

Retrofitting Suburban Settlements. A project for Limburg

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ABSTRACT

One of the rising challenges for architects is to rethink the future of suburban territories built through the repetition of the detached single-family house. If until the 90's the suburbs offered an attractive way of life, today many suburban territories are in demographic and economic decline. The province of Limburg in Flanders (Belgium) is a clear example of such condition. The article illustrates a design-research project that aimed at rethinking this suburban territory as a place where new generations could live and work. By reflecting on the historical circumstances that led to the construction of this suburban region, on the recent transformations of domestic space, and on the potential of landscape resources to restructure sprawling territories, the proposal becomes a wider case through which to start rethinking the condition of living and working in the contemporary city.

One of the rising and most pressing challenges for architecture is to rethink the future of suburban territories built through the repetition of one single type, the detached single-family house. If until the 90's the suburbs offered an attractive way of life and many regions in Europe have been covered by urban sprawl (the most notable ones being the Italian territories of the north-east, the Swiss Mittelland and Flanders in Belgium), today this seems to be no longer the case. For many people, especially younger generations, the city offers more opportunities for living and working. The rising pressure on the city have led architects during the past decades to largely focus on the city and search spatial solutions for its densification. Yet, at the same time, the city's 'success' seems to have reached a point of saturation. Now dense with inhabitants, it is increasingly difficult to find generous spaces for living or working in the city, especially when it comes to entrepreneurial forms of production that are not confined within the limits of the 'freelance' or 'service economy'. For these reasons, we have been interested in looking at one of these exemplary suburban territories – the region of Limburg in Flanders, Belgium – and understand its potential as becoming again an attractive and alternative place for living and working. To do so, it is important to first situate such hypothesis within Belgium's long history of urbanization and understand the social, cultural, and economic meaning that the single-family home has in such territories. By understanding the deep causes of the current urban crisis in Limburg, Flanders and Europe, it is possible to propose a

credible and transformative project of an exemplary sprawling territory.

QUESTIONING THE DETACHED SINGLE-FAMILY HOME

Flanders has a high number of homeowners and single-family houses: 70 percent of all houses are owned and almost 80 percent of the housing stock is made up of single-family houses.⁽¹⁾ This situation is rather unique in Europe and casts a long shadow back over the history of Belgium as an independent nation-state and its politics in support of home ownership.

Since the late 19th Century, Belgium's housing condition has been characterized by the hegemony of the single-family home as a way of life – a condition created by the long-standing 'anti-city' policy promoted by the Belgian government (De Meulder, Schreurs, Cock, & Notteboom, 1999). After its rise as an independent nation-state, Belgium went through a rampant process of industrialization, which triggered several social conflicts. Fearing a high concentration of urban-dwelling workers, during the 19th Century the Liberal-Catholic government pursued a policy of dispersing the labor force throughout the rural territory by promoting homeownership and affordable railway transport. Urban sprawl in Belgium was a carefully orchestrated political project with a threefold objective: the ruralization of industrial workers, the promotion of homeownership and the reinforcement of family values. The State's promotion of homeownership was an especially successful tactic that enabled the social, political, and, above all, ideological integration of the working class into the capitalist system (De Decker, 2011). This

was achieved by creating an institutional framework that allowed workers to obtain an adequate financial base through local savings and loan associations.⁽²⁾ The ease of obtaining funding for homeownership was reflected by the availability of domestic typologies, which combined affordability and the possibility of a family dwelling freed from the hectic rhythms of metropolitan concentrations. If one of the major tendencies in housing since the 19th Century was the splitting of living and working functions – the house on the one hand and the workplace on the other –, then, within the Belgian housing condition, the separation between the workplace and the home became even more radical: work was limited to cities, and living to the countryside. Suburban living was promoted not just as a housing solution, but as a way of life – the once-struggling family was suddenly unburdened from the toil and promiscuity of wage-laboring activities. The State reinforced this ideology by promoting and financing a whole spectrum of non-profit social organizations such as trade unions, farmers' association and women's organizations whose overarching goal was to educate dwellers in the virtues of family living (De Caigny, 2005). The activities of these organizations focused on every aspect of domestic living, including architecture. There was an urgency to emphasize certain aspects of a domestic space such as the representative role of the living room, replete with an outstanding fireplace, and the generous provision of bedrooms to individuate and define the role of each family member. In addition, both government institutions and social organizations were keen to emphasize the private garden (an important complement to the single-family house), 'sweetening' their idea of domestic life by connecting 'home' to 'land'. Yet gardens were also important as instruments of housekeeping – they provided space for domestic chores, such as washing and

drying laundry, and for the cultivation of the kitchen's herb and vegetable patches. Above all, the garden played an important role as a form of recreation, discouraging life in denser urban centers. In the imaginary of the home, the garden is a symbol of conforming to the local community (a non-manicured garden is a symbol of anti-social attitude), and today this remains one of its strongest roles – as testified by the elaborate topiaries of many homes in the region (Verbeek, Pisman, Leinfelder, & Allaert, 2011).

Following the Second World War and the advent of the welfare State, the government continued to promote home ownership and the further decentralization of urban living, making the entire rural territory of Belgium a de facto place for living. While in countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, planning activities were centralized and administrated by national institutions, in Belgium the government supported housing and the planning of amenities by subsidizing local authorities and private owners, thus devolving the re-urbanization of the country to a myriad of actors.⁽³⁾ As it has been noted, the middle-class colonization of the countryside took place in a piecemeal manner without the framework of a spatial planning policy, and this process of urbanization was the result of a governmental initiative rather than laissez-faire politics. Housing policy was thus an extension of the Fordist mode of production into the realm of domestic life. Despite its vernacular and pastoral appearance, Belgian houses were the product of a well-organized industrial process whose main goal was to make the house itself an item of consumption to instigate wealth production. Since the 60's, the middle class has built or purchased single-family houses much as they would consumer goods, a trend that consequently set the pace for the whole building industry.

In the last few decades, the progressive decline of the welfare State has only reinforced what was previously done. The success of living in the countryside peaked in the 80's and 90's when a new wave of detached homes flooded the already saturated 'countryside'. This time, the motivation was the possibility of owning a second-home. Moreover, many people from neighboring countries such as Germany and the Netherlands relocated to rural areas in Flanders to own a larger home in a taxpayer-friendly country. This phenomenon, which occurred especially close to the national border, gave rise to the 'villa parks' – clusters of large villas with large gardens, detached from any existing rural centers.

An important aspect of the single-family home in Flanders is its resistance to change. This has led researchers to define the problem of housing in terms of 'obduracy' (Bervoets & Heynen, 2013). What the political and economic process succinctly described above has left on the ground is very difficult to modify or alter. Not only are domestic habits extremely enduring and hard to change since they give a sense of orientation, especially within uncertain times, but also, the house itself speaks to a system in which a specific spatial condition is linked with deep-seated social and juridical frameworks. It is hard, for example, to imagine that those who are accustomed to living in a detached home would allow the further subdivision of their property or the sharing of their garden, but the future of baby-boomer-built suburban housing raises many questions, especially considering recent social and economic changes. In Europe, there is a visible trend that sees the reduction of household size to an average of 2.5 persons per house, and a growing mismatch between the number of suburban houses and the newer generations' desire to live in cities. After secondary school, many people

leave their parents' suburban houses. Another urgent issue is the rising elderly population, which finds itself increasingly isolated and lacking adequate care. While the countryside offers some respite from the hectic life of cities, the increasing depopulation and lack of social services make their lives lonely and devoid of social interaction. This condition is not only negative for the elderly, but also for the social wellbeing of the suburban territory.

Indeed, today the large suburban home with its spacious garden is the antithesis of what seems to be the most desirable form of accommodation – namely, a small house in the city – a condition that is even physically reflected in the area and program of these houses; a gap exists between their generous floor plans and the number of people who live in them. Moreover, many of the older suburban homes have a dated layout comprising many rooms, small corridors and steep stairs. They also feature an overdesigned architecture – an external rustic facade and an abundance of differentiated spaces inside, each requiring a specific kind of furniture. This condition leaves little freedom to adapt the domestic space of the home to new functions such as a workspace. Finally, rigid zoning codes – introduced only after the chaotic spread of detached homes has already taken place – prevent the possibility to retrofit existing properties and to thus transform the single-family house into a multi-family dwelling.

All these factors – relevant users, location, size, program, aesthetics, and flexibility of plan – have challenged the typology of the detached single-family home as the ideal house and it is not difficult to predict that in less than 20 years, considering the changing demographics, the entire stock of suburban homes will become obsolete and lose part of its economic value. Yet, it is precisely this threat that can push

for radical reform. Over the last decade, Flanders has timidly looked at alternatives to the single-family house, which address the possibility of densification and further subdivision of the existing allotments (Hayden, 1982).⁽⁴⁾ Although the juridical procedure for internal subdivision of the detached house can be complicated, new legislative measures have allowed the introduction of accessory dwelling units to existing family houses for care purpose. Yet, possibilities such as this are still limited if we consider the magnitude of the problem. To effectively tackle the rapid obsolescence of suburban houses, one should consider another important factor and lever in the radical change of these dispersed territories, and namely the emergence of new forms of living in relation to changing conditions of work.

CHALLENGING DOMESTIC SPACE

Unlike previous forms of domestic space, modern housing was invented by splitting 'living' and 'working' into two separate domains. We tend to underestimate the origin and the impact of this separation in the maintenance of the household.⁽⁵⁾ While until the 19th Century both living and working took place within house, with the rise of industrialization the workspace became a separate entity. This was not just a physical and spatial separation, but also – and especially – a social and juridical one. It implied that only work done in the workplace such as the factory or the office was going to be remunerated, while activities such as caring, raising kids, cooking, washing, and taking care of the household would be unpaid activities of the family, and thus considered a 'labor of love'. The exploitation of domestic labor has been a constant of domestic space since ancient times, but with the rise of industrial capitalism, the house was engineered to become capital's 'secret abode' – a resource which capital takes

largely for free. Only when professionalized – i.e., with maids – does it become paid work, but only a minority of households can afford professional domestic labor, while in the majority of cases this kind of work falls entirely on the shoulders of the family and traditionally on those of women.⁽⁶⁾

The house as a private place where a sense of intimacy is cultivated has been a powerful way to naturalize domestic labor, rendering it an intimate activity done only for the sake of the family and not for society at large. Within this context, the house became the pastoral refuge whose sense of intimacy and familial care were only enhanced against the backdrop of the immoral world, and the cult of domesticity as the idyll of family life was therefore born out of these social and political conditions. Family, private property and the detached home therefore became the trinity out of which suburban sprawl emerged. The separation between household and workplace was possible as long as wage labor was performed within defined temporal and spatial boundaries – the factory and the office were places in which work was defined by the 9-to-5 schedule.

Today this condition has drastically changed. With the rise of the Internet and the spread of 'immaterial' production, working activities have exceeded traditional spatial and temporal limits: work happens everywhere and at any time, and often within the domestic space (Lazzarato, 1996). This condition is problematic because work tends to invade any aspect of life, but it becomes even more problematic when, for those who do not have a dedicated 'office', there is no sufficient room for more flexibly organizing work-related activities. For example, it is difficult (if not impossible) to host a workplace like a small office, a retail space or a workshop within a detached home. Circulation and the pronounced

functional identity of domestic rooms (i.e., living rooms vs. bedrooms) is often an obstacle to working activities. This condition is made even more problematic by zoning codes and the juridical distinctions that make it impossible to use one's home as a workplace. And yet the only rising forms of production in these times of economic stagnation are small companies – 2 to 5 people – that would otherwise fit well within the domestic space if the latter could only offer some flexibility.

The advantages of working at home are usually to spare commuting time and to have a more flexible schedule. The disadvantages are working alone and a lack of social interaction. Communal living can increase the advantages and reduce the disadvantages of working at home by allowing people who do different work to share the same space. This situation is particularly convenient for artisans whose work requires bigger spaces and costly tools. In a shared workspace both square meters and working tools can be shared and thus have a minimal impact on the budget of one individual company or person. Another advantage to working at home, or very close to it, is that it allows for the combination of domestic chores – in a generous communal area, for example, different families or workers can also organize a space for communal childcare.

For these arrangements, suburban territories are both problematic and potentially beneficial. They are problematic because contemporary forms of work require a high degree of cooperation and social interaction, and these are the precise qualities that suburbia has traditionally been thought to lack. They have potential, however, because suburban places are today cheaper than city property and above all they are more generous in terms of space. What

prevents a new scenario from blossoming is the lack of both services and flexibility beyond family living. Within this condition, a more communal way of living would challenge both the lack of flexibility of the single-family home and the introversion of domestic labor. Communal living implies a more rational use of space and resources and exposes domestic labor as work that is necessary and that can be shared among the household members. Spaces such as kitchens, living rooms, and gardens can be shared by different families. As mentioned before, today the average family is composed of two or three members, which means there is more possibility for families to share a greater number of domestic facilities with the consequent reduction of domestic labor and energy consumption.

A PROJECT FOR LIMBURG. THREE STEPS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF A SUBURBAN TERRITORY

Limburg is a region located in the east part of Belgium, at the border with the Netherlands and close to Germany and Luxembourg. Once the El Dorado of coal extraction, then a pastoral retreat, several factors have led this suburban territory towards a condition of obsolescence. Yet, giving its central geographical position within Europe and the establishment of the country's largest National Park in 2006, the Hoge Kempen, are both recognized as great resources and fulcrum for reinterpreting this territory from a dormant suburb into a place that is desirable to both live in and work.


Aligned with this purpose of making Limburg a living and working area, Dogma's proposal consists of three distinct and, to some extent, consequential steps. The first step is a short-term scenario, which proposes punctual interventions primarily focused on public facilities. One of the most remarkable aspects of this

territory is its lack of civic space besides commerce and town centers. Civic space is understood as space that is beyond commerce, housing and circulation. These facilities are at first positioned to reinforce and emphasize the edge of the National Park with a path that makes the edge itself a public space. This path is defined by a sequence of Civic Centers that, like sentinels, guard the park and allow different communities to use their premises. These Civic Centers are the necessary first step to encourage communities to come together and organize themselves as a collective subject rather than as a mass of individuals. In such way, the path along the National Park can become the catalyst for other linear paths that define and reinforce the territorial features of this conurbation – the main road, the canal, the river. A series of minimal interventions such as bus stops, benches, playgrounds, and platforms are the subsequent stepping-stones that highlight the paths as public 'shorelines'. Rather than simply functioning as the sum of autonomous settlements, this conurbation can become a more structured territory whose main reference points are public facilities that challenge the privacy of suburban life.

The second step proposes a planned partial demolition of existing houses to shrink the footprint of built space and to enhance open land for agricultural use. Most of the houses in this territory are detached family homes that are resistant to any alternative use, and many are either underused or vacant. Moreover, several houses have been built outside concentrated settlements as self-standing structures along roads. Given the current demographic trend of this territory, which itself faces increasing depopulation, it is easy to imagine that in the next ten years most of these houses could become redundant. This is both a problem and a unique opportunity to put

forward a scenario in which municipalities can financially support homeowners who decide to demolish their over-dimensioned and underused home and invest in more sustainable and collective forms of dwelling.

The third step resists the current situation – that of an increasingly depopulated suburb – and instead proposes that, given the evolution of the ways in which we live and work, suburban sites may become attractive once again. Yet, this assumption is plausible only through a radical transformation of the economic and spatial rationales that have produced the suburban way of living in the last century. This step addresses the possibility of re-populating the suburbs, focusing on the retrofitting of existing settlements. This retrofitting is put forward through a series of housing types that question the standard of the detached single-family home by providing spaces that can easily adapt to different activities and forms of association. These housing types imply a different model of ownership, which is no longer tuned to a parcel of spaces but rather to a system of facilities.

Our project offers a range of possibilities for the near future. Because the proposal can only be conceived as a gradual transformation – one that involves a myriad of actors, from the State to local municipalities to citizens – it is important to highlight all possible directions, as opposed to one defined way forward. Our proposals therefore should be understood as possible examples of what this transformation might entail offering a glimpse of different living and working conditions we imagine for the near future. 

NOTES

- (1) See: Vanneste, Thomas, & Vanderstraeten, 2008.
- (2) See: Buyst, 1992.
- (3) See: Bervoets & Van de Weijer, 2010.
- (4) See: Antoninetti, 2008.
- (5) For an incisive critique on traditional domestic space as a private space separated from the workspace, see: Hayden, 1982.
- (6) About the exploitation of domestic labour, see: Federici, 2012.

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