

Solidary Mobile Housing

Edited by Aurelie De Smet, Burak Pak, Geraldine Bruyneel, Tineke Van Heesvelde

The SMH project is an experimental venture into potentially innovative resilient housing models. Considering that for many vulnerable citizens, stable and quality housing is the first step towards recovery, SMH aims at co-creating a new model in a living environment with real users and trace the social and spatial impact of this practice.

Including the users in every step of the conceptualization and the construction of their own houses, SMH empowers the future inhabitants to incrementally co-create a solidary living community in interaction with the surrounding neighbourhood. A parallel aim of the SMH is to envision alternative modalities of appropriation of underused spaces.

Together with the future inhabitants, the non-profit organizations; Samenlevingsopbouw Brussels and Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk (CAW) Brussels, the students and Professors from the Faculty of Architecture of KU Leuven reframed a Waiting Space in Essegheem, Brussels as a 'place of negotiation' and transformed it into a project through which questions about the city are raised, a place where experimentation and innovation take place. The project was funded by INNOVIRIS Co-create program.



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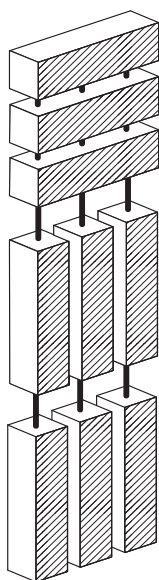
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1.1 PREFACE

“Of course we feel very much involved in this project: it is about us and our future.” The future residents of the first Solidary Mobile Housing project have their say in it. They proudly tell us how they were involved in the project from the beginning. In September 2017, the future residents were first introduced to the community workers, counselors, researchers and students in architecture who would be involved in the project. And over time the number of partners in the project would increase.

Together they looked for sites, reflected on living within a limited perimeter, learned about how to read a plan, to assess building plans and proposals, learned basic skills of carpentry, reflected about their role in their new neighbourhood...

“In the first place, this project ensures that we will have an affordable home with enough privacy, without being alone in the city”, that is one of the concerns shared by all the residents. Because of the long preliminary process, they have now become a solid group that learns to make agreements, to talk about sources of irritation and to work together. “The development of the project took a long time and sometimes we had the feeling that we had to give our opinion too often, but that is also part of a pilot project. We hope that many lessons will be learned from this first experience, so that the next project can be realized better and faster.”

Conversation with Amine, Benoit, Dennis, Didier, Jeremy, Marc, Omar, Robert

1.2 EDITOR'S NOTE

SEARCHING FOR A "NEW DEAL" FOR HOUSING IN BRUSSELS

Burak Pak

"everyone has the right to enjoy a life in conformity with human dignity"... "and the right to decent accommodation is central to this right"¹

Across the globe and particularly in Brussels, decades of neoliberal policies resulted in the commodification and marketization of the housing sector. While a parade of governments failed to provide decent accommodation to the citizens, the constitutionally guaranteed "right to housing" has gradually evaporated into a mirage which is strived for but never reached. On top of this, the financial crisis of 2008 and the refugee influx in the last decade gave rise to an increasing number of vulnerable citizens in need of affordable housing.

The Solidary Mobile Housing (SMH) team co-created this book during the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) epidemic, the economic crisis and the "Black Lives Matter" protests, together revealing structural forms of discrimination and inequality at a global scale. According to a recent brief by the United Nations, we are at this moment experiencing the amplification of the inequalities within and across countries that are pushing individuals and families into poverty. Our world desperately needs "measures that put people at the centre of response" to enable recovery, that can lead to better, more equitable and resilient outcomes for all.

This development has revealed the vitality of social responsibility of the governments in helping the citizens in need. In the last decade, significant criticism on neoliberal policies has emerged in Brussels, Belgium and across the world, and revealed how these policies incrementally eroded social welfare, jeopardizing the sustainability and resilience of the social support systems. Especially since the COVID-19 epidemic, it is widely argued in the intellectual spheres that the Welfare State is in a severe crisis. While the traditional ideals of solidarity are under threat, assumptions of traditional welfare are being challenged by the current policies. Growing forms of economic inequality continue to undermine the traditional safety nets and subvert solidarity in our society. All of these raise the emergent needs for novel structural forms of social and spatial solidarity.

Recently, numerous scholars, intellectuals, activists and politicians have made calls for a “New Social Deal” or a “Green New Deal” as a means to inclusively address the needs of all citizens while pursuing long-term sustainability goals. These calls demand an equitable approach to creation, distribution and sustenance of shared social, spatial and economic resources and propose an alternative relationship with the natural environment. Responsible and ethical urban policies are central to the emergent ideas of a “New Deal”. The supporters of this model propose that the governments and the civil society should step into a new role to address social and spatial inequalities and promote sustainable modes of living while making use of the existing resources more efficiently and effectively.

While 44.332 families are on the waiting list for social housing in the Brussels Capital Region, a variety of land and spaces owned by the government remain dormant and unused, referred to by us as ‘Waiting Spaces’. These spaces are potential areas for accommodating the Brusellites in innovative ways. The drastic increase in the number of house- and homeless people by 33% since 2010 make it even more necessary to search a “New Deal”. This increase is a clear call for the development and testing of smarter policies and urban strategies enabling novel architectural solutions for the creation of affordable housing together with an equitable use of the Waiting Spaces.

In this context, the SMH project is an experimental venture into potentially innovative and resilient housing models. Considering that for many vulnerable citizens, stable and quality housing is the first step towards recovery, SMH aims at co-creating a new model in a living environment with real users and trace the social and spatial impact of this practice. Including the users in every step of the conceptualization and the construction of their own houses, SMH empowers the future inhabitants to incrementally co-create a solidary living community in interaction with the surrounding neighbourhood.

A parallel aim of the SMH is to envision alternative modalities of appropriation of underused spaces. Together with the future inhabitants, the non-profit organisations Samenlevingsopbouw Brussel and Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk (CAW) Brussel, the students and professors from the Faculty of Architecture of KU Leuven reframed a Waiting Space in Essegem as a ‘place of negotiation’ and transformed it into a project through which questions on the city are raised, a place where experimentation and innovation take place. In this sense SMH was and (continues to be) purely a critical spatial practice, which encouraged all of its participants including social workers, students and studio coordinators to get out of the comfortable boundaries of traditional expertise in their fields and venture into the unknown, or “the intentional and skilful mastering of incompetence in the ocean of practices” as Markus Miessen puts it.

SMH went beyond practicing architecture as a solely physical product and explored the co-creation of alternate socio-spatial realities. SMH criticized existing protocols, and invented new protocols in this venture. It introduced novel socio-spatial perspectives for understanding and intervening in Waiting Spaces as a means to enable a critical version of the neoliberal architectural practices.

A quintessential affordance of the SMH project was the prefiguration and signposting of an innovative housing model as an example to demonstrate that “An Alternative Is Possible (AAIP)”. In this way, the SMH team deliberately aimed to counter the traditional discourse of “There Is No Alternative (TINA)” by engaging in a prefigurative practice as a socially responsible form of “futuring”² the housing in Brussels. SMH is an inclusive, dynamic, mobile and adaptable form of co-creating and dwelling in solidarity.

The end of the SMH Co-create project is by no means a “finale”, but a milestone of a new phase in our joint adventure. The next step is to open up the architectural solutions, socio-spatial knowledge, co-creation methods and tools produced in this project to a wider audience including citizens, governmental and non-governmental authorities, and experiment with different possibilities of upscaling the SMH project.

**Join us in this journey towards a
“New Deal” for Housing!
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1 Belgium constitution Article 23§3 and Housing Rights Watch Europe

2 Futuring aims to formulate expectations regarding the future and identify the emerging opportunities and threats it presents, so appropriate measures (qualitative and quantitative) may be provided through which to realize desired outcomes. Futuring is not intended to prepare an unchanged set of estimates, which will refer to an unchanging future. Rather it represents the making of decisions (whether regarding investments or otherwise) that will ensure the successful course of the enterprise and are characterized by flexibility