How to activate urban waiting spaces for affordable and solidary mobile housing in Brussels?
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The Brussels Region is facing an ever-increasing shortage of affordable housing and an increase in the number of homeless people. The 'conventional approaches' seem insufficient to cope with the current housing crisis. For many Brussels residents, the right to housing is not guaranteed today.

In contrast, there is a large amount of undeveloped land and buildings waiting to be redeveloped. These places can offer opportunities to experiment with innovative approaches in response to the challenges and urgent needs of our society. By making these spaces available for temporary, neighbourhood-oriented (housing) projects of a social nature, citizens can help make the city.

In this context, Solidary Mobile Housing experiments with activating urban waiting spaces through the co-creation of alternative forms of housing, oriented towards the housing of vulnerable target groups.
Projects like SMH offer an answer to several problems at the same time: the lack of affordable and quality housing, the vast vacancy rate, and the very negative impact this has on the urban living environment. Moreover, the co-creative approach to these problems empowers all the participants in the project and, more particularly, the vulnerable end-users.

As the SMH/M temporary housing co-creation model has the potential to intervene within the three components of the housing system. Building upon Romainville (2015) (Figure 1), in the longer-term, this model holds the potential to structurally transform the Brussels-Capital Region's housing system.

Therefore, such projects should be politically facilitated.

Figure 1: Building upon Romainville (2015), the potentials of The Solidary Mobile Housing (SMH) model to structurally transform the Brussels-Capital Region's housing system (Source: SMH Co-create Project supported by Innoviris).
1. Develop a clear legal framework for temporary, solidary mobile/modular housing

a. with respect to urban planning:
   - Develop clear, adapted standards and a flexible and speedy application procedure for temporary housing projects. In this context, the draft bill approved by the Brussels government (21/05/2021) regarding time-limited permits is a step in the right direction, but it needs further detailing: a swift procedure should be established to expedite the permit procedure for modular housing for social purposes. Also, clear quality, safety and hygiene standards need to be developed. These need to be adapted to easily relocatable, small-scale housing. In this context, the Region could possibly draw on the framework recently adopted by the Wallonian government (see here)

   - Allow flexible granting of temporary zoning changes for temporary projects

b. with respect to production:
   - Develop simple public tendering procedures: speed should be one of SMH’s major assets.

c. with respect to management and social rights:
   - Assure future inhabitants have the possibility of domiciliation.
   - Assure future inhabitants have the possibility to co-habit while retaining their social rights as individuals.
   - Assure future residents can volunteer for the co-construction of their homes and communal areas, without possible penalties related to their replacement income.

2. Facilitate access to urban Waiting Spaces/ un(der)used urban buildings and terrains for social/solidary initiatives and/or vulnerable users:

a. Put public land and buildings at the disposal of projects of general interest (housing, infrastructure, services...). In this context, the Region should limit the selling of public real estate and even consider buying up more land for this purpose.

b. Encourage owners of vacant land to make their land and buildings (temporarily) available for projects of general interest, by making it unattractive for them to leave it unused.

c. Compile an up-to-date, online, and accessible geo-database of vacant terrains and buildings and put them at the disposal of social organisations.

d. Facilitate matchmaking between spaces and users, building in the necessary guarantees that they will get their land back when they need it.

e. Compile a list of contact points within the various administrations and agencies (Sibelga, Vivaqua, the various communes) to expedite the connection to water, electricity, gas and sewage. Also, negotiating special tariffs with these agencies should be considered, as the cost of the installation is very high for short-term projects.

f. Monitor and evaluate all the above and adjust where necessary and support further innovative housing research and co-creation by funding innovative initiatives bridging between university, industry, governmental and civil sectors to accelerate the transfer of research and innovation results to contribute to Regional urban resilience, with the goal of providing a quality alternative for vulnerable residents. In this context, extending/upgrading the ‘Agence Occupations Temporaires’ could be a good option.

3. Prioritize social/affordable housing in temporary use, in combination with other (semi-)public functions. Modular housing projects should be included in the "Plan d’Urgence Logement" of the Brussels government.

4. Offer support for the provision of sustainable guidance, tailored to the situation and the individual users. In this way ‘housing as a verb’ can be realised, which means end users can be empowered through housing co-creation (Turner & Fichter, 1972).

5. Enable involvement of local stakeholders and users, to ensure that temporary use projects are serving local needs and creating/supporting small-scale solidarity networks/neighbourhood integrations.
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Policy briefs in the framework of the « Prospective Research »

List of publications

Books


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The author & project

Samenlevingsopbouw Brussel engages in social development work. For more than thirty years, Samenlevingsopbouw Brussel has stood up for less well-off Brussels residents and their right to the city. Community workers work together with socially vulnerable groups to improve their living and housing situation. They support people by bringing them together and by organizing them jointly, step by step. What the people themselves know and are able to do is the starting point. They set up projects with the aim of investing in the strength of people so that they can regain control of their lives and their environment (empowerment). Together with these people, they strive for structural policy change in the broadest sense.

The Faculty and Department of Architecture KU Leuven specialize in inter- and transdisciplinary research and education in the discipline architecture and urban design. The SMH project is a joint effort and integrates knowledge from two Research Groups organized under the Department of Architecture: The Altering Practices for Urban Inclusion (Alt Shift*) Research Group - focusing on altering practices (Petrescu, 2007) which question and transform the socio-political conditions of the spaces into which they intervene and test the boundaries and procedures of their own disciplines - and the Urban Projects, Collective Spaces and Local Identities research group - investigating how people and built or open space relate to each other, how space is appropriated and local identities are formed, how it contributes to the built and social environment of urban life.

CAW Brussel is a welfare organization with low-threshold first-line assistance for various vulnerable target groups in the Brussels-Capital Region.

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