The Great Repair I

Summary of Analysis

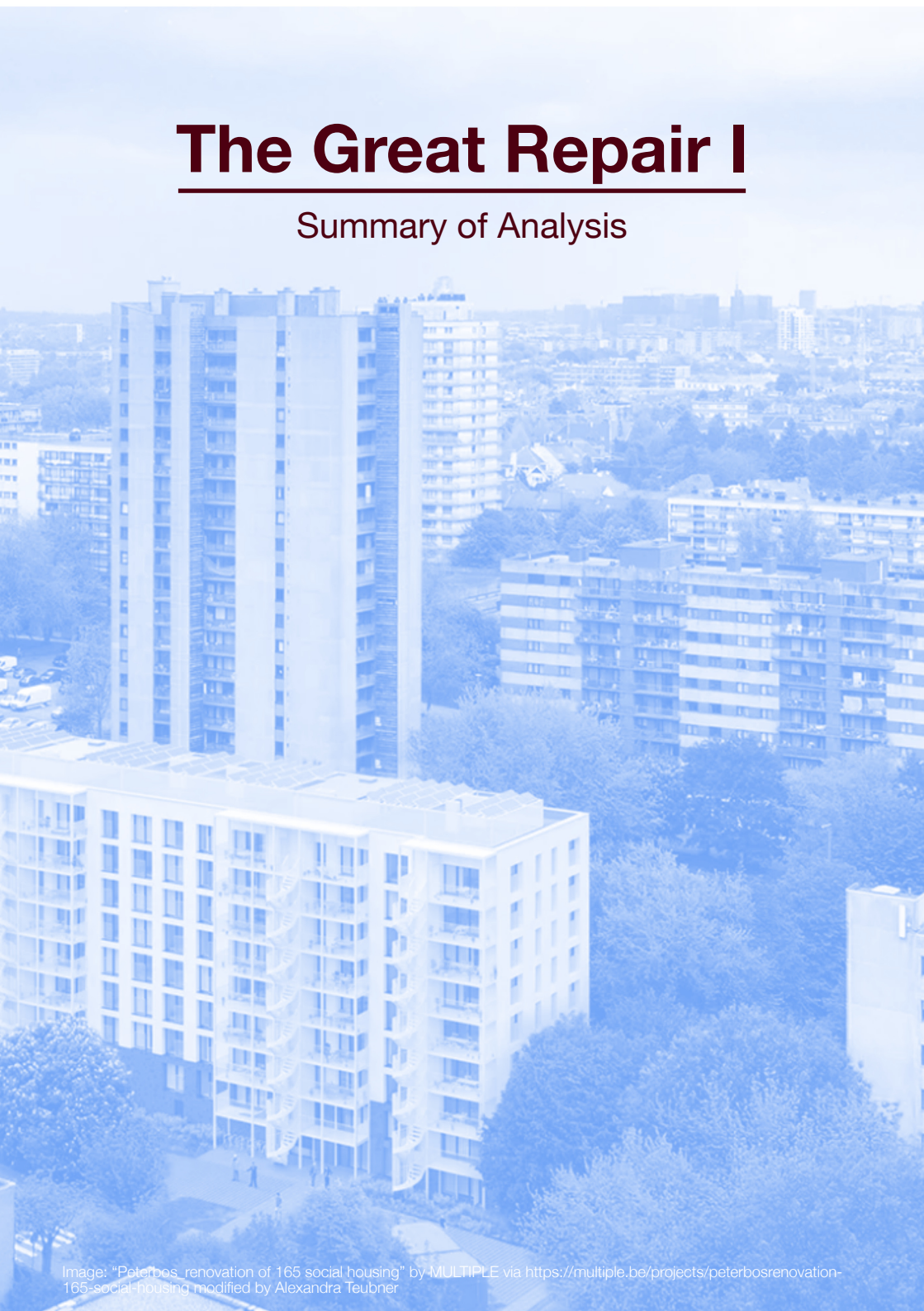


Image: “Peterbos_renovation of 165 social housing” by MULTIPLE via https://multiple.be/projects/peterbosrenovation-165-social-housing modified by Alexandra Teubner

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The Great Repair Brochure I came into existence through a collaboration between VUB-ULB students of the Master of Urban Studies and the teams of the Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA) and the Société du Logement de la Région Bruxelloise (SLRB). The goal was to explore social housing in a broader approach of repair, which emphasizes the everyday realities of social housing and works towards a more just societal transformation.

The brochure focuses on projects aiming at reactivating ground floors through different combinations of governance and practices of care. The selection of benchmarks ranged from active social housing renovations in Brussels to non-social housing contexts that focused on small-scale regeneration of common spaces. Through this it bases itself on a variety of case studies, which are both based in Belgium as well as internationally. These case studies touch on different aspects of the transformation and use of ground floors emphasizing different interesting practices like collective use, co-management between different actors, co-construction, sociocracy, small-scale economic activities, and everyday maintenance. It is important to note that none of these cases can be applied exactly to a Brussels context. However, they can be used as examples that show specific insights as well as limitations for a future project in the Brussels social housing scene. The following examples have been summarised in order to provide a general overview of each case, with the aim to show its relevance and limitations for Brussels. This brochure is a general summary of a more detailed version.

Houlette 37

Houlette 37 is a social housing renovation project in Brussels that combines the refurbishment of housing units with the regeneration of ground floors and shared spaces, supported by a resident-centred process.

Relevance

The relevance of the Houlette 37 project lies in its strong focus on ground floors, communal, and outdoor spaces as part of the renovation. The project includes a resident-centred approach, notably through the presence of a facilitatrice de chantier on the site who supported communication and resident involvement through collecting and integrating their input. As such, Houlette 37 offers a concrete case to examine how tenants participation can be integrated into renovation projects and how the activation and maintenance of shared spaces are addressed within the institutional framework of Brussels social housing.

Limitation

The transferability of the Houlette 37 project to other ground-floor renovations in Brussels is limited. The presence of an on-site facilitator is difficult to replicate under current budgetary constraints. Thereby, resident involvement mainly remained at the level of consultation and limited co-design, rather than extending to co-management of shared spaces. In addition, the strong cooperative culture of Logis-Floréal is not common across other SISP organisations, which may make similar approaches more challenging elsewhere. The long-term maintenance of the new shared spaces therefore depends on continued resident involvement and sufficient institutional support.

Parc du Peterbos

This is a public space redevelopment project based in the Brussels social housing neighbourhood of Peterbos in Anderlecht, Brussels. A masterplan was created by VVV and Studio Paola Viganò in order to integrate green spaces, paths and improve the open space as a “lived in park”. Besides this, small local projects and initiatives have also taken place to increase resident participation and improve the overall living quality of the neighbourhood.

Relevance

Due to its location in Brussels, the budgetary and governmental aspects are important to look at as they can provide structure for future programs on ground-floor activation and resident participation. Furthermore, there is a focus on the ground level, small-scale reparation and activation within the bigger picture of the masterplan which was developed. It gives a clear idea of the framework surrounding Brussels and its social housing policies and developments which are already in place.

Limitation

Even though this project is based in Brussels and is part of a well known social housing neighbourhood, the activation and projects remain specific to its area. The project is based on a bigger masterplan which is extremely case specific, budgetary intensive and takes its particularities into account. The budget on aspects such as participation is also relatively limited compared to its scale and even though ground floor activation is addressed, the actual creation and management of it is not fully developed.

Quartiere Chiesa Rossa

This project is based in Milan and looks at ground floor activation using participatory action through residents of social housing complexes. The ground floors are reactivated through short term rental contracts between residents and the municipality of Milan. Through this, renovation of these ground floors is developed whilst giving young local residents the opportunity to create a small term, low cost and low risk diverse uses such as workshops, commercial activities and local association centres.

Relevance

The housing stock in Milan is faced with the same limitations as the one in Brussels. It is an old modernist housing stock facing severe obsolescence whilst also facing high demands of use and population from its residents. This example gives an opportunity for a new way of thinking on the generation of a successful activation and renovation of ground floors at a low cost whilst also involving residents. It also actively focuses on the activation of existing housing stock which is facing difficulties instead of reaching for big term renovations which are budgetary and socially impactful.

Limitation

Even though projects like this in Brussels already exist, they are under different terms than the social housing stock. It remains extremely managerial and a big bureaucratic process involved in a difficult structure of financing through governmental agencies, the residents themselves and the social housing sector. In an area which is already facing many bureaucratic and technocratic challenges, this may be a big change in existing structures.

Kleiburg

A social housing unit constructed in the 1970s was renovated with ground-floor transformations and a DIY framework. Former ground floors that had been utilised as storage spaces were repurposed to accommodate small businesses, workshops, and bicycle parking areas. Passages beneath the buildings were expanded and illuminated to enhance safety and encourage activity. During the renovation process, tenants exchanged excess building materials (e.g., wooden planks, powders) or furniture that had become superfluous following the refurbishment.

Relevance

The project focuses on the renovation and conversion of ground floors, with the aim of creating a new governance model to manage the rest of the apartment blocks. The budget was reduced to facilitate the execution of the project, resulting in an iconic project for minimum intervention and maximum social impact. This benchmark is relevant because the budget is minimised to renew the ground floors and public realms, and their maintenance is carried out through resident participation.

Limitation

The idea of doing housing renovations themselves depends on what the tenants can and can't do, which can create differences between households. Maintenance depends a lot on the resident associations, which might cause problems in the future. The grounds also need ongoing support from the community and the local council. The DIY governance model isn't that useful in cities like Brussels, because it depends a lot on home ownership. But it's important to get the community involved and to keep the ground floor active when you're renovating social housing projects.

Void Decks

The term 'void deck' refers to the open, unsheltered spaces found on the ground floors of Singapore's Housing and Development Board's (HDB) residential blocks. These void decks are being maintained by the HDB and additional Residents' Committees. Recently, small scale resident-led projects have been implemented to reactivate the spaces and enhance their communal utility.

Relevance

Void decks serve as a prime example of how small-scale interventions can upgrade common spaces by introducing new social functions. The accessible way for inhabitants to get funding for their ideas is a huge motivational factor and low-budget in comparison to a renovation. The implemented Residents' Committee is also a huge asset in getting residents involved in the shared maintenance of those void decks.

Limitation

But although there are visible efforts to include residents in the processes regarding the void decks, the decision making power ultimately falls onto the HDB. When looking at this it has to be considered that Singapore is a politically quite controlled space. It should also be noted that while many projects exist, the actual number of active participants may be small relative to the total population. Applying this model to the Brussels context is challenging, as void decks were architecturally intended for community use from the outset, which is different to some social housing blocks in Brussels. Additionally the HDB has a higher budget especially for the maintenance.

Pla Buits

Pla Buits ("Empty Plots Plan") is a municipal initiative in Barcelona that temporarily opens unused or vacant public spaces for community-led projects, often of a social, cultural, or environmental nature.

Relevance

Although Pla Buits is not a social housing project, it is a relevant benchmark due to its governance model and the low-cost and community-driven activation and maintenance of shared spaces. Similar to social housing in Belgium, the plots remain publicly owned, but the citizens and organisations took care of the spaces, fostering a culture of maintenance and collective ownership. The project demonstrates how cooperative governance structures can enable co-design, shared responsibility, and everyday maintenance on limited budgets.

Limitation

While Pla Buits offers valuable insights, its transferability to the Brussels social housing context is limited. The programme operates within a municipal framework for temporary use of public land, which differs from the legal and institutional conditions of social housing estates. Collaboration between multiple actors was not always smooth, and bureaucratic procedures slowed project implementation, suggesting similar or greater challenges within the more regulated social housing sector. Limited financial and organizational resources also constrained the continuity of participation. Finally, the temporary nature of Pla Buits allows for experimentation but raises questions for further long-term continuity and maintenance.

La Borda

La Borda is a cooperative housing project based on the community land trust principle in Barcelona. It was fully created and constructed through and by its residents, involved in every aspect of the creation process. It started off as a grassroots project in order to reclaim space in a city that is facing a big housing market with extremely high rental prices. It claims to be a prototype in co-creation and of the transformation into community driven urban space.

Relevance

Even though La Borda isn't a social housing complex, people do not own their land as it is based on the community land trust model. Through this, it is interesting to see how people interact through co-creation on a project through which they don't have actual ownership of the land itself. The idea of co-creation is what is important to this case as many communal areas and facilities have been created by and for its residents. This could be something of interest for the activation of residents in social housing also not in ownership of their plots of land that they work on.

Limitation

As this project is looking to pioneer, both socially and architecturally, it does not face the same issues that most residents in social housing complexes face. They have the budget and mental capacity to actively create a project that they can be proud of and claim a form of ownership in this way. The co-construction of this project relied heavily on motivated residents, cooperative financing and institutional support which are all specific aspects that are not replicable looking at the Brussels social housing sector.

Pioneer Valley Cohousing

Pioneer Valley Cohousing (currently called Cherry Hill Cohousing) is a cooperative housing area in Massachusetts, the USA. The housing community adopted community-participation with voting, and decisions were based on consensus. Through time, this governance model seemed inconvenient, where for every decision, consensus was needed, and even a small group that disagrees with the idea blocks the application of the decision. In 2012, PVC adopted sociocracy to overcome this issue, and now decisions are made in circles that allow citizens to make decisions in their domain.

Relevance

Even though it’s not a social housing project, this benchmark is quite significant in terms of citizen participation and governance model that allows citizen to maintain their public and shared spaces. PVC applies sociocracy as part of its law, and it is one of the best examples that applies sociocracy. This case explains the importance of sociocracy through the experience of a housing community with its citizens. This requires good community participation and perhaps a strong resident base.

Limitation

Adopting this governance model quickly requires a base community that is already well-integrated and self-governed. Even in this case, there has been a teaching and adaptation phase. It requires good community participation and coordination, so it might take longer and be more difficult to apply to different kinds of housing communities.

Bruit du Frigo

Bruit du Frigo is an urban creation studio that works at the intersection of architecture, art and social mediation. They focus on participatory methods where residents are actively involved in the design and physical construction of projects. The main example shown here is the “Jardin Invisible” in Pau, France where they created a new programming for the outdoor spaces connecting different housing blocks that have previously been overlooked. These temporary interventions are being co-produced and tested to shape the future of a site.

Relevance

Bruit du Frigo’s general approach with challenging traditional built-to-last planning and applying Tactical Urbanism is highly relevant when looking for short-term solutions in the Brussels social housing context. The approach to connect different housing blocks in the “Jardin Invisible” is interesting, because the building structure is quite similar with small apartments and a lack of private outdoor spaces. So creating external living rooms to bring people together is a great approach. The citizen power gained through their participatory approach and the co-construction is exemplary and also makes it cost effective. Not only through saving personnel but also due to the temporary structures that test ideas to avoid wasting budget for future renovations.

Limitation

Whilst the tactical and short-term approach is applicable, some challenges appear when transferring their ideas to the Brussels social housing context. The described project focuses only on outdoor spaces which makes it challenging to apply it to ground-floor indoor spaces. Additionally the eye-to-eye participation relies very heavily on the willingness of residents to participate in construction workshops over a longer period. And since this project was a 2-year contract with many staff-intensive workshops, the budget was much higher, than maybe possible in Brussels.

Conclusion

The national and international cases emphasized different dimensions of good practices across various scales, offering lessons that we can adapt to the specific context of social housing renovation in Brussels. A “perfect practice” that ticks every box does not yet exist. This reality reinforces the urgency to find and create a strong case ourselves. Nonetheless, the studied benchmarks offer vital building blocks, ranging from structured governance models to experimental, temporary uses of space where tenants were actively involved in co-creation. While many of the case studies examples are not traditional social housing practices, they remain highly relevant because they challenge the status quo. They help us imagine new forms of repair that can inspire the social housing sector in Brussels, offering alternative ways to regenerate common spaces and install a form of maintenance that is shared rather than top-down.

The fact that no single benchmark can be perfectly transported to Brussels as a good maintenance practice in social housing proves the need for innovation. The goal is to create a mixed agency that can carry out both improvement works and daily maintenance, involving an alliance between residents and professional services that can create a sustainable, long-lasting alliance. Brussels is uniquely positioned for this shift because our housing stock is currently undergoing massive physical changes. The second phase of this research will move from these insights to a concrete pilot case study in Brussels. We will take inspiration from these benchmarks to build a prototype of a mixed agency involving both residents and maintenance services of social housing companies.



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