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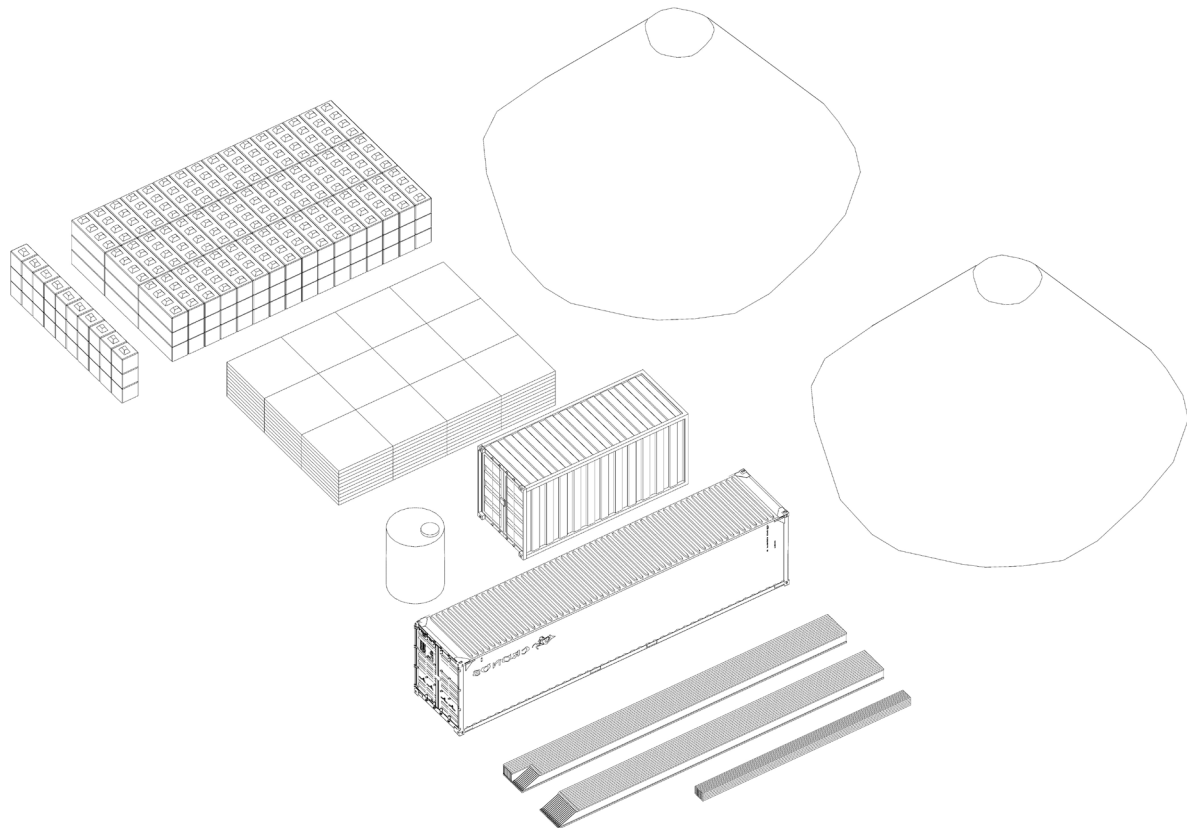
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Special Edition: Practices of Change



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**Gideon Boie**

is an architect and founder of Bavo, a research collective focusing on the political dimension of art, architecture and urban planning. He is a lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Architecture KULEUVEN. His research focuses on the urgent challenges in care architecture.

**Birgit Cleppe**

is an architectural engineer. She is writing a PhD on post-war art documentaries at the Arts Department of UGENT. In 2018 she was on the editorial staff of the *Flanders Architectural Review*.

**Nathalie Cobbaut**

has been working as a journalist since 1992. A lawyer by training, she has always been a generalist in information processing, with a particular attention to the popularization of the fields covered.

**Stefan Devoldere**

is dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Art at Hasselt University. As president of the 'Stadsatelier Oostende' (from 2016) and as former deputy and acting Flemish Government Architect (2011–2016), he stimulates the quality of the built environment in Flanders.

**Roeland Dudal**

is founding partner of Architecture Workroom Brussels, a European think-and-do tank for innovation in the field of architecture and urban and regional development. He studied architecture at the University of Ghent. He teaches architectural design at the KULEUVEN Faculty of Architecture Campus Ghent and Brussels.

**Pauline Malras**

is a freelance journalist who specializes in architecture, design and construction techniques. In 2013 she graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et de Paysage de Lille (with a focus on 'materiality and building culture'). She draws on her experience and her training to analyse contemporary developments in architecture.

**Hanne Mangelschots**

graduated as an architectural engineer from KULEUVEN. Within Architecture Workroom Brussels she researches and tests new process designs and platforms for spatial transformation, such as the Delta Atelier, You Are Here and The Great Transformation.

**Jolien Naeyaert**

is a Brussels-based architectural engineer and visual artist. She graduated from Ghent University in 2012 and subsequently studied autonomous design at the KASK School of Arts Ghent. Since 2015 she has been working at Robbrecht en Daem architecten.

**Nik Naudts**

graduated from Ghent University in 2006 as an architectural engineer. Since 2011 he has worked at Architecture Workroom Brussels, where he was the lead expert for projects including the exploration of the future Metropolitan Coastal Landscape 2100 and the Oost-Vlaams Kerngebied.

**Sigita Simona Paplauskaitė**

studied architecture at Vilnius Gediminas Technical University and holds a master's degree in landscape architecture from Kingston University London. After eight years of artistic and professional practice, she joined the team of the Brussels Government Architect in 2019 to manage the Urban Maestro project.

**Véronique Patteeuw**

is associate professor at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et de Paysage de Lille and editor of *Oase*. Her research focuses on the theory and history of architectural publications in relation to the history of the postmodern. She has been a visiting professor at KULEUVEN since 2019.

**Chloë Raemdonck**

is trained in the conversion and restoration of protected heritage and its durability issues. She has worked at restoration firms such as Origin Architecture and Engineering, Callebaut Architecten and JUXTA. As a project architect for the Ghent Urban Development Company (sogent), she became skilled at project management and public clientship.

**Bart Tritsmans**

teaches at the University of Antwerp. He obtained a PhD in history (University of Antwerp) and architectural engineering (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) in 2014. His research focuses on the historical evolution of urban green spaces. He is a former head of exhibitions at the Flanders Architecture Institute.

**Pieter T'Jonck**

is an architect. He writes on architecture, the visual arts and the performing arts for several Belgian and foreign newspapers and magazines. He works for the Klara radio station and was editor-in-chief of A+ in 2017.

**Michiel Van Balen**

is a civil engineer and architect. He worked as an architect and urban designer before he started the coordination of the adaptive reuse project of De Hoorn. In 2017 he co-founded Miss Miyagi.

**Serafina Van Godtsenhoven**

studied philosophy at Ghent University and completed an international master's programme in Urban Studies at VUB, ULB and UCM (ES), University of Copenhagen (DK) and Universität Wien (AT). In 2019 she joined Architecture Workroom Brussels as a researcher on 'The Great Transformation'.

**Carmen Van Maercke**

obtained her master's degree in architectural engineering (option: urban design) at Ghent University in 2013. She joined Architecture Workroom Brussels in January 2016, where she is project leader for innovative projects relating to unsealing, integrated and socio-spatial projects, and water.

**Guillaume Vanneste**

is an architectural engineer, researcher and teacher at the Faculty of Architecture, Architectural Engineering and Urbanism of the Université Catholique de Louvain (LOC-UCLouvain). He is a founding partner of vvv architecture urbanisme.

**A+ Architecture In Belgium** Bimonthly bilingual magazine, ISSN 1375-5072, Volume 47 (2020) N6**Editorial team**

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Guillaume Vanneste  
Ward Verbakel

**Editorial address**  
Ernest Allardstraat 21/3 –  
1000 Brussels  
redactie@a-plus.be  
www.a-plus.be

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# New governance strategies for urban design

Sigita Simona Paplauskaitė

There is an increasing awareness of the influence spatial governance has on both the economy and natural and cultural environments. It is becoming more and more obvious that current formal regulatory systems are unable to respond effectively to the crises of today, and there is a sense of inevitability of change in the globalized world, suggesting *ex definitione* instability, uncertainty, discontinuity and risk. Therefore, continuing to commission new urban projects in the same manner as we are traditionally accustomed to cannot actually improve the quality of the built environment itself. If we aim for long-term improvements, we must search for and identify adequate governance models. Those might include wider platforms of cooperation, new methods for quality supervision, and other types of initiatives that go beyond formal legislation to respond to pressing issues more laterally and proactively.

↓  
In Copenhagen, the city and state jointly set up the development and operating company By & Havn to

ensure the delivery of long-term city development. The harbour revived under a more sustainable vision.





The success of various initiatives is critically linked to the local culture that shapes the quality of urban governance and, as a consequence, the quality of the built environment. Therefore, understanding the complexity of the political conditions, legal framework and cultural setting might help to clarify the key challenges and driving forces behind the exemplary initiatives. Improving this design environment has a significant influence on how we perceive and deliver quality. At times, it can even form part of a country's entire vision. For example, Panorama Nederland<sup>1</sup> draws a future perspective for the spatial planning of all of the Netherlands. In this panorama, the Board of Government Advisers depicts how the major social and environmental issues of today can structure the improvements of the country in the coming decades.

Having the power to break the silos between different subjects and stakeholders, cultural activities provide a valuable contribution to introducing cross-cutting challenges into urban design. It is, therefore, vital to assure financial and structural support for these activities in the long term, and the solutions to doing so are numerous. Setting up and establishing multisectoral partnerships helps to ensure that educational activities for youth such as Arkki<sup>2</sup> in Finland are run both locally and internationally. A special tax regime in Romania entitled Architecture Stamp<sup>3</sup> dedicates a portion of building permit taxes/fees to cultural institutions. There are also the Prix MOP<sup>4</sup> in Belgium, Arkitekturkommun<sup>5</sup> in Sweden and the SAFA Prize<sup>6</sup> in Finland, which have all been initiated by local authorities and which highlight the importance of good urban governance processes by dedicating an award for excellence in commissioning (and not designing) the projects in architecture, urban design, landscape architecture and infrastructure. Local support for the education of a larger audience has also allowed many architectural events to emerge.

### **Value created through good design**

Multiple experts in the field of urban planning advocate for a new approach to studying the subjects of design, ecology, sustainability and spatial thinking in parallel. 'I feel that people don't realize the importance of design and how fundamentally it is linked to economic quality or sustainability', says Pooja Agrawal, the co-founder of Public Practice<sup>7</sup> who currently works at the British government department responsible for housing. She adds that in the UK the Covid-19 crisis 'had mostly impacted black and Asian minorities' ethnic people as they tend to have less access to open and green spaces, good air quality, also have issues of overcrowding and lack of affordable housing'. Yet this is just one example that addresses economic inequality and demonstrates the importance of urban design.

We live in a market-driven environment where sustainable design is often seen as being somewhat more expensive and it is a challenge to change that perception. It also touches upon the longer-term gains that can be achieved by creating well-designed places. Unfortunately, according to Dr James White, senior lecturer at the University of Glasgow, research on the quality of new real-estate developments in the UK shows that poorer neighbourhoods receive less investment in their design, thus reinforcing the economic disparity. He claims that the problem is that value is considered mostly as economic, not social, cultural or environmental value, and as long as investment agencies and developers whose primary aim is profit maximization dominate the real-estate sector, we cannot achieve better-quality developments.

The international reports from other European countries such as Estonia demonstrate their potential to act in short- and mid-term projects, but express the lack of sophisticated and considerate long-term plans. Dr Veronika Valk-Siska, counsellor for Architecture and





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- ↑ Panorama Nederland meets Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, The Hague, 2019
- ↓ Partnership agreements changed the approach to working with urban commons in Italy. Lancia di Via Cumiana



© Eo-City Torino



Design at the Ministry of Culture of Estonia, notes that when talking about the impact, ‘the key is to focus on the long-term gain because the social and design values can be converted to economic value only if the timespan is large enough’. As a solution to that, and to help predict and project the impact of certain actions and decisions, Estonia is developing an urban digital twin<sup>8</sup> for the entire country and some individual cities. This would also enable undertaking closer project-monitoring before and after the projects are realized.

### **Innovative economy**

Alternative bottom-up activities positively feed into the efforts of public authorities. Widely known as the placemaking movement, these activities aim to make cities more sustainable, inclusive and attractive. Placemakers prioritize community participation, and as such assist with larger public outreach and awareness-raising. Despite their positive social impact, healthy financial models are necessary to keep these initiatives running independently, but for new players in the field, it is hard to gain access to financing, especially from traditional commercial sources that are not immediately interested in social return. The Dutch Stadmakers Fonds<sup>9</sup> aims to fill that gap by matchmaking placemakers and investors to obtain investment in initiatives with clear social as well as economic returns.

Land prices in urbanized areas influence the quality of the new developments as well. Widely used across Germany, land value capture tools like concept tendering<sup>10</sup> allow municipalities to sell or lease land to high-quality projects, contrary to simply allowing a bidding war for the highest possible land price. The projects are thereby evaluated according to their contribution to the quality of the neighbourhood, programme, spatial composition, the proposed development processes and other criteria. As a result, district developments prioritize the inno-

vation and creativity of project developers and achieve more cooperative planning processes.

In Copenhagen’s case, the city and state jointly set up a development and operating company, By & Havn,<sup>11</sup> to ensure the delivery of long-term city development. Its financial scheme has proven to bring new dynamics to the city’s economy. For example, the revenue goes towards common goods such as paying for major infrastructural projects—development of the metro as well as urban spaces, parks and initiatives in the new urban neighbourhoods. By & Havn has its own *modus operandi* that seeks to align the ambitions of design quality, economy, social well-being and sustainability, to the same level, and uses a diverse array of tools to reach these goals.

Since, for many regions, finances are often in short supply, Thomas Kraubitz of Buro Happold argues that we ‘should reduce the excessive consumption that is not needed for living and life cycles of the city because this could help to compensate for the lack of resources to the poorer part of the community’. He cites the example of Berlin, where the city prioritizes and dedicates its budget to tasks supported by authorities and communities that represent low cost but promise high impact.

### **Can we do this together?**

‘If we could somehow empower the consumers more so they would become an important part in discussing the design and its quality, it could make a big change’, states Pooja Agrawal. To involve the citizens in city planning, the Place Standard tool<sup>12</sup> helps to structure the conversations around place quality. Others have tried to integrate new subjects into urban planning by introducing ‘gamification’<sup>13</sup> into participatory processes. Local municipalities have also searched for new ways to give voice to the locals. A legislative and radical instrument, the ‘Land reform agenda’<sup>14</sup> in Scotland, allows communities to have a say and purchase the land that is most important for them locally.

Furthermore, various cities have displayed innovative co-governance approaches. The cities of Bologna and Torino have implemented pacts of collaboration<sup>15</sup> between the municipality and the residents or local associations as a tool to secure partnerships on different levels. The municipalities of Milan,<sup>16</sup> London,<sup>17</sup> Glasgow<sup>18</sup> and Tartu empower their citizens by allocating a separate budget that their residents can freely use and allocate through voting.

### Going beyond the formal

To answer the question of what could be done to improve the quality of the built environment, we need a better understanding of the nature of innovation. Whether national<sup>19</sup> or local, innovation needs political support, which would ensure good leadership, fair allocation of resources, advocacy for the quality, transparency and collaboration in decision-making, and would encourage knowledge exchange. Innovation also requires thinking and acting beyond the formal regulations and mandatory roles. More so, we need to understand that this will be ‘a long-distance run’, and the sooner we learn to engage collectively in long-term visions, the more chance we will have to succeed. ▲■●

- 7 <https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/>
- 8 <https://investinestonia.com/a-full-3d-model-of-estonia-will-be-created-including-buildings-structures-located-below-the-ground-and-even-plants/>
- 9 <https://stadmakersfonds.nl/>
- 10 <https://urbanmaestro.org/example/konzeptvergabe/>
- 11 <https://byoghavn.dk/>
- 12 <https://www.placestandard.scot/>
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- 18 <https://www.ads.org.uk/stalled-spaces-scotland>
- 19 <https://davosdeclaration2018.ch/>

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- 1 <https://www.collegevanrijksadviseurs.nl/projecten/panorama-nederland>
- 2 <https://www.arkki.net/en/>
- 3 <https://www.oar.archi/proiecte-culturale/timbrul-de-arhitectura-resursa-pentru-comunitate-proiecte-culturale-si-educationale-2015-2018>
- 4 <https://cellule.archi/fr/node/179>
- 5 <https://arkitekten.se/nyheter/karlstad-har-utsetts-till-arets-arkitekturkommun/>
- 6 <https://www.safa.fi/vaikutamme/>





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## The House: A High- Performance Machine

Housing is about more than just choosing between a house or an apartment, in the city or outside. The housing question encompasses spatial quality, densification and affordability. A+288 features projects that testify to a certain experimentation with the housing dream or from which it appears that the architect has questioned the usual housing typology. With projects by, among others, Générale, BuroBill, Philippe Vander Maren, and Doorzon.



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↑  
Architectenbureau  
Bart Dehaene,  
Social housing

Schaerdeke,  
Lo-Reninge, 2020

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