

# OUT OF OFFICE

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**Abstract:** *In order to challenge the non-inclusive aspects of Belgian architectural culture, the article explores inspiring practices. It gathers insights from two pairs of individuals: Ivan and Valentine from the non-profit organization Convivence-Samenleven, and Bernardo and Marianita from the collective Mama (Maintenance Matters). Each of them has consciously chosen to depart from traditional architectural offices and their usual working conditions to directly engage with local communities. Their narratives extend an invitation to reconsider our work frameworks, time commitments, relationships with users, and redefine project evaluation criteria. On a broader scale, they encourage us to reflect on the social significance of an architect's work.*

**Keywords:** *working conditions, shifting practices, time commitment, social repositioning, empowerment*

**Resumen:** *Para desafiar los aspectos no inclusivos de la cultura arquitectónica belga, el artículo explora prácticas inspiradoras. Reúne opiniones de dos parejas de individuos: Ivan y Valentine de la organización sin ánimo de lucro Convivence-Samenleven, y Bernardo y Marianita del colectivo Mama (Maintenance Matters). Cada uno de ellos ha elegido, conscientemente, alejarse de los estudios de arquitectura tradicionales y de sus condiciones de trabajo habituales a fin de interactuar directamente con las comunidades locales. Sus narrativas extienden una invitación a reconsiderar nuestros contextos laborales, compromisos de tiempo, relaciones con los usuarios, así como a redefinir los criterios de evaluación de los proyectos. A una escala más amplia, nos alientan a reflexionar sobre el significado social de la obra de un arquitecto.*

**Palabras clave:** *condiciones laborales, prácticas cambiantes, compromiso temporal, reposicionamiento social, empoderamiento.*

## INTRODUCTION

The recent trajectory of Belgian architecture appears as a success story. Criticized strongly in the 1960s and 1970s, it experienced a notable resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s, steadily gaining prominence and acclaim across Europe. Geert Bekaert, an architecture educator and critic, provided a theoretical framework for this architectural renaissance, interpreting it through a neo-Marxist lens. He characterized a new attitude among architects who employed ironic and poetic manipulations of architectural conventions to nurture a practice that *keeps alive the sense of change and renewal* within everyday contexts. The resulting architecture is inherently non-generic, artistic, yet avoids spectacle. It operates subtly within the fabric of everyday life to counteract the looming threat of cultural homogenization.<sup>1</sup> These insights were articulated in the late 1980s, well before the emergence of *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle* practices, now often associated with Belgian architectural culture. Nevertheless, they remain relevant and applicable to numerous recent projects, including those featured in this journal.

This long-term perspective holds significance for me: the Belgian architectural tradition has slowly cultivated fertile ground for the adoption of new practices such as *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle*, rather than the reverse. In other words, it's not the architectural strategy that precipitated the shift in attitude, but rather the pre-existing mindset that seamlessly adapted to the new architectural paradigm. Therefore, I hypothesize that viewing Belgian architectural culture as a suitable model for catalyzing a paradigm shift among architects is an anachronism. While initiatives such as 'reducing, reusing, recycling' or the use of *irony and poetry* may hold appeal, they often fail to disrupt the status quo within the construction sector. Despite efforts, many renovations still excessively consume resources and contribute to

profit-driven practices and gentrification. They seldom address the underlying exploitation and hierarchical dynamics pervasive in construction sites and architectural offices. Contemporary Belgian architecture showcases architects' adeptness at adhering to environmental standards, yet falls short of ensuring active engagement in fostering climate and social justice.

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes' call for a moratorium on new construction prompts a thorough examination of internal practices within architectural firms as a crucial initial step for driving change in the construction sector.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that she is correct. Today, our focus should be on addressing what is hindering Belgian architectural culture: its lack of inclusivity. The pursuit of poetic and non-generic architecture demands significant time commitments, often leaving little opportunity to explore beyond the office, observe broader societal landscapes, and reflect on architects' own working conditions. According to a survey by the European Council of Architects, Belgium has the highest rate of freelance architects in Europe, at 35%.<sup>3</sup> This freelance status primarily affects young, talented architects who offer their creative skills to firms without formal contracts, paid leave, and for relatively modest salaries (which are challenging to quantify due to their independent status and the lack of statistical data). In examining the profession's historical evolution, Pier Vittorio Aureli and Marson Korbi caution against this trend: beneath the facade of a few stars, the average architect has become a precarious worker, whose impoverishment is inversely proportional to the wealth they help generate in the world of speculation and real estate promotion.<sup>4</sup> By imposing higher quality standards than what clients are willing to pay for, architects shoot themselves in the foot twice. First, they create working conditions that render architectural firms non-inclusive, as the imbalance between time

and compensation makes them inaccessible to individuals from various socio-economic and gender backgrounds. Second, they risk secluding themselves in an ivory tower caused by self-imposed standards.

In this article, I do not claim to provide a miraculous solution to address these challenging issues. Instead, my aim is to seize this publishing opportunity to explore inspiring practices. The two pairs of individuals I encountered have consciously chosen to depart from architectural offices and their usual working conditions to engage directly with local communities. In my view, their narratives extend an invitation to reconsider our work frameworks, our time commitments, our relationships with users, and to redefine project evaluation criteria. On a broader scale, they encourage us to reflect on the social significance of the architect's work.

#### **IVAN KNIPPING AND VALENTINE DUFRASNE – A SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE TO SHARE<sup>5</sup>**

I met Ivan and Valentine at the headquarters of the non-profit organization Convivence-Samenleven in the heart of Brussels.<sup>6</sup> This is where they conduct their consultations, helping tenants and landlords in addressing housing concerns. Together, we delved into topics like unsanitary conditions, gentrification, rent freezes and, in essence, the fundamental right to housing.

We initiated the conversation by discussing the frustrations they faced during their time as architects, experiences that fueled their social commitment and led them to the non-profit sector. While working as a freelance, Ivan observed that creative work was rarely a significant part of his schedule. Financial considerations on construction sites and the relentless pursuit of profitability by developers took precedence. Valentine found herself caught between affluent clients who stifled her creativity with their imposition of conventional designs and less privileged ones struggling to comprehend her high fees. A turning point for her occurred during a conference by Sarah de Laet, an activist for the right to housing.<sup>7</sup> The event sparked her realization that her architectural skills could be harnessed in the non-profit sector to address social inequalities related to housing. By expressing this, Valentine extends beyond the obligation of providing minimal shelter. She embraces the broader concept of a *home* – a place where one feels secure and a fundamental aspect for accessing various rights and social assistance-. Eventually, both Ivan and Valentine decided to depart from their current positions and seek alternative employment aligning with their ethics, even if it meant potentially sacrificing creative design in the process.

Now, Ivan and Valentine are colleagues at Convivence-Samenleven. Ivan focuses on tenants. He conducts consultations, visits their homes, and attempts to objectively assess their issues. He often has to differentiate between structural problems that fall under the landlord's responsibility (such as roof leaks) and occupancy issues caused by the tenant (for example, mold due to lack of heating). Ivan seeks to allocate responsibilities and proposes technical solutions. He collaborates with a social worker who maintains direct contact with the tenant, while Ivan communicates with the landlord. Conflicts are frequent during these exchanges. Dividing tasks helps bypass rent arrears issues and refocus discussions on technical improvement points. Valentine is responsible for the owner-occupier segment, predominantly consisting of financially precarious homeowners. She conducts home visits and audits to identify priority actions for repairing damages and improving housing comfort. Energy improvements, assistance in obtaining energy grants are crucial aspects of her work. However, sometimes, owners lack sufficient funds for proper works, and in such cases, improvements are made on a very small scale, advising, for example, the installation of door drafts and curtains to reduce acoustic disturbances between two apartments.

Ivan and Valentine's work straddles both technical and social aspects. Substandard housing is not always caused by material unsuitability. It can also result from conflicts and administrative issues (such as living under the threat of eviction). It has often an invasive effect. The occupant faces the issue daily, a situation that can lead to a generalized sense of discomfort and to a mental burden.

Ivan and Valentine typically work with individuals facing the lowest incomes and/or experiencing discrimination, leading to challenges in securing suitable housing. The available housing options are scarce, and the demand is high. Landlords frequently opt to seek alternative tenants rather than invest in property improvements. In such conditions, the process of finding new accommodation often extends beyond a year. This explains why tenants in substandard housing often refuse Convivence-Samenleven's intervention with their landlord. They fear being evicted if they assert their rights. Additionally, some tenants may perceive their landlords as benefactors for providing shelter, even when that shelter is, in reality, a windowless basement with exorbitant rent.

Faced with these complex situations, Valentine and Ivan's consultations act as band-aids –useful but inevitably insufficient to change the system-. Soon, our discussion took a political turn, to identify structural solutions. In Brussels, over 50,000 people are on waiting lists for social housing. The first demand of housing rights activists is simple: more social housing needs to be created to meet the needs of vulnerable populations and prevent the private sector from continually raising rents. Ivan also mentioned the rent grid, a tool implemented by the Brussels-Capital Region to set rent based on a property's size and location. He regrets that the tool is not mandatory but only incentivizes. Additionally, Convivence-Samenleven calls for the creation of a rental parity commission that would open up the legal right to negotiate the lease contract after its signing. Often, contracts are signed hastily and under pressure. Tenants frequently realize afterward that the rent demanded is exorbitant.

The fundamental issue for Ivan and Valentine is that housing is considered a commodity and not a right. This puts architects and urban planners in paradoxical situations where balance is difficult, if not impossible, to find. The Brussels-Capital Region has embarked on an ambitious energy renovation program for buildings: the RENOLUTION plan, which offers grants to owners who decide to improve the energy performance of their buildings. On the surface, the project is virtuous as it reduces energy consumption and improves residents' comfort. However, the project concerns the non-profit sector because renovating a property for a landlord means increasing the rent. Without constraints on rent, public aids are likely to enrich property owners (who have the duty to maintain their property, with or without aid) but may not reach the most vulnerable tenants who can no longer afford the renovated properties.

The same issue arises regarding public space. Some residents oppose the renovation of their street because it will make their neighbourhood more attractive to investors, inevitably driving up prices. However, doing nothing and watching the deterioration of spaces and buildings is also not an option. So, how can renovations ensure that they do not lead to evictions and do not accelerate the gentrification front threatening central Brussels? Valentine and Ivan's answer lies in patient, small-scale works, to help people stay in their homes and neighborhoods. The association organizes training sessions for maintenance and small repairs: knowing how to install a shelf, daring to nail into the wall, learning to clean one's home well. These actions improve daily life and help tenants feel empowered when dealing with landlords.

Valentine and Ivan possess a rare expertise among architects. Through consultations, visits, and activism, they are constantly in contact with the most vulnerable occupants, understanding their problems. They regret that the situation of these individuals does not receive more attention from the political sphere. They also observe that there is little space for dialogue to share their experiences with other architects, engineers, and urban planners. The few times such exchanges have been possible, Ivan admits that he did not feel heard, as engineers preferred to believe the results of their software calculations rather than his experiential feedback on the future occupants' usage patterns. However, Valentine and Ivan's advice to designers is simple: simplify technical choices and consider usage. They also hope that in the future, the incorporation of social work into the education and work of architects will become more prevalent.

## MARIANITA PALUMBO AND BERNARDO ROBLES HIDALGO – MAINTENANCE MATTERS<sup>9</sup>

Bernardo and Marianita are members of the Mama collective (maintenance matters). Bernardo is an architect and manager for construction. He currently holds the self-defined position of chief janitor within the non-profit organization Toestand for the Parc Ouest project in Molenbeek –a park he describes as “slowly being constructed–.”<sup>9</sup> Marianita is an anthropologist and professor at the School of Architecture and Landscape of Lille (ENSAPL). Together, they lead various projects involving occupation, transitional urbanism, and anthropological research.

I met them in the Pavilion of Parc Ouest for an extended exchange, occasionally interrupted by a neighbor bringing two hens for the park’s chicken coop or a mother and her son asking questions about the chess sessions held every Saturday in the pavilion. Marianita emphasized that sometimes one has to create their own commission. Some of their works respond to a call for proposals, but others are the result of their own initiative, not always tied to a monetary economy. Bernardo often looked out the window, attentive to the comings and goings in the park. Here, he knows everyone: the maintenance staff and their chief, children, parents, athletes, foxes...

Freshly graduated, Bernardo initially engaged in open competitions. Frequently well-ranked, he found a sense of fulfillment until a computer error granted him access to all submissions received by the organizer of a competition in which he participated. A total of 300 proposals had been submitted, representing a substantial amount of work, given the fact that each team probably consisted of 3 or 4 people. Bernardo questioned: What if these 1200 individuals directed their efforts towards transforming their immediate environment? This computer mishap prompted him to embark on an initial experiment in his hometown. A stockpile of broken granite benches owned by the municipality became his resource. He persuaded a forklift operator to assist in relocating the stones. He selected key locations, to accentuate the site’s landscape qualities by encouraging passersby to pause. The operation was straightforward and immediate. Between thinking and doing, there was only one step, rather than a thousand clicks.

The significance of this anecdote lies in the central role that fieldwork plays within the Bernardo and Marianita duo. This approach is fervently endorsed by Marianita, who, in her role as an anthropologist, considers on-site observation a crucial tool for knowledge generation. Transitional urbanism stands out as a primary strategy for them, providing an immersive perspective to understand how people inhabit a site. Moreover, it opens a pathway for site users to actively assert their claims, going beyond mere expressions of desire such as ‘I want a park.’ Instead, it activates our collective capacity for action: aspiring to a park translates into initiating the process by organizing a picnic on the vacant lot slated for transformation.

Among their foundational experiences, Bernardo and Marianita also mentioned their time at 123 Rue Royale, an occupation of a vacant office building progressively transformed in a collective home, housing around 60 people, running between 2007 and 2018 in the heart of Brussels. Living four years and until its end in this place sparked their interest in maintenance issues and made them understand the pivotal role played by occupants in sustaining the building –keeping it alive through communal care–. Meanwhile, Bernardo joined the interdisciplinary team gathered by architect Koen Berghmans in response to the open call from the Vlaams Architectuurinstituut (VAi) for the Belgian pavilion at the 15<sup>th</sup> International Venice Architecture Biennale (2016). In their proposal *Onderhoud als vak / Maintenance as craft*, they formalized their reflections about the intrinsic link between maintenance and architecture and the necessity for contemporary architects to re-examine matter, time and space of their conception process through the lens of maintenance. Finalist though not selected, this proposal consolidated Koen and Bernardo collaboration around maintenance matters and the beginning of MAMA collective and its website cataloguing various practices and political claims associated with maintenance.<sup>10</sup> The focus on maintenance dovetails with two additional concerns. Firstly, the material aspect: confronted with a significant

existing building stock, real estate vacancies, and the pressing need for housing, architects face a pivotal question—should they persist in building anew, or should they adapt their practices to maintain and inhabit what is already there? Secondly, their concern extends to often invisible workers and difficult working conditions in the construction and building maintenance sector, which they believe should be considered in the development of architectural projects.

Between 2016 and 2019, Bernardo was in charge of coordinating the temporary occupation of Place Marie Moscou for the non-profit organization Toestand. This position provided him with an opportunity to apply their insights on the significance of maintenance roles. The project team was committed to transforming the perception of the site and finding common ground among the various users of the site, ensuring, for example, that their work did not involve the eviction of those who used to drink alcohol on the benches. For Bernardo and Marianita, the response to conflicts in public space is not primarily material. The alternative they support rather relies on the human resources made available to accompany and manage the conflicts. In this regard, the janitor, park keeper, gardener –figures that tend to disappear from the management of public spaces– need to be revalued and strengthened. Bernardo shared with me his experience with the broken pots. At the beginning of the occupation, to counter the sense of insecurity, he placed potted plants –objects inherently fragile and delicate– on the square. The public was surprised, thinking the pots would be vandalized or stolen. Indeed, that was the case at the start of the operation. For several weeks, Bernardo meticulously replaced the stolen and broken pots until the damage stopped. The thieves and vandals had done enough; they grew tired. In a few weeks, the presence of potted plants in the square normalized. They were appropriated by the occupants, contributing to giving the square an almost domestic character. For Bernardo and Marianita, the experience was a success because it demonstrated the effectiveness of micro-interventions combined with a human presence on-site.

Transitional urbanism acts as a transformative exercise, impacting not only residents reclaiming their living spaces but, significantly, challenging public authorities to adapt to changing dynamics. In 2020, Bernardo and Marianita collaborated with the urban planning and architectural firm Metapolis, contributing to the design team for the Kolderbos social housing renovation master plan in Genk. In coherence with Marianita long-term and multisite ethnography of collective housing complex transformations by their inhabitants, which focuses especially on the topic of the ground floor in-between slabs spaces, Bernardo and Marianita proposed to move to Kolderbos with their two daughters for a family participative observation process.<sup>11</sup> Observing that some ground-floor residents had taken ownership of the outdoor space in front of their homes, transforming it into a *devanture* inspired by the lexicon of neighboring suburban areas –complete with trampolines, barbecue grills, tables, and garden chairs– Bernardo and Marianita recognized an opportunity to activate the underutilized green spaces at the back of the blocks. They proposed supporting and fostering the ongoing dynamic by removing railings and constructing stairs to provide all ground-floor flats with direct access to the collective garden. They asked for the help of the maintenance agents, who could participate in the works, rather than being confined to the task of mowing the lawn, an activity that doesn’t afford them much autonomy. While the idea seemed straightforward, the challenge laid for them in convincing all stakeholders –social landlord, site manager, municipality, neighborhood manager– that the residents could become key contributors to site maintenance, and that the daily tasks of maintenance agents could be adjusted. Bernardo and Marianita advocate for more flexibility in allocating responsibilities among public authorities, maintenance agents and inhabitants. In this regard, they consider hands-on architecture and urbanism as an important place for training.

However, they do not embrace temporariness for its own sake. They outline three conditions for justifying transitional urbanism: a prolonged duration, the client’s receptivity (ensuring that the interventions are not merely a strategy to prevent real squatting), and a clear prior agreement that the temporary efforts

aim to influence long-term dynamics. They also urge public authorities and architects to discard the concept of a vernissage (when the ribbon is cut to signify project completion). In their view, a project is never truly finished. On the contrary, the commencement of occupation, the emergence of new uses, is a critical juncture where the issue of maintenance deserves increased attention. To this end, they propose a modification of project evaluation criteria and public space management, advocating for the inclusion of human resources to facilitate a *smooth landing* of the project into the hands of the inhabitants.

Bernardo and Marianita's mode of thinking, while perplexing for public authorities, can also be confounding for fellow designers. Their practice is evolutionary, intertwining professional methods with life-oriented approaches – such as collectively managing their own living spaces or immersing themselves in Kolderbos with their families for a month to study and understand the place–. They challenge conventional boundaries, not only between work and private life but also between research and practice. Their approach seamlessly oscillates between anthropological observation and the execution of micro-interventions. Their affinity for blending categories stems from their belief that everything falls under the overarching concept of inhabiting: inhabiting space as a powerful and political act, inhabiting space to keep it alive.

## CONCLUSION

Bernardo, Marianita, Ivan, and Valentine share the common trait of not working in a traditional architecture office. They have escaped the status of freelancers or self-employed professionals, favoring the non-profit sector and its fieldwork, visits, permanent presence. By listening to them, it seems that this common trait modifies their practice and thinking, at least along three dimensions.

### Time

Their practices challenge the conventional notion of the finalized product within architecture. By addressing housing issues and underscoring the importance of maintenance, they shed light on the lifespan of a space both before and after designers' departure, prompting a reevaluation of architectural processes over extended timeframes. Their work also challenges the traditional time management of architects. Each of them dedicates a significant amount of time to observation and listening, at the expense of the design process. Unlike what Ivan and Valentine might suggest, I don't think their work lacks a creative dimension, but the temporal balance has shifted: an extensive phase of observation precedes and encompasses a straightforward proposal phase. *Reduce, reuse, recycle* thus primarily applies to their work time, which constitutes a first key variable for a paradigm shift.

### First step

Fieldwork, as emphasized by Marianita, plays a pivotal role in reshaping class dynamics. The architect is a figure emanating from the bourgeoisie, akin to a doctor. Stepping out of the office and making oneself available on site is a crucial symbolic gesture to challenge the class distinction. On the opposite, there may be a temptation for architects to distance themselves from political issues like the housing and energy crisis, asserting that these concerns fall beyond their design skills. But Bernardo, Marianita, Ivan, and Valentine's journeys testify to the contrary by showing that architectural skills are useful within the realm of social work. Rather than passively expecting people to participate, we should be bold enough to initiate encounters ourselves. The paradigm shift should also involve a social repositioning.

### Empowerment

Ultimately, Bernardo, Marianita, Ivan, and Valentine's endeavors share a common pursuit of empowerment through the act of inhabiting. Feeling better in your home because you engage in its maintenance and know your rights. Transforming a space and its negative perception through the presence of a park guardian. Reclaiming spaces for picnics. Installing old broken granite blocks or delicate plant pots. All of this consistently revolves around reinstating agency to inhabitants, especially those from working-class backgrounds, who might find formally renovated spaces alien to their own

lifestyles. The concept of the right to the city, as theorized by Henri Lefevre in the 1960s, permeates the two interviews. How can a city be truly inclusive, counteracting the eviction of the working class and the homogenization of lifestyles? What strategies should we develop to maintain people's agency in the urban-making process? These questions, while not new, remain pertinent and must not be overlooked when contemplating the future role of architects. I believe that a genuine paradigm shift cannot occur without re-acknowledging the inherently political nature of space.

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- 2 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, « Un moratoire sur les nouvelles constructions, » public lecture at Ateliers Nocturnes, Free University of Brussels, January, 23, 2024.
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- 6 Convivence-samenleven is a non-profit association dedicated to combating the commodification of housing. <https://www.convivence-samenleven.be>
- 7 Sarah De Laet, "J'habite, tu habites, ils spéculent," (various locations, 2021-2024). <https://conferences-gesticulees.net/conferences/jhabite-tu-habites-ils-speculent>
- 8 Interviewed by the author, February 15, 2024.
- 9 Toestand is a non-profit association that support "the temporary use of vacant urban spaces by developing an inclusive social and cultural dynamics, based on meeting, action and creation." <https://toestand.be>
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- 11 Olivier Boucheron and Maria Anita Palumbo, *L'entre-deux barres, Une ethnographie de la transformation des ensembles de logements collectifs par leurs habitants*, (Saint-Etienne : PUSE, 2023), 772

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