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**Non-conforming or illegal dwellings? How the negative framing of enforcement policies eroded public support for strategic planning in Flanders**

**Tristan Claus<sup>1</sup>, Hans Leinfelder<sup>2</sup>**

As a result of the first Belgian Planning Act in 1962, territory-wide national land use plans were introduced as a legal framework for the assessment of planning permit applications. Immediately two critical issues arose. First, the rushed implementation of these national land use plans resulted in the zoning of thousands of existing dwellings in non-residential zones, giving them the label 'nonconforming'. Obtaining a planning permit for renovating, reconstructing, or expanding these dwellings became more difficult. Second, because of a lack of an energetic enforcement policy, the Planning Act failed simultaneously to halt the development, without planning permit, of additional dwellings in non-residential zones. This led to a second category of dwellings that were not only nonconforming but also inherently illegal.

In 1980, planning policy became the competence of federal Belgium's sub-national governments, including Flanders. The 1995 Flemish government sought to address the issues of non-conformity through rezoning of the legal non-conforming dwellings, if they were located well, and ordering the demolition of the illegal ones. However, unforeseen was the extensive media coverage on the demolition of the illegal dwellings, which often blurred the distinction between the solution-oriented policy for non-conforming on the one hand and the restrictive enforcement approach of illegal dwellings on the other hand. This paper presents an analysis of press articles, news broadcasts, and parliamentary reports spanning 1995–2001 to illustrate how this framing eroded public support for a planning approach of the non-conforming dwellings in Flanders completely. Indeed, as landowners increasingly feared the demolition of their dwellings because of this media framing, a generic regulatory solution emerged in 2001 that bypassed the planning approach. Interviews conducted with ministers, members of cabinet, members of parliament, mayors, and government officials from that era also shed light on how this framing had repercussions on these legislative decisions.

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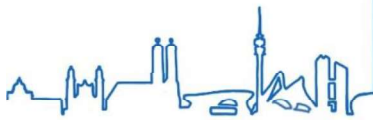
<sup>1</sup>KU Leuven Department of Architecture; [tristan.claus@kuleuven.be](mailto:tristan.claus@kuleuven.be)

<sup>2</sup>KU Leuven Department of Architecture; [hans.leinfelder@kuleuven.be](mailto:hans.leinfelder@kuleuven.be)

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