

Alternative forms of housing in Brussels.

A means to tackle the housing crisis

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INTRODUCTION

Living in Brussels today

Over the past twenty years, housing production in Brussels has become a central issue. This concern is based on three main observations.

First, the demand for housing has increased in Brussels while accessible real estate has shrunk rapidly. This lack of accessible housing in Brussels affects mainly the middle and popular classes. Housing production currently amounts to approximately 4000 housing units per year of which less than 10 per cent are social housing¹. Moreover, the housing demand has increased constantly. The target of The Brussels-Capital Region's Sustainable Regional Development Plan (SRPD) is to increase the public housing stock by 6500 housing units with 60% for social housing and 40 per cent for middle class housing by 2020².

Second, as a result of this first observation, there is a clear worsening of social inequalities. These inequalities are geographically distributed in a zone along the industrial canal, which connected the port of Antwerp to the industries of Charleroi in the 19th century. This disadvantaged area – “*le croissant pauvre*”, the so-called “poor crescent”- is characterized by its poor housing conditions (overcrowding, lack of privacy, poor sanitation, etc.). This situation is getting worse every year; figures indicate that the sale prices evolution has been undergoing an accelerated growth since the first decade of the 21st century.

Finally, the city's household configurations have been evolving dramatically. The traditional nuclear family is no longer a shared standard. A great diversity of households has emerged (isolated people, roommates, people in transit, blended families, single-person households, etc.). The traditional housing configurations do not correspond to this social diversity.

Living in Brussels tomorrow?

In light of these observations, it seems necessary to find new and affordable housing configurations, production and organization modes able to shelter a great diversity of people. Such housing solutions need to guarantee the daily quality of life of residents and enhance relations with the outside world. More generally, the purpose of these solutions is to produce more resilient responses to a fragmented territory.

This essay looks into housing projects displaying unusual, self-produced, spatial configurations, production systems and social organizations. In Brussels, citizens' movements for the right to housing are growing and the cases studied are presented as alternatives to the current housing production.

An approach through the concept of Commons

The hypothesis made in this essay is that the concept of Commons can play a decisive role in integrating housing in its environment as well as in articulating a variety of ways of life. The various places of life and the journeys of people through their territories are illustrated by J.

Lévy³ in his analysis of the “scales of life”. Commons can function as an interface between a broad diversity of life trajectories. Commons refer to the management of common goods by a group of people. Common goods can be of two kinds. On the one hand, they can be external to humankind as it is the case for natural resources. One speaks then of intangible assets. On the other hand, they are directly linked to humankind when they are built and controlled by humans. In this case, one speaks of tangible assets for objects or places. The latter definition of Commons is at stake when it comes to inhabited and urban spaces.

According to Dardot and Laval, “the central issue of Commons lies in the prospect of subtracting something from the private or the public realm, to turn it into a potential use benefiting to all those who could relate to it”⁴. Therefore, in order to exist, Commons must be present at the same time in space but also in the decision-making and the organization of lifestyles. The stake is to enhance citizens’ initiatives and collective decision-making by producing housing environments that foster the common good over individual needs. This issue is addressed in the case of housing in Brussels. The lack of affordable housing, the resulting urban fractures and the morphology of the Brussels’ city block often endowed with former industrial plots make Brussels a fertile ground in the quest for the development of Commons.

SELF-PRODUCED HOUSING EXPERIENCES IN BRUSSELS

Three cases of self-produced housing in Brussels have been selected for this essay. They all support collective living but on different levels and with diverse ways of functioning.

“Brutopia”, a collectively built housing estate

The first case study is a collectively built housing estate inaugurated in 2013. It is located in lower Forest, a poor neighbourhood to the South of Brussels. This collective housing project consists of 27 apartments with 53 adults, 31 children/teenagers, 2 cats and 1 dog.

Due to the lack of affordable housing in Brussels, a group of people gathered their resources. The purpose of the group was to collectively play the role of a standard developer by purchasing themselves a piece of land and constructing an apartment building.

The project has been developed in the perimeter of the “Saint Antoine district contract”.

In Brussels, the purpose of “district contracts” is to assist disadvantaged neighbourhoods by creating or renovating housing, rehabilitating public spaces, creating public proximity infrastructures, improving the environment and the social cohesion. In addition, for the past few years, the Saint Antoine district has undergone a new dynamic through the establishment of cultural facilities for the neighbourhood or the metropolitan region, such as the Wiels Center for Modern Art in Brussels. From the start, the inhabitants of “Brutopia” desired to be involved in this perspective.

To carry out their project, the inhabitants have developed a specific organization. They have created working groups on various topics such as architecture, accounting, or communitarian aspects. Within each group, a spokesperson was responsible for reporting on its work to the estate’s general assemblies. This collective work continues even though the project is now completed.

The project consists of various types of spaces. The inhabitants’ ambition was to favour the relations between their collective housing and the neighbourhood. With this objective in mind, most of ground floor spaces have been dedicated to neighbourhood services. There is a Community Supported Agriculture centre, a Homework School, a Centre for the Sick and the Elderly, a Debt mediation service for disadvantaged population. There are also three architecture offices.

In addition, the inhabitants have various community spaces to promote the group dynamic and foster relations between the different types of residents but also to limit to a certain extent the individual domestic spaces. The community spaces are a common garden, a multi-purpose hall and a common laundry. They also have a parking with shared cars.

Yet, the inhabitants value the individual realm. In this case, the surface areas of the apartments are not significantly different from those of traditional housing. Each household has an apartment, usually a duplex with a private terrace. Collective life is not necessarily present on a daily basis but takes place during formal or informal gatherings within the common spaces.

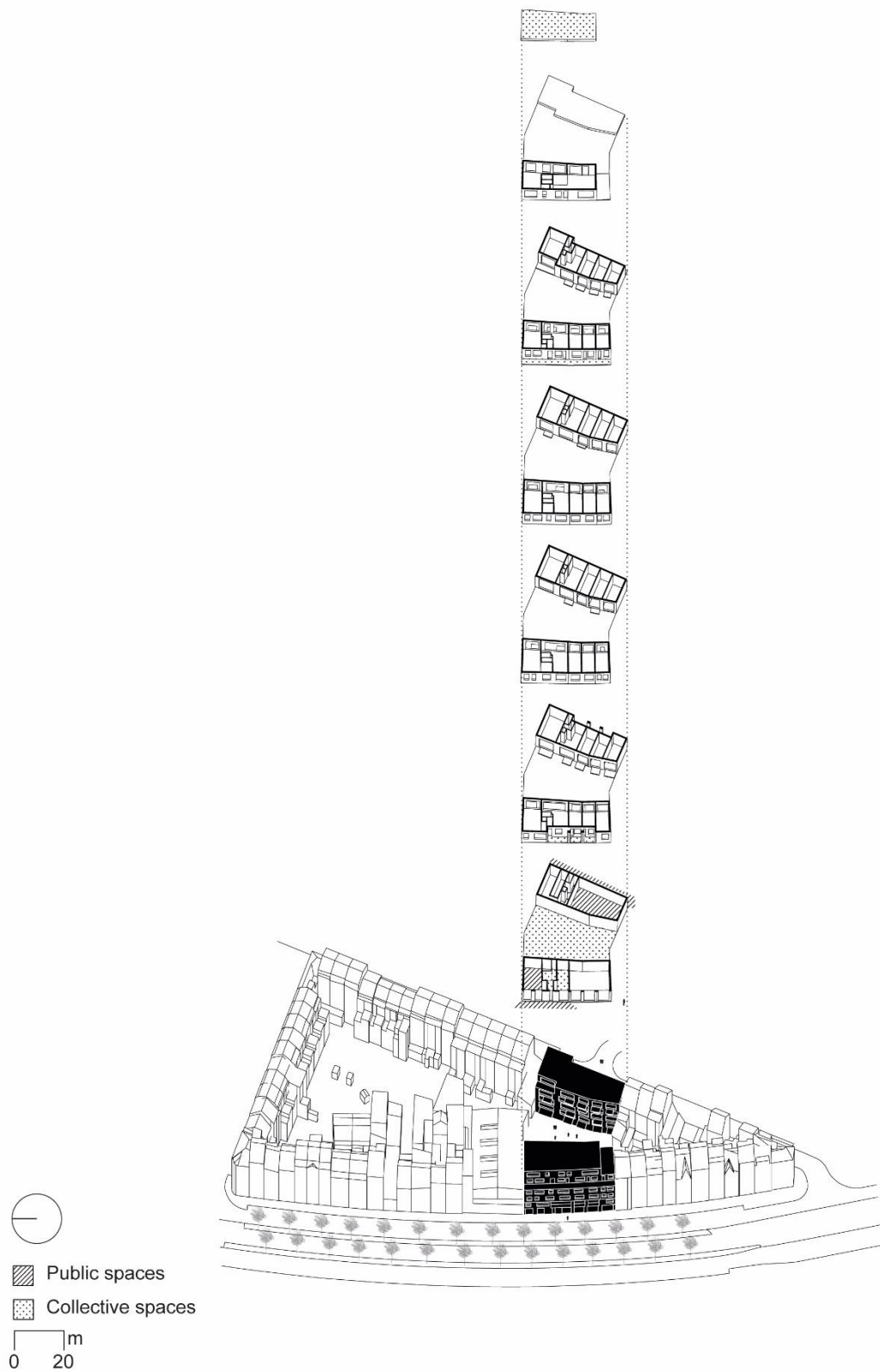


Figure 1

“123”, a collective and inclusive, yet precarious, housing project

The second case study is a squat in the centre of Brussels.

Its story begins in May 2007 when a group of people decided to illegally occupy a building at 123 rue Royale. An agreement of temporary occupation was concluded very swiftly with the Walloon Region, the owner of the place. This agreement persisted until the owner decided to renovate the building for another occupation giving the group a one-year notice. The group was allowed to occupy the building for free and, in exchange, it permitted the owner not to pay the vacancy taxes.

The building occupants are students, homeless persons, artists, people without papers, or simply people wishing to participate in a non-classical life plan. Most of them have had difficulties finding a dwelling in a context of housing shortage or for more personal reasons, and felt the desire to live in a grouped and united housing.

In “123”, there are 65 inhabitants. Depending on their personal situation, they pay a rent of € 60, 90 or 120. All decisions are taken collectively during general assemblies held every Tuesday, and within smaller groups meeting about specific subjects (e.g. cultural or festive events).

Their philosophy is to open their doors to the largest possible number of people. To this end, they open a series of public spaces every week such as a bike workshop, a *table d'hôte*, or a library. Those public spaces are situated on the first floor and on the ground floor of the building. All the floors are organized in almost the same way. They feature shared spaces: a kitchen, a small lounge, sanitation equipment and several specific communal spaces like a wood workshop, a painting workshop or a yoga room.

In “123”, there are two kinds of residents: permanent and temporary, and this determines the size of their private space and their right to vote during the general assemblies: only the permanent inhabitants get to vote during general assemblies. They have a 35 m² private space corresponding to four window-spans. If a resident decides to leave, he will always get priority coming back. This measure is taken to allow inhabitants to leave easily without being afraid of not finding anything else. Temporary inhabitants, or guests, can take part in the assemblies but do not vote. They live in guest rooms, which are smaller. The inhabitants' partners can take part in the assemblies but do not vote in the beginning. After some time they can become permanent inhabitants and have a right to vote.

The waiting list to live in “123” exceeds one hundred people. This speaks to the housing shortage in Brussels and accounts for the fight against unoccupied buildings through such initiatives.

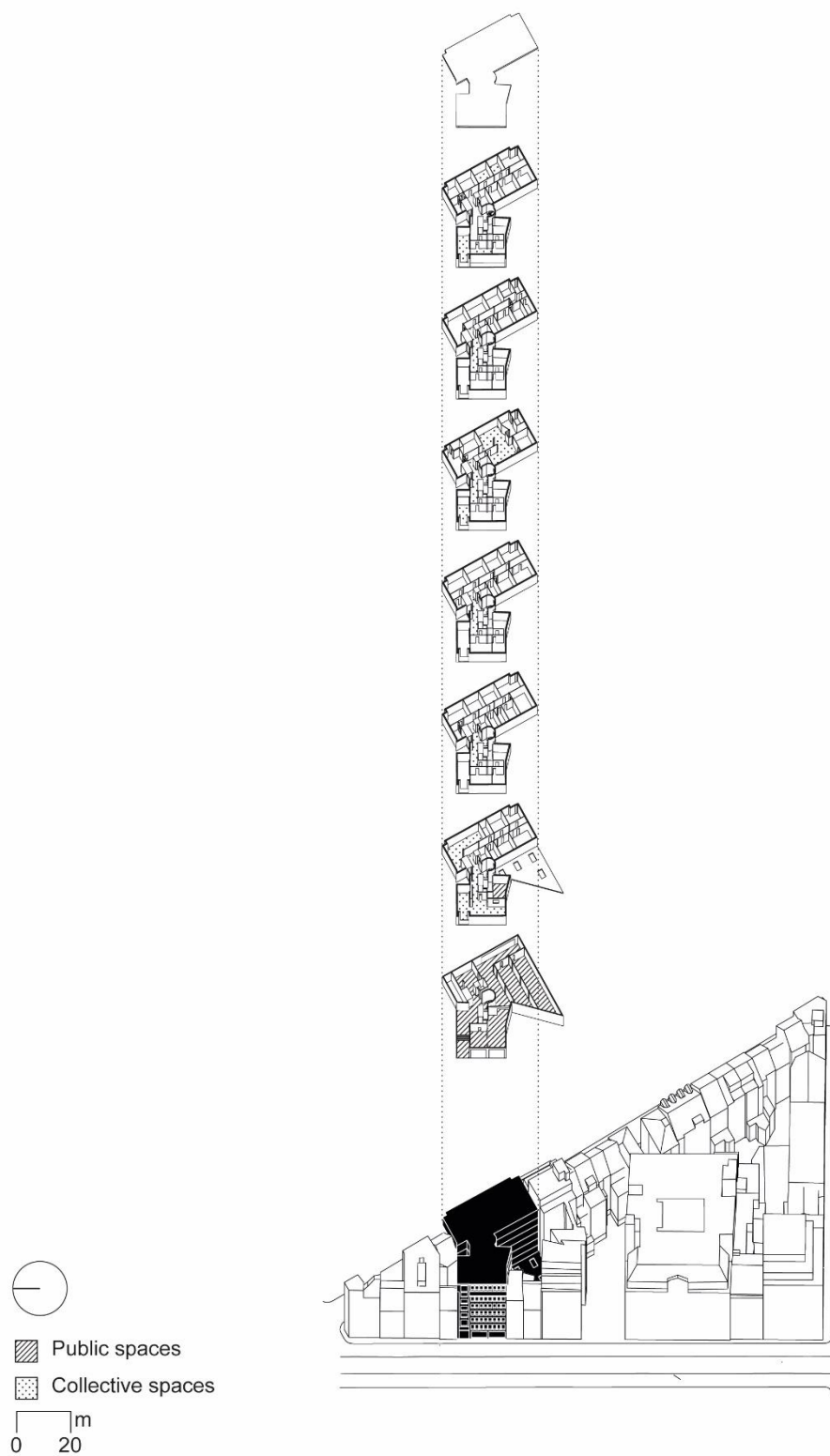


Figure 2

“La Poudrière”, a self-managed community

In 1958, two priests settled down in the district “The corner of the Devil”, a disadvantaged district of the capital. Their only purpose was to provide a reassuring presence in the neighbourhood. Little by little, the priests welcomed people in need and the community built itself up. In the 1970s, the community joined the Emmaüs movement. The philosophy of this community is to experiment an alternative to capitalism in which humans become the only priority.

Its members have four founding principles: presence, friendship, hope and personal fulfilment. The notion of community is extremely important. Salaries are shared and everything is bought in common.

In the beginning, the priests were looking for activities for the people they welcomed. Their first activity was working as movers for the people of the neighbourhood. Today, their main activity is the recuperation and sale of objects of all kinds. The community also has a farming activity on the side.

The sixty members of the community are living in three different geographical locations: Brussels, Pérulwez (near the border with France) and Rummen (70km from Brussels).

All decisions are discussed by the group at the general meetings held one weekend per month and they are then legally or administratively formalized by the association council and the administrative council (5 members of the community). The decisions concern the activities of the community or the buildings. The association council comprises thirteen members, ten community members and three non-members including a notary. The administrative council is composed by five members of the community. They meet once a year or whenever necessary. Besides the regular community members, some people work as volunteers. They do not participate in decision-making but can be responsible for a specific activity.

The community owns an important patrimony inherited from persons close to the community. In total, the patrimony of “La Poudrière” is composed of sixteen buildings worth 8 million euros. The buildings are located in five different places: Brussels (the Mother House in rue de La Poudrière), Anderlecht, Vilvoorde, Pérulwez and Rumen.

“La Poudrière” location occupies almost a whole urban block within which lie industrial constructions. The community interacts with the neighbourhood through the stores and their hospitality facilities. All the buildings of the block owned by the community have openings that lead to the community spaces. The community spaces occupy a large area in the centre of the block while the private spaces are at the periphery. The private spaces are divided according to the different needs of the inhabitants. For example, families have a kitchen and a dining room to allow for some family time during the weekends.

In recent days, the community has been less successful than in the 1980s. While there were 120 members in the 1980s, there are only 60 today of which 20 inhabitants live in the “La Poudrière” location. The community is therefore seeking a revival and a new form of collective life. For example, they are thinking of using their assets to implement a system similar to the Community Land Trust.

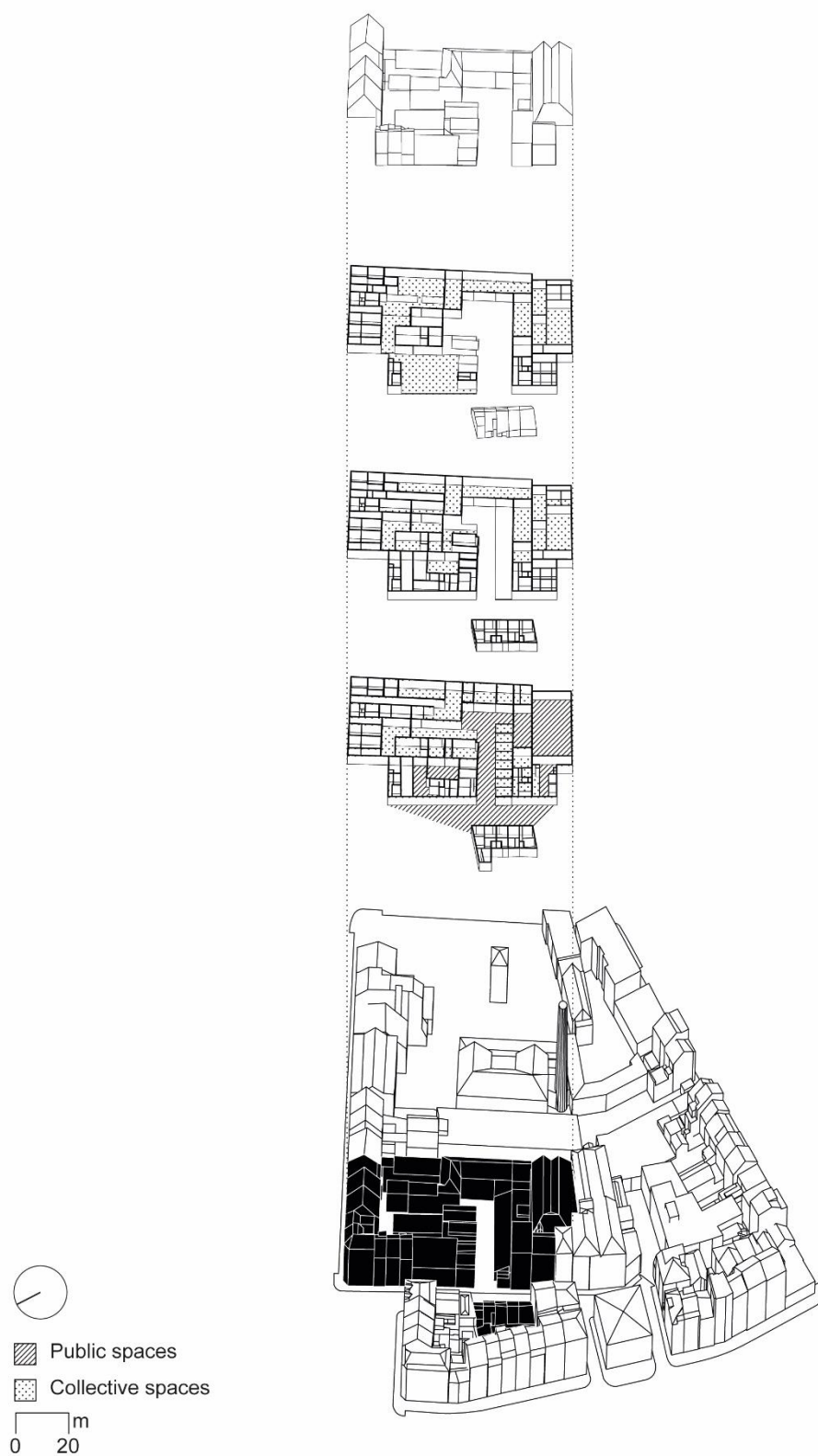


Figure 3

AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Commons play a central role in each case study. This particular choice attempts to respond to the housing issues regarding their usual production modes and the changing needs of society. However, the case studies differ in terms of organisations, uses and spatiality. This essay questions which criteria favour the development of Commons as spaces for domestic as well as for urban life through a comparative analysis. The purpose of this analysis is to associate social and spatial factors in order to understand which arrangements best support the “vivre ensemble” (living together), integration in the surroundings and sustainability.

The housing experiments studied in Brussels are small but display variations in their organization, spatial and social features. Moreover, given the current problems regarding housing affordability and the usual Brussels urban morphologies, those types of experiments are likely to multiply in the future. In this perspective, developing an analytical framework could provide a better understanding of those housing developments with respect to the contemporary issues of cities. This framework shed lights on the organisational, spatial and social features that are liable to cater to serve the needs and the changes of society. The markers of this first analytical framework will be completed by in-depth fieldwork research. The actual framework is organised into three dimensions.

The first dimension concerns the collective organization which encompasses three facets. First, to produce alternative housing from the traditional modes of production, every case study presents a different operating mode. These operating modes refer to the notion of ownership when producing or occupying the housing projects. Both “La Poudrière” and “Brutopia” produced their habitat through self-supported initiatives without any public or private funding. However, while in both cases the housing production was collective, land property is not. Indeed, the inhabitants of “La Poudrière” collectively own the entire estate while those of “Brutopia” collectively own the ground and the collective spaces but own their apartments individually. The case of “123” is different because the inhabitants are neither owners nor tenants of their dwellings but are tenants of a building belonging to the Walloon Region. Second, the legal framework in which the projects are developed also differs from one case to the next. In all three cases, the housing projects were implemented through non-profit associations. These associations benefit from a legal personality separate from that of its members. However, the scope of these associations’ action varies, being limited to the housing management in the “123” and “Brutopia” while it manages the entire life of the residents in “La Poudrière”. These differences might give a hint at the capacity of the system to be long-lasting. Finally, different governance patterns emerge in the projects. They all organise general deciding assemblies but at a pace that varies according to the development stages of the projects. In “Brutopia”, the inhabitants’ participation was particularly important during the design process. Nowadays, the housing organization is very similar to a traditional co-ownership. However, small working groups continue to develop collective projects for the estate. At “123”, general assemblies take place every week. Everyone can participate and make proposals. At “La Poudrière”, meetings are held every month. Everyone can participate. Yet, in this latter case, decisions are always subject to validation by the councils formed by the oldest members of the community.

The second dimension concerns the spatial organization.

First, the urban forms of the three case studies are quite similar. They are all part of a classical Brussels urban closed block. “Brutopia” and “123” display a similar topology since both their properties give access to a street on each side of the block. The centre of the land is treated differently however: “Brutopia” offering a central garden while the entire plot is built in the case of “123”. For its part, “La Poudrière” occupies one half of a block with a series of connected typical Brussels houses and former warehouses.

Second, the three case studies present a different percentage of collective spaces. They do not offer the same amenities and those are distributed differently. “La Poudrière” has the

highest percentage of collective surfaces while its number of inhabitants is the lowest. The collective spaces are for the greater part in the centre of the compound while the private spaces are spread at the periphery. The high percentage of collective spaces in "Brutopia" is mainly due to the area of the common garden, the remainder being devoted to the multifunctional room, the circulation spaces and the laundry on the ground floor. Collective surfaces in "123" occupy an important share of the building compared with the private spaces (which are 35 m² on average). They are distributed all over the building.

Eventually, each case study presents a mix of urban activities but the situation and the management of these activities are different. The external functions in "Brutopia" are not managed by the inhabitants. They are rented spaces on the ground floor. The activities carried out at "123" have no lucrative purpose. They are voluntary activities and gather at the same time residents and external volunteers. The activities of "La Poudrière" are mainly carried out by the inhabitants with the help of some volunteers. They constitute for the greater part their main activity and allow to meet partially the needs of the community.

The last dimension concerns the social and cultural aspects of the projects.

First, various relations between the inhabitants can be observed within the estates. The relationships in "Brutopia" are very similar to those of traditional housing models whereas "La Poudrière" proposes a completely different model. In the first case, community moments occur occasionally during festivities. In the second, all daily activities are collective (eating, cooking, working, etc.). At "123", communal kitchens on every floor are shared by a series of residents. But those can also use the larger collective kitchen at all times. Inhabitants choose to eat together or separately.

Second, in all three cases, the relations with the surrounding neighbourhoods are established mainly through a combination of functions. Differences can be noted however in the management of the activities held for the neighbourhood. While at "123" and "La Poudrière", those activities are managed by the inhabitants themselves, it is not the case in "Brutopia". In the various floors of the building and several times a week, various activities proposed by "123" create bonds with the neighbourhood and the city. Moreover, most of the meals are made with food recovered from various supermarkets of the city. "La Poudrière" has established a strong relation with the neighbourhood through its moving activities and its stores. Eventually, "Brutopia's" relations with the neighbourhood are established primarily through the centre for elderly people.

Third, farther relations, outside the city, only occur in the case of "La Poudrière". Indeed, exchanges take place between the three places of life of the community. Food products cultivated in the countryside locations allow to feed the Brussels' community.

CONCLUSION

The diversity of housing production systems presented in these case studies could be a clue into a better accessibility to housing. However, limitations subsist in each of them. Despite the contract concluded with the owner of the building, the housing future of the inhabitants of "123" is uncertain. Indeed, the contract of precarious occupancy offers only a temporary solution. For its part, the system of "La Poudrière" does not specify the possibility of leaving the estate after several years, thus engendering a rather peculiar lifestyle. The production system of "Brutopia" allows the collective purchase of private apartments at a lower cost but it does not avoid speculation upon their resale.

Although more and more shared, group or community housing exist, their legal frame still lacks a clear definition. This shortfall of effective laws to frame these new housing practices causes a series of inconveniences (loss of lone resident status, administrative issues regarding registration, etc.). There is no specific legal regime nor a specific definition for shared housing. Worse still, with the coming into force of a law against squatters in October 2017 it will become harder to occupy buildings the way the "123" does. Indeed, before this law, in order to obtain a contract of precarious occupation, the most effective solution was to compulsorily occupy an empty building and then, once recorded, to conclude such a contract with its owner. Today, with the new law, illegal settlers can be expelled much more easily.

In view of the evolution of the households' composition, there is an urgent need to think about a legal framework allowing the development of new forms of housing.

The central issue standing out of the governance systems analysis is the challenge of maintaining the inhabitants' investment in the decision-making processes and of preserving democratic and horizontal governance. In the oldest case, "La Poudrière", all important decisions must be validated by the councils made up of the eldest members of the community. Yet, their perceptions do not always correspond to those of the new generations which aspire to a different organization. The collective organization of "Brutopia" was particularly important during the conception of the project but this organization is not relevant any more in the day-to-day management of the estate. In "123", the difficulty of the horizontal governance lies chiefly in gathering all the inhabitants at the weekly meetings as well as in handling internal conflicts.

A research hypothesis would be to estimate the ideal number of inhabitants to ensure horizontal and sustainable governance.

In connection with this issue, the available spaces within the city of Brussels to produce this kind of project is at stake. This analysis shows that the case studies are integrated in existing blocks and do not easily fit into the fabric of the city. When producing larger housing projects, the issue of available space is crucial. How could such alternative projects compete with traditional private housing developments? This question might partly be answered through the projects' densities. Indeed, by producing more collective spaces and fewer individual spaces, the projects prove to be altogether more compact and hence more economically advantageous.

Moreover, a comparison of collective and individual spaces shows that the size and the use of Commons are proportional to the level of communitarianism. The inhabitants of "La Poudrière" have a high percentage of communal surfaces at their disposal. In return, their individual spaces are reduced. Likewise, this level of communitarianism seems to influence the diversity of uses and the connexions to their surroundings. In "123" and in "La Poudrière", the inhabitants organize on their own the diversity of the uses in the building as activities or services for the neighbourhood. It is also in these cases that the greatest share of disadvantaged people and variations in inhabitants' profiles is met. "123" presents a large opening towards the neighbourhood through its various activities. "La Poudrière" also welcomes a large number of disadvantaged people such as migrants or former prisoners.

From a social and cultural point of view, the overall trend tends to confirm that Commons generate initiatives on behalf of the inhabitants. The initial investment to create mutual places and services is usually compensated by the solidarity and mutual assistance generated by the Commons. As noted in the "123" or "La Poudrière", communal activities also facilitate the reintegration of people in society. Finally, "La Poudrière" displays an example of an open lifestyle and exchanges between the spaces in the countryside and the city.

Eventually, the analysis of the three self-produced projects displays a reduction of the individual sphere in favour of common spaces. In addition to creating a genuine community life within the projects, those common spaces create an interface with the neighbourhood through the implementation of activities and services by the inhabitants. Spatially, this is translated by a permeability and a continuity of the common and urban spaces.

Those housing projects demonstrate an ability to welcome heterogeneous sociocultural profiles, to stimulate urban space and to reconsider the traditional limits of the private sphere. The propensity of these self-produced spatial and social forms of dwelling advocates their interesting role to face the housing crisis in Brussels.

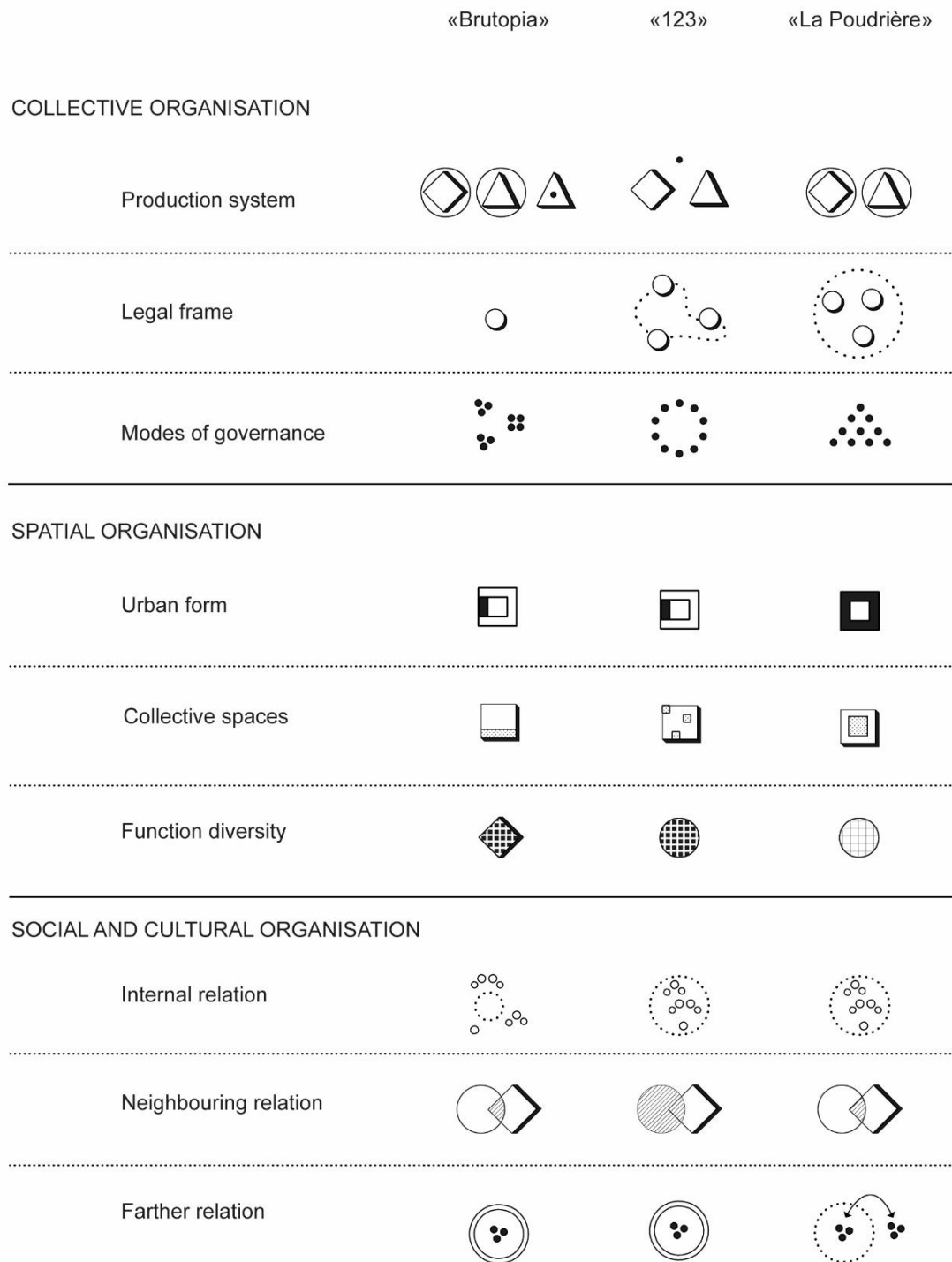


Figure 4

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