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Learning to Make Space for Demolition

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Keywords:

degrowth, demolition, context-driven research, landscape teaching, planning policy

ABSTRACT

The societal and political support for reducing urban sprawl in the densely urbanized landscape of Flanders seems to be growing, albeit slow. In its white paper for a new strategic planning document, the Flemish government proposes an evolution towards a zero consumption of open space for urban development in 2040, compared to the 6 ha per day now. This noble ambition ignores thousands of constructions and sealed surfaces, spread all over the landscape, that have a serious impact on physical, ecological and agricultural processes. The physical and mental 'space' in society to demolish these constructions, unseal the soil and restore or redevelop the landscape seems to be an unaddressed and thus non-existent challenge.

KU Leuven and University College Ghent have recently started to explore this challenge in a project funded by the Flemish Government Architect. The exploration has been set up as a common learning trajectory of students, teachers and researchers as it is embedded as a research project in the educational programs of both schools. The research ambitions seem quite obvious: a screening and typology of unused and underused constructions that could be demolished, reasons how and why these constructions are still present, their emotional significance for local society, (social, legal and financial) obstacles for demolition, and ideas and proposals for a qualitative landscape after the removal. During the learning trajectory, the participants will be inspired

by experts on issues that pop up.

Increasing the awareness in society as part of the learning trajectory is less obvious. A final exhibition at the Flanders Architecture Institute will raise relevant questions and stimulate the public to reflect on the sense and nonsense of the survival of abandoned constructions in an already densely urbanized landscape. By confronting visitors with recognizable situations and with the potential leap in landscape quality, the more academic learning trajectory will hopefully expand to a larger part of society as a first, modest step in learning how to make space for demolition.

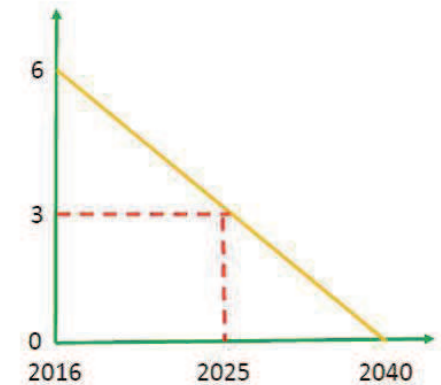


Figure 1. Reduction of daily consumption of open space

INTRODUCTION

Today's consumption of open space for new development in the already densely urbanized landscape of Flanders, the Northern part of Belgium, is on average 6 ha per day. Only recently the Flemish government has slowly but steadily come to the conclusion that this continuous expansion of human settlement area should be reduced significantly. An ultimate political approval is still pending, but the government's white paper for a new strategic planning document proposes a gradual decrease to 0 ha per day in the next 23 years (Departement Ruimte Vlaanderen, 2016). In other words, the current 6 ha daily consumption of open space should be reduced to 3 ha in 2025 and to 0 ha in 2040, an ambition

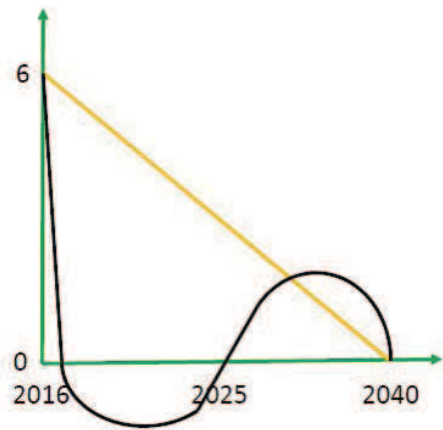


Figure 2. Combination of demolition and new development in S-shaped curve

which has become popularly known as the 'concrete stop'. However, it still implies that the surface under the slanting line in Figure 1 corresponds with the amount of open space that is yet to be urbanized before 2040, with many additional harmful consequences for a spatial system that is already under severe stress. Moreover, without vigorous measures, the reduction of the daily increase of settlement area will undoubtedly have some delay before (hopefully) heading for 0 ha in 2040. Harm will be done to even more open space as the surface under a bended line will be mathematically bigger than the one under the slanting line mentioned above.

Somehow overlooked, due to the large attention to the 'concrete stop', the white paper also suggests to decrease the rate of sealed surface by at least 1/5 before 2050. Although debates between government and administration are still running about the feasibility, this towering ambition is promising and trend breaking as it also implies a reduction of the already urbanized area. Just imagine the potential of combining the concrete stop, from the start, with the demolition of existing empty, unused or underused constructions and the removal of concrete or asphalt pavements (Figure 2). This creates

the opportunity in 2025 to assess at which more suitable, transit-oriented locations new urban development can be allowed. The strength of this combined story is that the demolition of 'bad' urbanized area will compensate for 'good' new urban development while no additional open space will be consumed.

DEMOLITION AS A LANDSCAPE OF CONFLICT

The demolition of unused or underused constructions and the removal of concrete pavement in a densely urbanized and highly fragmented landscape such as Flanders should be considered a contemporary and topical act of (landscape) architecture and urbanism. It is the spatial expression of a much needed 'degrowth' in current society. Where architecture and planning have always contributed to growth, they now should help society learn to 'degrow'. The 'degrowth' movement convinces more and more people that degrowth is not synonymous with 'getting unhappy' or 'missing opportunities'. It is a transition from efficiency to satisfaction: 'better' is no longer related to growth but to 'having enough'. (D'Alisa et al., 2015) More specifically, the demolition of unused artefacts in the landscape will reduce landscape fragmentation, allow for better development of agriculture and nature, create higher quality for recreational purposes, and, in particular, restore valuable, soil related ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and nutrient and water cycles. But demolition will of course also meet resistance, first of all because it seems so very unfamiliar. Secondly, although many of these buildings or pavements have been unused for many years, the destruction will be perceived by the owners as an infringement of their property. This perception is even more negative when owners feel deprived of speculative real estate values in relation

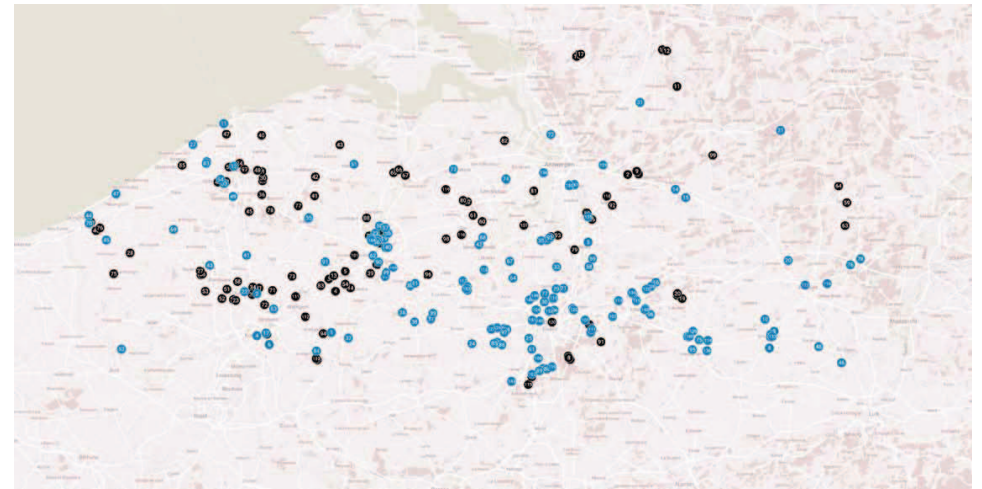


Figure 3. Crowdsourced map showing the distribution of cases across Flanders and Brussels

to current or future planning legislation. Thirdly, owners or neighbors might be emotionally attached to constructions for historical, social or cultural reasons.

These observations illuminate the 'landscape of conflict' demolition creates. A lot of the aspects mentioned above undoubtedly need more in-depth research. But, as 2040 is not that far away, doing nothing is not an option. The creation of 'mental space' in society for demolition is, however, a challenge that can be addressed immediately. Who doesn't know at least one construction in open space he/she hasn't already wondered about why it hasn't been demolished yet and how much better the landscape would be off without? That is why KU Leuven and University College Ghent have recently started to explore the physical and mental space for demolition.

ACADEMIC LEARNING TRAJECTORY

The exploration has been set up as a common learning trajectory of students, teachers and researchers as it is embedded as a research project in the educational programs of both schools. The research ambitions are quite obvious: a screening and typology

of unused and underused constructions that could be demolished, reasons how and why these constructions are still present, their significance for local society, (legal and financial) obstacles for demolition, and ideas and proposals for a qualitative landscape after the removal.

The first step in the learning trajectory consisted of a screening of unused and underused constructions. Students from both institutions were asked to collect real-life cases in their own familiar surroundings. These cases didn't necessarily have to be buildings, but could also include sealed surfaces, bridges or any other sort of construction. The cases had to show clear signs of disuse (or very inefficient use) in order to focus on possible quick wins rather than to run in conflict with current users, or to start never ending debates from the start. Another requirement for the selection of cases was that the removal or demolition needed to have a substantial added value to the surrounding open space once completed. This screening led to the creation and steady growth of a crowdsourced map that by now already contains over 250 entries (Figure 3). The variety of the cases is enormous and eye-opening: from burnt down or

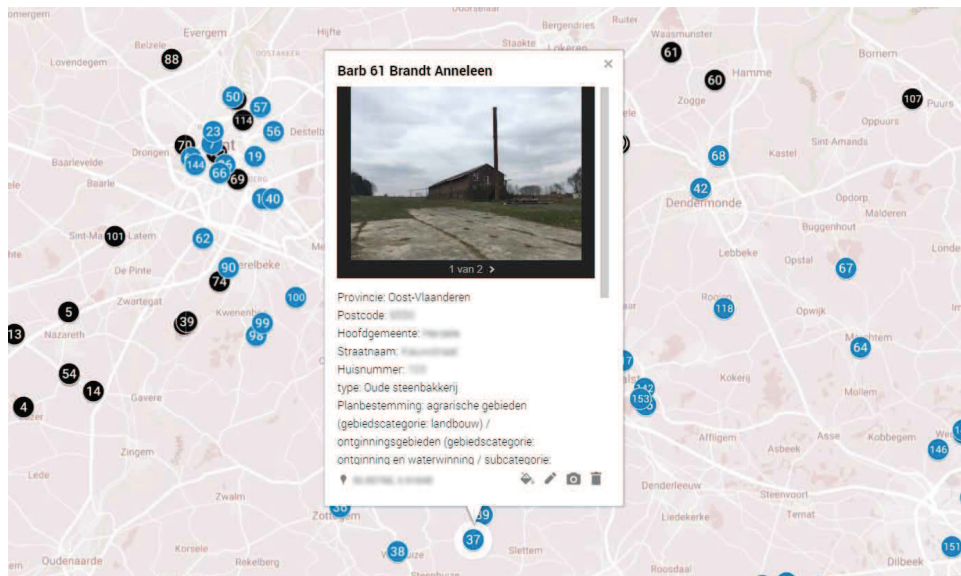


Figure 4. Detailed view of one of the cases (© Anneleen Brandt)

unfinished houses in zones intended for agricultural use to run down and closed theme parks, former military bases and airports, abandoned border control zones, failed recreational development or smaller dilapidated animal sheds.

Per case static info, such as address and planned use according to the land use plan, was added along with a selection of pictures (Figure 4). Also information and particularities about the spatial context and a brief history (as far as known) were included. Finally, students reflected briefly on the opportunities and added value of demolition.

Next, teachers and researchers jointly selected the most intriguing cases that represented best the broad range of cases and that seemed useful to be studied more in depth. The diverse backgrounds of teachers and researchers led to an interesting layering of the discussion on the selection. It was sometimes a challenge to come to an agreement whether a construction should (or should not) be demolished. This included for instance discussions on elements that could become heritage in the future, like on

a weathered grain silo that embodies the vernacular character of the historic landscape (figure 5), but that at the same time can also be seen as 'noise' when purely assessing the impact on soil sealing and visual landscape quality.

In the second phase students were asked, for certain cases, to track down the year of construction and the building permit history, to find out who the owner is, and to collect as much relevant information as possible. This was part of an attempt to find out what led to the loss of use and to the



Figure 5. Weathered grain silo and shed (© Timon Lamoot)

decay, and to determine the factors that contribute to the stubborn conservation of the construction. In other words, what are the obstacles for demolition? These often seem to come down to legal and financial reasons and range from building permit violations prohibiting further use, to real estate developers hoping to be allowed to re-parcel and develop one day, to land owned by government agencies (e.g. the Belgian railway company) waiting for possible future use, or to failed investments. Part of the in-depth case studies also involved interviewing stakeholders. These interviews gathered the narratives and helped try and understand the significance and meaning of the construction for society. Methods of analysis based on narrative approaches have a potential to give voice to actors (owners, passers-by, local residents, ...) that are often neglected in discussions



Figure 6. Before and after photo montage. This villa burnt down and was bought by a real estate developer hoping to re-parcel. Consequent requests for building permits have been denied following the negative advice of the Flanders Heritage Agency (© Stijn Vermeersch)



Figure 6: after

among experts (designers, policy makers, ecologists, ...) (Havik et al., 2017; Van Damme, 2013). Discussing demolition with local residents and passers-by also revealed the different values and meanings that are assigned to the construction and how it should develop, ranging from outspoken emotional attachment to support for demolition (Figure 6). A surprising result was the indifference of some of the local inhabitants: after several years, they didn't seem to notice the empty or underused constructions anymore. The limited time of the student exercise hasn't allowed for a thorough sociological investigation, but it has revealed different points of view and expectations that will play a role when discussing demolition in forums outside of academia.

Interestingly, students liked to use visualizations in their analysis and argumentation. Although design will only be required in the third stage, some students couldn't wait and already visualized their ideas in the form of photo montages (figure 6) and even abstract paintings. Interviews were associated with visualizations of preliminary design scenarios (Figure 7).

A third phase in the academic learning trajectory is taking place as we write. It focuses on the design of the future landscape of the sites of demolition and might even include methods on how this demolition can take place (e.g. instantly, partially, gradually,...). Dutch landscape architect Hannah Schubert was invited for a lecture on slow and natural transformation and the creation of a new reality as an alternative to instant demolition. Her explorative work suggests the introduction of minimal interventions for a maximal transformation by activating natural processes and thinking and planning on the long term. An additional overview of best practices, gathered by students, further focuses on international projects that deal with demolition and

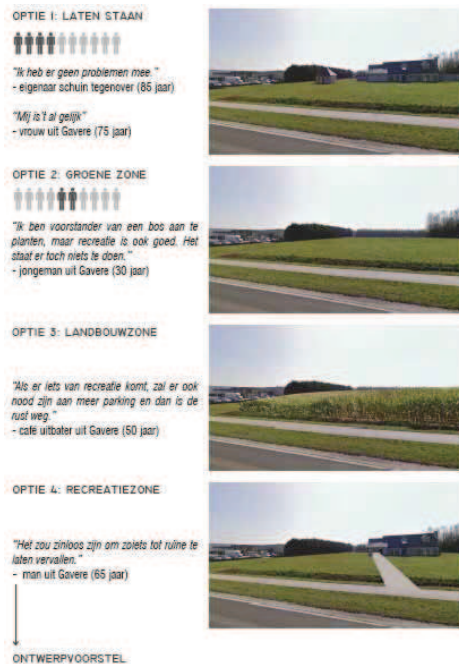


Figure 7. Quotes from discussions with inhabitants, leading to different design scenarios for future development of the site of an unused house in Zingem (© Ellen Van Mechelen and Maité Himpe)

redevelopment, such as Parc des Cornailles by Agence Ter and Alter Flugplatz Kabach by GTL architects. Design strategies, such as reusing and piling brick, asphalt and concrete on site, clearly inspire the designs by the students. Students' design of the Ursel WWII flight base, today used as a recreational area (Figure 8), is based on a gradual transition in time, from an operating airstrip to an ecological connection between the adjacent nature areas, combining the different historical layers of the site. The interventions are simple: the rubber between the concrete slabs is removed and the airstrip is diagonally pierced by green corridors referring to the original parcel structure that still structures the rest of the site. The idea is that nature will take over the site gradually, while the form of the WW II airstrip remains present. However, most of the sites deal with much smaller surfaces or singular constructions. In the case of a holiday

house in a forest – an archetypical result of the *laissez-faire* urban planning policy in Belgium – the surface won by nature because of demolition is only a couple of square meters. But, also the asphalted road leading to the house can be omitted, resulting in much higher benefits. The analysis and redesign of the sites in the second and third phases of the project already demonstrate that demolition is not merely about the construction or sealed surface but relates to its larger material (physical) and immaterial (social, cultural) context.

DISCUSSION

Universities and University Colleges in Flanders have three main tasks: education, research and consultancy. The 'Space for Demolition' project is situated at the intersection of the three. It is a context-driven research, meaning 'research carried out in a context of application, arising from the very work of problem solving' (Limoges, 1996). Flanders' planning practice and its reality are the starting point of the project. Students collect real-life cases in their own living environment. Critical reflection is stimulated throughout the project by means of a theoretical framework provided by the teachers and researchers involved and by experts. Students are also encouraged to think actively about the way in which their findings can be of service to society. They are asked for recommendations on how demolition might be perceived as an opportunity. Moreover, specific stories of people involved are elaborated in the cases, bringing in more subjective feelings about the constructions. Students are also stimulated to think about how their ideas can be made clear - by means of writing and presenting in drawings, visualisations and movies - in a creative and attractive way.

The project induced an interesting cooperation between the architecture department of KU Leuven and the



Figure 8. Analysis and design for the Ursel flight base. Historical analysis, stories of locals and experts and design are gathered in one poster (design in progress) (© Marisa Borabo and Jan De Meerleer)

landscape architecture department of University College Ghent. Teachers and researchers from various disciplines – planning policy, landscape architecture and architecture - interact and discuss on the theme of demolition, often with unexpected results. As mentioned before, the selection of the case studies has led to both emotional and instructive discussions on the advantages and problems of demolition. At that moment, it already became clear that the primary ambition of the project is to link the diverse meanings about demolition, rather than to give immediate and tangible solutions.

A final exhibition in Spring 2019, curated by the Flanders Architecture Institute, will raise relevant questions and stimulate the broader public to reflect on the sense and nonsense of the survival of abandoned constructions in an already densely urbanized landscape. By confronting visitors with recognizable situations and with the potential leap in

landscape quality, the academic learning trajectory will hopefully expand to a larger part of society as a first, modest step in learning how to make space for demolition.

At the end, the project will, in other words, lead to learning outcomes at three levels. Firstly, the students go through a process of self-regulated learning through own case studies. The possibility to choose their own cases enables them to take control. Moreover, they are free to choose their own actions for gathering information, expanding expertise and developing ideas and proposals for a qualitative landscape after removal. Secondly, the multidisciplinary cooperation and discussions between the teachers and researchers of KU Leuven and University College Ghent generates innovative knowledge by integrating the expertise of different disciplines. It sows the seeds for further multidisciplinary research on the theme. And thirdly, the feedback by the commissioning team of the Flemish Government Architect and by the Flanders Architecture Institute and the final public exhibition will lead to an upscaling of the learning outcomes of the project towards policy and society.

It is clear that the societal urge for degrowth poses new challenges for spatial design disciplines. Demolition has proven to be a very interesting entry point for interdisciplinary tuning on this theme, engaging various stakeholders. Although there seemed to be a general agreement on the necessity of demolition, the case studies gave way to both various interpretations and subjective feelings. While planners stress legal possibilities on demolition and the way in which de-sealing can be facilitated, landscape architects are especially interested in the void and possibilities for new green space left afterwards. Architects pay more attention to the objects to be demolished and their value and sustainability. It gives way to fiery discussions about functional, aesthetical and ecological values of

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specific buildings and their surroundings. After all, already now, it has become clear that creating both physical and mental space for demolition might not be as easy as originally thought...

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The project 'Space for demolition' is funded as 'BWMSTR label 14' by the Flemish Government Architect. We thank the students of KU Leuven and University College Ghent for their inspiring case studies.

INTRODUCTION

The financial crisis and, particularly, the austerity measures associated to the Portuguese bailout caused a deep recession in the country, leading to a decrease in the number of candidates to public high education (Figure 1) (DGES, 2018), with a particular impact in the number of candidates to study cycles perceived by prospective students and parents as less generalist, less prestigious, or less employable.

Public high education places in Portugal are proposed by the universities but ratified by the Directorate General for Higher Education. Admission to public undergraduate degrees and integrated masters occurs through a national competition with three phases. Most candidates are admitted in phase 1. Only unfilled places are available for phases 2 and 3.

The number of candidates to landscape architecture undergraduate degrees dropped dramatically in the country after 2010. In 2010 there was a complete fulfillment of the 150 places offered by the five Portuguese schools in phase 1. The number of admissions in this phase fell to 91 in 2011 and has been decreasing since then (60 admissions in 2017) (Figure 2, 3, and 4). (DGES, 2018).

The phenomena affected four of the five schools in the country. The University of Porto (UP) was able to fulfill all the available places and even increased them, from 25 to 30, in 2015 (a year after the bailout closure), but the other 4 schools were unable to regain the admission numbers hold before the bailout (figures 3 and 4). The situation is particularly serious in the two schools located in the interior municipalities of Vila Real and Évora, with the number of 2017 phase 1 admissions being respectively 5 and 2 (figure 2). (DGES, 2018).

In face of the acute decrease in the number of candidates to landscape

Landscape Architecture: The (Un)certain Choice in Uncertain Times

PECHA KUCHA PAPER

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Keywords:

employability; Portugal; high education; job; University of Porto

ABSTRACT

2011 Portugal's bailout was followed by a decrease in the number of candidates to public high education, with a great impact in the number of applications to landscape architecture undergraduate degrees. In face of the generalized public perception of landscape architecture as a less competitive and employable degree, this research aimed to assess: i) the level of unemployment of the University of Porto landscape architecture graduates, ii) the level of employment in the field of landscape architecture, iii) the level of self-employment and entrepreneurship, and iv) the geographic distribution of the employment. Employment data from graduates from 9 school years (2006-2014) was collected on social networking sites, personal webpages, and online portfolios, and later updated and confirmed with informers and/or the graduates. Results show that 85% of the graduates are employed; 64% have a landscape architecture job; and most of the landscape architecture jobs are in planning and design. The majority of the employees work for private companies, but 17% have created their own jobs. 79% of the graduates work in Portugal. The study has been helpful to adjust the University of Porto landscape architecture study cycles to market demand and to respond to the employment concerns of prospective students.

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PUBLICATION

Printing: Stevens Print
Edition: 200 copies

Delarue, S. & Dufour, R. (Eds.).
(2018). *Landscapes of Conflict. ECLAS Conference 2018, Ghent, Belgium. Conference Proceedings*. Ghent: University College Ghent – School of Arts – Landscape & Garden Architecture and Landscape Development.

ISBN 9789491564130



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