Figure 1. The Scandinaviëblokken as strange bodies in the postindustrial north of Ghent. Copyright © Michiel de Cleene.

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Scandinaviëblokken

From Ageing Modernist Condominium Toward a Vertical Neighborhood

Addressing Large-Scale Twentieth-Century Condominiums

In the second half of the twentieth century in Belgium and Europe, high-rise and large-scale projects embodied a renewed vision of housing, largely inspired by modernist principles. These developments were often seen as vertical equivalents for the urban fabric they replaced. Today, the architectural heritage resulting from these experiments demands reevaluation in light of their ageing status, often incomplete implementation, resident population diversity, economic constraints, environmental ambitions, and constructive issues. Additionally, the urban model they embody does not correspond to current aspirations of programmatic diversity, housing typologies, contextual integration, etc.

However, most relevant projects and studies related to large-scale residential blocks tend to address rental housing, meaning that the buildings are owned by an identifiable entity such as a real estate developer or a social housing company, implementing the project and managing the sites. Remarkable transformation projects such as Grand Parc in Bordeaux by Lacaton & Vassal, or the recent surge in architecture competitions and feasibility studies organized in Brussels by the Master Architect (BMA) and the Brussels Social Housing Company (SRLB/BGHM), addressing the renovations or transformation of social housing buildings from the tail end of the twentieth century, illustrate this trend.

Participatory processes are mainly implemented by informed owners of such sites. Despite very interesting initiatives such as "La Preuve Par 7," initiated by Patrick Bouchain, the implementation of alternative governance models regarding housing mainly addresses new communities. This is the case for most projects addressing housing cooperatives and Community Land Trusts (CLT). While theoretically possible, it is complicated for an existing community to unanimously embrace such models.

As the involvement of institutional stakeholders and developers is limited in existing condominiums involving a large number of owner-inhabitants, particularly when in a fragile and precarious economic situation, they are left out of the scope of most projects and studies. Due to their limited financial means, necessary maintenance has been lacking, leaving these structures to decay until demolition becomes inevitable.

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Alternatively, gentrification drives out the current owners and brings in new capital allowing for the necessary works, as illustrated by the well-known case of the Balfron Tower in London.[1]

Scandinaviëblokken—A Conceptual Study

The "Scandinaviëblokken"—as they are known and further referred to—were built for the working class near the Port of Ghent in the 1960s. The complex is an example of a condominium owned by a large number of proprietors, many of whom are in a financially precarious situation. It is in this context that, between 2022 and 2023, Studio Tuin en Wereld, AgwA, and Domus Mundi were commissioned for a "conceptual study" by the City of Ghent, its Master Architect, and Stedenbeleid Vlaanderen to explore the challenges and opportunities of co-owned buildings, using the largest of the Scandinaviëblokken, known as "Zweden," and its 224 apartments as a case study. Instead of envisioning a traditional project aimed at implementing a construction site, which the administration cannot impose on an existing condominium, the objective of the study is to distil recommendations relevant to a wide variety of stakeholders, such as the owners, politicians, administrations, and owners of neighboring properties, etc.

In this article, the authors discuss the process, the findings, the reflections, and the proposals embedded in the study. They write from their perspective as practicing architects and authors of the study at Studio Tuin en Wereld, AgwA, and Domus Mundi, which combines architectural and technical considerations with aspects related to history, sociology, economy, and governance. The objective of this article is to retrace key aspects of the process, discuss its outcomes, and reflect upon its learnings, in order to make it available to scholars, practitioners, administrations, politicians, and other stakeholders alike.

An Incomplete Masterplan in an Evolving Context

The two Scandinaviëblokken were originally intended as the first step in the realization of ten residential buildings and supporting facilities in a modernist master plan. However, these facilities, as well as the other eight buildings, were never realized, leaving the area with low density and without supporting facilities.

The Scandinaviëblokken are a condominium with a complex and diverse socio-economic composition on a site in full development in the north of Ghent. They form an ensemble of three buildings: the high-rise Zweden with 18 stories and 224 units, a medium-rise Finland with 9 stories and 75 residential units, and a low-rise supermarket. The study focuses on Zweden, the tallest of the three. Zweden has three vertical

cores, each with 4housing units per level. The dwellings face either the city center to the west or the Ghent-Dampoort marshalling yard to the east.

The area around the site has both spatial and social challenges. Spatially, the residential towers appear as an enclave in a transforming industrial environment. The construction of the new Verapaz bridge and the relocation of the ring road threaten to further reinforce this enclave feeling. On a social level, this environment is characterized as precarious, due among other factors to a lack of social amenities and investments.

The district around Zweden is currently being redeveloped with a new neighborhood consisting mostly of high-end housing. The spatial research questions are mainly concentrated around linking the area to the Oude Dokken and Houtdok Park (a new urban district under construction along the former seaport) and the developments along Afrikalaan itself. The development of Afrikalaan was the subject of a vision process aimed at creating a new live-work environment. The social and demographic challenges lie mainly in individual housing quality and the relationship between the existing residential towers and the new residential and economic program.

The Scandinaviëblokken fall within the study area of a Ruimtelijk Uitvoeringsplan (RUP) under preparation. A RUP determines the destinations and urban development regulations in a specific area that creates a context in which to consider granting additional building rights for the implicated parcels. This would allow the existing properties and activities to be intertwined with a new number of homes. At the same time, it could mean a financial return for the community of owners of the Scandinaviëblokken.

However, the land position is very complex. The condominium of Zweden and Finland jointly own part of the undeveloped space. The buildings are within 100 meters of a Seveso establishment producing, processing, treating, or storing dangerous substances. This implies strict rules and limitations on development within a security perimeter around the establishment. The city of Ghent owns the park and parking. Realizing additional residential rights that would generate revenue for the VME would require a complicated redistribution of land.

The RUP under development provides an opportunity to explore ways to support reciprocal spatial improvement. This part of the study argues that it is crucial to look beyond the plot boundaries. The areas around the Scandinaviëblokken were studied intensively in the past by means of several master plans, such as Triferto and Lubeck Site. A similar master plan should be developed for the zone encompassing the Scandinaviëblokken, delimited by the Lubeck site to the north, Christeyns to the south, Afrikalaan and Triferto to the west, and

the marshalling yard to the east. An initial volume study was prepared in the context of this concept study as a first reflection toward the development of a masterplan.

An important insight was that for facilities (shops, services, public transport), residents mainly focus on their surroundings and other peripheral neighborhoods. They do not rely that much on the center of Ghent for goods and services, where these facilities are too expensive. It may be interesting to strengthen the nascent sense of locality in the area, which cannot be replaced by a better connection with the center.

The Need of Renovation and the Risk Gentrification

The building requires urgent renovation due to problematic (fire) safety, uninsulated windows, poor solar protection, inefficient heating systems, defective technical shafts, pest infestations, etc. However, the structure is quite sound, the apartments are well-designed, and the views are astonishing. The building is flanked by a car dealer, a sensitive industrial equipment, a public car park, and an outdated supermarket. Across the road, the industries of the harbor are being replaced by a mixed-use neighborhood.

During the participatory workshops, we assessed the necessary works and the architectural potentials, with care for economic rationality, public spaces, and programming, resulting in the subtle articulation of perennial structures with changing appropriations. However, we were constantly faced with the triviality of our position as designing architects: most of the two hundred owners are residing there and many have a relatively low income. Do they have the economic capacity to undertake the renovation works?

In the current laissez-faire attitude, a majority of tenants will eventually vote for the necessary works to be carried out, expelling the most vulnerable owners and fostering gentrification. Conversely, with radical interventionism, the city could expropriate the building due to unsanitary and safety reasons and convert it into social housing. We felt that between these two extremes, a balance could be found to address the challenges of an inclusive energy transition in a diverse living environment.

Ageing Modernist Constructions and Social Reality

The building is indeed in the early stages of gentrification, which concerns the current residents. They fear that higher costs resulting from necessary investments will change the social composition of the building. There is a risk that they may be excluded from the process due to financial pressure. Moreover, some residents feel they are being treated pejoratively by neighbors and other people related to the site, which contributes to their feelings of isolation and marginalization.

Figure 2. An ensemble designed according to the modernist principles but due to not fully realizing the whole project now in a facility desert. Copyright © Michiel de Cleene.

Regarding ownership, we could establish that 4.5 percent of the apartments are occupied by people who do not have their legal residence here (10 flats), 6.5 percent of the apartments are registered as student flats (14 flats), 30 percent are resident tenants (64 flats), and 60 percent are resident owners (127 flats). Seven owners own more than one flat.

The flats themselves are appreciated by the residents. At the same time, the building has a high turnover rate. There is also frustration among some residents, as they do not feel 'seen' by the city administration and the building management. This feeling of being overlooked has been reinforced by the precarious socioeconomic situation of several residents, who are in a vulnerable position. Partly because of this, necessary maintenance works and investments have not been carried out.

To gain insight into the needs and challenges of the residents, a social-spatial and financial study was conducted based on four central research questions: First, action research was undertaken, actively involving residents in the research process, with the research team being present and accessible in and around the building. Through participatory research methods, residents shared their needs and challenges, and appropriate approaches were explored together.

A crucial aspect of this research was housing quality, examining safety, energy transition, and comfort. Measures to enhance the energy efficiency of the building, contributing to the sustainability goals of the city of Ghent, were identified. Attention was also given to the building's (fire) safety. Next to this action research, a series of thematic roundtable discussions with experts in different fields were organized on site so that the residents could join. During the process of these participatory workshops and roundtable discussions with experts, a careful examination was made of necessary works and architectural and technical possibilities, considering economic rationality, the quality of public spaces, and potential programming.

Throughout the study, attention was focused on how the building and the neighborhood could be designed to foster social interaction. This could involve creating communal spaces and amenities such as a shared garden, a playground, or a meeting space. As the study does not aim at a design proposal but rather at recommendations, the spatial demarcations are

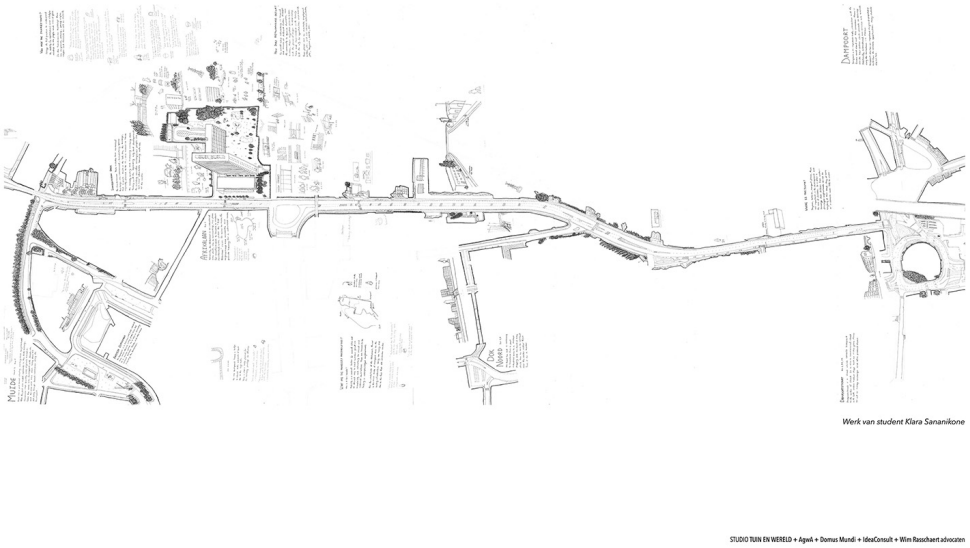

Figure 3. Graphical recording of one of the many round tables with both multidisciplinary experts and the inhabitants. Copyright © Authors.

blurred. Communal spaces and shared gardens can serve as a common good for the residents of the two blocks, or even for the wider neighborhood. Consideration was also given to the design of the building entrances to make them inviting for residents to meet and converse. Another point of attention was the enclave formed by the surrounding infrastructure and industry, isolating the site from its surroundings.

These research questions were addressed collectively through a series of thematic workshops, with the input of experts, stakeholders, and residents. In combination with the architectural explorations, both technically and spatially, the study defined a series of necessary works and architectural possibilities, with care for public spaces and programming, attention to economic rationality and inclusivity, and consideration for the intrinsic and historic qualities of the buildings, such as the primary structure.

Two Objectives: Renovation and Inclusion

The first workshops led to an initial draft of a thorough multiyear renovation plan to upgrade the high-rise building "Zweden" to meet or approach current energy standards, safety regulations, and living comfort. Two scenarios were developed: one of minimum intervention and one of maximum intervention. The minimum intervention focuses on energy transition and safety only. The maximum scenario also considered updating the interior fit-out of the apartments and the creation of collective spaces for the residents, aiming to foster interaction with the neighborhood.

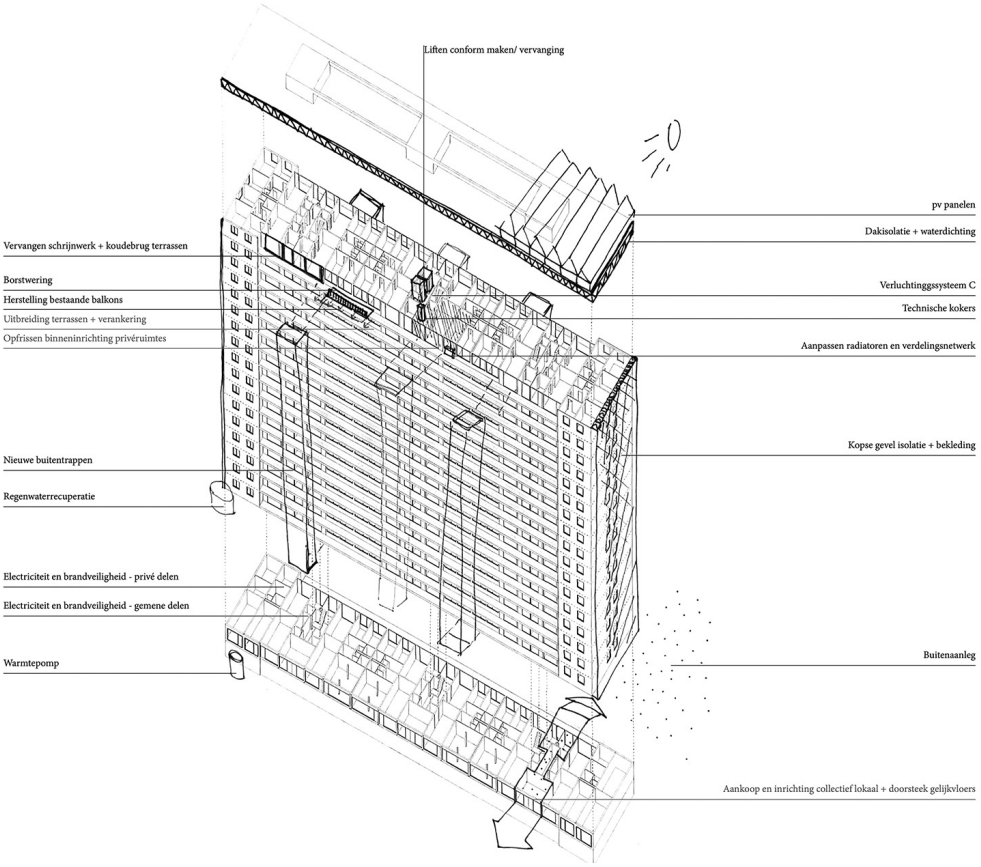

Figure 4. Ethnographic drawing mapping the use of space. Copyright © Klara Sananikone, We Will Meet Again Design Studio KU Leuven.

The cost estimation for the minimum version of the multi-year plan was calculated in the form of an elemental estimate based on key figures from similar reconversion projects, as observed in the practices of Studio Tuin en Wereld, AgwA, and Domus Mundi. The sum approximates 12 million euros. This amount represents the budget of three sections. The first section addresses works that bring gains regarding energy generation and management, requiring a budget of about 5.3 million euros. The second section includes interventions on the technical equipment, relevant in regard to environmental criteria and requiring approximately 4.9 million euros. The third section addresses housing quality and security, for which a budget of 1.8 million euros is needed. Adding VAT and general costs, the total comes to around 16 million euros, which is roughly 60,000 euros per housing unit. Of that, 40,000 euros are allocated for works on the collective parts and 20,000 euros for works on private property. Works addressing additional private comfort and finishings, such as renewing kitchens and bathrooms, are not included.

In order to reflect on the financial tools and property models to realize these substantial works within the framework of a

Figure 5. Summarizing diagram showing an inventory of proposed investments. Copyright © Authors.

condominium, it is important to position the ambitions regarding environmental impact (circularity) and inclusion (retention of existing occupants, social diversity).

First, the question arose whether the building was worth preserving or if total construction would be more advantageous. Many factors confirmed the scenario of a renovation. In the case of demolition and reconstruction, residents would have to move out of the building for a long period of time, since there is no space on the site for new constructions; the primary structure is in good condition and well designed; the apartments offer interesting spatial qualities; the environmental impact of total demolition in terms of grey energy is substantial and can be avoided. While substantial, the calculations show that demolishing and reconstructing the building is not a financially viable option; new urban policies would probably jeopardize the obtention of a building permit in the case of new construction, leading to a reduced number of housing units, etc.

Second, the study aims to examine the feasibility of realizing the works for safety, energy transition, and comfort while maintaining a maximum number of residents on site. As the neighborhood is evolving into a mixed residential area and accessibility to the city center is being improved, a laissez-faire attitude will lead to gentrification: the gradual replacement of residents with lower economic capacity by a wealthier population, willing to invest in the building, until the works are finally

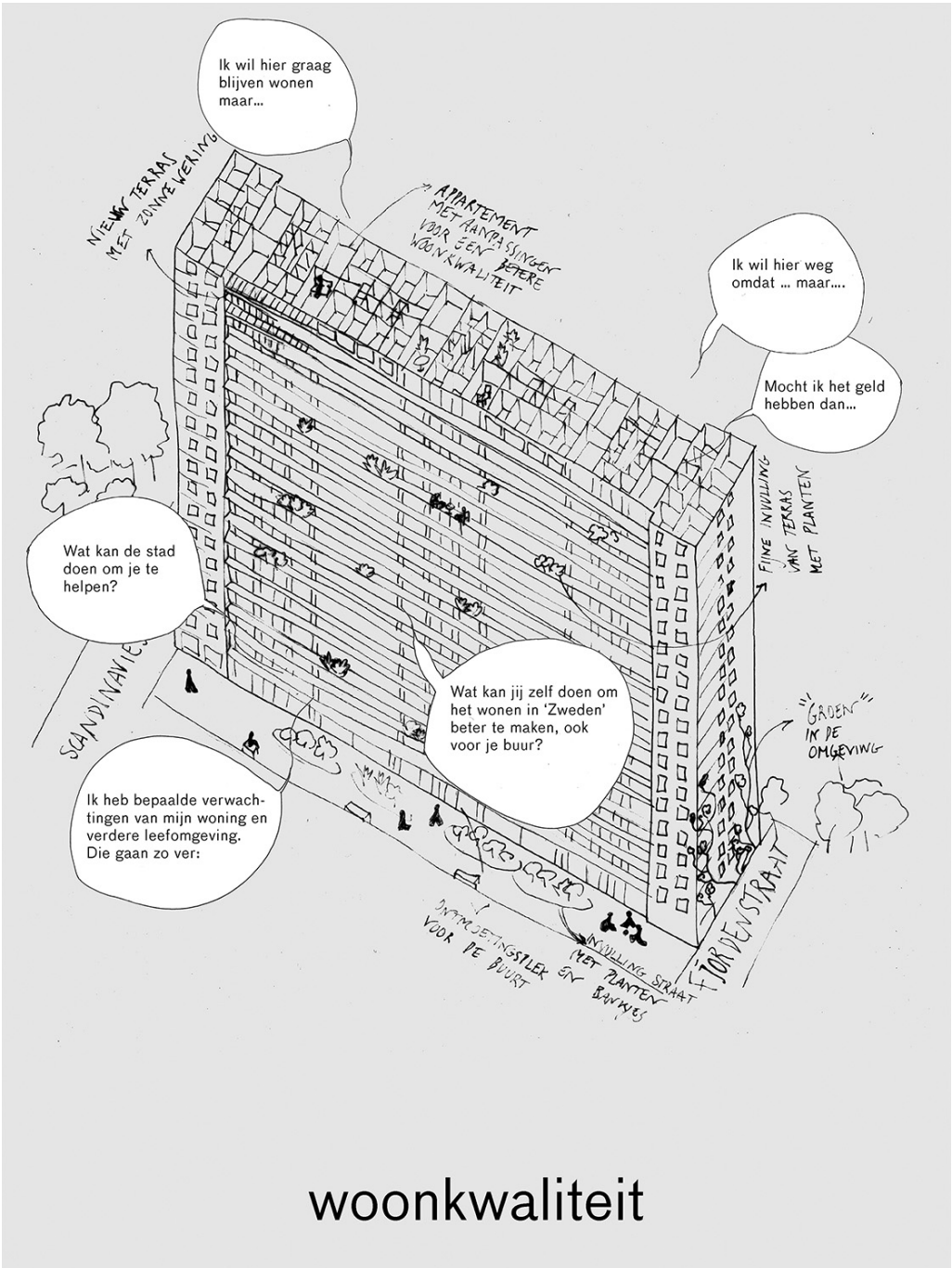

Figure 6. Poster used during one of the round tables. Copyright © Authors.

voted on in the condominium's general meeting, de facto expelling residents with insufficient capacity.

In consultation with the commissioner and stakeholders, it was decided not to further explore the scenario of total demolition and reconstruction, and to investigate the feasibility for an inclusive approach to the realization of the renovation works, in order to maximize resident retention on site.

This second insight became a pivotal point in the study and highlighted that the financial dimension is not merely a peripheral concern but an integral and central aspect of the architectural endeavor, a sobering reality that alters the perspective on the complexities involved.

A better understanding of the existing situation is needed in order to find solutions to foster residential security while executing the needed works.

Socioeconomic Reality: Limited Income and Diversity

The conceptual study was defined as an open question, addressing the past, present, and future of these buildings. Through successive workshops, in consultation with the commissioner, subjects were defined and refined in a spiral-like scheme. A primary requirement was to gain a better understanding of the socioeconomic reality of the building.

Anonymized information was obtained through the renovation programs of the City of Ghent. For about 45 percent of the flats, files were prepared for city-supported programs such as energy scans, renovation advice, or "Gent Knapt Op" (a program of financial support for low-income categories). Five percent of the families fall into income category III (higher income), 25 percent into income category II (annual income €40,730–€51,840 single; €57,020–€74,060 couple or one dependent + €4,160 per additional dependent), and 70 percent into income category I (lower income: max €40,730 single, €57,020 couple or one dependent + €4,160 per additional dependent). Data from the Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW) also revealed that 23 percent of families are entitled to an increased allowance in the "Gent Knapt Op" program (50 flats, of which 26 are effectively receiving this).

The resident composition in the building is ethnically diverse, with seventy-two different nationalities reportedly living there, indicating significant cultural differences. For example, some residents are prohibited by their religious convictions from paying interest, rendering taking out a loan ideologically impossible. Meanwhile, several wealthier owners have independently carried out improvement works, such as the renovation and insulation of windows. This results in varying speeds of renovation across the building. Resistance emerges when considering a collective approach to works on privately owned elements.

These observations indicate that the resident population lacks the necessary capacity to finance the works, and a straightforward multi-ownership model such as a condominium poses challenges in terms of decision-making and process in this situation.

Exploring Financial Instruments

The authors could not find comprehensive studies or experiments regarding inclusive approaches to the realization of renovation works of condominiums from the second half of the twentieth century, with large numbers of co-owners having little economic capacity. Indeed, the very precise combination of these different factors is quite defining; changing one parameter has a substantial impact on the equation. However, a series of aspects came quickly to mind based on previous experiences of the team members. Studio Tuin en Wereld and AgwA had experience in the renovation of modernist buildings and social housing. Domus Mundi, as a nonprofit facilitating renovation works for lower-income owners, had experience with limited financial capacities and available subsidies. IDEA Consult was an additional collaborator with expertise in real estate and governance models.

The team started to list possible approaches to reduce the cost to individual residents, such as:

- Subsidies for the private parts;
- Subsidies for common parts;
- A property development on one's own land, creating value to be invested in the older building;
- A development within a masterplan vision for surrounding land including neighbous (possibly with land swaps);
- Converting the existing condominium into a housing cooperative;
- Converting the site into a Community Land Trust (a model in which the property of the land and of the buildings is distinguished), meaning, for example, that the city would buy over the land, but not the building, thus augmenting the financial capacity of the owners;
- Third-party investment, such as participation in energy landscapes or philanthropy;
- Integrating social housing companies in the condominium;
- Renting out apartments to social real estate agencies;
- Interpreting the building as a stacked housing estate and thus as a special form of public domain, justifying public investment in the building;

etc.

Some of these strategies are very pragmatic, making use of existing tools. Others impact heavily on the nature of the organization and of the decision-making process. They may contribute to alleviating the burden of property and facilitate transformations, while surely implying the necessity of an appropriate accompaniment.

From the start, the approach was not to propose a unique, ready-made solution but rather to explore the efficiency of available instruments, to check their feasibility, and to make recommendations. By combining these instruments and adapting them to the specific needs of the Scandinavia site, the idea was that a tailor-made solution could be outlined, based on consultation with the residents.

Not all elements of the list above were investigated with the same depth, because they raise different questions. For example, it did not appear urgent to study the feasibility and effect of integrating social housing inside the building, as it appeared self-explanatory to the involved stakeholders. The study focused on three main aspects.

First, the potential development on the site included negotiation with the owners of the neighboring sites. This involved initial contacts with them and a preliminary design to highlight possible constraints and potentials, and most importantly, to outline possible interactions and land swaps, resulting in possible development to support the renovation works. Further details on these aspects will not be discussed here.

Two additional instruments were analyzed in depth: the implementation of a cooperative model and the calculation of the subsidies in the framework of a deep transformation of the building. They are exposed below.

From Condominium to Cooperative?

The financial feasibility of transforming the association of co-owners (hereafter referred to as VME, standing for Vereniging van Mede-Eigenaars) into a housing cooperative was assessed in close collaboration with Wooncoop. Viewed solely from this perspective, converting the VME into a housing cooperative seems feasible. Key preconditions include defining an adapted purchase price for the houses, assumptions about limiting registration fees, and anticipating an increase in the market value of the houses, all of which appear reasonable.

For most owners, the transformation of the VME into a cooperative offers financial benefits. In a cooperative model, contributions can be tailored according to the owners' incomes: experience shows that 8 percent of the apartments can be classified as social housing while maintaining a balanced financial context. Notably, a cooperative enhances owner empowerment in terms of management, while relieving them from making technical decisions. Unlike a VME, where owners are represented through a third-party commercial entity, the cooperative model offers direct representation of the inhabitants, ensuring a closer alignment with their interests.

The most significant challenge lies in the current property legislation in Belgium, which mandates that all owners must

unanimously agree to sell their property to the cooperative. This will require a comprehensive sensitization process. This requirement demonstrates that VMEs can be an inflexible decision-making tool, particularly as unanimity is needed for decisions concerning essential aspects of the property. Therefore, instead of a complete overhaul in a single phase, the transformation may occur over a prolonged period, with a smaller cooperative gradually acquiring a number of apartments. If successful, this approach may eventually lead to the cooperative gaining total control of the building.

From Individual to Collective Subsidies?

The financial feasibility of subsidies was simulated to determine the potential amount residents would be entitled to under current regulations. This calculation required several assumptions, mainly regarding the financial capacity of the owners. The results of these calculations are summarized below. For every €100 spent on the renovation, the allocation is as follows:

- Type of works: €45 goes to energy transition measures, €42 is needed for updating special techniques, and €13 is allocated to improving living quality.
- Subsidies: Residents have a right to an energy subsidy of €33 of the investment, €25 for techniques, and €12.5 for living quality.
- Ownership responsibility: About €60 is for the community's responsibility (VME), and €40 is allocated to private property (PRV).

For the lowest income category, the subsidy entitlements are:

- VME works: 25 percent subsidy, amounting to €15.
- PRV works: 32 percent subsidy, amounting to €13.

The remaining costs must be financed privately, summing up to €45 for VME works and €27 for PRV works.

Both VME and private owners can access a regional low-interest loan ("Mijn Verbouwlening," hereafter referred to as MVL). However, there is a cap: A maximum of 61 percent of the work's value can be financed through loans: 54 percent for VME and 76 percent for PRV, equating to €31 for VME and €30 for PRV. Once the subsidy is paid out, it is used for early repayment of the outstanding loan: €15 for VME and €13 for PRV. Consequently, the portion that needs to be financed with private capital is €29 for VME works and €17 for PRV works.

For example, if the total cost of works per housing unit is €60,000, then the lowest income category would need to repay

a debt to the VME of €27,000 for works on common areas and an additional €16,200 for works on private property. Of this, a maximum of €28,200 can be financed through MVL. The balance, €15,000, must be covered through private capital or another loan. For a vulnerable family, this results in a monthly financial burden of €202 (MVL €123 + market-conforming private loan €79), spread over twenty-five years. This adds to the debts and costs many of the inhabitants already have to manage monthly.

Another way of presenting it is to consider that for every €100 invested, a maximum of €28 can be subsidized, with the remaining €72 needing to be self-financed. Out of this €72, €47 can be borrowed through MVL, and the remaining €25 must be sourced through other means. Ultimately, the financial responsibility for the €72 falls on the private owner.

These results indicate that while subsidies significantly contribute to financing the renovations, they still require owners to cover a substantial portion of the funding, which may pose a significant challenge. Furthermore, although there have been recent policy changes since February 2024, it remains complicated to develop a holistic approach within the framework of VMEs.

Three Prospective Observations

The sections above discuss the tangible research developed in the study, from the point of view of practicing architects confronted with the limits of their disciplinary relevance. In the section below, three reflections are made based on the results of the study. These are more prospective in nature and aim to open new possibilities from an academic and political perspective.

Toward Vertical Neighborhoods

The first reflection concerns the opportunity of a paradigm shift in property perspectives. The study explored evolving ownership models that balance private, collective, and public interests to foster community engagement and ensure the feasibility of projects, including cooperative models and exploring combinations of private, collective, and public ownership. Envisioning collective housing as vertical neighborhoods establishes a new conceptual framework. Here, the term “neighborhood” is not used solely as a reference to shared spaces and services but also as an analogy to a public domain. Circulation spaces, technical shafts, elevators, and shared spaces become the built equivalents of streets, public transport, sewage and infrastructure, and public spaces. The innovation lies in viewing these vertical communities not just as private properties but as a specialized form of public domain.

This framework not only persuades but also enables governments to invest in the communal aspects of these (formerly) private properties. It signals a departure from the conventional view of private property, aligning with the evolving dynamics of urban living and encouraging a collaborative approach between public and private sectors for the benefit of the larger community.

Remarkably, the operational dynamics of vertical neighborhoods often require a lower investment in fit-out and maintenance compared to their horizontal counterparts. A comprehensive study by VITO (Flemish Institute for Technological Research) has quantified this difference, revealing a 7 percent reduction in the overall public infrastructure cost between these two development models. This cost efficiency underscores the potential advantages of embracing vertically oriented community structures, challenging conventional assumptions and suggesting a more sustainable and economically viable approach to urban development.

The relevance of this paradigm shift is twofold. First, as a multitude of similar buildings encounters comparable issues, the exploration of vertical neighborhoods offers a potential solution that transcends individual cases. It becomes a scalable model, presenting an opportunity for shared learnings and collaborative problem-solving. Second, within the specific context of Flanders, where policies tend to encourage collective housing, the concept of stacked neighborhoods aligns with these aspirations. It not only responds to the need for more communal living spaces but also offers a nuanced approach to public and private interplay. This is particularly crucial as urban planners and policymakers seek sustainable, community-oriented solutions that contribute to the overall well-being of residents.

Therefore, the examination of vertical neighborhoods is not just an architectural consideration but a strategic response to the evolving dynamics of urban living. It echoes the broader trend of prioritizing community, sustainability, and resource efficiency, and in doing so, serves as a catalyst for reshaping the urban fabric in ways that align with contemporary societal needs and aspirations.

Toward a Holistic and Participatory Approach

The second reflection proceeds from the density and diversity of the expertise spanning the study, including technique and design, socioeconomic and cultural diversity, participation, and organization. This underscores the need for a holistic and participatory approach, driven by project-specific transdisciplinary teams that include urban, architectural, technical, and socioeconomic development expertise, collaborating closely with public and community stakeholders.

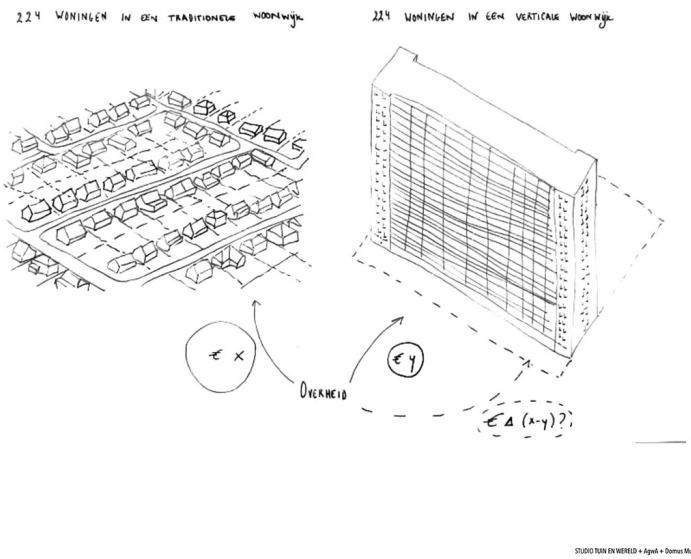

Figure 7. What if high-rises are considered in policies as a vertical neighborhood? Copyright © Authors.

An adapted process guidance, including additional resources and expertise, is crucial to embrace the complexity of such projects and seize opportunities to rethink current patterns. Coordinating profiles are essential to maintain an overview of these complex processes. The intensity of such supervision cannot be overstated: it must consider the socioeconomic reality of the community, the spatial, architectural, and physical conditions of the buildings, potential returns on investment, the management of works in an inhabited building, and issues related to comfort, health, and security, among others. Importantly, all decisions must be rooted in a participative process involving the owners, tenants, and possibly other stakeholders. A renovation director is necessary to monitor the process. In addition to the renovation director (project expertise), a complete team should include a renovation coach (technical expertise), a social supervisor (socioeconomic expertise), and, of course, the trustee together with the community of owners (participation expertise).

This approach can be compared to existing instruments. On one hand, there are neighborhood renovation projects, which address urban communities, and on the other hand, instruments such as "Gent Knapt Op," which addresses individual housing units. Both are effective, partly due to their interdisciplinarity. However, high-rise or large-scale housing buildings are largely underrepresented in these initiatives. Their communities often slip through the cracks, while they are in dire need of attention to prevent marginalization.

One might consider whether such multidisciplinary teams should be appointed for a limited time, within the framework of a circumscribed project, or if they should rather accompany the entire lifespan of a building. It is more about caring for a site and its community than about managing a one-time intervention and then disregarding it until the next crisis arises. This approach reflects a shift toward sustained engagement and long-term responsibility in building and community management, advocating for ongoing involvement rather than intermittent attention."

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Sufficiency: A Guiding Ethos?

The third consideration addresses a more implicit shift in the approach to such projects. Indeed, the study was guided by the ambition to fully embrace the existing reality in the development of a consistent reflection about its future. It confirmed not only the necessity to avoid the demolition of the building but also emphasized the need for close observation and empathy with the challenges and opportunities posed by the neighbors, the cultural and economic diversity, and the architectural and structural features of the buildings. In doing so, the approach seeks to combine minimal effort (inclusivity) with significant changes and improvements.

The principle of sufficiency emerges as a guiding ethos, prioritizing global sustainability and social awareness over theoretical optimization and maximal performance, which can lead to dehumanized decision-making and long-term counterproductivity. This principle carries particular significance in the development of a renovation master plan, urging a departure from conventional approaches.

Instead of viewing the existing reality as a hindrance, the imperative is to embark on a journey of close observation and appreciation, encompassing the social fabric, the building, the surroundings, and more. By delving into the deep knowledge of the existing, projects can avoid the imposition of ready-made solutions on ill-suited situations. In the current landscape, standards, legislation, and expectations often center on optimizing results, fostering growth, and achieving ideal objectives. Yet, these frameworks tend to overlook the broader impact on the environment and society, ignoring the inherent, permanent transformation within reality. The concept of sufficiency, as advocated by Thomas Princen,[2] proposes a paradigm shift—a search for "enough" rather than an elusive "more."

Amidst these considerations, it becomes imperative to recognize that this is a precarious discussion on a sensitive topic. It revolves around meeting basic needs while being acutely aware of the limits of environmental, human, and financial resources. The precariousness lies in posing a fundamental question: Is it ethically acceptable to consider bending rules if it aligns with meeting basic needs? This delicate discourse challenges us to reflect on the moral and ethical dimensions of urban development, prompting contemplation on whether, in the pursuit of meeting basic needs, there is room for flexibility within established norms and rules.

Conclusion

The strategy underlying these reflections may embody a profound metamorphosis of these architectural landmarks, transcending their status as mere structures to become diverse, lively, and affordable vertical neighborhoods. This transformative approach safeguards not only their architectural legacy but, crucially, infuses a humanist essence into their very fabric. By prioritizing inclusivity and accessibility, these vertical neighborhoods cease to be mere physical spaces; they evolve into welcoming hubs resonating with the humanist spirit.

This evolution, rooted in the idea of embracing the reality of the existing, marks a transition from their former identity as "fremdkörpern"—foreign bodies originating from a "tabula rasa," an idealized urban landscape—ushering them into a new era as embedded living environments. This is not merely a preservation of historical significance; it propels these spaces into roles as inclusivity hubs, adept at addressing contemporary environmental challenges. In the evolving tapestry of urban landscapes, they cease to be pejoratively viewed as remnants of the past and instead become integral contributors to a future where people matter.

Biographies

Tomas Ooms is a founding partner of the architectural practice Studio Tuin en Wereld and a senior head lecturer and academic promotor at the Faculty of Architecture of the KU Leuven. After graduating as an architect in 1995 Ooms completed a postgraduate in literature. He studied piano in Antwerp and harpsichord in Brussels. He was a guest professor at the Politecnico di Milano and the Istanbul Technical University, and he is a member of the In Practice interuniversity research group of practicing architects engaging their practice(s) at the heart of their research. Tomas has been granted the degree of Doctor of Architecture (PhD) from the Faculty of Architecture KU Leuven.

Harold Fallon graduated as a Civil Engineer Architect at UCLouvain. He co-founded AgwA architecture practice in Brussels in 2003. He has been lecturing and conducting research at KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture since 2007. In his PhD in Architecture at the RMIT in 2013, he explored the design strategies rooted at the heart of the architecture practice at AgwA. Since 2018, Harold has been supervising architects involving their practice in doctoral research. He is a partner of the Surviving Memory in Postwar El Salvador project. He is a cofounder of the In Practice interuniversity research group and coedits the In Practice book series.

Tim Vanhooren graduated as a Civil Engineer Architect at UGent in 2009. After being a teaching assistant at UGent (2010–12), he collaborated with the architecture offices ECTV (2012–14) and Bob McMaster architecten (2016–20). Since 2020, he is project coordinator at Domus Mundi.

Benoît Vandenbulcke graduated as a Civil Engineer Architect at UCLouvain. He co-founded AgwA architecture practice in Brussels in 2003. He lectured and researched at UCLouvain from 2001 to 2014. In his PhD in Architecture at UCLouvain, he uses the tools of a designing architect to engage with the work of Sanaa, Zumthor and Herzog & De Meuron, drawing from research carried out in his practice at AgwA. He has been a Professor at ULiège Faculty of Architecture since 2017, where he is leading a design studio on adaptive reuse, research, and supervises several PhD students. He is a co-founder of the In Practice interuniversity research group and coedits the In Practice book series.

Benoît Burquel graduated as a Civil Engineer Architect at the University of Liege and obtained a Master's degree in Human Settlements from KU Leuven. He has been a partner at the AgwA architecture practice and teaching at ULB Faculty of Architecture since 2017. He co-founded Real Estate Architecture in 2015, exploring the reconversion potential of architecture by private developers from the 1960s and 1970s by means of summer schools and publications. He coedits the In Practice book series.

Notes

[1] Oliver Wainright, "'The council tenants weren't going to be allowed back': How Britain's 'Ugliest Building' Was Gentrified," *The Guardian,* July 26, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jul/26/balfron-tower-britain-ugliest-building-gentrified.

[2] Thomas Princen, *The Logic of Sufficiency* (MIT Press, 2005).