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'Designing' Commons

Exploring interplays between commons, space and spatial design

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the commons debate engaging with space and spatial design by analysing community-based design processes in two housing commons institutions in Brussels. Based on a literature review and an action research in a Community Land Trust housing project and a public space regeneration project in a housing cooperative, I argue that spatial designers can play an important role in commoning by empowering people to act outside dominant planning discourses and by spatially articulating the social, cultural and environmental role of dwelling space. However, there is need for public support and flexibility in the institutional frameworks of spatial design execution in order to create room for such engagement.

Keywords: commons; space; spatial design

Introduction

In addition to the legal framework and institutional design that underpin the production and reproduction of the commons, 'space' is conquering a position in the commons debate. Renowned commons scholars mentioning the role of space in developing and sustaining commons are significant in this respect. In a lecture series on urban commons, De Schutter, notable legal commons scholar, emphasized 'it is necessary to grant spaces to people, in which people are motivated to invest themselves' (Brussels Academy, May 2016). In her extensive list of new commons, including neighbourhood commons, Hess (2008, 16) raises 'the goldmine of new commons issues' in the growing numbers of works on shared spaces. Bauwens, pioneer of the peer-to-peer economy, progressively addressing urbanism is another writing on the wall (Berliner Gazette, *Die 'Commons' Stadt: lasst uns das Prinzip 'Gemeingut' auf die Stadtplanung übertragen!*, June 2013).

Not surprisingly, architecture and planning researchers and professionals are also increasingly interested in the commons (Marcuse, 2009a; Stavrides, 2012 in *An Architektur*; Petcou & Petrescu, 2015). Commonly used and managed spaces beyond market or state relationships speak to their

imagination of a 'direct democracy'. The reasoning is that they hold the promise to decrease control of spatial production by capital and state on behalf of urban inhabitants. This is in line with the meaning of the Lefebvrian 'right to the city'; the right of urban inhabitants to participate in the production and appropriation of space (Marcuse, 2009b; Purcell, 2002). Diverse labels have been created for the variety of self-organized initiatives and resistance strategies that shape these spaces, including insurgent practices, bottom-up planning, DIY architecture and commons urbanism. Examples can range from co-productive planning of neighbourhoods and dwellings (Petcou, & Petrescu, 2015; Aernouts & Ryckewaert, 2018), over squatting empty buildings or lands (Squatting Europe Kollektive, 2014), to collectively managing water management systems and community gardens (Ostrom, 1990).

Notwithstanding, within architecture and planning research both the relationship between spatial design and housing commons and its translation into practice remain obscured. There is lack of a coherent insight in the characteristics and preconditions that are supporting such relationship, while the role of spatial designers within commoning processes remains underdeveloped. The latter is particularly important, as in-depth knowledge on the context and preconditions of these processes can positively inspire other cases (Saija, 2014). Moreover, it can form 'an opportunity to reformulate', and 'resuscitate' spatial 'practice' (Till, 2005, 21; Doucet & Kypers, 2009). This paper is an effort to contribute to this by analysing the interplays between space, spatial design and commons; and the role of the spatial designer as an agent steering commoning processes. It therefore builds on (1) a literature review on congruencies between commoning, the sociology of space and spatial design theory; and (2) an action research during the design process in two forms of housing commons in the Brussels Capital Region (BCR), Belgium. One experience is the co-design process of a Community Land Trust (CLT) housing project in Molenbeek, while the other is a public space regeneration process in a cooperative garden suburb in Evere.

In the following section I will theoretically approach congruencies between 'commoning', space and spatial designers. Three main issues will come to the fore: the political role of the spatial designer, an engagement with the social, cultural and environmental role of space and a focus on processes rather than a clear-cut end result. After discussing the research context and methods in the third section, I will describe the two cases in the fourth section according to the three main issues in order to raise important questions and practical considerations about the role and methodologies of spatial designers in shaping housing commons. I will situate these cases within and outside various discourses on commons and spatial design, and explore following questions: In what ways were these three issues addressed? Which methods and tools were used?

Commons and spatial design

Commons are resources subject to collective control regarding access and use. For governing the use and disposition of these resources, arrangements are made. This implies that people have to organize themselves to reclaim resources as commons, and to negotiate their rules of access and use, assign responsibilities, make certain agreements and legal appointments to effectively manage the resource together. The latter incorporates a process of 'commoning': practices of mutual help, collective trust, reciprocity and co-operation. Commoning, a term coined by Peter Linebaugh (2008), is thus the binding component that forges the social relationships between members of a community and the resources they share and manage. Building on the sociology of space, commons and architecture and planning theory, I define three main interplays between commoning, space and spatial design.

A participatory way of acting

Negotiating rules of access and use, assigning responsibilities and making agreements presuppose a participatory way of acting among commoners (Boillier, 2016). According to Helfrich and Haas (2009, 15) this implies 'expanding the dichotomy of the haves and have-nots, owners and non-owners, public and private to include the missing third element: the participants, co-owners and citizens within their communities'. Throughout spatial design history, a rich variety of methods and tools have been deployed to involve inhabitants in the conception of their living environment. They evolved from an 'advocating' role of spatial professionals - advocating the interests of a community - to a role in which spatial professionals only 'consult' inhabitants. Participatory ways of acting in architecture and planning disciplines are currently regaining momentum (Krivy & Kaminer, 2013). Although in many Western countries, the participatory stance has been inserted into the protocols of planning bureaucracy - for instance through the 'neighbourhood contracts' in Brussels and France and the 'development advisory boards' in Berlin - a more radical form of participation outside formal public consultation platforms has been advocated (Marcuse, 2009; Blundell Jones et al., 2005). Despite their ambitions and merits, participatory protocols have been scrutinized for depoliticizing conflict (Purcell, 2009) and facilitating pro-market developments (Swyngedouw et al., 2010). In the worst scenario public participation has been applied to 'increase the acceptability of the designer' (Watts and Hirst, 1982, 17 in Till, 2005), or 'to persuade accepting decisions that have already been made' (Pateman, 1970, 68 in Till, 2005).

The explicit demands for more legitimate forms of democracy beyond state and market have led to the re-exploration of self-organizational spatial initiatives and resistance strategies. This coincides with the aggregation 'spatial agency' which is gaining ground in architectural theory (Doucet and Cupers, 2009). Spatial agency stands for a (revived) political engagement of spatial professionals. Such professionals search for bonds with civil society, set up initiatives for claiming the right to the city, provide tools for action, initiate projects on abandoned sites or develop collaborations with specific

communities. Instead of working for public authorities or private entities, they deploy their knowledge of architectural processes to empower people to take control over the spaces they inhabit (Schneider & Till, 2009). Promising as it may seem, while promoting equality, Swyngedouw (2005) and Uitermark (Sociale Vraagstukken, De gevaarlijke belofte van burgerschap 2.0, October 2012) have emphasized the reverse side of such intentions. Under the guise of strengthening citizenship, DIY initiatives and strategies are often promoted to hide the austerity policies, shrinking public services and more prominent role for the market that underlie it. Furthermore, initiatives deriving from the 'creative class' tend to impose cultural values and assumptions that do not necessarily meaningfully engage with the communities living in such neighbourhoods. As such, transferring goods and services to self-organized citizen initiatives may reproduce the inequality and segregation they fight against (Swyngedouw, 2005). From a commons perspective, spatial designers might therefore recognize the limits of their actions and question whether they disrupt or reinforce inequalities, effectively developing a participatory way of acting.

Social-ecological relationships

If commoning is perceived as a social practice of a community in the course of (re)producing shared resources, spatial professionals engaging with commons should recognize the relation between space and social interactions. Considering the social role of space, means taking into account the diverse 'patterns of use, appropriation, perception and significance' of the physical infrastructure of space (Ryckewaert & Landuydt, 2007, 9). These patterns are prominent issues in the social dynamics of commoning, and might be in conflict with the legal interpretation of ownership (Marx, 1867).

Heterodox Marxists and city sociologists as Lefebvre (1968), Foucault (1984), Remy and Voyé (1981) and Soja (1996) have theorized the sociality of space. They have given a prominent role to space in social research. What marks their work, is their rejection of the Marxist conception of the urban as merely being the transformation of space into a commodity by capitalism. According to these authors, space is not only a passive receptor, but also a potential arena of play. Space and social forms as such become mutually constitutive, implying that geography 'shapes class as much as class shapes geography' (Soja in Borch, 2011, p. 113). Lefebvre has identified spatiality as a 'trialectics' of three types of space. Later on, this scheme has been adopted and disseminated by Soja, who argued that both Lefebvre and Foucault had developed much the same argument, but that both were not understood by most scholars. The scheme of Soja, who makes a very concrete distinction between the physical, mental and social aspect of space, has many overlaps with the trialectics of Lefebvre. However, Lefebvre's conception of space is more complex, underlining a stronger coherence between the stratification, physicality and rhythm of spatiality. The three registers of space identified by Lefebvre and Soja, respectively include:

- 'Perceived space' (Lefebvre, 1968) or 'Firstspace' (Soja, 1996): 'Perceived space' and 'Firstspace' is the space that can be empirically determined. It is directly sensible or perceivable. For Lefebvre, it is both the medium and outcome of human activity, behaviour and experience. With his conception of 'Firstspace', Soja especially points at the physical dimension of space. The social dimension which is inherently part of Lefebvre's 'Perceived space', the spatial practices and routines of production and reproduction, is thus less pronounced in Soja's conception.
- 'Conceived space' (Lefebvre, 1968) or 'Secondspace' (Soja, 1996): Both point at the way we think about space. It represents the world of theories, concepts and discourses used to understand or plan space. It is the space of scientists, planners and technocrats, embodying relationships of power, dominance, control and production.
- 'Lived space' (Lefebvre, 1968), 'Thirdspace' (Soja, 1996), or 'Heterotopia' (Foucault, 1984): The space in which the social aspects most strongly come to the fore is the 'Lived', 'Third' space or 'Heterotopia'. These three terms are used to deconstruct the binary logic of space in order to create a third, alternative and significantly different logic or perspective of space. This third space is the space of actual life, the space of virtual interchange between humans and their constructed, spatial worlds, embodying local knowledge as well as stories, values and experiences. Some spaces effectively invite for conversation, affording special kinds of dialogues of the kind we can find in 'lived space'. In the same vein, 'lived space' is also a level of the space in which non-dominant powers of society come to the fore. The only way to make it come to the fore, is to resist attempts of the other two spaces to dominate. Hence, it becomes a site of struggle, of the clandestine, the informal, the disturbing and the enactment of power. For Soja, such 'marginal space' can become the centre of struggle against injustice. When able to struggle through the pain and suffer, it can become the place for a new creativity and openness, and thus the acquisition of power.

In order to nourish the latter register of space, it is worthwhile to take a look at Jean Remy's work on space. Also Remy (1981, 2015) has defined spaces 'that invite' for interchange, working as a resource for guiding social interactions. Remy does not follow the trialectics of space but prefers to make a distinction between production and appropriation. The latter is mostly linked to 'lived space' and to a lesser extent 'perceived space'. Once passive, as a reflector of social structures, once active, as a resource of in- or exclusion, he underlines this 'inherent' role of space, which is secondary to social behaviour, but which is marked by unpredictability (Remy, 2015). The following spaces are defined as potential resources:

- Public spaces, places marked by flexibility and freedom of appropriation are equally important in this respect. According to Rémy (2016) these spaces have an undetermined sociability and accessibility. They can give a sense of a 'home' for surrounding residents, while creating a hospitable environment for passengers (Rémy, 2016);
- Interstitial spaces, created by blurred lines between open and closed, public and private, can provide opportunities for informal encounters. By using the metaphor of the seam - 'we are not anymore in the forest, nor in the fields' - Remy (2016, 32) links such spaces to productive uses. Stavrides (2010)

calls such spaces 'in-between' or 'porous' spaces. Porous places, according to him, provide opportunities for informal encounter, creativity and new forms of collectivity, as such immediately linking space to processes of commoning;

- Finally, 'secondary spaces' involve a form of sociability in the sense that they promote social transactions that involve subtle interplays of trust and defiance, solidarity and conflict (Remy, 2016). They are opposed to 'primary spaces', in which the roles and constraints of the 'ordinary life' are more or less fixed. Their spatial composition evokes a game of 'the hidden and shown', 'opacity and transparency' and a sense of being elsewhere. Secondary spaces offer the possibility to take distance or escape from ordinary daily life and to do something 'else'.

Commoning as a practice in which people come together to strengthen, manage, preserve or protect resources has a particular cultural and environmental implication. Treating the territory as a resource for commoning means to seek direct control over spheres of life such as the city, neighbourhoods, food, water and land. Beyond the spatial arrangements that facilitate such collective control, there are the cultural values related to the appropriation of the territory as a resource. As Boillier states, 'whatever the shortcomings of any individual natural resource commons, its participants realize that they must work with them, not against them. Unlike markets, commoners do not treat the environment as an object or commodity, but as a dynamic living system that enframes their lives' (2016, 18). This logic nourishes personal and collective experiences that offer possibilities of entitlement and responsibility that go beyond market consumer logics (Petrescu, 2005). Spatial designers engaging with commons might nourish such logic while '[resisting] the environmentally damaging and socially destructive aspects of capitalist development' (Charley, 2008, 160).

From noun to verb

Claiming, producing, managing, sharing resources and reproducing commons are in the first place on-going processes of negotiation. Linebaugh turned the noun 'commons' into a verb to emphasize the fact that (re)producing the commons is an incessant activity, an engaged action, and not an end product. In spatial design practice, this demands a shift from focusing 'on designing objects to designing processes' (Dzokic & Neelen, 2003, http://www.stealth.ultd.net/stealth/06_processmatter.html). Beyond the actual design, such shift implies imagining the different actors involved, the strategies, processes and events further down the line on which designers might only have a limited impact (Schneider & Till, 2009).

In what follows I will describe and explain the research in two community-based cohabitation projects, structured according to the 3 main interplays between commoning, space and spatial design, as defined above. Throughout this narrative, I will elaborate on practical considerations, methods and tools that were used to engage with this knowledge in housing commons as a spatial designer.

Although the theoretical and empirical part of the paper are presented chronologically in this paper, during the action research they were not developed in a linear way, but organically informing each other. In the same way the theory informed the use of methods and tools within the cases, insights from the cases (re)directed the literature review. This reflection on and within practice is inherent to action research, which can be seen as a form of critical praxis. Following the vocabulary used by Wakefield (2007, p.331), praxis is here seen as 'the melding of theory/reflection and practice/action as part of a conscious struggle to transform the world'.

Research context and methods

The BCR is a particularly relevant case when it comes to an increased interest of civil society and architects to co-produce urban space. For several decades the region is dealing with severe problems of housing affordability and quality. These problems are intertwined with a historical support for homeownership outside the city, an institutional diversity and attractiveness in terms of employment provider, head seat of Europe and international metropolis (Dessouroux et al., 2016). Due to this on-going housing crisis, a network of organisations has originated in Brussels, focusing on housing activism and alternative housing solutions. As Corijn and Groth (2011) put, 'there are many examples of urban struggles and resistance in a city basically run by private developers and alien political forces' (2011, 149). The recent implementation of a CLT in Brussels (CLTB) - the first on the European mainland - is such example. It was established by a group of concerned citizen organizations and activists as an alternative housing solution for underprivileged groups in light of an on-going housing crisis. Engaging with a non-speculative form of housing production by holding the building land in a trust and limiting resale rights for residents, CLTB can be considered as an institution managing housing commons. From the beginning, it has been supported by the BCR for this purpose, and subsidized in order to keep the dwellings affordable for low-income groups. Nonetheless, the organization is strongly committed to involve households in the development of their future dwelling. The origins of the garden suburbs in Brussels, on the other hand, go back to the housing crisis at the beginning of the 20th century. Nowadays, they are under firm control of the umbrella organization for social housing, but in some of the rental cooperatives that own them, decision-making processes are still embedded within the community (Aernouts & Ryckewaert, 2018).



Figure 1: Vandenpeerenboom (CLTB) & Destrier (Comensia) (image made by the author)

The first action research concerns the design process of the CLTB pilot project 'Vandenpeerenboom'; a collective housing project of 32 dwelling units and a neighbourhood facility on a vacant plot in Molenbeek. A residential neighbourhood and a vacant strip along the little used Brussels' west railway border its surrounding streets. From the very beginning of the project, CLTB has been bringing together future inhabitants and stakeholders to discuss and reflect on the design of the housing project. It has been organizing these reflections and discussions around several types of meetings: design workshops, general meetings and advisory boards. Next to CLTB, social workers and architects of local associations are involved in the project in order to co-organize these meetings and to support each of the participating future inhabitants in their trajectory. The Housing Fund - an organization that facilitates the right to housing in Brussels - is another important stakeholder in the project as it grants loans to the households and acts as a building contractor. Subsidized by the Brussels Government, it was bound to the rules of the public tender to select a design-and-build team. The future architect did thus not take part in the reflections and discussions during the design workshops. Instead, architects of the associations worked as 'intermediaries' to co-develop a list of recommendations with future inhabitants for the public tender specification sheet. A second set of workshops was held after the public tender in order to evaluate the

proposals of the different design-and-build teams. For this set of workshops, the future inhabitants were split up in 3 groups to evaluate the projects. Guided by a social worker and architect, each group focused on one theme in the evaluation: 'zero-energy standards', 'cohabitation' and 'urban design'.

As a researcher and architect, I studied the internal documents of the first architecture workshops and co-organized the second set of workshops between October 2014 and March 2015, dedicated to 'urban design'. Although I actively contributed to the content of the workshops, my participation was also a learning process in which I came into contact and practiced participatory tools and methods.

The second action research concerns the development of a community-based public space rehabilitation process in a post-war garden suburb in Evere, Brussels. In contrast to the CLT project that was granted financial support from the beginning, the rehabilitation process was marked by a bottom-up approach towards neighbourhood regeneration. The approximately 300 households of the neighbourhood are social tenants as well as co-operators, meaning their neighbourhood is managed by a rental cooperative that is subject to the Brussels social housing legislation. Residents have a voice in the governing board and the general meetings of the rental cooperative. Despite some apartment blocks marking the Northern and Southern part, the neighbourhood consists of single-family houses with individual front and back gardens, alleyways and a longitudinal park, 'Le Mail de la Hacquenée', that crosses the neighbourhood. As highlighted by these physical components and governance model, the neighbourhood is clearly inspired by the pre-WW2 garden suburbs built in the urban fringe of Brussels. This model is based on principles of shared land ownership, community life and tenant participation. Next to housing, the neighbourhood includes a kindergarten and community house. In the community house, residents are supported by 2 cultural workers to develop neighbourhood activities such as homework classes, a knitting atelier, an exchange project with a local cooperative in Morocco, a world kitchen, creative workshops for children, a world kitchen, weekly clean-up actions by youngsters, beekeeping, vegetable gardening and composting. The latter activities are sustained by 'Uni-Vert', a group of inhabitants reuniting around 'green' projects.

Faced with security problems in the neighbourhood, since several years this group is sustained by the cultural workers and cooperative to develop a plan for neighbourhood regeneration. Although neighbourly relationships are relatively good, the area deals with typical problems such as a run-down outdoor space and certain 'hotspots' for illicit businesses and intergenerational conflicts. Above this, the longitudinal park includes some diseased trees, which have to be replaced. To recharge the park, they organized events such as picnics, drawing ateliers, petanque, a cabin for children. However, they lacked the spatial knowledge to take these activities to a next level.

In this action research, I took a more prominent role. Together with spatial designers and an anthropologist I 'initiated' and 'steered' a co-design process with the cultural workers and Uni-Vert. Between October 2015 and June 2016, we organized workshops, assemblies, informal meetings and activities in order to structure the design trajectory.

Empirical evidence

'Organizing' participation?

Both projects opted for the method of the workshop in order to involve (future) residents in the design of their dwelling space and living environment. This is in contrast to a body of self-organized initiatives in participatory urbanism that advocate a direct-action approach. These initiatives denounce the design workshop as an expert-driven, value-laden process that creates inequalities between designers and communities. Brooke (2013, 25) for instance states that the design workshop 'does not meet our present definition of participatory urbanism, in which incremental, tangible, immediate action are paramount over (en)visioning and conceptual speculation'. In contrast, in the context of these two projects, workshops were important moments in the design trajectory to 'organize' the participatory design.

First, it was in line with the participatory governance culture of both cases, which reunite stakeholders around organized general meetings, events and management committees. For the development of the CLT project, the non-profit organization 'Arc en Ciel' was established, with the related designation of a president, treasurer and secretary; general meetings; consultation meetings; and follow-up committees specific to such organization. In the Destrier project 'joint venture' was the name that emerged to underline the fact that we wished to move away from the traditional delineation of 'architect' and 'client'.

Second, the inequalities related to different professional backgrounds and cultures were taken as a starting point and regarded as an added value. In the Destrier project, the mutual trust gained throughout the sequence of workshops and informal meetings was important for us as designers, in order to avoid the feeling of being 'intruders' in the neighbourhood. During these workshops and meetings we shared informal breakfasts, lunches, dinners and a film screening during which we had 'ordinary conversations'. These conversations around the table uncovered personal stories and neighbourly relationships within the neighbourhood, while positioning equality between the residents, cultural workers and us. As Ross states, they 'presume in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge' (Ross, 1991). Similarly, for Rancière (2010, 22 in Boano & Kelling, 2013, 45), equality is about listening to the voices of 'the oppressed' as equals; it is 'not an end-state but a starting point that requires a constant verification in an open and experimental logic operating from the outside-in'. Although we were not constantly present in the neighbourhood, we had our

temporary office in the community house, slept in one of the social housing during the weekends and spent a lot of time in the neighbourhood. At the same time we also familiarized inhabitants with our profession, by teaching spatial design methods and tools. We deemed it necessary for them to understand the way a spatial design process takes shape and plans are being made. Inhabitants were supported to take notes and pictures, to draw on tracing paper, to read aerial pictures, to build a scenario and develop a vision. They were also actively stimulated to take up their voice and explain the project to other stakeholders such as the aldermen of the municipality and the director of the cooperative.

During the Vandenpeerenboom workshops, smaller groups composed of (future) residents, social workers and architects worked together in order to each bring in information from a different perspective. This work was followed by a restitution moment with the entire group to exchange the ideas that were expressed. Working in smaller groups stimulated mutual help and trust. By paying attention to an equal distribution of speaking time, also more timid persons were encouraged to speak up and share conflicting visions. My contribution as a non-native speaker in a group dominated by non-native speakers, added to breaking down language barriers. Also in this project, future inhabitants learned reading plans, detecting different functions, checking the minimal dimensions of dwelling spaces, evaluating the spatiality of certain configurations and following the different steps involved in the building process. Such capacity building seemed self-evident. They would be involved in assessing all projects submitted by the public tender and were confronted with the complexity of the building process at several moments in time.



Figure 2: Design workshops (images made by the author)

Finally, the format of the workshop proved to be a suitable way to reunite the diverse group of designers, social workers, (future) residents, neighbourhood inhabitants and institutions who do not necessarily have links with activist environments and who are only able to dedicate a limited amount of time in the projects. In line with Stavrides (2012, 16 in *An Architektur*) in both projects 'the exclusionary gesture to understand space as belonging to one community' was rejected. In the Destrier project on the one hand, the group of active participants (Uni-Vert) is relatively small in comparison with all stakeholders. In order to legitimize our actions, during the workshops we created low-threshold participation opportunities for anyone who was interested. The workshops consisted of design studios and open meetings. The design studios were dedicated to those that were willing to actively contribute to the project, while the open meetings offered occasions for other residents to see and to react upon the work we were developing. In order to ensure visibility, the latter were organized outside in le Mail, the longitudinal park cutting through the neighbourhood. Publicity for these events was made by developing

playful flyers, a newspaper and posters and through digital communication platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and email. The format of the design studios and open meetings were particularly successful in forging connections and collaborations between these different participants. Moreover, they stimulated new intergenerational and intercultural contacts among neighbourhood inhabitants and officials, which even surprised the cultural workers.

The CLTB workshops on the other hand, which deal with the co-design of a housing project for a defined group, predominantly involved future inhabitants. Nonetheless, the institutional set-up of CLTB envisages a participation of non-inhabitants as well. For a limited yearly fee, everyone can become a member of CLTB and consequently join and vote in the general meetings. Next, for each project the organization tries to integrate non-residential functions in collaboration with neighbourhood associations. In the case of the Vandenpeerenboom project, local associations were regularly consulted to discuss this issue.

In short, in both projects the 'weaknesses' of the workshop were taken into account and turned into an opportunity, forging connection between different types of stakeholders, involving participants in the set-up of the workshops through formal and informal meetings between and during the workshops, creating awareness of the tools and methods everyone could bring in, and involving both (future) residents and outsiders.

Addressing the social, cultural and environmental role of space

In both the collective housing and public space regeneration workshops, space was seen as a resource for facilitating social encounters and sustainable practices, albeit with different accents.

As the Vandenpeerenboom building concerns a newly built project, it was not possible to address the housing project as currently perceived and lived. However, in the workshops preceding the public tender of the CLT project, sensibilities and preferences regarding public, collective and private spaces were discussed. During the first workshop, Arc en Ciel for instance visited the neighbourhood of the project site. In small groups, they discovered the architecture of the neighbourhood, the public and green spaces, social services, schools, cultural and commercial spaces and sports facilities. The strengths and weaknesses for each theme were highlighted on plan, written down and photographed and presented by the 'reporters' of each group at the end of the day. During the following workshops, in which collective housing projects were presented and visited, the architecture of collective facilities, the impact of the dwelling within the neighbourhood and the organization of the individual dwelling were dealt with.

The resulting recommendations, that were developed during a synthesis workshop, show an intention to provide ground for neighbourhood encounters, to speak a similar architectural language like the houses in the street and to develop environmental activities. For instance, the recommendation

to have 'a set-back of the facade and an enlargement of the street' (15) can be interpreted as a desire to create a buffer zone or 'in-between' realm puncturing the strict division between the street and the private dwelling units. Together with the 'facility for the neighbourhood' (35) and the 'meeting room' both '[consolidating] and [reinforcing] relationships' between the inhabitants and '[permitting] to develop neighbourhood activities' (15), the emphasis on porous boundaries show how the future residents conceive their community in close relationship with the neighbourhood. However, the document remains quite general at that point. A reflection on the current dwellings of the households, their inscription in the neighbourhood and patterns of individual and collective appropriation, could have possibly led to more specific guidelines. Remarkably, the fact that the list of recommendations addresses social relationships beyond the housing project seems to be an opportunistic choice as well. The list states that 'knowing each other' could reduce 'feelings of insecurity', in the same way collective infrastructure such as internet, television, water and low-energy construction techniques should 'reduce economic expenses' (35). Ideas for 'environmental actions' such as rubbish cleaning in the street, a 'collective vegetable garden' and 'rainwater recuperation', nevertheless express a commitment to develop small-scale quotidian practices contributing to a more sustainable and sociable living environment. It's important to notice that such commitment could be biased through the influence of the social workers and architects. Indeed, the list of recommendations is in the first place the result of a collective work, with cross-pollination between all actors.

Taking place in an existing context, another approach was used for the public space regeneration project in Destrier. The abundance of green spaces, such as alleyways, a longitudinal green strip and a park offer a pleasant environment for children plays, daily walks and sports activities. The community house and the children football pitch provide important infrastructures for encounter. While adults, elderly and children mainly sustain the activities in the community house, the football pitch works as a magnet for youngsters. At the football pitch, they do small exercises and play matches with friends or youngsters from social estates nearby. Furthermore, the gardens of the houses have a particular importance for the cooperative residents. They do not own their house but have a strong freedom in the design of their outdoor space. Some inhabitants have a modest oversized terrace or lawn, while others created a fishpond, hold chicken, invested in rainwater recuperation and developed permaculture gardens. The different patterns of use, appropriation, perception, experience and significance of the dwelling environment were important lines of enquiry during the first workshop in which a collective diagnosis of the site was made. During this workshop, personal and collective narratives within the neighbourhood were unfolded. The first evening was dedicated to grasp some first impressions and immediate needs of residents, by asking them the simple question: 'What do you like' and 'What do you dislike'? This helped to perceive some issues the users of the outdoor space in the neighbourhood are dealing with.

During the design studio of the second day, three groups consisting of both residents, cultural workers and spatial designers discussed the themes property, identity and landscape. With the theme property we wanted to explore the conflicting relationship between the legal and perceived ownership of a place (Walker, 1994, 83). The theme identity scrutinized historical and cultural representations of certain spaces within the neighbourhood, while the theme landscape was dedicated to understanding its productive and natural characteristics. The themes were investigated by collectively visiting, discussing, photographing and tracing specific locations that related to the theme according to each member. The resulting conversations and drawings revealed some important landscape structures and reference points, while uncovering similar or conflicting interests in different spaces. For instance, a cultural worker part of the 'ownership' group took the rest of the group to the alleyways, explaining that for him, these alleyways opened up opportunities for more creative ways of wandering through the area. A woman responded that, although one alleyway was located behind her garden and provided a welcome variation to her daily walk with the dog, it made her feel uncomfortable as it served as a route of escape for thieves. Hereupon a youngster described how he used to follow the pathway as a teenager when he once stole someone's purse. The bushes allowed to change clothes and to hide the purse, while hindering access by police cars. By explaining this practice that he had carried out several times, the others started to perceive the act of stealing as a rascal trick, rather than a crime. Sharing this information to one another and hearing the positive and negative connotations related to the themes helped to overcome prejudices about a space and the quotidian practices that shape it. The following day of the workshop was dedicated to future projections and scenarios. The workshop participants were invited to imagine a new future of the neighbourhood, first by exploring their personal vision for the neighbourhood on a limited piece of paper, then by developing 2 possible scenarios for the neighbourhood. Keeping in mind the themes and issues we touched upon the former day, we asked the two opposing questions 'what if Destrier would become a more isolated neighbourhood' and 'what if Destrier would be more strongly connected to the surrounding urban tissue'? While not necessarily agreeing, two teams were invited to invent arguments to highlight the potentials of each question. Afterwards both groups defended their arguments for a 'tribunal'. By searching for arguments for both seemingly simple questions, the groups were forced to think beyond their own prejudices and representations of the neighbourhood. It allowed new stories and future uses to be imagined and projecting their spatial consequences, which helped to develop a vision with relevance to a wider user community.

The guidelines of the masterplan developed during the workshops include the valorisation of a bicycle network and some important nodes in the north, south and middle of the estate. These nodes are located at the intersection of the Mail and the roads and pathways that prolong the streets in the neighbourhood. For the more frequently used nodes in the north and south of the estate, the guidelines project a better connection to adjacent bus stops and the rehabilitation of a football field in order to relieve pressure from the football pitch. Between the less frequently used nodes and next to the alleyway

between the backyards of residents and neighbours, the guidelines mark spaces for collective investment. In these spaces the 'intermediate' and 'secondary', as theorized by Remy (2016), seem to coincide. While they offer an important 'counterspace' (Remy, 2016) or 'marginal space' (Soja, 1996) for youngsters to escape from everyday life, due to a blurred legal status and spatial components such as a badly implemented football pitch, bushes and hedges they provoke social transactions of defiance and conflict rather than solidarity and trust. However, due to their dimensions, non-functionality and 'in-between' status - between forest and field, between pathway and park - they also allow for new spatial articulations that rebalance the social transactions. These new spatial articulations build on the productive uses of the private garden, the creative workshops for young children and the environmental activities promoted in the community house. Caring for the vegetable gardens, beehives and compost offers important individual and collective benefits such as meeting opportunities, entitlement, and leisure. The tangible results create a great sense of motivation and devotion. Dedicating spaces to similar activities can allow to multiply the use of these spaces and to actively encourage others to appropriate the space.

The issue of time

The participatory trajectories of the two projects under study here were carried out during a long time-span. In order to monitor the outcome of the design process, both dealt with a form of institutionalization.

Regarding the CLT project, the integration of the recommendations in the public tender could be perceived as an institutionalization of the participatory design process. Indeed, several aspects were included in the tender specifications. Among the most notable were the collective garden, 'which should maintain and strengthen contact between residents, and more specifically between children and adults, and which should include rest and meeting zones' (Fonds du Logement, 2014, 16). The collective circulation spaces had to 'improve the quality of life of the future residents and stimulate contacts between residents, without serving as a source of conflict due to noise nuisances' (14).

Notwithstanding, the tender also had serious limitations. First, there were no clear agreements about the impact of the evaluation of Arc en Ciel for the criterion 'urban design and architecture'. This criterion forms one of the 5 evaluation criteria used by the building contractor. In this case, problems did not arise, as the evaluation made by both Arc en Ciel and the Housing Fund led to the selection of 1 design-and-build team. However, if this would not have been the case, the legitimacy of the outcome could have been questioned.

Second, some concerns expressed in the list of recommendations made by Arc en Ciel were not included in the tender specifications. One of them is the image of the building in the street and the

neighbourhood. As some future residents stated during the evaluation workshops, the facade of the winning project 'looks like a prison'. While indicated in the list that there should be a dialogue with the street and the neighbourhood, the two opposing volumes of the winning project are not particularly successful in creating an interface with the street. Except for outdoor circulation corridors on different levels, the facade has little architectural refinement and doesn't refer to the historical context of the site or the 19th century town houses in the streets. At street level, passengers don't get a glimpse of what is happening inside the building core. Other projects were more interesting in this respect. By creating vertical segments in the facade and softly varying the colours, one project gives the impression of consisting of several analogous houses. The slightly cantilevered terraces in these vertical strips refer to the balconies of the town houses. In contrast to the upper floors, the entrance at street level gives a more collective face to the building, due to two large cut-outs with collective functions along it that arrive in the inner courtyard. Both cantilevered terraces and cut-outs puncture the boundaries of the facade, creating porosity. This inner courtyard is yet less spacious than the one of the winning project, which has the largest surface and which is illuminated by the meandering white brick facades. The individual apartments of the winning project are also better organized. For future inhabitants especially the separation between the kitchen and the living room of the winning project is an added value. This preference was however not included in the project brief of the Housing Fund. Arguably, a more detailed summary of the workshops or the inclusion of the list of recommendations as an annex to the tender specifications could have led to project proposals that addressed these criteria more adequately.

In the Destrier project -which relies on research funding and voluntary efforts and not on immediate government support- as spatial designers we had to imagine events further down the line on which we will just have a limited impact. For this reason, we came up with an action plan instead of a fixed masterplan for the site. For each action we developed a fiche with guidelines for the interventions. These guidelines include images on the concept and potential elaboration of the interventions, the different actors that should be contacted, the estimated cost of the intervention and the different steps to take. Structuring the design into a number of actions allows incrementally investing the public space: residents can do small interventions with a limited amount of subsidies from the region, while larger investments can be undertaken with the support of the municipality, the housing cooperative or the region. In order to give force to this action plan, the last workshop several actions were 'activated'. Horses were placed on the 'Mail de la Hacquenée' (literately translated: public promenade of the amble horse), to refer to the name of the linear park; signs were added under the names of the street to highlight the origins of the quarter, a shooting range; on one of the nodes, temporary street furniture was created with wooden pallets. These temporary interventions were particularly successful in attracting passengers and outsiders. Several people asked about our activities and proposed to lend a hand.

By involving the municipal, cooperative and regional stakeholders in each stage of the project and inviting them for each workshop, we ensured a continuous feedback on the project and tried to develop a support base for continuing the project in the future. The larger investments that need their support will however be subject to the public tender rule as well. It remains to be seen whether the action plan and its designers will be involved once such public tender would be organized. Either way, the smaller interventions are embedded within the community house organization and will be discussed and organized during the monthly management committees. As architects we will be less involved, but still be present during these meetings to support the decisions that are made and to help to design certain actions.

Such continuous, intensive and often voluntary engagement of spatial designers, researchers and social workers shows another important process-related aspect. It was a subsidized community centre that employs architects and social workers and relies on voluntary efforts of students that developed the CLT model and initiated the Vandenpeerenboom project. In the Destrier project, the regeneration project was enabled through the involvement of cultural workers of the community centre and voluntary efforts of an anthropologist and spatial designers keen to learn more on this matter. I was able to contribute to both projects within the framework of my action research. The collaboration between universities, interested spatial professionals and community centres brings back memories of the community design centres of the 1960s, linking architectural education with community building. In line with the 'living lab' approach, such centres could create environments to practice knowledge building and to experiment with and strengthen commoning practices.

Conclusion

I started this paper by pointing at the increasing links that are drawn between the theory of the commons and spatial research and practice, which remain blurred in academic publications and architectural essays. This paper is an attempt to bring both together by delving into scientific literature on commoning and spatial practice and by presenting an action research within two types of housing commons: a Community Land Trust project and a public space regeneration project in a rental cooperative neighbourhood. This action research draws on my own experiences as a spatial professional. Within scientific literature, I found 3 main themes linking commoning and spatial practice: (1) a participatory way of acting; (2) reinforcing the social, cultural and environmental role of space and (3) focusing on processes. Within the course of the action research, I tested different methodologies and tools that address these themes, leading to three main findings.

First, making agreements about the use of aspects of the environment as a collectively shared and used resource - commoning - presupposes a participatory way of acting. In my practical experience in housing commons, spatial designers can contribute to commoning by treating all actors as equal

participants (Boillier, 2016), each providing relevant knowledge in the course of the design process. Important to stress is that 'equal' in this case, means an equality of 'intelligence' rather than an equality of 'knowledge'. Only by recognizing differences between the knowledge of spatial professionals, communities and other stakeholders an imposition of false equality might be overcome. Naturally, the participation of powerless communities not automatically implies equal decision-making processes (Saija, 2014). In the two projects, therefore, as spatial professionals we actively encouraged (future) inhabitants to take initiative and give their opinion during workshops and feedback moments with other stakeholders. In order to enable them to do this, we made them familiar with spatial design, the tools that are used and the processes it involves. In this respect, commoning within spatial design practice empowers and strengthens people's capacity of acting outside the influence of dominant discourses (Saija, 2014).

Second, during the course of the design process, (future) inhabitants on their part can bring in relevant knowledge notably on the second theme: the social, cultural and environmental role of space. Regarding this, urban sociologists such as Soja (1996) and Remy (2016) have mentioned the ambiguous relationship between space and patterns of individual and collective appropriation but have also recognized that space can function as a resource for in- and exclusion. In a commons perspective, relationships between people and spaces that enforce social capital and entitlement can be perceived as resources for inclusion. In the Destrier regeneration project, we could grasp such relationships through our long-during presence on site, by discussing them during workshop exercises, over the course of informal meetings and by co-developing interventions on site. In order to get more in-depth information on expectations and preferences regarding their future dwelling, in the newly built CLT project, participants' neighbourly relationships, volunteering activities and hobbies in their current habitat could have been explicitly articulated during the workshops.

Third, Linebaugh developed the term 'commoning' in order to emphasize that developing and reproducing commons is an on-going activity. In spatial design practice, it implies taking into account the events further down the line after the participatory design process. While empowering participants was a key aspect in order to ensure a good continuation of both projects, there is need for adapted legal design frameworks and structural institutional and spatial support as well. When governments are involved through (necessary) subsidies, an adaptation of the public tender - in which inhabitants are recognized as an official evaluator - proves to be necessary in order to legitimize the intensive participatory process that precedes it. Another precondition is the on-going support of the institutions and places in which such projects take place. The institutional structure of the two projects enabled to embed the design process in the existing participatory governance culture, while the flexibility and resilience of the existing spatial layout of the regeneration project still allows inhabitants to do

interventions and activities on their own. These characteristics of housing commons serve as important learning schools for spatial designers dealing with co-design processes (XXXX, 2017).

Finally, both projects nevertheless proved that such co-design processes require a demanding and long-term engagement of all stakeholders and spatial professionals. Regarding this on-going engagement, the university could take up a notable role. For instance, higher education programs such as architecture and urbanism have a long tradition on 'embedded research', through the organization of design workshops or design studios that deal with urban or rural issues. Such workshops and studios tend to involve policy-makers, specialists, investors and civil stakeholders in their process, in order to have an impact on their agenda (Cox, 2014). In a context in which practices beyond state- and market gain importance, action research and workshops within existing community struggles can offer a valuable research methodology to study, engage with and empower such practices. Similarly to the community design centres, social and spatial science education programs could combine research, teaching and training with a service to the wider community, familiarizing students with their political position from an early stage in their career. However, recalling Swyngedouw (2005) and Uitermark (2012), in order to not reproduce the inequalities they are fighting against, such collaborations should not be promoted at the expense of public support.

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