Another inhabitant extends his balcony on the public garden, using privatization as a mean for socialization with everyday passersby. Right next to his balcony, undocumented migrants store their belongings and improvise a changing room. Farther away, a few elderly people set up and maintain vegetable, flower, and herbs gardens, well protected behind high and solid fences preventing intrusion.

Exemplary of resignification tactics, the eastern slope was torn down last year (October 2018), before the municipal elections. The “*spir*”—as locally called by young men, derived from “*spiral*”—had been blamed for hosting drug dealing and youth late-night meetings while damaging the feeling of safety among other inhabitants. Diverting its original function, young men turned a public passage into an occupation, reducing the plinth’s porosity to the public realm. The demolition forced the displacement of the subversive activities. Just like the closed vitrine mentioned earlier, the slope’s clearance generates [dead-end] spaces awaiting new meanings: the balcony becomes a meeting space and playground for teenagers. Down the street, it opens the view, erasing layers, and emphasizes the closure of the building’s ground floor. Now the loss raises a new urban question: how do we deal with a blind wall on a public space?

VERS UN SOCLE PLUS OUVERT: DESIGNING WITH ETHNOGRAPHY

The overlay of spatial manipulations [buildings and infrastructures] and regulatory frameworks have accumulated contradictions and inconsistencies in the Northern Quarter, and more specifically around the *Héliport* plinth and collective housing. These spatial misfits challenge the widespread middle-class



Figure 7: Chaussée d’Anvers: Conflictual resignification. A slope formerly occupied by young men was demolished in October 2018. Courtesy: Drawing by author, August 2019

standard definition of public spaces, introducing cracks, exceptions, and mobilizing locals’ creativity. Interstices get charged with new meanings and alternative uses and occupations, colored by the people engaging with them. In-between spaces showcase urban diversity, accommodating the excluded otherness. They display the unspoken claim, the invisible but implicit fight. Articulations between different worlds, interstices are both mediating spaces and disputed thresholds—undoubtedly spaces for socialization threatened by privatization supposedly to consolidate security. Conflictual co-habitations and forced interventions can eventually lead to displacements, inducing a migratory pattern of spatial practices looking for other interstices.

Nevertheless, urban contexts need margins, loose spaces to be the alternative ground, the honest and democratic stage of what is a neighborhood today⁹ and a simultaneous performance of what it could become tomorrow. In my opinion, the plinth (like *avenue de l’Héliport* or *chaussée d’Anvers*) is—due to its history, morphology, materiality, etc.—one of these loose spaces, or rather, an articulation of loose spaces staging a multitude of spatial variations from home to street. It physically translates into a messy collage, a

broken mosaic with inconsistencies, morphological mismatches, and interstitial spaces not belonging to any system. Weakly defined, these gaps are left open to interpretation, subversion, and resignification. In the mixed and multicultural Northern Quarter, interstices are “stages” conditioning and framing the negotiation of co-presence. As leftovers, they allow for and are reciprocally activated by the performance, the mutual entanglement between evolving space and society. Combining and mediating the different temporalities and movements of urban space and users’ everyday lives, they orchestrate plays on a binary rhythm that produce harmonies and dissonances, and simultaneously transform, stress, or soften their own in-between condition.

Beyond the map, the immersive experience bodily confronts personal limits, cultural expectations, and local necessities, sketching a multiple definition of public space closely bound to its context. *Héliport* is intensely used (young men) and avoided (young women), anonymous (dumpsite) and meaningful (gardening), conflictual and mediator. The presence and absence of these [in]visible markers, report cultural relationships with space and environment. Moreover, they are manifold expressions of politics. Does the over-representation of young men indicate a playful public space or a lack of infrastructure dedicated to (and opportunity for) them? Does street dwelling concentration highlight the welcoming (quiet, safe) character of a space, or the absence of decent organized shelter for the same group? Does young women’s invisibility express an attachment/seclusion to the private space or an exclusive and gendered local public space? Ethnography invites us to decode signs and tactics that individuals and groups – as consumers-makers¹⁰ – perform out of necessity or freedom on a space to overcome its difficulties or commit to its maintenance, and eventually project its ideal version for the future.

Urbanists tend to project a functionalist vision for space. We design to host activities and programs, and we plan for users. By our practice, we regulate space and control people.¹¹ Mobilizing ethnography aims at enlarging our scope and enriching our vocabulary. It forces us to present ourselves not as urban professionals, but as active recipients of a

local expertise, (un)consciously trained through the repetition of everyday practices. It challenges our role, the hierarchy and timeframe of conventional projects, confronts ephemerality and reiteration, fieldwork’s unknown dimension, and the future’s uncertainty. This shift of perspective is subversive because it forces us to move out of our offices and personally connect with the site we plan to transform. Provocative, it potentially confronts with critical practices, generating contradictory feelings as it stresses the limitation of space to control behaviors. To the contrary, the fieldwork in *Héliport* reveals a patchwork of marginal spaces, forgotten by the ruling institutions but under an unrecorded local maintenance. Cities and buildings are moving objects, endlessly adjusted.¹² However, interrogating the invisible present must keep us in the motion of projection to avoid falling into a static fascination. There lies perhaps the most challenging aspect for architectural ethnography, and arguably, its limits.

The brief “*Héliport: vers un socle plus ouvert*” presents the plinth as an obstacle: kilometers of blind walls, closed ground floors, impermeability between parking and street, (dis)connection of elevated garden, concrete materiality, etc. “*Opening the plinth*” invites us to clarify the blurred contours between private and public realms. Rather, could it be addressed as an opportunity to rethink the plinth as signifier: an urban structure with a clear definition, “open” to everyone (whatever culture, gender, age, income...), to all activities? To borrow again the theatrical metaphor: make it a meaningful stage. The walls of the plinth could get some thickness, ranging from a separating line (between spaces of different value, urban chambers) to a container of techniques (supporting performances displayed on public space), a backstage, a curtain—a movable wall that expands the street realm for a while—a building, or inhabited wall, backgrounds for new plays/activities.

Mapping is a historical and territorial reconstruction of a site-palimpsest.¹³ Ethnography reveals different sense(s) of the same place and stimulates interpretation. Finally, that is perhaps what we, as contemporary architects and urbanists must do in priority, working with interstitial spaces: building or restoring democratic meanings in urban settings and keeping our practice political. ■

ENDNOTES

1. "Héliport: *toward a more open plinth*" – design competition launched by the City of Brussels and the Brussels Bouwmeester on October 8th, 2018.
2. "Plan d'Aménagement Directeur Maximilien-Vergote" (PAD) – vision developed for the Northern Quarter by the design team: 1010au & grue, 2017 – ongoing.
3. Alan D. Marvell and David Simm, "Unravelling the geographical palimpsest through fieldwork: discovering a sense of place," *Geography* 101, no. 3 (2016): 126.
4. ASBL Cité Modèle, local antenna of the social housing company *Le Foyer Laekenois*; PCS Quartier Nord, social cohesion program jointly supported by the municipality of Brussels and the social housing company *Le Foyer Laekenois*; Maison de Quartier Millénaire, municipal community house (for elders mainly); Maison de Jeunes l'Avenir, municipal youth house, closed since 2017 after being damaged.
5. See call for interest "*Héliport : vers un socle plus ouvert*." See also discussions conducted in March 2019 with PAD Maximilien-Vergote authors (1010au & grue) and the winning design team selected for the study on the *Héliport* plinth (Centrale).
6. Camillo Boano and Giovanna Astolfo, "The new Urban Question: A conversation on the legacy of Bernardo Secchi with Paola Pellegrini," *Society and Space*, December 16, 2014.
7. Andrea Mubi Brighenti, *Urban Interstices: The Aesthetics and the Politics of the In-between* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
8. André Corboz, "The Land as Palimpsest", *Diogenes* 31, no. 121 (1983), 12-34.
9. Hilde Heynen, "Space as Receptor, Instrument or Stage: Notes on the Interaction Between Spatial and Social Constellations," *International Planning Studies* 18, no. 3-4 (2013), 342-357.
10. Michel de Certeau, "The Practice of Everyday Life. 'Making do': uses and tactics," in *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, ed. Gabrielle M. Spiegel (London: Routledge, 2004), 229-289.
11. Garrett Wolf and Nathan Mahaffey, "Designing Difference: Co-Production of Spaces of Potentiality," *Urban Planning* 1, no. 1 (2016): 59-67.
12. Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva, "Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move: An ANT's view of architecture", in *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, design, research*, ed. Reto Geiser (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008), 80-89.
13. Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens, *Loose Space: Diversity and Possibility in Urban Life* (London: Routledge, 2006).