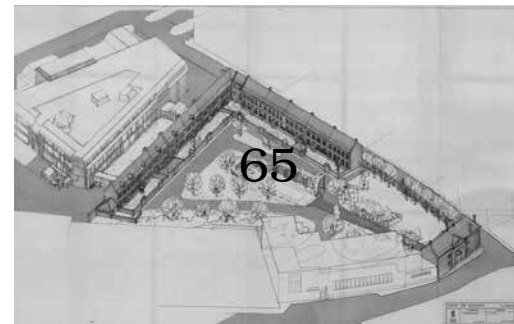


Trace

Notes on adaptive reuse

N°3 On Collectivity



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Editorial

Sharing places

Articulating collectivity in the existing fabric

B. Plevoets & N. Augustiniok.

The question of shaping our built environment relates, in essence, to the relationship between public and private spheres and spaces. Although public and private, or collective versus individual, are often seen as opposites, this polarisation is artificial. Instead, architecture and the urban environment are marked by varying gradations of intimacy and collectivity. In his book *Building and Dwelling*, Richard Sennett elaborates on the dual character of the city, which he describes as the *ville*, the formal organisation of the city, and the *cit *, the emotional experience and the character of life in a neighbourhood. Quoting Aristotle, who wrote that ‘a city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence’, Sennett argues for a building approach that stimulates social interaction and diverse ways of inhabiting the city.¹ He introduces the concept of the ‘open city’ as an answer to the contemporary planning and regeneration problem: a city that combines planned forms and uses with informal activities and interventions. In essence, the open city needs various forms of collectivity to create a built environment that is both convenient and pleasant to inhabit.

The adaptation and reuse of the existing built fabric also serve as an exercise in rethinking the collective versus the private realm and redefining borders and interactions between these interconnecting spheres. The third issue of this *cahier* discusses the results of the Master’s programme on adaptive reuse at Hasselt University during the academic year 2018–2019 and selected projects of the research group TRACE, providing perspectives on the notion of collectivity. Although we did not define collectivity as an annual theme from the start, the work on Flemish beguinages, both in the design studio and in the research seminar during the first semester, guided students’ sensitivity to the expression of collectivity in the built environment. Hence many students recalled this theme in their Master’s projects during the second semester, which provided us with a reservoir of relevant cases to illustrate this concept.

Collectivity: Meaning and interpretations

The meaning of the word ‘collectivity’ is ambiguous and has diverse interpretations. Firstly, collectivity refers to ‘the collective whole’, ‘the people as a body’; it approaches the mass as a single body and abstracts the individual need to address it in more general terms. The first CIAM conferences to discuss the problem of housing rely, for example, on this interpretation of collectivity. However, more recent large-scale urban and architectural developments continue in this vein.

Secondly, collectivity also refers to ‘the quality or state of being collective’, ‘the experience or feeling of sharing responsibilities, experiences, and activities’. The participatory approach in architecture and urbanism that developed in the post-war era strongly relies on people’s engagement with the places they inhabit. Scholars like Jane Jacobs have steered public participation in the planning process and bottom-up initiatives to counteract large-scale, commercial developments in favour of the preservation of qualitative (historic) buildings and structures. Her actions with the local community to save Penn Station in New York, for example, have become iconic in the bottom-up urban discourse.² However, the gap between formal urban and architectural practice versus the actual needs of society is not only expressed through slogans and demonstrations but also in informal interventions in the built environment. Hence, simultaneously with the rising interest in the participatory process, scholars grew interested in the informal uses and adaptation of the built environment. Although many informal interventions result from people’s actions to serve personal needs (e.g. housing or to make a living), the multiplicity of similar, individual actions illustrates a more general or collective necessity. As expressed through the informal, collective interest can be seen as a third interpretation of the notion of collectivity.

¹ Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (UK: Allen Lane, 2018), pp. 6–7.

² Jane Jacobs, Samuel Zipp, and Nathan Storring, *Vital Little Plans: The Short Works of Jane Jacobs* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2017).

The recognition of the value of the informal has not only led to a different approach towards the design and redesign of cities but also an entirely new understanding of the architectural design of collective or public buildings. Herman Hertzberger, like other structuralist architects, consciously works with various gradations of collectivity and the invitation to users to appropriate space. His design for the Centraal Beheer office building is basically a concrete skeleton that connects several equal spatial units that are polyvalent in the sense that they can accommodate different types of functions. In *Lessons for students in architecture*, Hertzberg explains himself:

The surprising effects obtained by the people who work at Centraal Beheer in the way they had arranged and personalized their office spaces with colors of their own choice, potted plants and objects they are fond of, is not merely the logical consequence of the fact that the interior finishing was deliberately left to the users of the building. Although the bareness of the stark, grey interior is an obvious invitation to the users to put the finishing touches to their space according to their personal tastes, this in itself is no guarantee that they will do so.

More is needed to happen: to start with, the form of the space itself must offer opportunities, including basic fittings and attachments etc., for the users to fill in the spaces according to their personal needs and desires.³

Hertzberger's design served as the main reference for our faculty building, which was built in the 1980s and designed by the local architect Dolf Nivelde. Hertzberger's reflection on the Centraal Beheer office building is hence equally applicable to our school. Each space can change throughout the year, or even the day, in terms of use – successively serving as an atelier, lecture room, exhibition space, or reception hall. The architecture of the school does more than simply provide a place for a fixed educational programme; the polyvalent character of the different spaces allows the building to adjust to changes and even invites adaptation and experimentation.

Fourthly, collectivity can be interpreted in relation to 'the commons', to what belongs to or is shared by the community as a whole. Cultural heritage, defined as 'a common good passed from previous generations as a legacy for those to come',⁴ embodies the common in both a tangible – places that people connect with collectively – or intangible way,

referring to collective memory and narratives. The concept of collectivity is therefore fundamental to the heritage discourse and even reaches out towards future generations. In practice, however, the collective nature of heritage is anything but obvious: buildings may be privately owned and inaccessible or commercially developed to benefit a single owner; different social groups may attribute distinct values to a building or site, which may lead to conflicts over what commonalities to represent or what characteristics and narratives to preserve in the conservation process; or the 'museumisation' of heritage for tourism purposes may isolate it from its active social and urban context.

In what follows, each contribution to this volume of the *cahier* is positioned within the discourse on collectivity. In addition, the different notions are further illustrated through student works that are not discussed in the individual contributions but are nevertheless relevant.

Collective living: Typology and morphology

The ambiguous notion of collectivity becomes apparent in various typologies designed to serve specific forms of communal life. These typologies range from beguinages or monasteries, representing specific forms of monastic living, to modernist social housing schemes or even more extreme forms of 'forced' collective housing systems like panoptic prisons. In a visual essay on projects that address religious typologies, Nikolaas Vande Keere and Saidja Heynickx present a selection of images, showing the results of the design studio and Master's projects. Through sometimes delicate, sometimes more radical interventions, the students rethink the relation between the shared and the individual. Images include photographs illustrating a poetic reading of the host space, hand drawings showing site analyses or design proposals, pictures of models, plans, and sections. Complementary texts elaborate on the use of different media – photographs, sketches, architectural drawings, models – in the design process.

Karen Lens continues by reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of the adaptive reuse of monastic heritage. In an increasingly secularised society, religious communities are diminishing, and many monastic sites are being abandoned. By defining six spatial and conceptual anchors, Lens describes how the typology is shaped by collective patterns of living, which can offer an incentive in defining a new programme for the site that will pass its collective character to future generations.

Vernacular reuse and adaptation as expressions of collectivity

Christoph Grafe's contribution elaborates on the role of cultural institutions in urban dynamics. Abandoned buildings, often former industrial sites, are accessible and affordable spaces to become the milieu for cultural exchange. Many of today's influential cultural institutions emerged from an informal occupation of these spaces, such as Friche la Belle de Mai in Marseille or SESC Pompeia in São Paulo. Such places, Grafe argues, embody the democratisation of culture and the emancipation process.

Since the 1960s, architectural and urban theories have embraced informal practices, while the concept only entered the discourse on adaptive reuse about a decade ago with the publication of Fred Scott's chapter 'The literate and the vernacular'.⁵ Vernacular architecture is widely recognised today as a valuable contribution to our built heritage, and by adopting the term 'vernacular', Scott implicitly attributes value to these interventions. Equally, in our Master's programme, we develop a discourse on adaptive reuse that builds on the informal as much as formal professional practices. We strive to raise students' sensitivity to the knowledge and qualities embedded in the informal uses and adaptations of buildings and sites and encourage them to incorporate this tacit knowledge in their design proposals. Several students searched for a pattern in the multitude of individual, informal interventions at specific sites as a collective comment on their present state. In our contribution to this *cahier*, Marie Moors and I discuss two Master's projects dealing with the regeneration of modern housing estates. In these projects, the students have used the informal adaptations of the sites as a source for their design strategy. The first project is the Prisyfgyka housing estate in Athens, constructed in the 1930s to house refugees of the Asia Minor conflict. The buildings are protected as heritage sites but have been neglected and therefore offer their users the opportunity for change. Anna Papageorgiou's proposal conserved the heritage values of the site but also incorporated user-led adaptations. The second project is the Al Sawaber housing complex in Kuwait. Although the project initially envisioned luxury middle-class housing, the estate suffered from disrepair and a negative image. When Diana Mosquera M. selected the site for her Master's project, the complex was threatened with demolition. Therefore, her goal was to show how the site could be altered to serve contemporary housing needs, with the surrounding public space becoming an asset to develop the highly dense surrounding neighbourhood.



[1] Informal settlement in Addis Ababa, a high-density neighbourhood with organic street patterns and a mix of new (unsustainable) houses and more sustainable, vernacular houses.



[2] Design of the neighbourhood to create qualitative public spaces. Project by Mebratu Butta.

Mebratu Butta worked on the regeneration of an informal settlement in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). The settlement faced several spatial problems, including the poor quality of the houses, which were constructed from non-sustainable materials (e.g. iron sheets) and often lacked washing or cooking facilities; the density of the area without public spaces; and the many dead-ends in the network of streets and alleyways. Instead of completely replacing the neighbourhood with a new, modern housing scheme – as is today the conventional approach in the region – Mebratu opted for a softer attitude, rooted in the existing characteristics of the area – its *genius loci*. He developed a road network built on the existing organic pattern but removed some of the dead-ends and transformed others into pedestrian sections in the neighbourhood. By smoothing and softening the existing stone pavement of the main streets, he preserved one of the distinctive charac-

³ Herman Hertzberger, *Lessons for Students* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1991), pp. 133, 23–24.

⁴ European Union, 'European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage' (Luxemburg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019), p. 4.

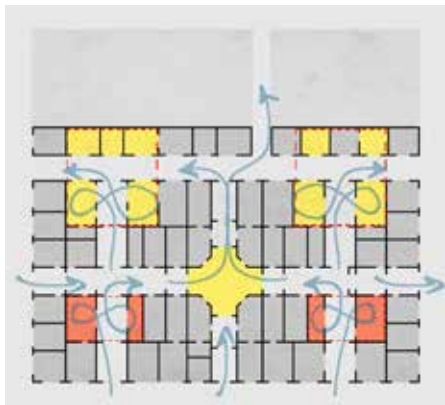
⁵ Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008); on vernacular adaptive reuse see also Plevoets, Bie, and Julia Sowinska-Heim, 'Community Initiatives as a Catalyst for Regeneration of Heritage Sites: Vernacular Transformation and Its Influence on the Formal Adaptive Reuse Practice', *Cities* 78 (2018): 128–139.

teristics of the area while supporting local craftsmanship. Furthermore, he proposed removing some clusters of small, added shelters to create collective spaces for social activities or children's playgrounds. Within this improved urban structure, new houses could be added, typologically inspired by the vernacular architecture of the area.

Mohamed Soliman worked on the Okelle Monferrato in Alexandria (Egypt), a building constructed in the late 19th century based on a design by the Italian architect Luigi Piattoli. The typology of the building recalls the *passage*, with two 'interior streets' that cross perpendicularly under an impressive glass cupola. As part of the European quarter of the city, the building represents the Western ideal of living and moving within the city. The building is protected as a national monument but has been 'neglected' in

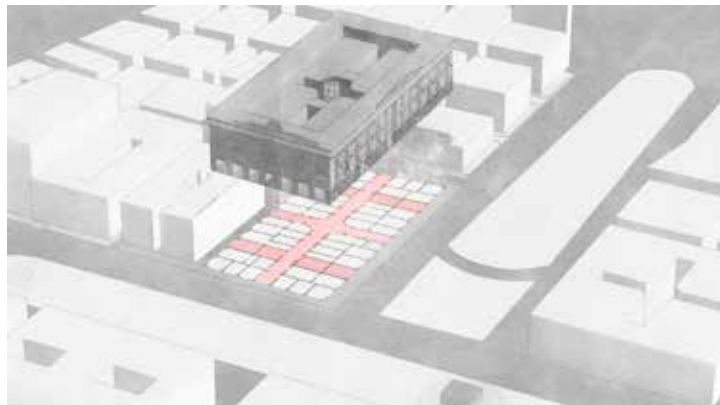


[3] Okelle Monferrato in its current condition, characterised by informal interventions.



[4] Conversion of the Okelle Monferrato, functionally linking the shops at the back of the building with those on the opposite side of the street. Project by Mohamed Soliman.

recent years and appropriated by local merchants. Interventions include advertisement and product displays covering large parts of its façade, the inner streets are narrowed or blocked by new shops, the upper floors underused, and from the glass roof of the central cupola, only the iron structure is still in place. Based on an analysis of the Islamic quarter of the city, Mohamed sought a cultural appropriation of the Western-style building by further enhancing the existing ambiguity between interior and exterior and public and private space within the building and the surrounding urban fabric. Mohamed's concept for the Okelle Minferrato aligns with Sennett's argument that the open city needs porous buildings that allow an open flow between inside and outside, but it retains its external shape and can still adapt to the changing flow – like a sponge that can absorb water thanks to its porosity.



Heritage as a common

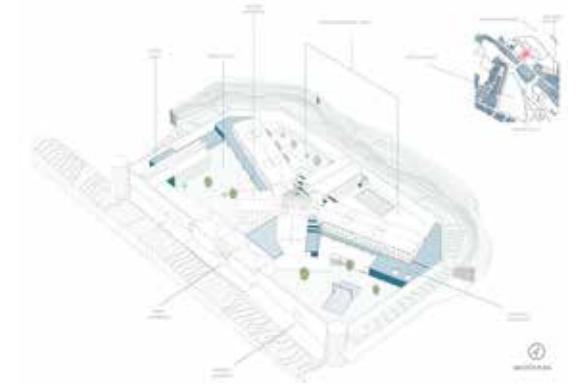
Most contributions and projects do not embody one specific interpretation of collectivity but instead, work with the overlap and ambiguity between these different understandings. In that way, Nikolaas Vande Keere recalls the projects described in the visual essay, re-reading them in the light of collective memory. Through a critical review of Pierre Nora's concept of *Lieu de Mémoire*, he compares and contrasts *collective memory* versus *heritage* – both concepts that do not stand for static facts but are social constructs that change over time.

Another project that works with the notion of collective memory is Samir Hajjar's Master's project on the reuse of a former panoptic prison in the neighbourhood of El Paso just downtown from the historical centre of Quito. The Garcia Moreno prison was designed in 1869 to house 290 prisoners but held 6,000 people when it was closed in 2014. The living conditions in the prison were inhumane due to overpopulation, lack of facilities, and great acts of violence among and against prisoners. The scale of the building and the regular escapes of prisoners negatively affected the image and security of the neighbourhood. Despite its contentious history, the prison is part of the collective heritage of the city and the country, as many 'famous' prisoners and political martyrs were imprisoned here. Moreover, being located in the buffer zone of the UNESCO-protected historical centre of Quito, its façade should be preserved to avoid disruptions of the existing fabric. With the adaptive reuse of the abandoned prison, Samir aimed to regenerate the neighbourhood of El Paso to serve the local community. The protection of the World Heritage Site had severely limited the potential for rehabilitating the historic centre and its buffer zone, limiting not only the possibility of intervening in the fabric of the buildings but also the type of programmes that could be implemented. As these restrictions have shown to compromise the liveability of the area in favour of (international) tourism, Samir decided to present an alternative approach. He integrated a small museum and archive into the watchtower in the centre of the panopticon and reused the different wings for neighbourhood functions and collective housing. The prison walls are no longer meant to create exclusion but become an enclosure that provides protection.⁶ Samir's proposed intervention in the Garcia Moreno prison preserved most of its existing building but radically changed its meaning. The example of the prison may be extreme, but equally, every intervention serves as a comment on the building and potentially changes its meaning.

⁶ Samir was greatly inspired by the adaptive reuse of the former prison in Hasselt as our university's Faculty of Law by noA-architecten. For a description of the case see: Bie Plevoets, and Koenraad Van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 196–202.



[5] Historic postcard of the Garcia Moreno prison with the city in the background. (sustainable, vernacular houses.).



[6] Adaptive reuse of the prison, showing inner courtyards that become gardens and recreational areas for the neighbourhood and the added collective housing in the former prison wings. Project by Samir Hajjar.

The concluding contribution by Koenraad Van Cleempoel addresses a project that is very close to our research group and appeals to us in a very personal way – it will soon be transformed into a new campus for our school. Soon, the school will not only be housed in the Herzberger-inspired building on the rural outskirts of Hasselt but also in the historic beguinage in the city centre. The beguinage, modelled as a *hortus conclusus*, is one of the sole collective green spaces in the centre of Hasselt. Recalling Jane Jacobs' actions to save historic sites and green areas from large-scale commercial development through collective civilian actions, when this site was offered for sale on the private market, students took action and started a petition against these plans. Koenraad Van Cleempoel describes how the project emerged into an adaptive reuse project for our architectural school.

The relationship between these social and architectural values in the beguinage typology was also analysed by Genius Loci seminar students (fall semester 2018–2019). They studied the potential of this urban typology to be transformed into sustainable collective housing, comparing the site to a selection of post-war housing projects.⁷ Seven post-war European projects of architectural interest and importance were compared with seven Flemish beguinages as a hypothesis to examine programme versus typology. The assignment was organised over six weeks, with groups of four students. Each team produced a poster of one beguinage in relation to one contemporary project. By focusing on a housing programme – marginally combined with small-scale productivity – students were invited to move beyond the heritage value of the beguinage and to explore its potential for new use.



[7] Centraal Beheer office building, design by Herman Hertzberger, 1972.



[8] Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, design by Dolf Nivelde, 1989–1991.

⁷ The six beguinages were: 1. Antwerpen, Sint-Catherinabegijnhof; 2. Diest, Sint-Catherina ten Velde; 3. Gent, Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ter Hoyen (Klein Begijnhof); 4. Herentals, Begijnhof van Herentals; 5. Hoogstraten, Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Begijnhof; 6. Leuven, Groot Begijnhof van Leuven; 7. Turnhout, Sint-Catherinabegijnhof. The

20th century collective housing projects included: 1. Le Corbusier, Unité d'Habitation, Marseille/Nantes/Berlin/Briey/Firminy (FR & DE), 1945; 2. Atelier 5, Siedlung Halen, Halen, Halen (CH), 1961; 3. Alvaro Siza, Quinta da Malaqueira, Evora (PT), 1977; 4. West 8, Masterplan Borneo-Sporenburg, Amsterdam (NL),

1993; 5. Druot, Lacaton & Vassal, Tour Bois-Le-Prêtre, Paris (FR), 2011; 6. Assemble, Granby Four Streets, Liverpool (UK), 2013; 7. Silvia Carpaneto / Fatkoehl architekten / BarArchitekten, Spreefeld, Berlin (DE), 2013.

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[6] Samir Hajjar, 2018–2019.

[7] Centraal Beheer office building, designed by Herman Hertzberger. © Willem Diepraam, photographer.

[8] Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, designed by Dolf Nivelde. © Iwert Bernakiewicz, photographer.

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