Aspects of Density:
Extrapolations from Four Town Houses

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This article takes four town houses and a number of associated urban design projects as the basis for a discussion of the practical issues raised by the drive for greater density in Flanders. It is my contention that these projects, which demonstrate facets of an evolutionary, piecemeal approach to urban development, offer several valuable lessons in relation to questions of density: on the utility of house types which tolerate or support proximity; on the intimate relation between architecture and urban design in realising quality and quantity; and, in passing, on the relativity of density as a concept and the importance of a mixture of residential with other uses. These lessons may be of interest to neighbouring regions, but deserve particular consideration in Flanders, where it would be all too easy to overlook their local significance.

The density question: the specificity of Flanders

The ambition to build at higher densities in the regions of northwest Europe - Flanders, the Dutch Randstad, Southeast England - is driven by a number of factors: population growth, the tendency to smaller households, the decreasing supply of undeveloped land, and the ambition to manage urban growth in a more sustainable framework. In Flanders' neighbouring regions, the first of these issues - rapid population growth - dominates and distorts the agenda, to the point that the currency of debate is 'housing units' in their hundreds if not their thousands[1]. Flanders' situation is distinguished by less intense pressure from population growth, and by the relatively light market pressure on its cities. Te relative absence of these pressures can either serve as an opportunity for the creation of exemplary solutions or as an excuse for complacency.

While the piecemeal tradition has kept Flanders free of large scale 'problem' developments in the past, it is not clear whether the administrative, commercial or design disciplines are in place to achieve even the modest housing expansion currently envisaged with a minimum of coherence. Is Flanders incapable of large scale urban expansion, or does it simply not need them? The everyday practice of Flemish development, with many

levels of government and the relative dependence on private sector and individual actors, appears singularly resistant to urban design or strategic initiatives, with their requirement for decisiveness and political willpower[2]. This abdication threatens to place a burden of excessive expectation on architectural practice: to solve the challenges of city making without the full range of tools required for the job. In what follows, I have attempted to demonstrate the close interdependence of architectural and urban design disciplines in delivering both quantity and quality in urban areas.

An 'exhibition village'

The VLABO[3] 'exhibition village' [Kijkdorp] at Londerzeel is a very clear illustration of the possibilities and limitations of architecture as a tool for addressing the challenges of dense, or sustainable living. This project is underpinned by a praiseworthy but futile belief in typological experimentation: praiseworthy because the issues demand deviation from conventional practices and mentalities, futile because the 'types' are interpreted as freestanding objects, without a coherent urban plan to anchor them[4]. As such, the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

A number of architects (including BOB 361, Hugo Koch, Frank Delmulle and Hans Barbier) have tested their considerable ingenuity in sketching out permutations for the combination of houses (and, more successfully, on the design of the houses themselves): in staggered or straight rows, clustered, scattered on small plots. Yet the absence of a clear strategy for the public realm has led to considerable waste of space, as well as poorly defined linkages to the existing settlement. The whole appears to be dominated by a fear of proximity: difficult conditions, such as corners or back-to-backs are avoided. Despite the urban appearance of the architectural typologies used, all that has been achieved in terms of density is a distinctly suburban 30 units/ha.

At face value, the four thoughtfully-conceived town houses in this year's selection distinguish themselves mostly through their inventive response to the specificities of their individual sites. Yet their handling of the generic issues around the proximity of urban living is also exemplary: how the privacy of the inhabitants is maintained in dense urban surroundings, the relation of living spaces to external spaces, the way orientation is managed to achieve sunlight, daylight and views. They are 'town houses' not so much in their location as in their compact character, which permits relations of proximity with other houses. We can characterise them as four distinct formal types: terrace house, patio house, shed and sawtooth-roofed factory; in the context of the Yearbook, let us consider them as parts of a paper exhibition village, representing the best of piecemeal Flemish production.

What is crucial in distinguishing the town houses from their equivalents in the real 'exhibition village' is that they are embedded in perimeter blocks which establish coherent and well defined public realms around them. The utility of these types lies in relation precisely to specific issues of the urban block: each type embodies a set of spatial and social relations extending from the public space to the interior, from the front to the back. At the risk of exaggerating the representativeness of the Londerzeel 'exhibition village', its fragmented quality contrasts with the consistent urban logic of the piecemeal examples, highlighting the Flemish strengths in 'evolutionary' practice as much as the weaknesses in relation to development from scratch. For rhetorical clarity, we can say that Flanders does 'evolutionary', and doesn't really know where to start with 'revolutionary'.

four houses

Nollet and Huyghe's house in Assebroek, Bruges is part of a thin ribbon of urbanisation along the old highway to Ghent, with farmhouses and barns caught in a fabric of villas, terraces and workshops dating from the late nineteenth century onwards; outside this strip lie woods and water meadows of simple beauty. This is Flanders at its most unaffected and charming, with historical use and contemporary despoliation both lightly present[5]. [see plans 1, 12]

The plot is narrow and deep at 6 x 45 metres: typical terrace plot proportions. The house is on three floors, with rooms front and back divided by the stair. The narrow passage which runs from front to back at ground floor level is a fairly typical feature of semi-rural housing in Belgium: the entrance to the house is in its middle, as if combining front and back door. The displacement of the entry door from the front to the side creates a more severe, abstract character on the house front, reinforced by the blank wall at second floor level. Indeed, given the north orientation and the presence of a busy road, only the first floor office is opened up to the street: emphatically so, with a 4 metre wide picture window. The geometric purity of the street front is emphasised by the velvety sheen of the black-oiled bricks and the white-painted timber window frames. Its assured presence seems to lend a certain conviction to the surrounding ribbon development, uncertain of its urban status.

Terrace houses by definition draw their light and views at the front and back. The resolute privacy and relative blankness of the street front goes together with the extreme openness of the back of the house. This, in turn, is eased by both the depth (160 metres) and haphazard construction of the block, which mean that the house is barely overlooked from the rear, and by the south orientation of the living rooms and garden at the back of the house. However, even this strong rearwards orientation is given a balanced expression in the mix of screened and exposed views that the street front offers. The framed view of the office and deep view through to the garden give more in the way of variety to the street than the average, more open facade after the application of net-curtains - a selective application of Dutch-style living under the public gaze - as well as allowing for a modicum of passive surveillance.

The patio house is in essence an introverted house type, having its focus on, and drawing its light from, internal courts. In older examples, or more southerly countries, its street presence is often little more than a door in a blank wall. However, despite the dense surroundings of the Prinsenhof district of Ghent, and the small building plot, the Leeuws-Croes house by Marie-Jose Van Hee is engaging precisely in its openness to the street. [see plans 2, 13]

At 8 x 15 metres, the building plot is compact in the extreme (though it was in fact previously occupied by two workers' houses): crucially its width is sufficient to offer possibilities that terrace plots cannot. The site edges are built up on three sides, with a large warehouse volume, now converted to a theatre, on the site to the rear (until the late nineteenth century this was a large garden), and houses on both sides. The street is a mere 3.5 metres wide, which has the advantage that it receives only local traffic, however car-parking must be accommodated within the building plots.

The three storey building accommodates two courts: on the street side a paved court, accommodating a car, at the rear a walled garden, with a narrow passage linking the two. These leave a house that is L-shaped in plan, with a small room at the front and a large one at the rear, and the stair in between. The diagrammatic simplicity of this layout contrasts with the dynamism and transparency of the rooms, achieved by the integration of the stair in the open interior and the disposition of windows, including internal and external corners.

The narrow passage linking the two courts is a telling detail: by consistently pulling the building away from the edge of the site, Van Hee allows light and sun to enter from the most unexpected angles. The benefits of this tactic are most evident in the first floor living room, which though only 6 by 3.5 metres has a feeling of great spaciousness. Full height glazing at the end reveals the brick party wall only one metre away, allowing in a slice of midday sun, while to the side, a horizontal window looks out to the garden, and the brick wall of the factory building behind. The light from these windows and the texture of sunlight on the garden walls animates the room. Opposite these, a view of surprising extent opens out: through the window that folds round the corner towards the stair, you see out over a rich patchwork of roofs and gardens, with in the distance the chimneys of Ghent's old industrial north.

The paradox of this house is that the highly enclosed and blank character of the site has permitted great openness and transparency, without

compromising the sense of privacy from within. If a two storey brick wall at the rear seems on first consideration an unforgiving neighbour, it not only eliminates any question of overlooking, it helps define the garden as a room. As in the Nollet and Huyghe house, the office is placed on the street side, the least private if not necessarily the most public of rooms. The regular mullions provide a sensation of screening - there are no picture windows - while also providing a rhythmic unity to the freely disposed window openings. A balanced contact between house and street has been achieved, where privacy is maintained but the street is overlooked, and animated by screened proximity and by shafts of sunlight.

The De Vylder/ Hofkens house is part of an interior plot in the centre of Ghent, close to the church of St Michiel. [see plans 3, 13]. It is one of a group of three houses in converted factory buildings, on the interior of an urban block formed by a variety of workers' and bourgeois houses. The number of developments on interior plots within urban blocks in Ghent are testament to its status as an early industrial city (indeed, extensive textile production chains were in place even before factory-centred production started). A survey of Ghent in 1800 shows 70 textile businesses in the centre of the city, mostly situated on the interior of blocks; and in 1826 there were already nearly 300 beluiken - groups of houses around a court or dead-end street on the interior of a block, accessed via a gate on the street[6].

At 22 x 11 metres the De Vylder/ Hofkens house has a generous footprint; however, the buildings line the perimeter of the plot, with a blank wall to the rear, conforming to the beluik type. The typical single sided orientation of the beluiken is modified in the project by the creation of small patios and gardens at the ends of the houses. These give the houses different aspects, and more sunlight, and form private external spaces, the necessary complement to the grassed communal yard which the three houses face onto. The creation of a whitewashed light court only one metre deep at the north end of the De Vylder/ Hofkens house gives the adjacent rooms (bathroom and utility room) surprisingly generous light, but also increases the transparency of the house as a whole, diminishing its shed-like longditudinal emphasis.

The Fonteyn studio house, like the Nollet and Huyghe house, presents a relatively closed face to the street, and opens up to the rear. Its situation is different in two fundamental respects: the orientation of the rear is northwards, and the houses behind are only 30 metres distant. The design reflects the highly specific nature of the commission, to provide studio and guest accommodation for the main house behind, and although it is capable of use as an independent house, there is a degree of intimacy to the relation between main house and studio. [see plans 4, 9]

The factory-like sawtooth roof permits a relatively deep construction of only one storey - the house dimensions are 8.8 x 12 metres - whose interior is handled in the manner of a loft, with blocks housing servant spaces defining a plan of primary rooms of varying sizes, the deceptive informality of the plan managing the transition from three rooms at the front to two at the rear. The interior is filled with cool north light, though the openness of the house allows through shafts of sunlight from the windows at the front. The fusion of single storey suburban house and metropolitan loft, a surprising meeting of opposites, is handled with self-evident calm.

Type and archetype

The idea of type in relation to buildings amounts to an acknowledgement that there are only so many solutions to typical plot structures and uses, and that these solutions mediate social patterns of use[7]. 'Type' is seen by some architects as limiting, by others as liberating, in its impersonality and restriction of creative freedom. The brief consideration I have given above to the way in which the architects of the four houses have interpreted type in relation to the specifics of their sites, and to the social conditions of their day, shows sufficiently the significant scope for patient ingenuity that is left to the architect.

The architects' conception of these four houses reflects, however, a deeper

awareness of the cultural history that is embodied in patterns of building and dwelling. The ability to make buildings which have an undemonstrative clarity to their organisation, which profit from the particularities of their situation, but which also possess a constructional language with wide resonances, testifies to the maturity of the architects' visions - all the more remarkable since three of the four are in their early thirties. More importantly, it also suggests that the idea of type offers access to deep-rooted social experiences, that they are able to tell us about the society and technologies we live with[8].

Nollet and Huyghe's use of geometry is in many ways familiar, suggestive even of an architecture more concerned with abstract visual harmonies than the dense resonances of lived experience. However, their compositional tactics are also imbued with commonplaces of the Low Countries. In the street front of their house, the views offered to passers-by are both engaging and unaffected: taking the picture window of the office to the floor offers the interior as a mundane but intriguing tableau, while the perspective through the passage and corner window to the garden has a beguiling, intimate quality reminiscent of a painting by de Hooch. Equally, the patchwork is a theme for both the building and its garden. The distinct black colouring of the house engenders tonal difference with its neighbours, discreetly drawing attention to the discontinuities of the urban fabric; the patchwork is reprised in the coloured glass balustrades on the rear elevation. The assertively geometric divisions of the garden, laid out as a series of parallel strips separated by hedges, moving from lawn through vegetable garden to chicken coop, echo the way the divisions of the land have been translated into an urban structure, the petrified agricultural framework which surrounds the house.

The mediterranean origins of the patio house type leave little explicit trace in Marie Jose Van Hee's design: they register only in the house's surprising generosity and relaxed spatiality. On close examination, however, many of the house's qualities derive from Van Hee's assimilated knowledge of Roman and mediterranean houses, which the eight metre plot width has made it possible to deploy.

The garden plays a fundamental part in the life of the house, as is implicit in its the room-like proportions and dimensions, and explicit in the interlocked planning of house and external space. The direct relation between the dining room and the garden, reinforced by the large sliding door, is as typical of suburban as it is of Roman houses, though the enclosure of the garden give this relation an intimacy that recalls the latter. The play of layered transparency throughout the house, in the entry, where the rear garden can already be glimpsed, or in the living room where close and distant views are balanced with the sophistication of a house in Pompeii, all the more engaging for its unforced quality. For it is without doubt the naturalness of certain mediterranean propositions on privacy, gardens in town or views which give them a compelling relevance for contemporary urban houses[9].

Where both Nollet & Huyghe and Van Hee engage with more archaic traditions of dwelling, Fonteyn's studio house engages with the recent but nonetheless distant past, that of industry. The imagery of Fonteyn's insertion into an area of undistinguished recent housing is understated, in part though the building's discreet volumetric difference from its neighbours. The sawtooth roof has long been assimilated to the language of artists' studios: distant echoes of both factory and loft are presented in domesticated form, both scale and materialisation removing any abrasive edges to the industrial associations.

Each of these houses seems to carry a small residual charge from the social evolutions which have influenced the structure of settlements: from agriculture to the town, from rural leisure to the city, from industry to leisure. Indeed, taken together, they seem to map the evolutions of the city through its successive expansions and contractions. Although not necessarily conscious, the evolutionary character that is fundamental to every city, and which is very much evident in Flanders' cities, seems to have left its mark on the conception of these houses.

The evolutions of the site are particularly evident in the house of De Vylder and Hofkens, where successive layers of urban development are presented as a composite, hybrid identity. The 'light touch' restoration re-presents industry with an archaic, humanising patina; the light courts give the factory shed the fragile aura of a ruin, emphasised by the tree growing around the column and through the beam in the entry court; the note of ruin is offset by the generous, unaffected liveability of the house and communal garden, counterbalancing melancholy with an unsentimental practicality. The grassed court is suggestive of the garden or pasture which preceded the industry, also witnessed by the magnificent trees in the garden behind; the greenhouse glazing overlays this with a note of industrialised agriculture. The mix of intuitive delicacy and commonsense in this intervention achieve what a more self-conscious project might not: a simultaneous presentation in one place of the different forces that have shaped this plot of land and its buildings over the long duration of the city.

Four urban projects

For all the qualities of individual houses, however typical the conditions, it is perhaps still difficult to extrapolate to wider questions of density and the planning of urban areas. It is, then, of particular interest that three of the above houses have served as 'prototypes' for medium scale urban housing projects: Nollet & Huyghe's 10 terrace houses in Brouwerstraat, Ghent (winning competition design, construction due to start in 2004), Marie-Josee Van Hee's 9 patio houses for Schaafstraat in Antwerp (competition entry), and noA architecten's 27 terrace houses for the Vetex factory site in Kortrijk (first ex aequo in competition). I will also discuss the recently completed housing complex at 't Paandereitje in Bruges, containing 49 houses and 26 apartments.

The projects throw some light on practical issues of urban 'grain', a loose concept covering a multitude of interdependent issues relating to space and character, amongst them the complex interplay of block size, plot size, building type, uses and the spatial structure of the public realm. All four projects work within existing urban blocks of varying scale, and have had to bridge the gap between the individual plot and urban dimensions, reinterpreting the existing morphology to contemporary expectations of domestic and public space.

The question of public space raises issues for the architect which are not present in one-off houses. Instead of working within an existing street where the character is determined by other houses, and where, for example, a completely introverted house can be created without affecting the neighbourhood, the conception of the constituent houses is more closely interdependent with the idea for the public realm.

The Ramen project by Nollet & Huyghe, in which the construction of a large underground car park is the primary motivation, proposes the completion of the small perimeter block of only 90 x 55 metres with ten terrace houses on the narrow Brouwerstraat and an office and apartment building occupying the 'head' of the site on Ramen [see plans 5, 13]. A pedestrian route passes through the block behind the vehicle entrance, with a pedestrian entrance in the small public garden giving access to the vast below-ground public territory of the car park.

This level-headed urban strategy, which gives a respectable and appropriate density (63 dph), is raised to another level by a certain lyrical quality to the conception of the project. The ten houses are composed in a play of repetition and difference, with a continuous cornice level and flat facades, but with five house types designed by four different architects (Nollet and Huyghe have designed two different types themselves). The tension between individuality and commonality is expressed in the varying proportions, rhythms and degrees of openness of the street fronts, and in the lugubrious colour harmonies of three earth-toned brick types - green, grey and ochre.

However, the seductively reassuring image of an urban fabric restored with a known type cannot conceal the considerable ingenuity that has had to be

expended on these houses in order to temper the inflexible orientation of the terrace house. Prior to the twentieth century, the orientation of houses in relation to the sun tended to be a secondary consideration to their location in the perimeter block. Continuity of the urban fabric is not fully compatible with good solar orientation - but, having discarded the means but not the aims of 'soleil, espace, verdure', how are we to weigh the virtues of urban continuity against the vices of a north facing living room, or the virtues of a sunny living area against the vices of urban fragmentation?

At Ramen, the south orientation of the street front and north facing garden are the exact opposite to the felicitous aspect of the Nollet & Huyghe house; equally, the three room deep plan of the houses, typical of nineteenth century terrace houses, sets a number of further challenges. Three of the five house types are proposed with internal terraces on the second floor to light the depth of the house better; all except one are relatively open to the street; one is almost entirely symmetrical, offering identical accommodation to front and back, as if unable to decide between sun and privacy. In the context of ongoing density discussions, it will be interesting to see how far the explorations at Ramen - perhaps these are worthy of the description 'typological experiments' - convince as perspectives on the renewal of this house type.

In her competition project for Schaafstraat in Antwerp, in the area just to the north of the Central Station, Van Hee utilised the small plot depth of the patio house to effect a change in the public space of the area [see plans 8, 14]. Taking a typical plot size of 8 x 16 metres (almost identical to Leeuws-Croes house in Ghent, therefore), she proposed a block of nine patio houses, composed of one row of six houses on a north-south orientation, and a second row of three houses on an east-west orientation, along with two apartments. Her scheme takes advantage of the fact that the disposition of rooms in patio houses is more tolerant of rotation and reversal than in a terrace house, permitting a close back-to-back arrangement; equally, the far smaller plot depth makes corners a much less problematic condition than in a terrace house perimeter block. Thus in a relatively small depth a four-sided block can be created, with inhabited street frontage on all sides.

The gain of this compactness is in this case that the existing perimeter block could be shortened, and a second, smaller block created, with a small public space in between, onto which the new Design Centre 'de Winkelhaak' would face. This act of cutting the head off the existing block has a specific logic here, creating a pedestrian link between the covered market to the west and the shopping street to the east. By working against the prevailing grain of narrow, deep terrace plots, and replacing a row of north-facing houses, dwellings of a very different stamp are inserted into the area, and a worthwhile addition to the existing public realm network is proposed.
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Van Hee uses the slightly tapering geometry of the block to create small differences between the houses. The shifting of volumes within the plans betrays an anxiety to avoid repetition that is perhaps disproportionate to the small number of houses, but offers a way of ensuring difference between similar houses within a unified architectural language. The public space, inflected by the rhythm of tall doorways, and overlooked from the raised half-level from living rooms and kitchens (the half-level is a typical tactic of nineteenth century middle-class houses to achieve distance from the street), suggests a balance of neighbourhood intimacy and urban anonymity.

This project offers two concrete insights into the vicissitudes of 'urban architecture'. The proposals make sense in part because they are conceived in the context of a wider set of interventions, billed by the city of Antwerp as 'Stationsomgeving: een integrale aanpak', which include the new square and underground car park at Sint Jansplein, and the Permeke [business?] centre on the De Conincplein, as well as the Design Centre; the wider framework for this renewal project is the (controversial) project for the city's ring boulevard and the new high speed line from Brussels to Amsterdam, stopping at Antwerp Central Station. However, it was exactly this wider framework of infrastructure and acupuncture which encouraged Van Hee to step outside the limits of the competition site, and propose moving the building line by a

metre on one side, and purchasing an adjacent site for creation of the public space. It is difficult to call on the procedural tools of urbanism, in the form of changing land ownership or compulsory purchase, in an architectural competition, without scaring the horses: it appears that in this case these considerations played a role in deterring the jury from this scheme.

The cocktail of high expectations without strategic back-up is also evident in the inventive but flawed project for 't Paandereitje in Bruges [see plans 7, 11]. The policy tensions between the desire to attract young 'city-leavers' back to the city, and the ambition to achieve high densities generated a near impossible task, of high density, house-based construction. If we may reasonably take the 72 units/ ha which could be achieved by repeating the house Pluimstraat as an indication of where the maximum density achievable with single family houses may lie - and for all its undoubted charm I would repeat the description 'compact' that I used earlier - the 91 units/ ha that were to be achieved at 't Paandereitje were unlikely to be compatible with generous single family houses for 'city leavers'.

Perhaps in deference to Bruges' predominant single family houses, probably in relation to the target market, too, the development consists of 62 'houses', based on a 10 x 10 metre module, of which 80% are one family houses, with the remainder divided into two apartments each. At the level of the houses, the compactness of the plots is in too many places expressed in an uncomfortably attenuated feel: with dwellings spread over four floors, the houses retain little of the 'garden-centred' feel that is the patio house's main asset as a type.

At the urban level, the shallow block which was a virtue in the situation of Schaafstraat, Antwerp, is here less clearly positive, in the context of an urban block 280 x 100 metres. The blocks of back-to-back patio houses create five cross-streets: there are nine 'clusters' of houses on the site in all. The one example where the cross street connects to an existing narrow street, therefore offering a link between Garenmarkt and the Astrid Park, links the development discreetly (elegantly, even) into the existing urban fabric; the remainder are the result of the project's internal 'grain', and run into dead-ends against the garden walls of the properties to the rear. The internal network they form is neither fully integrated with the wider network of public space, nor clearly demarcated from it.

In the majority of sites, it seems necessary, or even useful, to accept the distinction between the exterior and interior of the block. This is an archetypal feature of the perimeter block, which in the larger blocks of the city edge was often a separate plot - a yard or a garden, a place of productive work. With industrialisation of work these plots were taken into increasingly intensive use, for factories and also housing. The urban blocks on the outer edge of Kortrijk are at up to 300 x 150 metres unusually large, and perhaps for this reason proved viable as industrial locations for longer than was the case in central Ghent. The closure or departure of these industries to the city periphery has led to a number of projects to build housing on the interior of the block.

Although the studio house by An Fonteyne was designed for a terrace site on the periphery of Oostende, the proposal by noA architecten (An Fonteyne, Jitse Van de Berg, Phillippe Vierin) uses it as a prototype for houses on the interior of a block in Kortrijk, vacated by the Vetex textile factory [see plans 6, 10]. The site was a sea of sawtooth roofs lapping up to the edge of the back gardens of the houses which form the exterior block, although due to their apparently poor condition the decision was taken prior to the competition to clear the interior of the block, with the exception of the large cubic factory building at the centre.

As in the original factory complex, the project seeks to build up the spatial structure of the interior of the block from the repetition of a single dominant orientation, building up a repetitive grain that echoes the rhythm of the demolished factory roofs. The blocks are aligned, according to the basis of the type, on a consistent northerly orientation (in this case northeast - southwest), with the living area of the houses alternating between front and

back. Although the brief allowed for relatively large areas of public space and communal facilities, which have subsequently proved to be unattainable, the type itself appears capable of higher densities.

The generous space and informal arrangement of the studio house appear plausible as urban family houses, though the adoption of the factory 'grain' gives a dominance of northlight that is perhaps hard to justify. Possibly the most engaging aspect of the scheme is the way in which an identity is established for a series of houses. As in the studio house, the blocks which house servant spaces are brought to the glazed facades forming a strong but varied rhythm. The gentle angling of front and rear elevations interacts with the roof profile to create rising and falling rooflines. The shifting reflections, forced perspectives and modulating rhythms which these would generate suggest a recognition of difference and individuality within the composition, without emphasising the individual unit.

Putting density in perspective

The projects discussed above illustrate some of the complex challenges of urban renewal which face Flemish cities. Here, density is far from being the primary issue: density is a means to an end, and not a goal in itself, and little is served simply by building more densely, or higher, in cities or in the countryside. The goal of more sustainable development which underpins the Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen depends among other things on radical reduction of construction in rural areas, and increased use of public transport. With wealthier inhabitants and businesses having left the city for the comforts and conveniences of the periphery, achieving these aims will depend on the quality of accommodation realised and the resulting character of the urban areas. Excessive densities, or public spaces without the population or services to support them will not contribute to the process. Significant urban design interventions may be necessary, perhaps like Eduard Bru's proposals for Poblenou in Barcelona, where new streets cut through the Eixampe blocks look to open up the under-utilised interiors for higher density and more mixed development. Is such a radical 'piecemeal' approach conceivable in Flanders? Whatever, the perimeter block seems to be the vehicle of this evolution par excellence.

With the current Flemish demographic situation, there seems little excuse for an obsession with quantity, or in particular the easily quantified housing unit. For it is also productive that business or even cultural uses are integrated in the urban fabric, where they benefit from public transport accessibility. The suitability of the interior of perimeter blocks for uses other than housing is demonstrated by a number of projects in the current selection. The former factory building behind the Leeuws-Croes house is now in use as a theatre; the administrative centre in Kortrijk by noA architecten makes effective use of the interior of a city centre block for offices; while the university lecture hall in Antwerp by Driesen-Meersman-Thomaes excavates a public space for the students from within a perimeter block of housing, and underneath the lecture hall itself. The construction of the premises for the student organisation as the last of the row of terrace houses before the lecture theatre block is more than just a contextual gesture, it is a recognition of the important overlap between institutional and domestic realms.

The renewal of inner cities requires much decrease as well as increase in density. It is worth making the point that although Marie-Jose Van Hee's Schaafstraat project stands as an example of medium-density, low-rise residential construction it represents a de-intensification of the city from its current density, halving of the number of houses on the site. 23 houses would make way for nine houses and two apartments, mirroring the transformation of the Leeuws-Croes House, Ghent, where two houses have been replaced by one. Equally, in the case of the De Vylder/ Hofkens house, any talk of intensification is highly relative: the three houses are slight in relation to both the 11 apartments which a developer proposed for this same site, and the one hundred employees who worked in this factory one hundred years ago. The need for dense de-intensification is the simple product of the situation that unattractively high densities and wastefully low densities are still both very much present throughout Flanders.

The projects discussed in this article illustrate that town houses occupy an important place in the density spectrum between apartment buildings and suburban houses - all the more important as plots for the latter get progressively smaller, and the fear of proximity becomes more and more untenable. However, the effective use of urban house types depends on an urban design framework where the 'difficult' conditions of corners, backs and interior plots are acknowledged and economically answered. It is not just the house type, but above all the way that adjacencies are handled, that leads to quantitative and qualitative gains. This is true in urban areas but also in the many half-urban, half-rural areas of Flanders, where urban typologies have long been used and appropriated. Indeed, it is possible to say that much of Flanders is in an explicitly evolutionary condition - is in a state of perpetual becoming - in transition from a state of wild nature (there is little of this left) to an urban state, with most of the region in a multitude of hybrid conditions between the two.

The policy of 'inbreiding' - the intensification of existing settlements - requires a reading of the existing urban grain, and of its relation to contemporary social practice, of considerable subtlety. Finding appropriate and affordable proportions between new housing, employment sites, collective services and public space is essential to the short- and long-term success of such interventions. Is it unrealistic to think that such careful consideration be brought to bear on a mass of small and medium scale projects? Possibly: but if Flemish 'evolutionary' practice can be stepped up to a new scale and a new quality - a radical 'piecemeal' practice - the failure to manage development at a larger scale might be seen not so much as a shortcoming but as a blessing. Such a path would take Flemish action on density away from those pursued in neighbouring regions. But ingrained though some of the habits may be, this is no easy option: it may seem paradoxical, but harnessing the power of piecemeal development will require much urban design intervention and political will.

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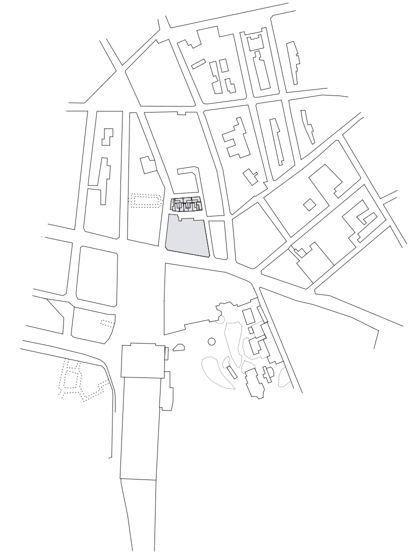

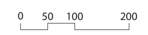
0 50 100 200

Footnotes

1 800,000 new houses planned in NL 1995 - 2005; 2,000,000 new houses planned in Southeast England 1996 - 2016; 400,000 new houses planned in Flanders 1995 - 2010. Past experience of such numerically obsessed expansions in Britain suggests little scope for optimism; and, although planned in many cases with considerable care and skill, urban expansion in the Netherlands has taken place at a breathless pace that the social impact will take time to assess.

2 There are, of course, cities where some discreet and sophisticated urban design practice has been carried out in recent years, amongst them Leuven, Eeklo, Kortrijk.

3 VLABO: 'Vlaanderen Bouwt', a not for profit organisation which in partnership with local government and contractors seeks to stimulate the construction of 'good, characterful and affordable houses' ['degelijk, karaktervolle en betaalbare woningen']. www.vlaanderenbouwt.be. The exhibition village Kijkdorp Kruishoeve at St. Jozef Londerzeel consists of 92 houses for sale, and was developed in partnership with Intercommunale Haviland and the local authority.

4 It is a larger scale use of the approach which in an earlier version, at Aalbeke, was described as the 'cacophonous climax' of Flemish housing praxis, a 'microcosm of the Belgian chaos...supposed [through the quality of the architecture] to deliver a reductio ad absurdum, by generating a high quality, coherent housing project'. Bruno De Meulder , Jan Schreurs, Annabel Cock, Bruno Notteboom, 'Patching up the Belgian Urban Landscape' , OASE 52, p109. [Sleutelen aan het Belgische stadslandschap].

5 It is worth pointing out that this strip varies between one and three blocks deep, beside accessible areas of countyside. This is fundamentally different to the typical lintbebouwing or strip development, where construction one plot deep bleeds off into the countryside, creating large areas of inaccessible open land.

6 Roger Moreau, Archiefbeelden Gent, Deel V: Beluiken, Poortjes en Cites, p 8. See also Robert Duplessis 'Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe'.

7 Adrian Forty summarises the concepts of type and typology developed in Italy in the 1950s and 60s as follows 'Typology was a means of describing the relationship between buildings and the city of which they formed part, and thereby showing how individual buildings were manifestations of the collective and historical processes of urban development; it was a way of showing that an 'architectural event' was not just four walls and a roof, but something that existed only as part of the general urban phenomenon, considered both spatially, socially and historically.' Forty, Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture, p 308.

8 I take this to be one implication of the following passage by Alan Colquhoun: 'Just as language always pre-exists a group or individual speaker, the system of architecture pre-exists a particular period or architect. It is precisely through the persistence of earlier forms that the system can convey meaning. These forms, or types, interact with the tasks presented to architecture, in any moment in history, to form the entire system'. Colquhoun 'Typology and Design Method' in Forty 'Words and Buildings'.

9 The sophisticated spatiality of Roman houses of the Imperial period was the result of the attempt to incorporate the features of large country villas in often impossibly compact urban sites: this suggests interesting echoes between the problems the Romans experienced in relation to speculation and density, and those of our own time.