

## ACHS – Canada

### Small-scale heritage; the canary in the coalmine

Flanders has a historically grown dense network of routes and paths, linking towns and villages on an average one day walking distance. Within the fabric we detect numerous small-scale historical buildings with an identity importance way beyond the artefact itself, representing an old collectively used mesh, entwined with societal narratives.

Today ‘The Urban’ and ‘The Rural’ seem to merge. This finds expression in a fast transforming hybrid and ambiguous spatial structure consisting of fragments of various densities and features. The impact of this @urbanisation<sup>1</sup> process on daily life is not only a physical, morphological evolution<sup>2</sup> but has especially to do with a dramatic change of the identity of the open space where in this heritage is situated. As an early indicator of major social and ecological change, small-scale heritage serves as the canary in the coalmine. Appropriation of this built heritage by the everyday-members of local communities<sup>3</sup> becomes more explicit the moment these fabrics or heritage landscape are subject to a high urban pressure.<sup>4</sup>

In our contribution we examine both the importance of this daily collectively used mesh and what the impact of the urbanisation process is on it by carefully observing and mapping social behaviour, even very small events, related to small-scale heritage, as a tangible warning of a larger problem.

Within the amalgam of open and built spaces in the Flemish cultural landscape we cannot differentiate private or public open space in a clear-cut way. The territory of rural built heritage comprises not necessarily the surroundings of a bounded place even if physical walls or hedges surround it. It is rather a collective zone in which the several old routes, pathways and trails of inhabitants, natives and newcomers are closely entangled as part of a subtle social, cultural and ecological meshwork<sup>5</sup>

Two main urbanisation forces impact on these zones. On the one hand the character of the open space as a collective space wherein this heritage is situated is increasingly used privately, where ‘private’ is not so much to be understood as a situation of ownership but rather as the nature of the activities taking place. They no longer serve the community, but by fencing they are increasingly visually, physically and mentally linked to the private. Due to their limited accessibility they cannot be appropriated as they used to. On the other hand a combination of leisure seeking tourists and the urban mentality and lifestyle leads to the use of the open space in the rural area, as ‘urban park’. Historical community buildings are made increasingly a public room, which can be consumed and experienced as leisure space. Those forces are not negative per se but the problem is that local government, investors and even the heritage administration only focus on the physical artefact as such, both neglecting the invaluable collectively used space, to which heritage clearly belongs, and ignoring the meaning of it within the local communities.

With two cases namely The Rupel region and the Brabantse Kouter we will illustrate both how, due to the increasing ‘requisition’, the boundaries of rural built heritage are reframed and the character of the fragile mesh in which the link between heritage and the land is fundamental is under growing threat as the collective space is shrinking increasingly. In contrast to old models and to challenge our view on appropriation processes this contribution will focus on recently developed methods and tools to map and recognise these complex realities. This gives new insight both on its significance and possibilities and how it leads to socially better and better-accepted projects making it a tool of true local empowerment.

<sup>1</sup> @urbanisation: word composed by the author, @ indicating that we need a new and specific terminology for this highly urbanized rural areas, related to rurbanisation of formerly rural areas on the fringes of towns or cities. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>

<sup>2</sup> Tempels, B., Verbeek, T., Pisman, A., promotor prof. Allaert, G, (2012), *Verstedelijking in de Vlaamse open ruimte. Een vergelijkende studie naar vijf transformaties*. Steunpunt Ruimte en Wonen, Heverlee.

<sup>3</sup> Community has to be understood the way Emma Waterton & Laurajane Smith state it in (2010) *The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage*, International Journal of Heritage Studies, 16:1-2, 4-15,

<sup>4</sup> An interesting quote of Carballo and Emelianoff says that it’s the conscience of the disappearance that evokes the patrimonial interest. In Emelianoff, C., Carballo, C. (2002) *La liquidation du patrimoine, ou la rentabilité du temps qui passé*.

<sup>5</sup> Ingold, T., *Up, across and along* in T. Ingold, (2007) *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge., p. 72-103.

### Notes on contributors

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Gisèle Gantois is an architect, specialized in the restoration and adaptive use of small-scale rural heritage. She teaches in the International Masters, faculty of architecture at the KU Leuven, campus Ghent, Belgium.

She's doing research on what methods and tools can be found to explore, to detect, to unveil and to map the intangible of the tangible to develop cultural heritage and its context differently by understanding the actual cultural, social and ecological significance for the individual or the community today. PhD research project: Gantois, G. (2014-2018) *The Architect - Heritage Practitioner as Storyteller. Tracing the Ecological and Cultural Significance of rural built heritage of local importance in the framework of adaptive (re-)use.* Promoters Prof. Yves Schoonjans and prof. Krista De Jonge.

She is author (with Yves Schoonjans as co-author) of *The architect as mediator between the built heritage and the social construct.* (2014), *The Nameless Local.* (2015) and *Storytelling as strategy to envision the changing meaning of heritage from an object-focused approach towards an intertwined contextual one.* (2015) and editor (with Prof. Dr. Yves Schoonjans and Prof. Dr. Kris Scheerlinck) of *The Cuesta of the Rupel Region; New Challenges for its Cultural Heritage. Volume I and II* (2015)

Prof. Dr. Yves Schoonjans has done research since more than 10 years on Architectural history/theory and culture, with a focus on informal discourses. More recently an extra emphasis in his research is laid on a new expanded focus: heritage, appropriation and design-strategies together with dr. Kris Scheerlinck and in interaction with different partners (Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Cuba, Belgium and UK). Where Schoonjans is emphasizing the aspect of heritage, local identity and appropriation of architecture; Scheerlinck is focusing on the relation between architecture and appropriation of urban space. In this line they have several running phd-projects.