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Braem's Arena District

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## Small talk about stone flowers: Reading transient icons in Renaat Braem's Arenawijk

Marie Moors and Elke Couchez

### Introduction

During the past three years (2020–2022), the Belgian photographer Elisabeth Broekaert has documented the Arenawijk in Antwerp. The Arenawijk was built between 1960 and 1964 by Belgian modernist architect, urban planner, theorist, and educator Renaat Braem (1910–2001) in a progressive brutalist vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> In his built and written oeuvre, Braem was firmly committed to social housing and criticised the post-war spatial chaos in Belgium.<sup>2</sup> In 1946 – when the need for housing in Antwerp was acute – Braem, together with urban planner Octave De Koninckx (1914–1967), engineer August Mennes (1884–1953), and architects Geo Brosens (1891–1967), Flor Laforce (1902–1973), and Louis Kuypers (born in 1923), was commissioned to design a social housing development on an unbuilt plot of land in Deurne. This new assignment was the last social housing project in Braem's momentous career (Fig.1), in which he strove for the full implementation of iconographic sculptures. Like many other modernist housing ensembles, a recent feasibility study of the Arenawijk has shown that the buildings do not meet contemporary housing requirements and, as a result, the northern development of the site will soon be demolished. As part of a new master plan, residents are currently moving out of the apartment blocks in the north and south of the site. In 2019, the Arenawijk was still considered an icon of Flemish post-war social housing and praised for its heritage values – material and immaterial alike.<sup>3</sup> Today, it is covered in a rugged blanket of negativity.

Broekaert's lens has registered the materialisation of time through slow decay. In one picture of an interior, for instance, wallpaper is peeling off from the walls (**Fig. 2**). Where paintings and pictures once hung, now only a yellowed void reminds the viewer that these interiors were inhabited not long ago. In the room next door, dozens of flies are lying dead on their sides on a greyish worn-out vinyl floor. With their legs up in the air, they seem to have suffered a sudden death (**Fig. 3**). The feeling of 'abrupt' abandonment and frozen time is prominent. This perception of decay is precisely what one might expect from a documentary photographic series on a brutalist housing ensemble, reminiscent of the Smithons' *Golden Lane Housing* competition entry (1951–1952) and Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith's *Park Hill* (1957–1961) in Sheffield, both grounded in socialist theories. Architects have recently praised projects like these as landmarks of the modernist 'street in the sky' concept – aerial walkways, spacious flats, surrounding green areas – yet they have also been scorned by the public, tenants, and officials as 'brutalist failures', characterised by 'austere'

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Braeken, *Renaat Braem 1910–2001* (Brussels: ASA Publishers, Vlaams Instituut voor het Onroerend Erfgoed, 2010). On his work as an educator, see Elke Couchez, 'The Antwerp (Stair) Case: How a Modernist Architect Staged His Educational and Ideological Programme', *Paedagogica Historica* 53, no. 6 (2017): 799–826.

<sup>2</sup> Braem's most cited work is *Het lelijkste land ter wereld* [The Ugliest Country in the World], published in 1968. Renaat Braem, *Het lelijkste land ter wereld* (Asp / Vubpress / Upa, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> In 2019, the Flanders Heritage Agency classified the Arenawijk as architectural heritage.

and ‘inhuman’ design, a ‘monstrous appearance’, and failed ‘utopic visions’. More often than not, this negative perception has led to decisions to demolish such ensembles.<sup>4</sup>

The photographs shown here are only some of an entire series in which Broekaert captured how residents have appropriated the space in the private interior and the semi-public exterior (**Fig. 4**). However, our focus in this paper is not on the private spaces, but on how residents interpret and give meaning to their homes, the building, and its unique artistic iconography. Furthermore, we question how these added layers of meaning – deviating from the original messages conveyed by the architect – contribute to the appropriation of space; and what role they can play in the light of a site’s regeneration.

One image in Broekaert’s series led us to this specific focus. In that picture (**Fig. 5**), a woman walks her dog. Braem’s building is in the background. Broekaert photographed her twice: in one shot, she is under a sculpture of an abstracted head supported by a concrete buttress; in the other, she is walking away. Her orange coat and the loose green leash contrast strongly with the monochrome concrete walls, which have turned green and appear dirty at the edges. While the woman is looking away, the sculpture is shown frontally with a four-petal flower traversing the eyes. The stone face, covered with flowers, stares right at us.

We took this provocative glance as an invitation to re-read Braem’s sculptures, which are spread over the site and integrated into the buildings in the southern blocks (indicated in blue in **Fig. 1**). Those blocks will not be demolished but regenerated as a housing cooperative.<sup>5</sup> For Braem, the ‘formal expression’ of the building – such as the organic contours of the structures and the integrated sculptures discussed in the next section – was more important than the dimensions of the floorplans as well as the thermal and acoustic insulation.<sup>6</sup>

Because the current discourse on the transition of modernist complexes is primarily focused on technical and economic needs, we want to dive deeper into the contemporary meaning of those sculptures on-site by evoking and examining the use of architectural iconography.

In the first part, we will outline the historical development of the site through the lens of iconography. In the second part, we will dive deeper into the symbolical meanings these sculptures carried out when they were erected by Braem and compare them with some of the other sculptures made by the architect and the broader debates on architecture and art. To do so, we will build on the notions of iconography and iconology developed by art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968). In a third section, we will explore the transient

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<sup>4</sup> These discussions are especially lively on social media. The role of photography in the evaluation of brutalist architecture has been discussed in Hamish Lonergan, ‘Meme, Memory or Critic: Revaluing Brutalism on Social Media’, in *Valuing Architecture: Heritage and the Economics of Culture*, eds. Ashley Paine, John MacArthur, and Susan Holden (Amsterdam: Valiz, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> The implementation of art in architecture was identified as a unique artistic value by the Flanders Heritage Agency. We assume that these sculptures played a role in the decision to not demolish the southern blocks.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Strauven, *Renaat Braem Architect* (Brussels: Archief voor moderne architectuur, 1983).

meaning of the icons through the current residents' eyes via informal interviews<sup>7</sup> introduced here as 'small talk', in situ observations, backed up by the photographs of Elisabeth Broekaert we described above. In the conclusion, we will return to the notions of meaning, interpretation, and appropriation and reflect on how these could broaden the debate on the adaptive reuse of modernist ensembles.



**Fig. 1** Master plan of the Arenawijk. The northern blocks will be demolished (red), and the southern blocks will be regenerated (blue). The central part of clustered small apartment towers will not be adapted; its residents will stay. Photos indicate the different icons on the site, implemented in the southern blocks (blue). © Marie Moors, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The first author walked around the site for more than eight hours spread over three days with photos (Figs. 5, 10) of the icons and a map of the site (Fig. 1) in hand. She sporadically addressed passers-by (approximately 15 people) and asked if they knew the story of Braem and his 'stone flowers'. In many cases, this opened the conversation in an informal and comfortable way, using so-called 'small talk'. By sharing this titbit of historical information, asking passers-by about their thoughts grew less demanding.



**Fig. 2** Interior detail in the northern blocks. The yellowed wallpaper with the white void – a trace of its former inhabitation – is peeling. © Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.



**Fig. 3** Dead flies found in one of the emptied apartments in the northern part of the Arenawijk. © Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.



**Fig. 4** Interior view of one of the apartments in the northern part of the Arenawijk. This interior brims with replicas of famous artworks, bucolic scenes, and figurines of young boys holding umbrellas. A woman, standing under a candelabrum with fake candles and a small macrame dreamcatcher, is resting her hand on a heavy wooden cabinet. © Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.



**Fig. 5** Architectural iconography by Renaat Braem as part of the Arenawijk representing love and luck: a flower growing through an abstract representation of a head. © Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.

### The iconographic history of the Arenawijk

The Arenawijk's history dates to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as the housing blocks are organised around the (former) 'Fortress of Deurne'. This fortification complex was built by the Belgian state around the Spanish ramparts in 1852 and was supposed to function as an armoured camp for Antwerp. Nonetheless, the fortress never fulfilled its initial purpose; instead, it was used as a refuge during the Second World War. In 1946, the military domain was recategorised as a residential zone. What is remarkable is that the iconography of the fortress architecture remains visible today. Braem placed the more rigid apartments in the north and the expressive two-storey duplex residences with galleries in the southern part, on the outer circumference of the plot – supposedly to embrace the green park. Yet, the yellow contour lines in **Figure 1** colour the interface of the new housing blocks of Braem with the anterior Fortress of Deurne. As a result, the historical (and iconic) pentagonal scheme is still legible<sup>8</sup>.

In his early sketches, the fortress was to be reused as a community centre – through new organically shaped openings, adaptations, and additions – to serve public cultural facilities, though today, it is only used as a private sporting complex.<sup>9</sup> Was the opening up of the fortress to the public a literal expression of his socialist agenda? We cannot say with certainty. Yet, the integration of concrete sculptures into the architecture of the complex definitely was intentional. Three abstract sculptures – Braem called them 'social accents of

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<sup>8</sup> We thank Nikolaas Vande Keere, for the informal and formal moments where we could challenge our ideas on iconography in the context of the Arenawijk.

<sup>9</sup> Similar to his other architecture commissions, Braem had ambitious ideas that eventually were dismissed in the execution phase. Further, his intentions to flank the fort with seven high-rise towers remained hypothetical.

love and happiness' – can be found in the southern part: more specifically, one in the sawtooth formation and two in the elongated, delineated building block. The first (**Fig. 5**) is the flower that grows through the head with the centred eye, described earlier. Another sculpture of flowers blossoms on a star, and a representation of a flower rising from the sun is placed as a crown on the staircase turret providing access to the first gallery. Initially, the sculptures were intended to be painted in bright colours, but that never happened.<sup>10</sup>

### Tracing intentions and symbolic layers: An iconographical reading

If we are to develop an iconographic reading of these icons in a Panofskyan way, we have to reveal the symbolic content of the artworks by describing them and comparing them to other works of art (both in literature and in the visual arts). In a subsequent iconological reading, these observations can be connected to social and economic factors of a certain period, allowing the observer to see the artwork as marking an era and expressing its underlying ideological strains.

The first job of an iconographer is to decode represented symbols.<sup>11</sup> A brief glance at Hans Biedermann's *Dictionary of Symbols* (1994) tells us that the eye has been considered the most important organ of the senses throughout European art history, functioning as a receptive organ and a transmitter of inner spirits.<sup>12</sup> Looking at Braem's biography, the connection to Freemasonry can be made here as well. Being a member of the Freemason lodge 'Droit Humain', Braem might well have derived the reference to the eye from this context.<sup>13</sup> In his work, the eye is depicted as a mediating organ between humanity and nature, shifting between the physical and the spiritual realm. A drawing of his murals in the VUB Rectorship building (1972) shows the same idea: only through seeing can one come to reason and an 'enlightened' state of being (**Fig. 6a and b**).

Consequently, the star is a frequently used symbol that allows for multiple interpretations: it appears both in Indian and Abrahamic religions and is widely used on flags and military and police insignia. According to another dictionary of symbols, stars can indicate notions of supremacy, consistency, guidance and guardianship, vigilance and aspiration.<sup>14</sup> In

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<sup>10</sup> Jo Braeken, *Renaat Braem 1910–2001* (Brussels: ASA Publishers, Vlaams Instituut voor het Onroerend Erfgoed, 2010); Marie Moors and Bie Plevoets, 'Re-Reading the Visions of the Modernists of CIAM', in *REHAB 2019 - The 4th International Conference on Preservation, Maintenance and Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings and Structures* (Guimaraes, Portugal: Green Lines Institute, 2019); Marie Moors, 'Reviving Modernist Housing: Arena District of Renaat Braem' (paper presented at the 16th Docomomo International Conference, Tokyo, Japan, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Tom Hardy, ed., *Art Education in a Postmodern World: Collected Essays* (Bristol: Intellect, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meanings Behind Them* (New York: Meridian Books, 1994). The iconography of the eye in works by Braem has been discussed in Elke Couchez, 'The Antwerp (Stair) Case: How a Modernist Architect Staged His Educational and Ideological Programme', *Paedagogica Historica* 53, no. 6 (2017): 799–826.

<sup>13</sup> He delivered many lectures for this lodge between 1945 and 1984. See: <https://archieef.onroenderfgoed.be/vrijmetselarij;term/browseTerm>.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Tresidder, *The Watkins Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Watkins Media, 2012).



Freemasonry, the five-pointed pentagram is referred to as the 'blazing star', and it is used as a symbol for the 'mystic centre', signifying regeneration. Braem used these symbols in a non-dogmatic way and only referred to them in marginal notes next to drawings. He wrote, 'just as nature creates flowers, we make stone flowers. They too are resting points on the path of eternal evolution'.<sup>15</sup>



**Fig. 6a and 6b** Murals on the upper floor of the VUB administration and the rectory, depicting humans in total harmony with nature and reaching an 'enlightened state of being', by Renaat Braem, 1971–1976. Source: VUB, by Jan Landau.

Braem's biography and architectural oeuvre provide some insight into how we can understand 'evolution', demonstrating that much of his work was inspired by socialist beliefs. His father was a member of the *Frontpartij* (Front Party) and belonged to the pacifist and socially committed left wing of the Flemish Movement. Hence, Braem's social awareness and commitment began at an early age. He finished his architecture studies at the Academy for Fine Arts in Antwerp in 1935, where he was introduced to socialist literature. During his education, Braem was inspired by the revolutionary momentum of Russian constructivism. Subsequently, he wanted to integrate the visual arts, responding to the socialist society, into an architecture symbolising liberated humanity. He referred to a civilisation where solidarity would not be affected by individual differences and defined architecture as follows (1934): 'Architecture is the art of organising the living environment to liberate mankind both physically and spiritually.'<sup>16</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Braem joined the Belgian Communist Party (KP) but left it around 1950 because he – and many like him – thought that the KP uncritically followed the

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<sup>15</sup> Free translation into English: Strauven, *Renaat Braem Architect*, 86. Original quote: 'Zoals de natuur bloemen scheidt, maken wij stenen bloemen. Zij ook zijn rustpunten op de weg van de eeuwige evolutie'.

<sup>16</sup> Jo Braeken, 'De Erfenis Van Een Sociaal Bewogen Architect - Renaat Braem En De Menselijke Stad', *VMSW Woonwoord* (2010): 6-9.; the original citation in Dutch reads 'Architectuur is de kunst van het organiseren van het levensmilieu met als doel de stoffelijke en de geestelijke bevrijding van de mens'.

Russian Stalinist model.<sup>17</sup> Braem later declared that he was a party of his own, ‘a Braemist, a loner in politics and architecture, committed exclusively to the social re-orientation of art and architecture’.<sup>18</sup> For Braem, civilisation could be transformed by the concept of a ‘classless society’. The role of modern architecture was to anticipate this mission. Braem was convinced that architecture should be perceived as a ‘community art’. He translated this vision regularly via visual or so-called ‘plastic’ additions to his buildings.<sup>19</sup>

An illustrative example is his 1950s revolutionary Kiel housing estate, where murals, colour contrasts, sculptures, and carefully orchestrated outdoor landscaping were all aligned in the design and combined with public facilities. Braem presented the Kiel project at the CIAM Congress (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne) in 1953.<sup>20</sup> Among other topics, the role of aesthetics and art was extensively considered during this conference.<sup>21</sup> Siegfried Giedion (1888–1968), Aldo Van Eyck (1918–1999), Alison Smithson (1928–1993), and Peter Smithson (1923–1903) believed that a synthesis of the arts could undo the feeling of alienation, which arose as a flip side to the rapid proliferation of highly technocratic building processes characterising post-war urban redevelopment.<sup>22</sup> Art thus had to contribute to a more humane environment.

At Kiel, Braem paid specific attention to the entrance halls of the different apartment blocks, where he placed sculptures to reference ‘the social purpose’ of his intentions or to remind the residents to strive for a ‘happier’ family, the fundament of a ‘clean’ community, according to Braem. A monumental canopy in reinforced concrete supported by caryatids of a man and a woman holding a child (**Fig. 8**), and a group of sculptures entitled ‘Higher Up’ – three circus performers standing on top of each other, expressing the ‘joy of life’ – illustrate this perception (**Fig. 9**). Whereas the conception of the artworks was defined by Braem, the execution of the sculptures was completed by different artists. Additionally, Braem devised a pattern of contrasting colours and motifs for the walls and ceilings in the entrance halls, which were only partially executed. Following the Kiel project, Braem was commissioned for

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Strauven and Renaat Braem, *Renaat Braem: De Dialectische Avonturen Van Een Vlaams Functionalist* (Archief voor Moderne Architectuur, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Renaat Braem, *Het Schoonste Land Ter Wereld* (Kritak, 1987), 112.

<sup>19</sup> Strauven, *Renaat Braem Architect*. See also Couchez, ‘The Antwerp (Stair) Case’. Braem used the word ‘plastische kunsten’ in Dutch to refer to the visual arts, which we translated as ‘plastic’ in this text.

<sup>20</sup> He was no stranger to the CIAM entourage as he was introduced to the CIAM community through the intercession of his mentor Le Corbusier in 1937.

<sup>21</sup> ‘An appeal for a synthesis of the Major Arts had already been made by Le Corbusier at the Liberation in 1944 in the journal *Volonté*. Then the theme was taken up by CIAM in 1947, at the Congress of Bridgwater which led to the creation of a section of CIAM devoted to a synthesis of the Plastic Arts. Finally at the end of 1948 a meeting was held in Paris to put in practice this introduction of the plastic arts into architecture’. See: [http://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/corbuweb/morpheus.aspx?sysId=13&IrisObjectId=5712&sysLanguage=en-en&itemPos=44&itemSort=en-en\\_sort\\_string1%20&itemCount=216&sysParentName=&sysParentId=65](http://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/corbuweb/morpheus.aspx?sysId=13&IrisObjectId=5712&sysLanguage=en-en&itemPos=44&itemSort=en-en_sort_string1%20&itemCount=216&sysParentName=&sysParentId=65).

<sup>22</sup> Nicola Pezolet, ‘Spectacles Plastiques: Reconstruction and the Debates on the “Synthesis of the Arts” in France, 1944–1962’ (Ph.D. Diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012).

other collective housing developments like the Modelwijk in Brussels, Sint-Maartensdal in Leuven, Kruiskenslei in Antwerp, and the case study in this paper: the Arenawijk in Deurne.<sup>23</sup>

To conclude this iconographic reading, we can say that the Arenawijk is a representative example of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, in which Braem (partly) realised his socialist vision of architecture through the assimilation of architecture and art. Tracing some symbolic layers, comparing Braem's images to other projects, and adding a biographical reading, we can thus conclude that he represented his socialist vision for a more 'humane' architecture via these 'secular icons'. However, in 2021, the historical conditions, the ideological underpinnings, and the vision of the role of art and architecture in society have changed. How, then, do residents perceive these icons today?



**Fig. 7** Male and female caryatids carrying a child and supporting an entrance hall canopy. Kiel housing estate, Renaat Braem, Antwerp, 2019. © Marie Moors.

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<sup>23</sup> Karina Van Herck, 'Wooneenheid Kiel', Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/126553>.



**Fig. 8** Sculpture 'Higher up': Three circus performers standing on top of each other, expressing the 'joy of life'. Kiel housing estate, Renaat Braem, Antwerp, 2019. © Marie Moors.

### **Multi-interpretability of icons**

As the photographs of Elizabeth Broeckaert have shown, the Arenawijk is marked by the inevitable ravages of time. The poor condition of the buildings and their urgent need for renovation can be read as a metaphor for the current debate on possible futures for modernist housing ensembles. The constructions are literally 'giving up', which results in unfavourable and uncomfortable living conditions. Simultaneously, this 'blanket of time' – especially the patina on the iconographical sculptures – can be interpreted as weakening the initially proclaimed socialist utopia. To what extent are these sculptures still perceived as 'socialist accents of love and luck'?<sup>24</sup> Of course, we can ask ourselves if these sculptures should not rather be appreciated as historical relics and evidence. However, we are convinced that a contemporary reading of these icons heralds refreshing insights, developed as a new lens to look at modernist ensembles undergoing a process of regeneration.

The question 'what do contemporary layers of meaning attribute to the site?' becomes all the more pressing when we look at the intense social and cultural transformation that the site has undergone in the 1990s due to different migration policies. According to the official numbers of the city of Antwerp, the southwest of Deurne – which includes the Arenawijk – is home to 54% foreign-born inhabitants (including the origin of their parents).<sup>25</sup> From previous site visits, we know that many first-generation residents do not feel any hesitation in voicing their worries and fears about the shifts in residency patterns; they even categorise

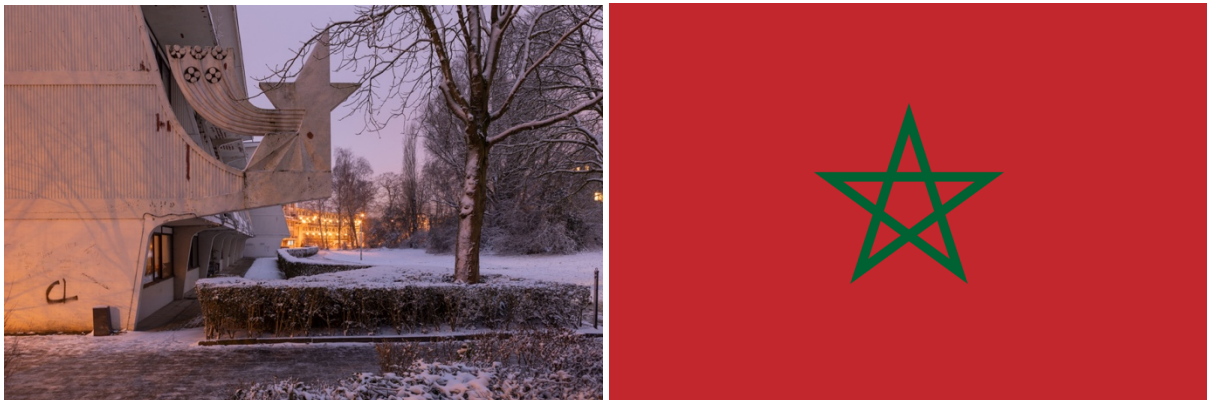
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<sup>24</sup> Free translation in English: Strauven, *Renaat Braem Architect*, 86. Original quote: 'Zoals de natuur bloemen scheidt, maken wij stenen bloemen. Zij ook zijn rustpunten op de weg van de eeuwige evolutie'.

<sup>25</sup> Stad in Cijfers: Databank, 'Inwoners naar nationaliteit, leeftijd (8 klassen) en geslacht 2021 – Buurten', Stad Antwerpen in Cijfers, <https://stadincijfers.antwerpen.be/?var=natcube>.

this issue as the main reason for the site's material degradation.<sup>26</sup> As a result, we researched the role that the iconography of the Arenawijk plays for its current diverse group of inhabitants, represented by 60 nationalities. Via informal talks with residents on-site, new readings of the place and interpretations and connotations of the sculptures emerged.

'The star reminds me of our Moroccan flag'. Two younger boys standing confident on their electric scooters answered our question about their personal associations with the sculptures in the district without any hesitation. These boys knew the sculptures. However, that was not always the case. A mother with two young children, who have been living in the neighbourhood for a couple of years now, had not noticed the sculptures before. When we asked her what the star meant for her on the spot, she also referred to the Moroccan star (Figs. 10-11). Her young son stated that the icon of the head reminds him of an evil eye that watches over and controls people. They also associated it with the Jewish Star of David and the Nazi regime. Other passers-by – most of them with Moroccan origins – referred to the lack of colour in their district, especially these 'grey' icons. They pointed out the contrast with their quaint, blue-and-orange-tinted Moroccan neighbourhoods. Initially, Braem had planned to paint the icons all in bright tints. Can this be the first step in the site's re-appropriation?



**Fig. 9** Sculpture in the Arenawijk representing love and luck: flowers blossoming from a star by Renaat Braem, Arenawijk, Antwerp, Belgium, 1964 © Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.

**Fig. 10** Flag of Morocco. © [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag\\_of\\_Morocco.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Morocco.svg).

More than half of those interviewed had never noticed the sculptures – surprisingly, most of them were first-generation inhabitants who had lived there for a long time: 'I have never thought about it. People are not interested in it at all, are they?' asked an older man enjoying his beer in the community centre. Also, five rubbish collectors, an elderly couple, and another male inhabitant shared this vision.

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<sup>26</sup> Marie Moors and Koenraad Van Cleempoel, 'The Living Heritage of Renaat Braem's Arena District', (Nordisk Arkitekturforskning (The Nordic Association of Architectural Research), forthcoming).

Melancholy is another aspect that frequently emerged during our talks. 'It reminds me of the past', explained a young boy who is growing up in the Arenawijk. Along the same lines, a young girl pointed out the following: 'I appreciate those old things. It is just like in Albania, but then more pretty'. A young mother, who was getting some fresh air with her newborn baby, linked the iconography in the Arenawijk with images in her Romanian hometown. These personal memories and connections made by the residents were mainly positive. It is interesting to observe how these abstract sculptures, by the hand of Braem, leave open a certain identification, regardless of the author's intentions and the observer's cultural background.

Generally, people were fascinated by the meaning of the icons. Each of them shyly admitted that they had never paid attention to the sculptures before, yet after a short historical contextualisation, all of them found it a pity that they did not know the intentions of the architect. 'I think the architect had the urge to leave something behind', one said intuitively and accurately. Three others linked the icons to the uniqueness of the site, or to say it in their words: 'they are super cool' and make the neighbourhood 'at least not mundane and boring', 'I am sure people will start to miss the icons if they would disappear'.

The moment we asked the recent residents for their opinions, visions, and interpretations of the iconography in the Arenawijk, they were pleasantly surprised. Their faces literally glowed.

### **Conclusion: Towards a living heritage**

In this paper, we developed a double reading of Braem's on-site sculptures. First, we used the lens of the inventor or art historian, which enabled us to get closer to the initial symbolic layers. Second, we used the approach of the field worker via in-person interviews. Whereas the iconographical reading could be further developed by looking more closely at similar artworks of the 1940s and 1950s, the fieldwork imposed its own challenges. As researchers having expertise in architecture history, theory and adaptive reuse, we struggled with how to develop open-ended methodologies to question people about their interpretations of their surroundings.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, we used this paper to engage in 'small talk' on the topic of public spaces, embracing this approach for writing 'living histories'. Though this approach is far from a solid scientific method, it allowed us to question the notion of iconography and think about its transient meanings. Braem's 'stone flowers' in the Arenawijk have undergone a considerable shift in appearance, meaning, and interpretation. His socialist message of love and luck might never have reached its recipients; instead, it opened a new world of suggestive

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<sup>27</sup> As researchers affiliated with Hasselt University, we are subject to a bureaucratic system where GDPR administration for conducting interviews led to extremely complicated and excessive procedures. This complication alienated residents and, in many cases, they turned away. Despite trying to openly 'connect' with people, spontaneous, in-depth conversations were not possible due to these administrative, dissuasive obligations.

interpretations. His formalist and abstract language allowed for multiple (multicultural) readings, leading to our conclusion that an iconographic reading is a way of putting the potential of the multi-interpretability of architecture on the table in adaptive reuse projects.

Our Arenawijk case reveals that meanings and associations shift over time and that the intention of the architect is only one thread in a polyphonic narrative. An iconographical reading, however crucial in an adaptive reuse process, does not sufficiently consider the layers of time and the personal associations of the residents. When reusing such sculptures, we have to go further than retrieving the initial artistic intentions (insofar as we can assure them) and release the idea that an image should trigger an 'appropriate' interpretation.

Architects should be concerned with the social implications and the shifting meanings of both artworks and buildings and embrace the non-neutrality of images or signs. As Nicholas Addison wrote: 'Iconographic analysis, or even its Panofskian extension into iconology, contains the danger of assuming that the vehicle, or in semiotic terms the signifier, is neutral. Here the artwork's content (the signified) is delivered by its formal means (signifiers) in a seamless process of transmission where only the symbolic nature of its represented objects stands in the way of literal interpretation'.<sup>28</sup> Willem A. DeVries links interpretation and meaning in the article 'Meaning and Interpretation in History' (1983), arguing 'that interpretations have to do with meanings, it is through interpretation that we come to know meanings'. Furthermore, 'interpretation involves something like re-enacting or re-living in one's imagination the historical moment to be interpreted'.<sup>29</sup> When we draw a parallel with architecture, we can say that through the interpretation of the sculptures, we may have found a key to keeping heritage alive. What if we see the inhabitants – rather than the architect(s) – as the 'experts' of the site? What if their creative translations of personal associations with the sculptures ensure their involvement with the site in an honest, memorable way? What if they can now write their own story over the existing layers?

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Addison, 'Who's Afraid of Signs and Significations? Defending Semiotics in the Secondary Art and Design Curriculum', in *Art Education in a Postmodern World: Collected Essays*, ed. T. Hardy (2006), 120.

<sup>29</sup> Willem A. DeVries, 'Meaning and Interpretation in History', *History and Theory* 22, no. 3 (1983): 253–63.

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### List of figures

[1] Master plan of the Arenawijk. The northern blocks will be demolished (red), and the southern blocks will be regenerated (blue). The central part of clustered small apartment towers will not be adapted; its residents will stay. Photos indicate the different icons on the site, implemented in the southern blocks (blue), by Marie Moors, 2020.

[2] Interior detail in the northern blocks. The yellowed wallpaper with the white void – a trace of its former inhabitation – is peeling, by Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.

[3] Dead flies found in one of the emptied apartments in the northern part of the Arenawijk, by Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.

[4] Interior view of one of the apartments in the northern part of the Arenawijk. This interior brims with replicas of famous artworks, bucolic scenes, and figurines of young boys holding umbrellas. A woman, standing under a candelabrum with fake candles and a small macrame dreamcatcher, is resting her hand on a heavy wooden cabinet, by Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.

[5] Architectural iconography by Renaat Braem as part of the Arenawijk representing love and luck: a flower growing through an abstract representation of a head, by Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.

[6A-B] Murals on the upper floor of the VUB administration and the rectory, depicting humans in total harmony with nature and reaching an 'enlightened state of being', by Renaat Braem, 1971–1976, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), by Jan Landau.

[7] Male and female caryatids carrying a child and supporting an entrance hall canopy. Kiel housing estate, Renaat Braem, Antwerp, by Marie Moors, 2019.

[8] Kiel housing estate, Renaat Braem, Antwerp, by Marie Moors, 2019.

[9] Sculpture in the Arenawijk representing love and luck: flowers blossoming from a star by Renaat Braem, Arenawijk, Antwerp, 1964, by Elisabeth Broekaert, 2020.

[10] Flag of Morocco, retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag\\_of\\_Morocco.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Morocco.svg), accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> of september, 2021.