

## **Urban improvisation – reconstructions of the interplay of private and public initiatives in spatial transformation processes**

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### **1. Introduction**

Flanders is spatially fragmented; a dispersed city (Gulinck et al, 2007). Fragments of age-old farmland border on generic villa allotments, oversized industrial areas, shopping centres surrounded by parking space, factories reconverted to garden centres, etc. The Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (1997) considers spatial fragmentation as a negative process leading among other things to undefined leftover spaces, pressure on non-built-up areas and an increase in traffic. The Plan therefore offers concepts to halt and invert this process.

Rather than trying to invert this fragmentation, though, De Meulder et al. (1999) propose to work with it. Through meticulous reconstructions of spatial transformation processes, they set out to reveal spatial patterns and relations within the dispersed landscape. These patterns and relations are then taken as the starting point to structure this dispersion (Dehaene & Boon, 2006). What the reconstructions also reveal is that fragmentation processes are the result of numerous iterations of public and private initiatives which are hardly ever coordinated, let alone planned. Until the implementation of the Structure Plan, for instance, most decisions concerning land use were made at the level of the municipality, often without any planners being involved (Renard & Liefink, 1995).

In this paper we argue that patterns and relations are not only found in the dispersed landscape, but also in the interactive processes between public and private initiatives which generate this landscape. We refer to these patterns and relations as *urban improvisation*. In jazz, an improvisation starts with one player setting a tune until another player decides to play along or comes up with his own tune. The result is a

complex and unpredictable interplay of action-reaction, at some moments very clear and coherent, at others totally fragmented. In this paper we will translate the concept of jazz improvisation to the context of spatial transformation by applying it to a number of cases: the construction of a neighbourhood, the transformation of a historic street and the development of a park, all situated within the city of Antwerp, Belgium. For each case, we will reconstruct the public-private interaction process and assess a series of spatial and social features by comparing it to locations where the public initiative prevailed and no improvisation took place. We will argue that urban improvisation can be considered as mode of planning in its own right and illustrate that it can lead to social and spatial quality, even while also producing fragmentation.

## 2. Fragmented Flanders

The Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (1997) starts from the proposition that Flanders is spatially fragmented and that this fragmentation is increasing. Among the causes of this fragmentation, it points to a range of market mechanisms: “*For instance, the operation of the housing market results in massive suburbanisation with privately owned detached houses in its periphery, whereas changes in economic patterns lead to the (re)localisation of production and distribution facilities from the urban centres to the periphery or along international routes*” (p.44). The resulting fragmentation, it is claimed, has led to the displacement of urban dynamics, the decreased impact of planning and design, undefined leftover spaces, new typologies and programs, the development of non-spaces, strong pressure on unused spaces and increase in movements.

In other words, the Spatial Structure Plan regards fragmentation as a negative process which should urgently be neutered and replaced by “*a sustainable form of urban development which manages space in a way that benefits the present generation without endangering the needs of future generations*” (Art. 1.1.4). In order to achieve this objective, the authors of the plan propose - among other measures - to categorise urban centres on the basis of morphological and functional criteria and to define developmental options for each resulting type of urban centre, including desired density, permitted facilities and acceptable types of housing.

The principle of categorisation is reminiscent of Christaller’s Central Place Theory (1933). Christaller shows in his theory that the growth and location of settlements follows a hierarchical pattern in which large centres are surrounded by smaller centres, which in their turn are surrounded by yet smaller centres. The distance between those centres is determined, among other factors, by travelling time. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, Belgium was a classic example of the Central Place

Theory. The widespread possession of cars, however, has diminished travelling time and upset Christaller's hierarchy. By limiting the developmental options of the various centres, the Structure Plan seems eager to counter the negative consequences of spatial fragmentation through a return to Christaller's original hierarchy.

The Structure Plan is now over a decade old and has partially achieved its objective. It has delineated agricultural, natural, residential and other zones and established awareness among the Flemish public that land is a finite resource. Developers have started building more compact constructions and authorities in other policy domains have adopted the principle of structural planning. However, these paradigm shifts have not succeeded in halting the process of fragmentation (Gulinck et al, 2007). Various explanations have been offered for this phenomenon, including the cumbersome hierarchical structure of the Plan, the limited resources of provincial and communal authorities, the complexity of newly emerging social problems and speculation by land owners (Voets et al, 2010).

### **3. From a Flemish to a regional scale**

In *Patching up the Belgian Landscape* (1999), De Meulder et al describe how in the space of a century and a half Flanders has been transformed from a Christallerian geography into today's nebulous urban sprawl. The authors' central argument is that the underlying process of fragmentation is firmly anchored in cultural and socio-economic realities. The narrative starts in the mid-nineteenth century when the introduction of a dense network of regional and local railways rendered every nook and corner of Flanders accessible. One of the reasons for the development of this network was a desire to counter the explosive growth of the cities. Workers became commuters and were thus enabled to remain in their villages where they could rely on their traditional social networks in periods of crisis. This transportation policy was supported by a housing policy which aimed to enable every worker to own residential property. Land was thus transformed from an agricultural resource into an investment product, which set off a process of the allotment of land into small individual plots, a process which continues to this day. These twin policies have resulted in the very limited growth of Flemish cities in comparison with the surrounding countries and, as a consequence, a limited form of urbanisation which has mainly developed in the countryside along existing streets and routes and in close proximity of railway stations and crossroads.

This process accelerated considerably after World War II, when travelling by train became more comfortable and cars became affordable for everybody. Now the middle classes also started to commute. A law introduced by De Taye added 50,000 new detached houses in the countryside in the space of a decade. The policy was no

longer striving merely to limit urban growth, but was actively promoting an urban exodus. Thus, during the nineteen sixties and seventies, the middle classes collectively deserted the grey and polluted cities in search of a house with a garden in a natural environment, thereby slowly urbanising culture in the countryside.

As a consequence, a culture of land allotment and building one's own house has developed, characterised by small contractors, traditional construction techniques and a direct relationship linking contractors, architects and owners. This has led to a multitude of individual projects of low complexity with minimal intervention by the authorities – an effect which was further reinforced by the autonomic powers of decision held by communal authorities until the introduction of the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders. This has meant that, for all practical purposes, there was no policy. With each subsequent generation, the Flemish countryside was further urbanised and today the Christallerian model has completely disappeared. By introducing selective densification, the Structure Plan strives to return to the original conditions, which offered a clear distinction between built-up centres and open landscape. However, De Meulder et al stress the fact that the existing settlement patterns occupy large amounts of space and present a very specific, fine-grained and a-systemic structure which cannot be systematically densified. Moreover, as the above historic overview shows, the unit of measurement has been the individual allotment plot and there has been no intention to enter into a relationship with surrounding structures and the remaining open landscape.

In other words, the authors also recognise the disadvantages of fragmentation, but contrary to the Plan's authors, they do not believe it is possible to return to the Christallerian model. In their view, the main task imposing itself today is to transcend the logic of allotment. Individual plots cannot provide a locality or community with an identity. There is a need for structures which can generate cohesion at an intermediary scale and give common direction to a loose collection of unconnected plots. De Meulder et al state that the landscape could play this role. Thus, densification to them does not imply the increase of housing and facilities as prescribed by the Structure Plan, but rather the qualitative improvement of the remaining open space. In recent years, the authors have substantiated this view by developing concrete projects for a number of Flemish villages (cf. e.g. De Meulder & Devisch, 2002; Dehaene & Boon, 2006).

#### **4. Fragmentation resulting from individual actions**

In 1948, Weaver introduced the concept of *organised complexity* to refer to problems which seem complex when viewed on a macro-scale, but whose individual components on the micro-scale follow a set of simple rules of interaction. The

interaction of the parts thus generates a whole which is larger than their sum and which cannot be deduced from the behaviour of the individual components ('emergence'). In other words, the components organise themselves without being managed by a central authority. With the concept of emergence, Weaver introduced the theory of complex systems. Beside organised complex problems, he also distinguished *simple problems* and *disorganised complex problems*. The latter term refers to problems which not only seem complex, but also behave in a complex way. Following the historic reconstruction by De Meulder et al (1999), the fragmented Flemish cityscape can be considered as a system of organised complexity. From a distance it looks complex, but it actually behaves in a relatively simple way because it has a limited number of actors, namely private builders and authorities. Compared to the surrounding countries, planners, developers, investors, corporations and the like have historically played only a limited role in Flanders.

Weaver states that simple problems present a limited number of variables, which means that they can be described as mathematical equations with predictable outcomes. Disorganised complex problems, on the other hand, are characterised by a large number of variables, which means they can only be described in terms of probability theory and that predictions are virtually meaningless. Organised complex problems are the intermediate condition between these two extremes: the number of parameters is too large to describe the problem as a mathematical equation, but not so numerous as to exclude the usefulness of probability theory. Weaver proposes to use simulation models to deal with such problems, implying that the behaviour of the individual actors, rather than that of the system as a whole, can be described in equations called rules of interaction. It is the confrontation of these actors within a set of delineated conditions which structures the behaviour of the system. In order to determine the governing rules of interaction, a model made up of a number of generic rules is applied and the behaviour resulting from it is compared to the real problem and adjusted accordingly. When both are in harmony, the rules of interaction have been determined and predictions can be made concerning the future behaviour of the system within the set of delineated conditions.

De Meulder et al (1999) pose that intervention in Flanders' fragmented urban sprawl presupposes insight into the spatial processes which have shaped this cityscape and which are propelled by regional landscape elements including topography, soil composition and water management (De Meulder & Dehaene, 2002), as well as by policy decisions and cultural and socio-economic behaviour patterns. Additionally, if this process of fragmentation is indeed an organised complex problem, intervention requires insight into the rules of interaction which govern the behaviour of actors participating in the construction of the cityscape. In this view, the governing spatial processes constitute the set of conditions within which the actors operate. Knowledge of both is therefore required for intervention to be successful.

Reconstructing the rules of interaction requires a specific analysis different from the analysis of the existing use of space which is employed in the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders, and also different from the analysis of the evolution of spatial patterns used by De Meulder et al. It requires an analysis of the actors: what are their objectives, which are the tools they use and how do they react to each other's interventions? Such an analysis moreover requires the use of a different scale: instead of using as the unit of measurement all of Flanders, as the Structure Plan does, or regional subdivisions, as De Meulder et al do, the analysis should be carried out at the scale on which the actors operate, which is that of the individual allotment plot. We are no longer looking at a quest for spatial structures and patterns, but at direct spatial experiences and relationships. From the bird's eye perspective, we need to descend to the level of everyday action.

The question remains, however, whether rules of interaction which can help explain the process of fragmentation actually do exist. Can we detect a certain order in the manner in which private builders react to the conditions imposed by authorities or to the behaviour of other private builders? Or will we see on the contrary that every situation is unique and no general rules apply? In other words, is the process of fragmentation in actual effect an organised complex problem or not?

## **5. Four case studies**

In order to answer the above questions, we will briefly discuss four different cases – all of them centered on streets in the city of Antwerp: the *Milisstraat*, the *Bleekhofstraat*, the *Fruithoflaan* and the *Grote Steenweg*. In each case, we propose to reconstruct the origin and history of these streets and specifically to determine which actor (authority of private builder) has initiated a specific action and how these actions have interacted with each other. The scale for this reconstruction is that of the individual allotment plot and the individual actor. On this detailed scale, not every action has been documented and not all documents are readily available. The reconstructions should therefore be considered hypotheses. These hypotheses are of course based on historic sources, but to these are added the authors' extrapolations, associations, presuppositions etcetera. In general, the hypotheses remain within the strictly probable, but in some cases they have consciously been taken out of proportion in order to explore potentially interesting interactions. The following is a brief summary of these reconstructions.

### **5.1. Case 1: Milisstraat – Oedenkovenstraat (total length: 350 m)**

The Milisstraat and Oedenkovenstraat are aligned streets located in the Antwerp district of Borgerhout. Both contain only terraced houses in completely closed rows. Virtually every house has a back garden. The origin and historical development of both streets is straightforward. The city of Antwerp imposes two general urban development rules: one aiming at the protection of privacy ('the rule of lights and sights') and one aiming to ensure visual coherence ('the rule of harmony'). All builders have followed both rules, with the exception of just one who has built up the entire garden area.

In all, this makes for unambiguous interaction between the actors: the council determines the rules and the individual follows them. The rules are sufficiently open-ended to allow for personalisation: for instance, every house uses different building materials and presents a different building height, window distribution etcetera. Yet, because all houses are placed along a single straight building line, have the same width and similar facade compositions, the whole still presents a strong visual coherence.

This street type is promoted by the authorities as the ideal to be aspired to: a street composed of personalised terraced houses suitable for families with two children.

## **5.2. Case 2: Bleekhofstraat (total length 350 m)**

The Bleekhofstraat runs parallel to the Milisstraat and Oedenkovenstraat, but contrary to them it is spatially fragmented. Beside terraced houses, it also contains two flat blocks, a school surrounded by green space, a number of unused plots, receding retail properties, reconverted former warehouses built perpendicular to the plot, ... The use of space is equally diverse: some retail properties, for instance, have storage or parking spaces across the street, a number of buildings have windows in the side walls, others present a blind facade, ...

Unsurprisingly, the origin and history of the Bleekhofstraat are not as straightforward as in Case 1 either. Although in principle the same two general rules of urban planning apply here, the street has always had a different program which has excepted it from those rules, involving bleaching meadows (hence its name), a candle manufacturer and a chocolate factory. A possible reason for this different development is the fact that the Bleekhofstraat is straddling the border between two city districts and therefore attracted a concentration of less desirable functions, which brought different building scales and construction types to the street. Both factors have remained constant throughout its history. The candle manufacturer, for instance, was replaced by the school and the flat blocks, the chocolate factory was partially broken down to make room for parking spaces, smaller industrial constructions perpendicular on the street were scheduled to be reconverted into collective housing

projects, ... Recently, the city council has financed a project inspired by one of the historical construction types in the Bleekhofstraat, involving residential buildings with a patio perpendicular on the street. In this case, the authorities have introduced a new local urban norm in addition to the ideal image of the terraced house with a garden.

The interaction between the actors is more complex than in Case 1. The two general rules determined by the authorities formed the point of departure and the first residential buildings duly followed these rules. The larger non-residential program, however, departed from them and in the course of history private builders increasingly decided to ignore the rules imposed by the authorities – without, however, directly breaking them. They either chose not to build on certain plots or to reconvert existing structures to serve different purposes. Others avoided compliance by negotiating with the authorities – such as the builders of the school and the flat blocks. In the case of the most recent project, the authorities themselves, inspired by private interventions, decided not to comply with their own rules.

### **5.3. Fruithoflaan (total length 700 m)**

The Fruithoflaan is situated in the district of Berchem. It is a relatively recent street characterised by high-rise flat blocks of between six and thirteen floors. The oldest among them include retail spaces on the ground floor level. The most recent blocks are placed perpendicular to the street and surrounded by green space. It is a relatively wide street with lanes separated by a central green space. All the surrounding streets are composed of terraced houses, which gives the Fruithoflaan an outspoken insular feel.

The origins and history of the Fruithoflaan are relatively unambiguous. The avenue was once part of a count's estate. In the 1920s, the estate was subdivided into allotments by its owner who was inspired by similar lucrative development projects in the surrounding districts and communes. As Berchem then suffered from a pressing lack of housing, the local authorities did not object to the allotment. Both actors developed plans, but they did not reach agreement and in 1953 the count decided to sell his estate to a developer. A few years later, the latter did reach an agreement with the authorities, who allowed the developer to construct a relatively new type of housing with greater density than the surrounding construction types and presenting a relatively new urban layout. In return, the developer agreed to construct sports facilities and road infrastructure. In the following years, other developers copied this new construction mode. In the early 1960s, a second developer succeeded in convincing the council to build with an even greater density and in yet another layout, which involved merging plots, building higher, reorienting buildings and

retracting the building line. It is not entirely clear why the authorities gave their blessing to these changes, but again the model was copied by a number of other developers until the final construction phase ended in 1980 and the street was fully built up.

The interaction between the actors, then, follows an iterative pattern. Initially, as in the other cases, both rules imposed by the council apply. However, one developer wants more and negotiates with the authorities to get a tailor-made plan accepted. Other developers follow suit. Then another developer decides to renegotiate the conditions and obtain permission for yet another different model. This is again repeated until finally the avenue is built up completely.

#### **5.4. Grote Steenweg (total length 700 m)**

The Grote Steenweg connects the centre of Antwerp to the commune of Mortsels. The present case study, however, only looks at the stretch between the King Albert Park and the Binnensingel (the inner ring road) which is contained within the district of Berchem. This part of the road is mainly composed of retail properties and flat blocks, but also contains a garage, a school, a convent and a church. Building height varies between two and eight floors. The building line jumps in and out several times and is interrupted by squares and lawns.

The scale and statute of this road (a main access road) make for extremely complex origins and history. The following is a succinct summary of events happening in the last few decades. Older photographs clearly show that up until the first half of the twentieth century the road consisted mainly of terraced houses with two to four floors and retail spaces on the ground floor. A map dated 1912 shows the council's ambition to urbanise the road's statute: the road needs to be widened to accommodate the increasing traffic and the buildings need to become higher to respond to an increased demand for housing. We start from the hypothesis that the council could not just expropriate properties across the board and therefore needed to negotiate with many owners to implement its plans, which has resulted in a fragmented outcome in terms of types of construction, program, shapes, building line etcetera. Presumably, the interaction between the actors developed along the following lines: the council imposed the two general rules and private builders complied – until the council adapted its vision on the road's statute. In order to convince private builders to accommodate this new vision, however, the council was forced to make concessions to suit their respective needs.

Each of these cases can be read as a generic script for interactions. In Case 1, for instance, all private builders comply with the framework imposed by the authorities. In Case 2, not all private builders comply entirely with the framework, but all do remain within the framework. In Case 3, private builders negotiate with the authorities and succeed in having the framework adapted. Finally, in case 4, the authorities themselves introduce a new framework. Case 1 is the most common scenario in Antwerp, but the other scripts also occur more than once, albeit sporadically. Cases 2, 3 and 4 give the impression of a spatially fragmented environment.

## **6. Urban improvisations**

What is striking in the cases is that the spatial (planning) framework is constantly changing and that both authorities and private builders can initiate changes. Changes can be made directly through negotiations or indirectly when private builders decide not to comply with the rules or to explicitly break them. Whatever the case, the change always impacts the spatial processes which structure the cityscape.

A wide array of practices can be included under the heading of spatial planning, ranging from the development of an overall framework which private builders comply with on one end to the complete absence of such a framework and total freedom of action for private builders on the other extreme. Case 1 falls in the first category, while the other three occupy various positions between both extremes: the authorities have designed a spatial framework, but this is not unconditionally applied. Private builders have the ability to directly or indirectly modify it. This practice strongly reminds us of improvisation.

In jazz, improvisation is a term which indicates musicians interacting with each other, in a game of reaction and anticipation which does not follow a written script or score. A session starts off on an established *theme*, *rhythm* or *chorus*. Then one musician plays a solo part, after which the musician may return to the agreed theme and be joined by the others, or alternatively another musician may continue with a solo part inspired either by the first solo or by the established theme.

Improvisation is about interaction in the sense of people reacting to each other, but not about interaction in the sense of cooperation to create one coherent product with a consistent quality throughout. After all, players may deliberately work against each other, trick each other, choose to create their own story while disregarding the others etcetera, all while remaining guided by the established overall theme.

Santi and Illetterati (2010) distinguish three defining characteristics of improvisation. The first characteristic is the centrality of transgression (or transcendence) of the rules. The authors consider rules not merely as a prerequisite for improvisation but as the actual core around which an improvised session is constructed. Thus, a solo player will time and again challenge the established theme – turn it around, reduce it to its bare minimum etcetera – but nevertheless always return to it. Santi therefore states that the superficially opposed concepts of ‘rules’ and ‘freedom’ are in fact inextricably interlinked in improvisation.

A second characteristic is recognisability or familiarity. Improvisation is about interaction. According to Santi, this implies that each solo part must on the one hand be sufficiently surprising and innovative to challenge the other players, but simultaneously sufficiently recognisable for the other musicians to play along to it.

The third feature of improvisation is craftsmanship. Santi states that the musicians participating in an improvisation session on the one hand learn thanks to the repetitive character, but simultaneously also teach by time and again re-interpreting the existing elements. This reinterpretation presupposes craftsmanship: refining and bending the rules while preserving their identity (‘crafting and scaffolding’). Again, Santi affirms that ‘technique’ (i.e. rules) and ‘spontaneity’ (i.e. freedom) enter into a ‘mutual and inextricable relationship’.

Improvisation therefore requires training and perspicacity, insight both into one’s own playing and into that of the others. Today we observe that classically trained musicians have all but lost the ability to improvise, even though this ability has historically been an integral part of musical knowledge and musical schooling programs.

Finally, it is important to note that within jazz, there are different degrees of improvisation, ranging from one improvised solo part accompanied by the orchestra all the way to free jazz where nothing is agreed on beforehand and the process of action and reaction itself is the guiding theme.

The interactive processes as shown in the case studies could be rewritten as sessions of jazz improvisation: the authorities sketch a planning framework (cf. theme, rhythm or chorus). A private builder then initiates construction (cf. plays a solo part), whereby s/he can either stay within the framework, ignore it or modify it. Next, the authorities can decide either to allow the construction, to forbid it or just to tolerate it – or even to adapt the existing framework (cf. solo part). Then the private builder’s turn comes again. As in jazz improvisation the actors react to each other’s contributions without following a blueprint. Neither the resulting spatial product nor the evolution of the process are known beforehand.

In order to establish whether interactive processes can really be labelled ‘urban improvisations’, it is interesting to check whether they present all three characteristics identified by Santi and Illetterati.

The first characteristic focuses on the importance of rules as a precondition and calibration point for improvisation. In Case 1 - Milisstraat – Oedenkovenstraat – all private builders’ initiatives comply with the planning framework. The framework, however, is sufficiently open-ended to allow for a large amount of personalisation. As a result, each housing unit is different from the next one. In the other three cases, the planning framework is modified in the course of the process, either at the request of private builders or in response to their efforts. All cases explore or transgress the planning framework and thus comply with the first characteristic. However, the motives for the explorations and transgressions differ from those playing in jazz improvisation, in which each musician has the same motive: to collectively create a piece of music and arouse emotions. In urban improvisation, the different actors’ motives rarely coincide: private builders tend to act in their respective self-interest, while the authorities strive to serve the common interest.

The second characteristic stresses the balance between innovation and familiarity. Unlike what is the case in jazz improvisation, however, inspiring one’s fellow actors is not the main objective of builders - unless maybe in the indirect sense of offering an innovative solution to a specific problem. On the contrary, initiatives which are too innovative might cause other actors to quit, which is what happened in Case 4 - the Grote Steenweg – where broadening the road required expropriation and one private owner refused to sell his property, which forced the authorities to revise the planning framework.

The third property – craftsmanship – indicates a technique to refine and bend the rules while preserving the overall identity. The first two cases comply with this requirement: interventions do not transcend the scale of the individual plot. The perception of these streets has therefore not changed in any substantial way in the course of recent history. The other two cases, however, are harder to fit into this profile: while initiatives are also implemented incrementally, the difference between the various steps is larger. In these cases, the perception of the whole has changed to a considerable degree.

Based on these three properties, Santi and Illetterati state that jazz improvisation requires training and insight. Here, we discover a considerable difference with urban improvisation. In the case studies, actors who display spatial knowledge are rare. There is no tradition of improvisation. Another great difference is the collaboration between the actors, which is usually limited to a single construction project, after which the player disappears and a new one shows up. After all, most people only

construct one house during their lifetime and even those who build more than once are unlikely to do so in the same street. Urban improvisation sessions, then, continually change players.

Finally, as in jazz, we can distinguish various forms of urban improvisation, including those which stay within the prescribed framework and those in which the framework itself evolves. Moreover, the degree of open-endedness of the framework may vary widely. The result is an array of urban improvisations ranging from those evolving within a strictly defined framework on one end to pure free-jazz on the other extreme.

Despite the differences, however, there are sufficient resemblances to label the cases as 'urban improvisations'. Rowan (2004) even goes so far as to state that spatial structuring cannot exist without improvisation. Thus, planning processes may start with proposals offered by a planner, but that is only the start of a long and unpredictable trajectory in which a range of actors evaluate and refine these proposals time and again – exactly as happens in a jazz session.

## **7. Conclusion: the quest for quality**

In disciplines of art such as music, theatre or comedy, improvisation implies quality. In many other disciplines, however, improvisation is associated by many with tinkering, provisional solutions and cut-and-paste operations: in other words, it generates negative connotations. This is certainly so in the discipline of spatial planning.

However, the case studies show that urban improvisations can definitely result in (spatial) quality. On the other hand, quality is a very subjective concept. In the framework of this study, spatial quality is judged by the degree of spatial diversity and the presence of spaces for (alternative forms of) collective experiences.

In Case 1 - Milisstraat – Oedenkovenstraat – spatial diversity is limited to use of materials, building height, window distribution, application of colour, ... This allows for a personalisation of the design of one's own house. Improvisation has not here resulted in special spaces for the collective.

In Case 2 – Bleekhofstraat – a wide diversity has been achieved with respect to plot size, program, construction type, orientation, use of materials, ... This variety allows for multiple functionality (e.g. a building materials retailer, an art gallery, a supermarket, ...), offers breathing space for small (often immigrant) start-ups, mixes different types of housing (terraced houses, flats, high-rises, lofts) and enables a school to be surrounded by green space in the city centre. However, in between these

are many unused properties and spaces and conflict situations. The various programs, despite resulting from pure self-interest, have nevertheless in an unplanned way created special spaces for collective use. Thus, the low walls surrounding the high-rises function as seats for parents waiting for their children to finish class, the gardens of the perpendicularly oriented residential buildings provide green space for their neighbours across the street and the larger plots also serve interesting semi-public functions.

Case 3 – Fruithoflaan – also offers a large diversity. Contrary to what is the case in the Bleekhofstraat, the actors here are not individual private builders but developers and contractors. Yet we find a strong coherence, partly because of the recent construction of the buildings, partly thanks to the guiding role of the local authorities and partly because all buildings have been constructed within a relatively short period of time. By adapting the planning framework, the council has managed to respond to an increasingly pressing demand for construction. The result has been a new spatial condition, a small self-contained city with semi-public (collective) spaces to suit inhabitants. Although the building types were new, they turned out to be very popular: most of the original occupants are still there today and the facilities have adapted to the inhabitants.

In Case 4 - the Grote Steenweg – we find an equally large diversity and here too, the actors are mostly developers. However, in this case we are dealing with isolated renovation projects spread out over a relatively long period of time, which has not provided much coherence and created quite some leftover spaces and conflicting situations. The number of special collective spaces is low.

Both the measure of diversity and the presence of alternative collective spaces are the direct result of urban improvisation. In all cases we studied, however, this improvisation has come about as an ad-hoc affair without any training or insight on the part of the actors. This has created diversity but also unnecessary conflicts, which could have been prevented by the establishment of a tradition of improvisation with its own language, tactics and strategies, a platform for the exchange of knowledge, ...

Substantial research has been done into the role of private builders within the framework of spatial planning (cf. a.o. Healey, 2005; Boelens & Spit, 2006; Dell & Van Vugt, 2010). Less attention has been paid, however, to the role of both private builders and authorities in the interactive process and its impact on the built-up environment. Most studies, moreover, look only at the regional or urban scale and do not descend to the scale of actors, objectives, strategies and tactics (Weaver, 1948). Yet this is the exact scale on which improvisation in Flanders takes place between small entrepreneurs, individual private builders, on individual plots and allotments. A

tradition of improvisation will only succeed in taking hold if it focuses on filling both of these gaps.

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