

# Learning from the Urban Commons in Flanders and Brussels

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**Keywords:** Urban Commons, Bottom-up, DIY urbanism, Make-shift urbanism, Palettes.

## 1. Introduction

In Europe, social, economic and technological consequences of the industrial revolution have brought several challenges to the use and management of the commons (Bravo and De Moor, 2008). By the beginning of the twentieth century, *private property and market exchange* became the dominant organizational logic and led to the gradual disappearance of the historical commons which used to shape the rural landscape of Europe (Peman and De Moor, 2013). At the center of this logic was the emerging model of economic man -*homo economicus*- a self-interest driven rational being in contrast with *homo cooperans* who acts on the basis of free cooperation, consensus building and self-organization.

In addition to these socio-economic and spatial transformations, most prominently after the 1970s, neoliberal policies and globalization promoted practices which are disconnected from the needs of the people (Harvey, 2013). Consequently, common resources -and specifically public spaces in our cities- started to be increasingly exploited by market forces (Helfrich, 2011). In time, these practices become widespread and transformed into spatial production modes through which global capitalism and political regimes exercise and express their power (Newton and Pak, 2015, p.101).

Following these developments, the financial crisis of the 2007-2008 and the austerity measures adopted by the governments have moved alternative approaches to making urban spaces to the center stage. Since then, there has been a resurgence in the number of do-it-yourself (DIY) cooperatives initiated by citizens, activists, artists and designers. Ordinary people all around the world have started to claim a shaping power over the processes of urbanization; over the ways in which our cities are made and remade (Harvey, 2013, p.5). In literature, these have been given a variety of names such as: "DIY urbanism", "make-shift urbanism", "austerity urbanism" (Tonkiss, 2013).

The international Occupy movements against social and economic inequality produced several relevant examples. In most cases, the citizens went beyond protesting and attempted to establish different forms of temporary commons. For instance the occupation of the Taksim Square and the Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013 or the Movimiento 15M in Madrid and Barcelona in 2011-2015 were clear bottom-up initiatives appropriating, reclaiming and redefining public spaces as a reaction to neoliberal planning policies which involved creating alternative mechanisms to re-distribute commons resources such as land, food, books and medicine.

However, DIY cooperatives are not limited to radical protests. For instance, commonly referenced examples such as R-urban by Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée and the Prinzessinnengarten –urban gardens- in Berlin Kreuzberg point out to hybrid strategies which range across different vectors: *from temporary to permanent; public to private; authored to anonymous; collective to individual; legal to illegal; unmediated to mediated* (Iveson, 2013). In this sense, it is necessary to recognize the diversity of these

individual initiatives. On the other hand, what is clear is that within these initiatives, 1) *creating* and 2) *safeguarding* urban commons emerge as two shared lines of interest (Bradley, 2015)

All the developments reported above have made echoes in Belgium and resulted in numerous bottom-up initiatives for making urban commons. In this study, we will specifically focus on these attempts at communing, located in Brussels and the broader Flemish region.

In this context, the main aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the implicit design principles behind the urban commons in this particular context by making a critical analysis of their spatial and material qualities in relation to the local collectives that create them.

Our study will present a study of specific cases from Belgium (Ghent and Brussels) and reveal the shared qualities inherent in these collective self-built interventions (Section 2). As result, we will discuss the *design principles* behind palesthetics (Section 3); trace the unspoken rules regarding the appropriation of the referenced resources and how they are adapted to local conditions (Ostrom, 1990).

## 2. Learning from the Spaces of the Urban Commons in Flanders and Brussels

Flanders is known to have historically hosted rural commons (Institutions for Collective Action, 2015). Among these, two of them are well researched: Heirnismeersen, Ghent (Sint-Baafsdorp) and Gemene en loweiden in Assebroek and Oedelem. The first one, Heirnismeersen, was a marsh used as common land (Figure 1) which was founded in the twelfth century and terminated before the year 1930 (De Moor, M. and Debbaut, 2002).



Figure 1. Heirnismeersen Ghent indicated as “Groote Heirnesse” at the center of the map of Ghent (and Belgium) dating from 1904 Source: NGI Belgium

The second, Gemene en loweiden is a large piece of land (85 hectares) located in between Assebroek, today a suburb of Bruges, and the town of Oedelem. It was founded in the fifteenth century and still operational today not because of the need but rather as a continuation of medieval traditions (Nieuwsblad, 2014). The common land and commons regulations regarding this piece of land has also survived (De Moor, M. and Debbaut, 2002). The area is currently urbanized and at the border of the city of Bruges. As referenced above both of the commons were rural.

From a contemporary perspective, at least one initiative can be referenced as “urban commons” in Flanders. Boerenhof is an inner courtyard located in Ghent between the streets of Schommel, Kwakkel, Pannen and Victor Fris. It has been studied in-depth by Hanne van Reusel in the framework of a Master’s Dissertation (Van Reusel, 2014).

Until 2014 eighty numerous dilapidated garages were occupying the area (Figure 2 at the top). The city of Ghent purchased this land and aimed to develop the site as a parking lot (Stad Gent, 2015). Many residents of the surrounding houses disagreed with this plan and united in a group of residents called “’t Boerenhof” (Van Reusel, 2014). Through various temporary (and partially illegal) interventions this activist group made a permanent convinced the City of Ghent to use the entire area as a green area, partly shared with the neighborhood. Owners of the homes in the surrounding streets can now own and self-organize a piece of garden (Stad Gent, 2015).



Figure 2. ‘t Boerenhof, at the top: before (2013) and at the bottom: after (2015) the demolition of the garages and the interventions by the group of residents. Source: Microsoft and Google.

The interventions by the residents were quite diverse in time and space. The starting gesture was to plant a tree to the entrance of the site which had a symbolic meaning, followed by making garden furniture using recycled palettes (Figure 3), cultivating the land and planting vegetables and flowers, creating a playground and a mini kitchen for children, placing temporary tent structures and organizing small inviting events, opening holes in the garden walls to access the garden and installing

bird houses and scarecrows (Van Reusel, 2014). Most of these interventions were built by the residents from different age groups (including youngsters) as DIY projects. This process reveals how simple construction methods can lead to complex designs such as garden furniture incorporating a deck, seats and a planter full of interesting plants.



Figure 3. Some of the interventions self-made by the residents of 't Boerenhof. Source: The public Facebook Group of 't Boerenhof

A second context to study is Brussels, an extremely fertile ground for activist movements. Being the de-facto capital of Europe, its citizens have experienced the negative repercussions of top-down planning, globalization and neoliberal policies to their highest extent; which is widely known as “Brusselization” in the literature. As a reaction to these, different forms of urban cultures and activism have emerged in the form of collectives composed of diverse individual practices coming in and out of the architecture and urban design disciplines (Doucet, 2010). Not all are documented well and it is quite difficult to have a complete overview of all of the cases in this paper. The attempts to create a network of the local commons are under progress.

To start with, Brussels has an established culture of **collective urban gardens** (*les potagers urbains collectifs*) all around the city; mostly in the form of “kitchen” or “edible” gardens where herbs and vegetables are grown around the house for household use (Farmers’ Handbook, 2015). A list of active gardens classified by the city of Brussels include more than eighty collectives. Local varieties such as

chicory, radish, beans, pumpkins and peas are commonly grown by these collectives under specific terms and loan agreements (Les Potagers Urbains, 2015).

The collective gardens are managed by the gardeners themselves, which implies a collective organization and a participating group. In some cases, coordination is carried out by an institution (association, commune ...) to support the gardeners in the management of the project. Some of the gardens are made up of one large collective land where everything is shared, others are divided into individual plots, while some others adopt a mixture of both. The loan of a garden plot from the owner is limited with the activities that involve the cultivation of the land. List of recommended suppliers for collective gardens include a number of necessary resources for community gardening: hand tools, geotextile, soil, seeds, compost, rainwater tanks, fittings and pallets (Haricots, 2015).

In all collective gardening cases, efforts and resources are pooled (tools, seeds, compost ...) and the sharing of experience among gardeners is sought. For this purpose various networks are made available to the collectives including Les Potagers Urbains and Haricots asbl. Specifically the use of recycled pallets are motivated and promoted by these networks (Figure 4).

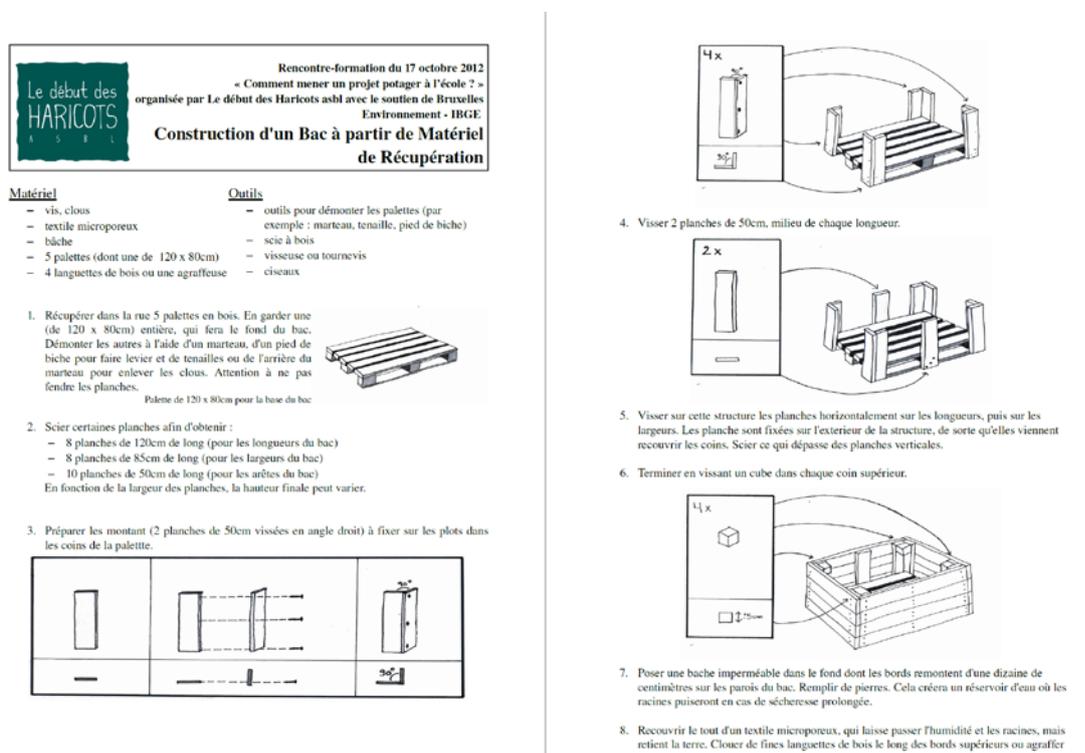


Figure 4. Instructions for making a vegetable garden project at school; by Haricots asbl and Brussels Environnement Institute (IBGE). Source: the website of Les Potagers Urbains (2015).

Another clear example urban commons is "Commons Josaphat". Brussels-Capital Region is the official owner of a large area of twenty four hectares in the Josaphat terrain in Schaarbeek, Brussels (therefore the site can be considered as public property). For years the terrain has been waiting for a new use. There is already a master plan prepared for this site unfortunately prepared without the participation of Brussels citizens (at the time of writing this paper, the plan was still not made public).

The main aim of the group Commons Josaphat is to create an alternative for this wasteland, inspired by practices of the commons and motivated by contemporary ecological issues (Commons Josaphat, 2015). This group intends to: "propose to the government a concrete way to build the common good, to give

*decision-making power to the assembly composed of all people who have a stake in the future of this neighborhood. These include local citizens, those who will live there, those who wander on it, those who work there, who look at the construction of the balcony of their window". (Commons Josaphat, 2015).*

As of August 2015, parts of the site have been appropriated by the group to form 1) an urban collective garden 2) storage of relevant resources, watertanks, compost etc. 3) a stone barbecue 4) a grid of logs as foundations of a future shed to be constructed using surplus pallets found on the site 5) a dining table made out of pallets and pieces of wood (Figure 5). All of the interventions above are intentionally made to float on the ground both as a gesture to avoid permanence and to avoid possible legal conflicts.



Figure 5. The appropriation of Josaphat site by the members of the Commons Josaphat collective as of August 2015. Photos by Burak Pak

In Brussels, there are also numerous examples of safeguarding the urban commons, specifically the public spaces. Free 54 started as an action to protest the removal of public benches from one of the most popular squares in Brussels in front of the Sainte-Catherine Church. The triggering event was an agreement made by the city of Brussels with the restaurant owners to allow them to expand their terraces further. The action was directed against the privatization of the public square in the form of invasion of terraces and large umbrellas, and the removal of banks which has been claimed to oust the loitering, unemployed and the homeless people (Brussel Nieuws, 2015),

Free 54 gained immediate support, spread beyond the reconstruction of the benches. It transformed into sporadic events of public occupation; as a provocative action claiming the whole square as urban commons (Figure 6). The creative use of recuperated pallets is a characteristic feature of the movement accompanied by self-organization practices such as a DIY bar with affordable drinks and a stand that allows the citizens to prepare their own food on the square.

According to the public declaration of the group, this movement aims to turn Saint-Catherine into a public space where all Brusselites (and visitors) can openly use as *“a meeting place, a place to eat, drink and dance together, a place to take a breath, a place where everyone is free and welcome, no matter their language, income or age”* (Free54, 2015). In this context, it won't be wrong to claim that it is a clear attempt to reframe the privatized public space as a common-pool resource.



Figure 6. Free 54 movement: Saint-Catherine as urban commons. Source: (Brussel Nieuws, 2015) and the public Facebook group of Free 54.

### 3. Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we introduced various Urban Commons in Flanders. Analyzing these cases, we find a “common” denominator, that is related to the way immediate action takes place to safeguard a common agenda. For example, we notice the extensive appropriation of recycled wood shipping pallets in these cases and how these are combined with the natural elements to create furniture, decks, walls and load-bearing structures. We call this emergent and widespread phenomenon “the palesthetics” of the urban commons.

Concluding from the different cases, there were numerous local factors that triggered the use of pallets as a commons resource. First, pallets are widely available as a surplus resource, especially within the transport industry: they are considered essential materials in a context defined by urban harvesting (Van Hinte, 2010), emphasizing the availability of local resources or materials rather than the idea of importing them that is often associated with traditional market mechanisms. Moreover, using pallets means recycling and by doing that, converts it into an attractive alternative and ethical practice. On a more practical level, using pallets means relying on an relatively easy process and assemblage of preconstructed units as the modules are easy to transport due to their lightness.

There is also a higher possibility of outdoor use, as its resistance and structural qualities are not majorly affected when in contact with water or high humidity. Related to the final result of an urban or architectural intervention, and more specifically its final aspect or image, the units have an open, unfinished and incomplete finish that is coherent with the idea of commons, that prefer relying on the process rather than on a final product or outcome. Variety is at the same time an issue, as there is a wide range of precursors or prototypes available.

Most importantly, the use of palettes seems to easily trigger an immediate action (e.g. it can be cut with a manual saw by only one person in a reasonable amount of time). In this context using palettes as a resource is really convenient for bottom-up initiatives, because the participants do not have to set up long term decision making or start from preplans. Due to the limited possibilities of dimensions it is a modular structure; but flexible at the same time.

Besides the specific use of certain materials or products as part of the commons, we would like to suggest that it is also possible to find common design strategies behind the making of the urban commons; the unspoken rules regarding the appropriation of the referenced resources and how they are adapted to local conditions.

Reflecting on the cases and the discussion above the examples of these can be summarized as:

- *Adhocism*: A strategy characterized by avoidance of pre-planning, tendency to respond only to the urgent as opposed to the important instead of establishing long-term procedures.
- *Activism*: vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving goals.
- *Adaptivity*: The inherent capacity for making adjustments to environmental conditions
- *Temporality*: Relating to the sequence of time or to a particular time
- *Incompleteness*: Refusal of a single static desired final state; making a never ending process.
- *Interactions with the nature*: The promotion of interactions with the nature or living organisms in general.

It is important to note that Adhocism and incompleteness are hardly compatible with Ostrom's (1990) first design principle that characterize robust institutions for managing common-pool natural resources. None of the urban commons reported above (except the government mediated collective gardens) had *clearly defined boundaries*. However, many of them were quite resilient (although it not easy to forecast the future of these initiatives).

A possible explanation to this phenomenon is that Ostrom's (1990) first design principle may not apply to urban commons. Urban commons are not necessarily natural resources, they are man-made. In this context, a reflection on the specificity of urban commons as an artificial construct can be an interesting topic of study.

Furthermore as a future direction; establishing a self-organized network of urban commons (as a knowledge commons) would empower the commoners as well as all researchers who want to initiate a deeper study on the urban commons.

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