



Architecture for use and appropriation *From ephemeral to permanent practices* Els Vervloesem

Urban development progresses, by definition, with stops and starts. The waves of investment that sweep across the city are hard to predict and, in their wake, places that temporarily escape planning, direction and control are frequently left behind. This is a blessing — not only for the city, but also, and above all, for its users. Because it is often in these buildings or urban fragments, which for one reason or another remain unseen or are written off, that precisely the space for renewal is found. Just as the best ideas come along when your thoughts are briefly unfocused, new forms of urban life take shape in areas that have, for the time being, eluded the attention of investors, urban planners and policy-makers. They are often places where more is allowed and possible and, as a result, the opportunities are greater. Their open nature and low threshold usually makes them relatively accessible and thereby more tolerant of unconventional people and behaviour.

These sorts of indeterminate, poorly defined urban places have a long history of attracting temporary initiatives. In the first instance, this might involve passers-by or individuals who have difficulty in finding a place elsewhere, or who prefer to stay out of sight, such as children and adolescents, but also the homeless. In addition, activists, artists and socio-cultural workers have considerable experience in squatting, appropriating or temporarily utilising unexploited urban space. The reasons and motives are varied: from a politically-motivated struggle against empty

buildings and property speculation, through the search for affordable studio and workshop space, to seizing on a location's potential for forging neighbourhood connections.

For several reasons, including the economic and financial crisis of 2007, and the halting of large-scale urban projects, temporary use projects have spread like wildfire. In anticipation of better economic times, initiatives that temporarily transform vacant sites into public spaces have appeared with increasing regularity, often becoming laboratories for new forms of urban development. The best-known example is urban agriculture, but there are all sorts of other variants too, such as skate-parks, flea markets, sports fields, neighbourhood bars, community kitchens, party venues, camping sites and spaces for performances and art exhibitions. What all these initiatives and projects have in common is that commercial concerns give way to the interests of the public. For the initiators, it is no longer the property value that is of prime importance, but the appreciation of the social and cultural capacities of these sites. Small-scale, everyday activities in such spaces can act as a lever for urban development: they generate encounters, social dynamism and interaction.

The authorities are also picking up on the concept of temporary use. In recent years, municipal departments and public institutions have become increasingly convinced of the possibilities that it can offer, although this also

comes with the risk that the temporary use initiatives will become instrumentalised, recuperated or institutionalised by the authorities. There is a real danger that, as soon as the economy picks up again, there will be a return to business as usual, or that the role of this type of enterprise will be reduced to the creation of support for projects with less democratic objectives. But despite this tension, or precisely because of it, several recent practices have highlighted the enormous potential of such free zones (temporary or otherwise). This has given rise to a range of new and committed initiators, often a mixture of citizens and professionals, who become actively involved in the organisation of their city. It is striking that this does not remain limited to an anti-something crusade, or a bottom-up movement. In most cases, purposeful strategic alliances are formed between unconventional players and the traditional parties involved in urban development. It is when these sorts of practices are employed as a way to break into the existing policy framework that they can really make a difference.

There is a worldwide revival of public occupation of urban spaces, both as a strategy for questioning the present power balance, and also as a means of putting communal interests on the agenda. Examples include the Occupy movement and the action taken by Reclaim the Streets. Although these practices are of a completely different order, it is worth mentioning them in this context as they also adopt similar

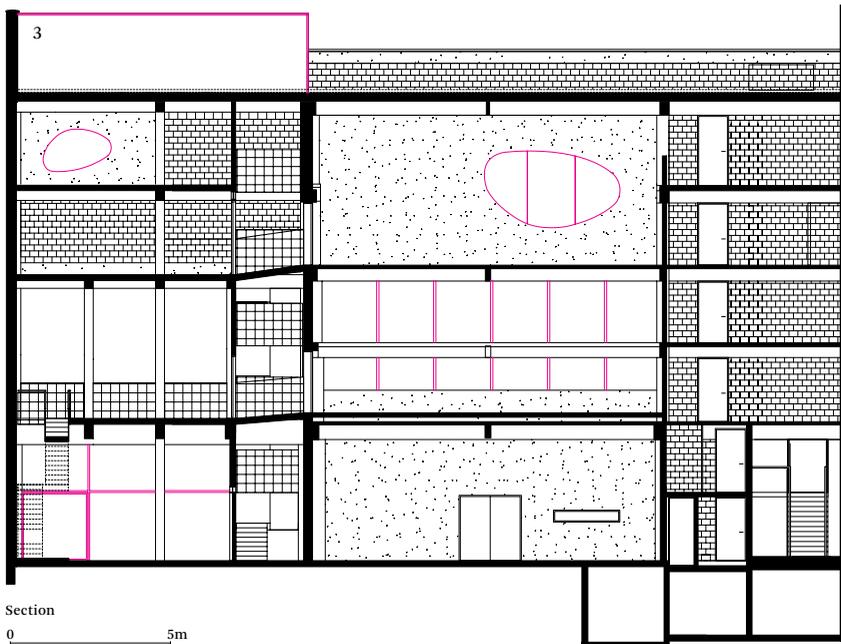
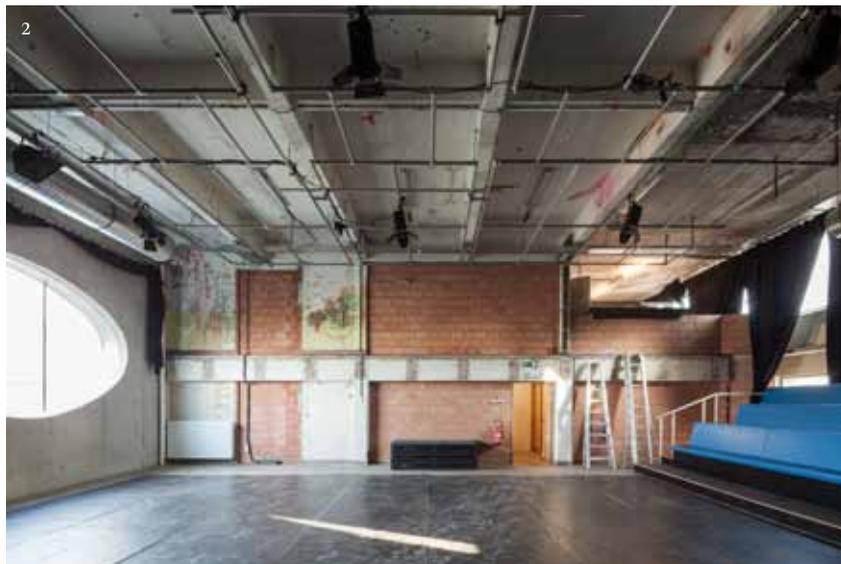
strategies. The key point is the claiming of a place as a symbolic act. By extension, this also opens up new perspectives regarding the significance of architecture within the city. Rather than designers and spatial planners shutting themselves off from a reality that they can never fully control, whereby they marginalise their own position in society, this movement offers an opportunity to once again assume a position in relation to that reality. It is a question of adopting a dutiful but self-confident attitude whereby the potential power of design in the occupation of space is rediscovered. The concept can then be seen as something that provides a handle that helps facilitate the process of appropriating, activating and reinforcing the urban space. Since temporary projects deviate markedly from standard building-to-order, designers are challenged to draw on an alternative register and take up a different, cooperative position. As a result, some end up feeling more like curators, facilitators or mediators. Boundaries and roles become blurred. These temporary sanctuaries create room for experimentation, also for architecture.

THREE IDIOSYNCRATIC SITES — HET BOS, PARCKFARM AND 019

*there was drawing on the walls
doors were slammed
shouting of 'oi polloi'
the windows were painted black
the hair stood on end
shaved off
painted red
dogs
dogs everywhere
always indoors
and pissing outside
there was laughing
and shouting everywhere
footballing, eating, clinking of
glasses, fooling
quiet vomiting*

(Extract from Benjamin Verdonck's farewell speech at the Scheld'Apén closing party on 12 October 2013)

What the three projects of Het Bos, 019 and Parckfarm have in common is that they all began as temporary initiatives. Since the contexts in which they arose were very different, the notion of temporary use does not always refer to the same thing. Het Bos is a sequel to Scheld'Apén, an artist's collective that was established in a squat at the former Petroleum South industrial site in Antwerp in 1998. An artistic sanctuary for young artists, musicians and theatre-makers sprang up in this no-man's-land, free from existing structures and with a heavy dose of anarchism. The organisation sought, and fairly quickly



obtained, official recognition. A year later, they also received approval from Antwerp city council to develop a youth programme in the 'villa' and surrounding grounds. After more than a decade of working, playing and experimenting without interference, the site came under pressure from, amongst other things, a plan to build a football stadium (which was never executed). An alternative location was sought and, in the end, an empty municipal warehouse was chosen, located on the Eilandje, a stone's throw from the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS). The recent relocation signalled an important turning point for the organisation, in terms of space, location and objectives. From a hidden refuge in the green outskirts where anything was possible, to the centre of the city where more order and rules apply. From casual, ad hoc joint activities to a new sort of institution where more structural relations can be established. BEL Architects converted this warehouse into an arts workshop, which, as a tribute to their roots, the Scheld'Apén renamed 'Het Bos' (the wood).

The 019 project is of a completely different nature; it can be seen as an example of the latest generation of temporary use, and was initiated by Ghent city council. In anticipation of the rede-



velopment of the Old Docks, sogent, Ghent's urban development company, wanted to breathe new life into the former harbour area by temporarily reactivating a factory building that had fallen into disuse. The same approach had previously led to the launch of DOK, a temporary meeting-place on the other side of the water, where concerts, films, exhibitions, talks and an open kitchen are

organised, among other things. 019 gave Smoke & Dust the opportunity to set up an artistic meeting-place in the former welding workshop for five years, with an adjacent space for silkscreen printing, a sound studio and a wood and metal workshop. Smoke & Dust is a collective that originated as a recording label on Ghent's hard-core punk scene and expanded into the 019 artists'



1-3 — Het Bos youth cultural zone, Antwerp
BEL Architects
1 & 2 © Tim Van de Velde

4 & 5 — Parckfarm, Brussels
Alive architecture and Taktyk
© Alive architecture and Taktyk

collective, which includes a graphic designer, an artist, and the architect Olivier Goethals.

Parckfarm is part of the Parckdesign biennale, a cultural event organised by Leefmilieu Brussels (Environment Brussels). A neglected railway cutting on the rim of the Tour & Taxis site, amidst several multicultural districts, was transformed into a public park with room for local food production. Unlike the previous editions of Parckdesign, the organisers sought a project that would have a lasting impact on the neighbourhood. A team of curators, headed by Thierry Kandjee (Taktyk) and Petra Pferdmenges (Alive architecture), spearheaded the programme and invited artists, architects, landscape architects, students and local residents to take part in experiments within an alternative, more democratic model of public space.

SPACE FOR THE CITY

Het Bos does not shy away from major issues. Since its foundation, this art workshop has focused explicitly on drawing in the city and, by extension, the world. This is achieved not just through their support to all sorts of grass-roots movements, collectives, groups and individuals. In addition, Scheld'Apen — and now Het Bos — has always been an open house for fragile and vulnerable people. One example is the long-term cooperation with the Opvangcentrum Linkeroever (reception centre). Refugees from such conflict zones as Syria, Afghanistan, Nepal and Congo cook there in the *volxkeuken* (people's kitchens) every week, a tradition that has moved together with the Scheld'Apen to Het Bos. The active quest for interaction with the outside world carries on in the programme of work and through the organisation of the space. This takes the form of a progressive system, which evolves from closed to open in terms of character. The studios for the artists, performers and musicians are creative spaces and, as such, are the most secluded from the outside world. The stages provide the inspiring arena where new work can be debuted and fresh ideas tested before an audience. The kitchen, in one of the most central areas, is the 'door to the outside': it is here that the artists and the public meet, and where direct exchanges occur. Lastly, the evening debates on topics related to urban issues connect to the world outside. The way in which BEL Architects have handled the existing building is perfectly in tune with this vision. Taking as their motto 'removal instead of addition', they converted the dark, monotonous, low rooms of the warehouse into a variety of open and closed, more or less public spaces that vary in height, size and natural light levels — simply by remov-



ing several floor slabs. Its rough finish is partly due to budget constraints but, at the same time, it leaves latitude for further appropriation by its users. As a result of the intelligent connection of the rooms, both shared and independent use of the space is made possible. Equally, the interplay of spaces that are heterogeneous and flexible in their use creates the opportunity to organise a continuous programme in which various activities can merge into one another with no problem.

ANYTHING OR NOTHING

The new 019 artist's collective has no illusions. They assume that the welding workshop in which they now temporarily reside will probably be demolished in the long term. But like Het Bos and Parckfarm, 019 take advantage of the opportunity to claim a visible place in the city. In its programme, Smoke & Dust targets an exclusive niche audience that would not be catered to, or hardly at all, elsewhere in Ghent. The interventions in and around the building are both restrained and provocative. Flagpoles have been fixed to the edge of the roof on the front façade, with artist-designed flags that often feature political messages and slogans pertaining to current affairs. An oversized billboard is ostentatiously hung alongside the commercial hoarding, for which no permit was ever requested. Reused concrete traffic barriers, originating from surrounding building sites, serve as benches and a buffer for the entrance zone. Inside the building, a wooden box, which is painted black and resembles a sculpture, has been placed at an angle in the high central space. 'We wanted to add something that can be anything or nothing,' Olivier Goethals explains. By twisting the volume with regard to the

enclosed area, it is not corridors that are formed, but spaces. The result is the opposite of a panopticon: once you enter the volume, it is no longer possible to gain an overview. The organisers of the talks, performances and exhibitions are requested to make active use of the box, which generates unexpected inversions and atypical user experiences. For example, during one performance the musicians stood in the corners of the building while the audience listened to the music in the box in the middle. After the interval, the roles were reversed. The fact that Smoke & Dust, as a collective, sets itself up as curator, co-user and co-designer of the building makes it possible to take a different, incremental design approach. There is no longer a fixed final image. It is, rather, an unplanned, accumulative, step-by-step way of creating architecture. For example, a high flagpole with a flag of no less than seven by eleven metres was just recently installed. A canopy will later be added over the front door and, in the meantime, there are plans to put sheds on the roof that can be used as accommodation for artists. In this way, the building work continues, responding to chance occurrences and unexpected opportunities and possibilities, and adds to a story that will never be complete.

SHARED 'PRODUCERSHIP'

The design strategy for Parckfarm is as simple as it is effective: making visible, and enhancing, that which already exists. When they first examined the site, the curators saw that several collective gardens, small livestock farms and a pigeon coop had already been set up on its fringes. These pre-existing informal practices formed the starting point for the concept that underpins the basic



infrastructure of the new Parckfarm. The curators developed a master plan, organised a design competition and also launched a request for initiatives from the neighbourhood. One of the requirements was that both the production and the management of the installations should take place in consultation with local residents. This led, among other things, to the following interventions: Kotkot, a chicken house and sheep pen; L'Usine du TrèsOr Noir, a compost toilet with chutes and fermentation tanks; Bee Car, a bee house; Cubious, a 3D kitchen garden; and Farmhouse, a central meeting place where, among other things, farmers offer their produce. The various contributions ranged from improvised collective actions to more precise design interventions. For instance, local residents took it upon themselves to build a bread oven. A professional design team from 1010 architecture and urbanism guided the construction of the Farmhouse, while an old greenhouse from the Netherlands was dismantled and rebuilt on the site, in a revised form, with the help of volunteers. The task demanded a certain degree of precision in terms of execution, which contributed to the fact that the participants remained enthusiastic throughout its construction and were very proud of the end result. The designers deliberately opted not to improvise, but to employ a meticulous design system in which a



selection of plain and sustainable materials was consistently applied in a grid of thirty-centimetre squares. Even when the designers departed, the local residents added new furnishings on the same principle. As was to be predicted, Parckfarm initially attracted primarily highly educated, creative, white residents. But the network gradually expanded and the actions on the site were also able to appeal to an increasingly diverse group of people. This is not to be underestimated: many well-intentioned participation projects hardly

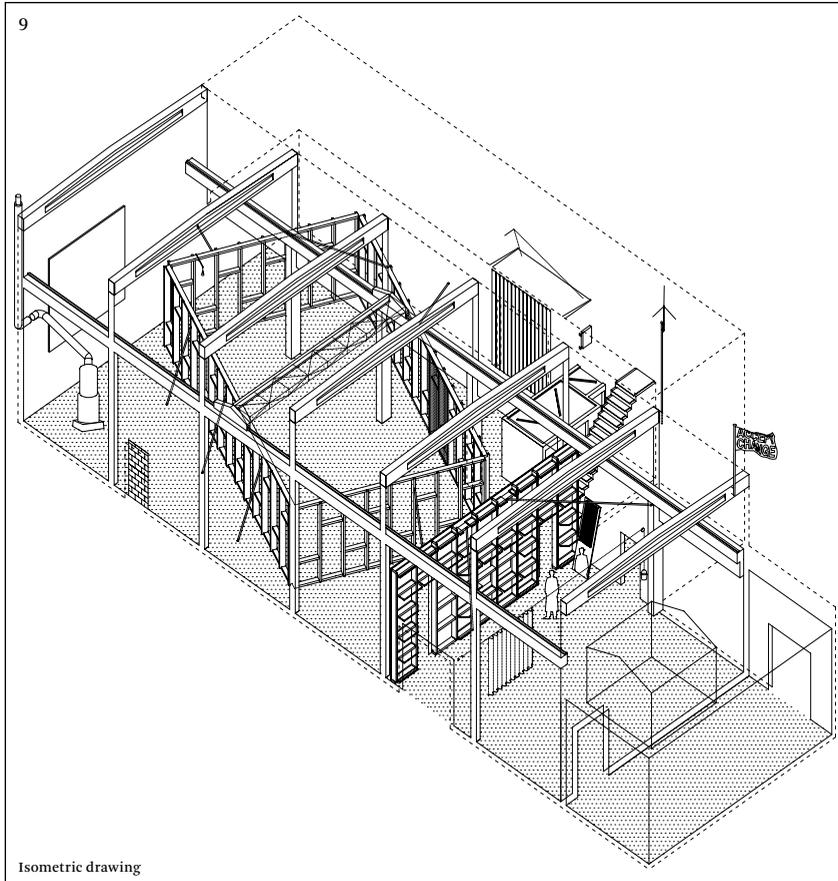
succeed in this goal at all. This sort of objective, which transcends the project level, also echoes in the slogan 'from the landscape to the plate'. Each and every one of the many minor actions is linked to major urban issues and touches upon essential systemic changes. The cultural refuge of the biennale creates the conditions within the official governmental framework that permit new and unprecedented activities. Parckfarm is a project that unites urban farming, community building, a short-chain economy, multiculturalism and self-organisation.

This new temporary park welds together the social, spatial and economic boundaries between Molenbeek, Laken and Jette.

ADOPTING A DIFFERENT SORT OF DESIGN REGISTER

Each in their own unique way, Het Bos, 019 and Parckfarm adopt an active position towards the city, and all its attendant issues, by focusing on use and appropriation. In all three projects there is a broadening of what is understood by architecture. In the first place, it is a matter of extending time. This is expressed most strongly at Parckfarm. It is less clear when the process of creating architecture begins and ends, but in any case it does not stop after the completion of the construction. In addition, the position of the designer as the obvious hero of the design process is brought into question. Who takes up which role is especially vague at Parckfarm and 019, and it no longer really matters. What the three projects also have in common is that they use design to explicitly question the interaction with the immediate and wider urban environment, and to reinvigorate and strengthen it. In addition, each of these projects forms a critical commentary on contemporary policy and the way in which it influences the urban space. At Het Bos, this is expressed in the alternative way youth

and cultural work is envisaged, 019 moves the markers in order to offer a cultural programme, and at Parckfarm it is more about the quest for an alternative use and meaning for the public space. Lastly, the three projects use design as an integral part of the process of spatial appropriation. All three aspire to a poetics of use in their production of architectural significance. This ranges from making things visible, through claiming and taking possession, to the reprogramming and reactivation of urban space. In this way, these projects continue to build on the existing city in a sustainable way. They make use of the potential of vacant, unused buildings or barren land on sites that are waiting for better days. Through their establishment in the social and spatial fabric of the city, they generate new meanings, and each in their own way succeeds in overturning the manner in which we currently talk and think about the city. These experiments are examples of good practices that should be applied more widely. They contain the seeds of alternative forms of city-making, from which not only the users and designers, but also future principals and policy-makers can draw inspiration.



Isometric drawing



10

9 & 10 — 019 collective arts centre, Ghent
Olivier Goethals
10 © Filip Dujardin

Interactions Audrey Contesse

The studios belonging to the artists Michel François, Thomas Leroy and Koen van den Broek are all located in dense urban blocks, either in, or near, a city centre. Koen van den Broek (b. 1973), a painter, works in a former garage on the outskirts of Antwerp. Ever since the age of eighteen, Thomas Leroy (b. 1981) has been searching for the perfect studio space, both in the cities where he has lived, and in those he has visited. For the past decade, however, he has been based in Brussels for its cosmopolitanism, scale and proximity to other large cities; more specifically, he has chosen the neighbourhood of Ixelles in order to be close to his gallery. Rather than use the word *atelier*, the sculptor prefers the term *studio*, as a way of differentiating the artist's space from the *ateliers* belonging to the craftsmen with whom he collaborates on his installations (i.e. metalworkers and cast-makers, etc.). Michel François (b. 1956) is another artist who works predominantly in these kinds of workshops; at other times he has been known to share a studio with fellow artists, or use the spaces provided by his galleries. In a career spanning thirty years, he has never possessed a studio of his own. As with Thomas Leroy, it took time to find the right location, as it needed to be a place with enough room and plenty of light. He eventually found it just a stone's throw from the Brussels-South railway station in the borough of Sint-Gillis, in a former warehouse belonging to a publisher: a building spread out over three floors that extends through the interior of the



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block between Bosniëstraat and Gérard Van Caulaertsquare.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, artists have often transformed seemingly uninhabitable buildings into studio spaces. The first issue is the presence of natural light. As an architectural typology, the artist's studio is a space that combines three functions, namely a workspace, an exhibition space and a living space, without necessarily constituting the artist's main residence. As a dwelling, it must enable — perhaps even facilitate — artistic creativity. In order to be able to define the programme of the studio with greater precision, Michel François

appropriated his building by moving into it before the renovation work began. The layout of the former warehouse lent itself to the main functions of a studio: the warehouse on the lower floor; an administrative office, work studio and private exhibition space on the level of Bosniëstraat, and the artist's residence on the upper floor. The organisation of the volume is extremely variable, which mirrors the artist's practice: it is a work in progress. In 1956, Reyner Banham¹ underlined the influence of art upon the evolution of the artist's studio. Thus the great windows that were inserted into the façades of Parisian houses in the

1 — Studio for Koen van den Broek, Merksen
Haerynck Vannmeirhaeghe architects and Carl Bourgeois
© Filip Dujardin