Lateral Shifts:
Rethinking Real Estate Through the Design-Based Studio

One of the central questions of this conference is: what kind of hunches do you bring to the academic environment and why? With the following example in this paper we want to reflect both on possible themes and on the specificity of the studio setting.

INTRO

In the design research studio 'Reshaping the Commons', tutored by Lara Schrijver and Sven Verbruggen, students produce a thesis in which they combine theory and design—making utopian realistic[1] projects that catalyse alternative uses of commons. Situating their proposals against the backdrop of local challenges and existing sites implies a component of realism. The quest for innovative intentions, on the other hand, introduces a visionary or utopian element. The approach of the studio builds upon other design-based research in Flanders such as Labo XX, Antwerp Metabolism, and The Ambition of the Territory—reports that elaborate on strategic urban development and architectural research focused primarily on Flanders yet also reflecting on comparable urban conditions on a more global scale.[2]

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Figure 1. Cover of architectural researsch studio report

ANALYSIS RESIDUAL SPACES IN ANTWERP

Total of vacant parcels	354
Total surface of residual spaces	97.787 sqm
Total number of vacant buildings	522
Total surface of empty buildings	156.419 sqm
Combined total surface	254.206 sqm

254.206 m2 Residual Spaces in the Historic City of Antwerp
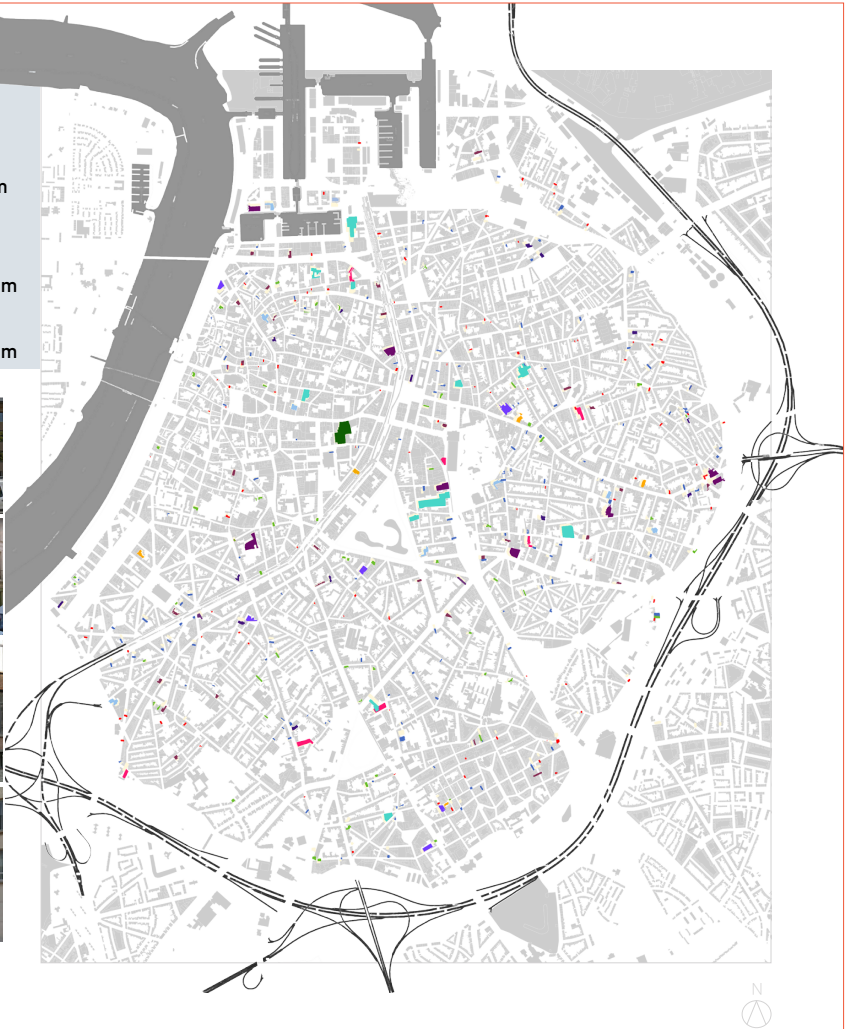
Figure 2. Mapping the residual spaces in Antwerp. (Images made by Annelies De Langh, edited by Sven Verbruggen)

In the 2017-18 version of this studio, the central question was: what can architecture do? Or, how can we pursue an effective correlation between the built environment and the formation of individual and collective habits? In contemporary prescriptive theory the notion of architectural engagement is often situated in shared spaces and new collectives. In order to investigate this, students explored current ideas on the commons and on shared spaces, while also formulating a design brief that ought to impact how daily life took form. The design brief then took substance in a topical issue such as an ongoing conflict between the city of Antwerp and private landowners that results in the long-term disuse of residual spaces—a paradoxical impasse, given that the city needs to be densified and a housing shortage exists. The example we explore in this paper is an interesting result from a group of three students—out of sixteen students participating—who built on the ideas of collective housing, in the process shifting their focus to the underlying mechanisms of real estate and thus addressing the urgency of this ongoing conflict. Together they presented a proposal on three different levels or scales. In the following paragraphs we will briefly expand on the students' project and reflect on how and why we pursue specific hunches together with the students.

PROJECT

Picture the possibility of sweeping up all the residual spaces of a city, of 'tagging' them as shares in a new form of real estate cooperative, where each little sliver of space becomes worthy of trade—not in the current sense of financial capitalism, but as a way of 'buying into' a collective housing development. This may sound like a revisiting of Gordon Matta-Clark's 1973 project on New York real estate (Reality Properties: Fake Estates),[3] but it was a research-based design thesis, seeking a way to address the many lost snippets of unusable space throughout the city if Antwerp, and the urgent need for affordable collective housing.
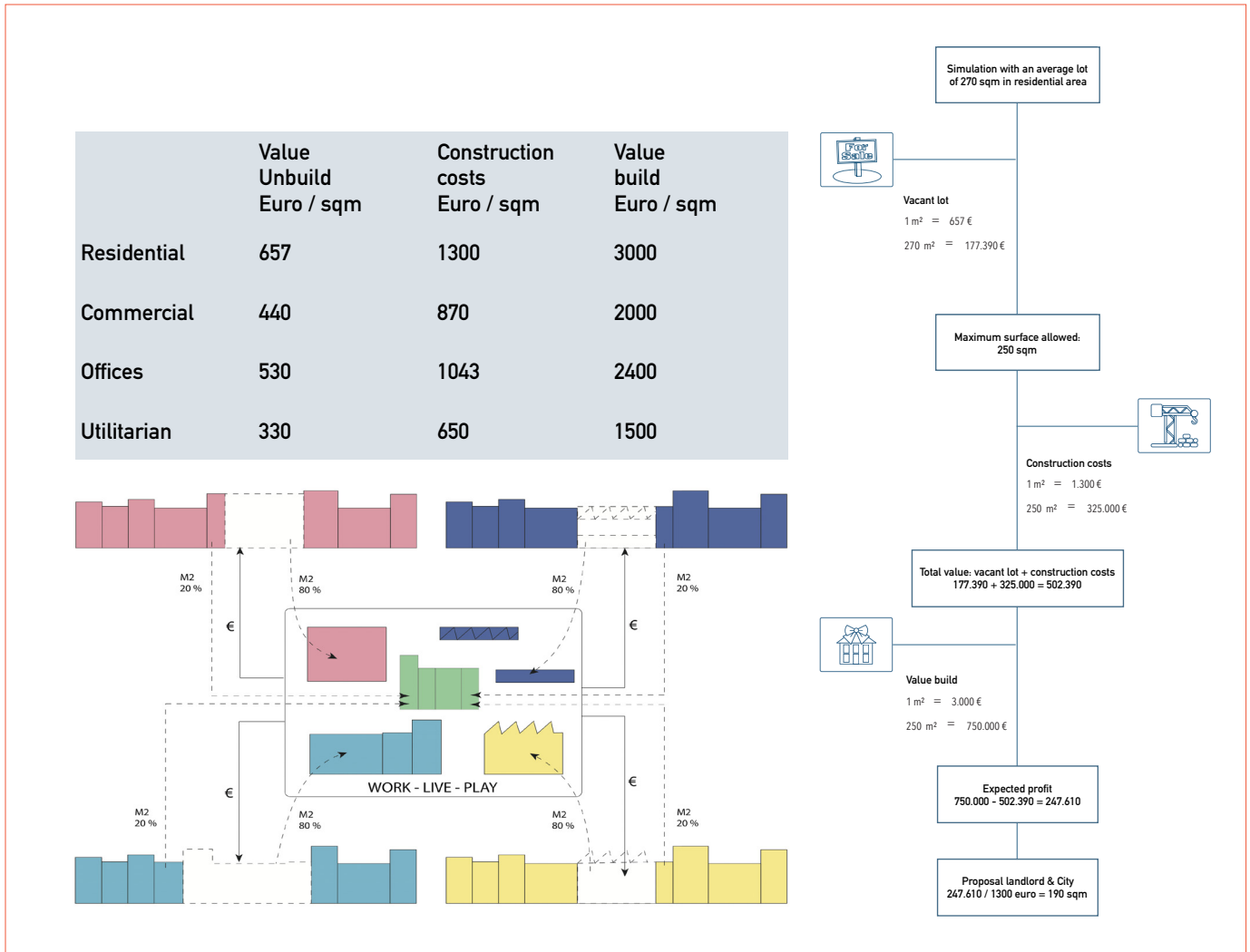
	Value Unbuild Euro / sqm	Construction costs Euro / sqm	Value build Euro / sqm
Residential	657	1300	3000
Commercial	440	870	2000
Offices	530	1043	2400
Utilitarian	330	650	1500

Figure 3. Simulating costs and profits. (Images and charts made by Annelies De Langh, edited by Sven Verbruggen)

The threesome Annelies De Langh, Sofie Dascotte, and Nathalie Casteels first presented individual statements, each working towards an individual thesis, but as their projects developed, they began working together on the research and eventually collaborated on defining their respective design proposals. At the time, in August 2017, a local newspaper had reported an urgent problem: Antwerp had a large number of unused vacant lots in the middle of the city resulting from a particular conflict. The city refused a number of landowners permission to develop their plots, often because these landowners wanted to 'overdevelop': they requested more than regulations allowed for in order to maximize their profits.

The students went into the city and mapped all these problematic lots. Figure 2 gives an impression of how these vacant sites look today and how they are spread throughout the city. Not developing these residual spaces results in a paradoxical gridlock, because a developed equivalent of all these lots is needed to cope with current and future housing demands.

When mapping out these spaces the students calculated some critical numbers: about 250.000 square meters are currently vacant in Antwerp. The colored patches in Figure 2 represent spaces that are in the middle of these conflicts. The question for the students then became how to recuperate 250.000 square meters for the city of Antwerp.

The first student, Annelies De Langh, came up with the idea to gather all these landowners and form a collective. In this way, rather than being numerous individual opponents to the city, they would become a substantial group that can negotiate with the city on their behalf. Additionally, Annelies argued that through this critical mass, an opportunity could emerge in spatial organization. Individual houses typically consist of 80% programmed spaces and 20% secondary spaces such as stairs, corridors, technical areas, and other serving spaces. If one were to combine a number of individual houses into a bigger project, the accumulation of these secondary spaces becomes large enough to accommodate new programme. This is what we call

Figure 4. Project proposal that combines transferable Development Rights of residual spaces. (Images made by Annelies De Langh, edited by Sven Verbruggen)

The new development would have to provide each shareholder 192 square metres to generate a profit equivalent to if they had developed their own private lot. Figure 4 shows a potential design for such a proj-ect. The green area is the extra space—the 20% secondary spaces grouped together—that emerges out of this program as potentially new spaces and services.

At the time of the thesis studio a problematic competition was going on to develop a large urban block close to the Old Harbour and nearby the Antwerp Museum MAS. The local company 'Cores devel-opment' was trying to develop this site, but it took a while to find a bal-anced project proposal that could convince the city and to which they as developers were prepared to commit to. Annelies chose this site for her project: one big ensemble that gathers all the development rights of the individual landowners—proportionally taking into account a variety of specific house-work-related demands such as the required number of dwellings, apartments, micro-units, offices and retail spac-es and so on.[4] With the extra 20% 'Specials', the project could address
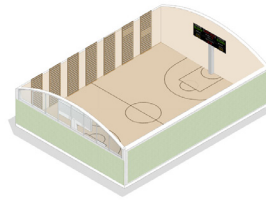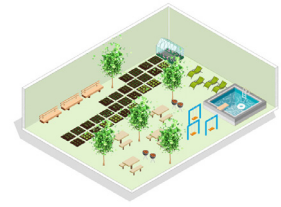
| SPECIAL 1: URBAN FARM | SPECIAL 2: SPORTS | SPECIAL 3: ATELIER / EDUCATION | SPECIAL 4: RECREATION |

Figure 5. Project proposal that combines transferable Development Rights of residual spaces. (Images made by Annelies De Langh, edited by Sven Verbruggen)

societal needs desired by the city much better than strictly private developments would have been able to do. Figure 5 shows that Annelies proposed for example urban farming, sports, studios, education, and recreation without actually interfering with the interest or profit of the private units. In a way she succeeds in addressing the needs of the city in combination with the needs of the private landowners. This is a realistic project with the green areas showing how these gained spaces allow for serving a larger collective.

The second student, Sofie Dascotte, addressed a new problem in trying to dismantle this conflict or paradox. She addressed the vacant spaces that would remain once the first project succeeded in transferring the development rights to one large-scale building ensemble. She analysed a generic part of the city that consists of several urban blocks with some vacant lots scattered throughout. If the idea of Annelies worked, then all the owners of residual spaces would have traded their private property for shares in the collective, leaving

behind vacant areas for the city to develop in a different way. As profit has already been made elsewhere, these plots are no longer part of a conflict. Figure 6 shows that as a result, openings arise to the inner courtyards of these dense urban blocks. The residual spaces no longer have to be fenced off and can become part of a semi-public collective space. Sofie anticipated that the other inhabitants would start negotiating for a bigger shared or collective garden, starting with the ones adjacent to the protruding openings. Eventually, this might create a space of negotiation that in a progressive state com-pletely breaks open the original block into separate parts. The setting evolves from a block with a common enclosed garden to a new collec-tive space expanding into a larger network. Decomposing the blocks this way would also mean introducing new fronts to the unveiled sides of the block parts. The new common spaces will not only focus on needs of the collective that constituted the block in the first place. When dealing with needs of other collectives, each block will start to relate to other parts in this new tapestry of decomposed blocks to
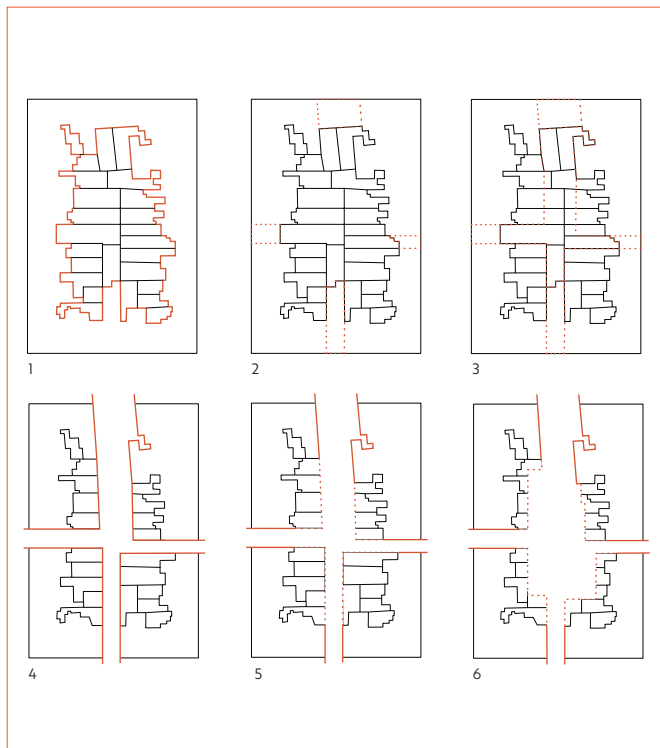
Figure 6. Different phases of transforming a generic urban block. (Image made by Sofie Dascotte, edited by Sven Verbruggen)

Figure 7. The colective as a network. (Image made by Sofie Dascotte, edited by Sven Verbruggen)

house specific needs. Ultimately by addressing the edges or borders of the renewed settings, Sofie invented an urban pattern that makes a network of low-speed traffic streets connected to the inner courts, turning the city into a diversified community with a lot of sharing spaces and common infrastructure [Shown in Figure 7].

Finally, the third student, Nathalie Casteels, concentrated on the demands that could arise during the transformation or transition into this new urban fabric. One could think of small initiatives when the urban blocks are not yet transformed into this network of shared spaces. Nathalie considered a setting in which one collective inner space exists as a bubble and compared it to a setting in which several blocks incorporating certain functions or needs such as a repair shop, a rentable lodging, bicycle sheds, playgrounds, and the storage and supply of alternative energy [Figure 8]. One element in her project is the idea of a very small unit—a new typology—that would emerge inside these urban blocks and in the midst of transformation, start forming little districts within this new tapestry. Nathalie's concern during her research was a future in which many people will be living alone or be part of a small household. Cooperating with Sofie and Annelies provided her with a utopian realistic context to embed historic insights on minimal housing unit into a modern, western European city.

This paper briefly summarizes the key features and innovations of the three projects, by students Annelies De Langh, Sofie Dascotte, and Nathalie Casteels, and reflects on the elements in the studio
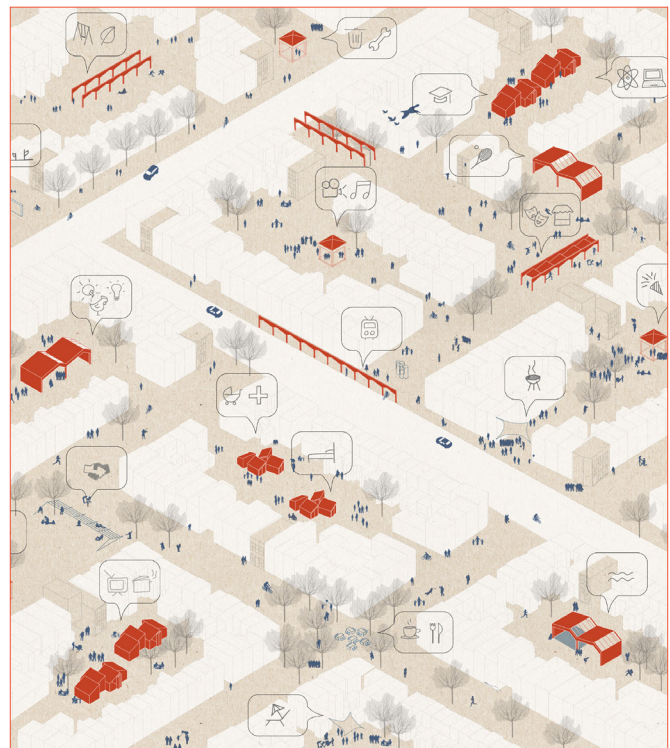
brief that triggered a particular approach. Together they conceived of a city block defined primarily by the connective tissue of shared spaces. What has not been claimed by collective spaces, remains to be filled in with houses. Finally, Nathalie added in the tiny house as a new type of real estate development. Providing an architecturally challenging form to minimal living, The architectural research projects trade square meters for spatial quality. Together, these three projects form a semi-autonomous triad of design proposals meant to provoke new ways of thinking about the city and its dwelling spaces.

In light of this conference, we make explicit the following simmering hunches that we—as tutors—added to their inquiry:

> From a pedagogical or theoretical point of view, we challenged them to consider how we ought to recuperate theoretical legacies such as Augé's Non Places, or Sola-Morales's Terrain Vague within a contemporary context?
> From a research point of view, we aimed at projecting a sequence of opportunities that follow from solving this initial gridlock around residual spaces in Antwerp.
> By making the connection with the AMS, these students had to explore how these hunches can be grounded in real policies.
> We encouraged and guided them in producing an image of a more dense and diverse urban environment by means of progressive private partners. In the end we hope to steer the research hunch towards an instrument that can enrich the aims of real-estate/
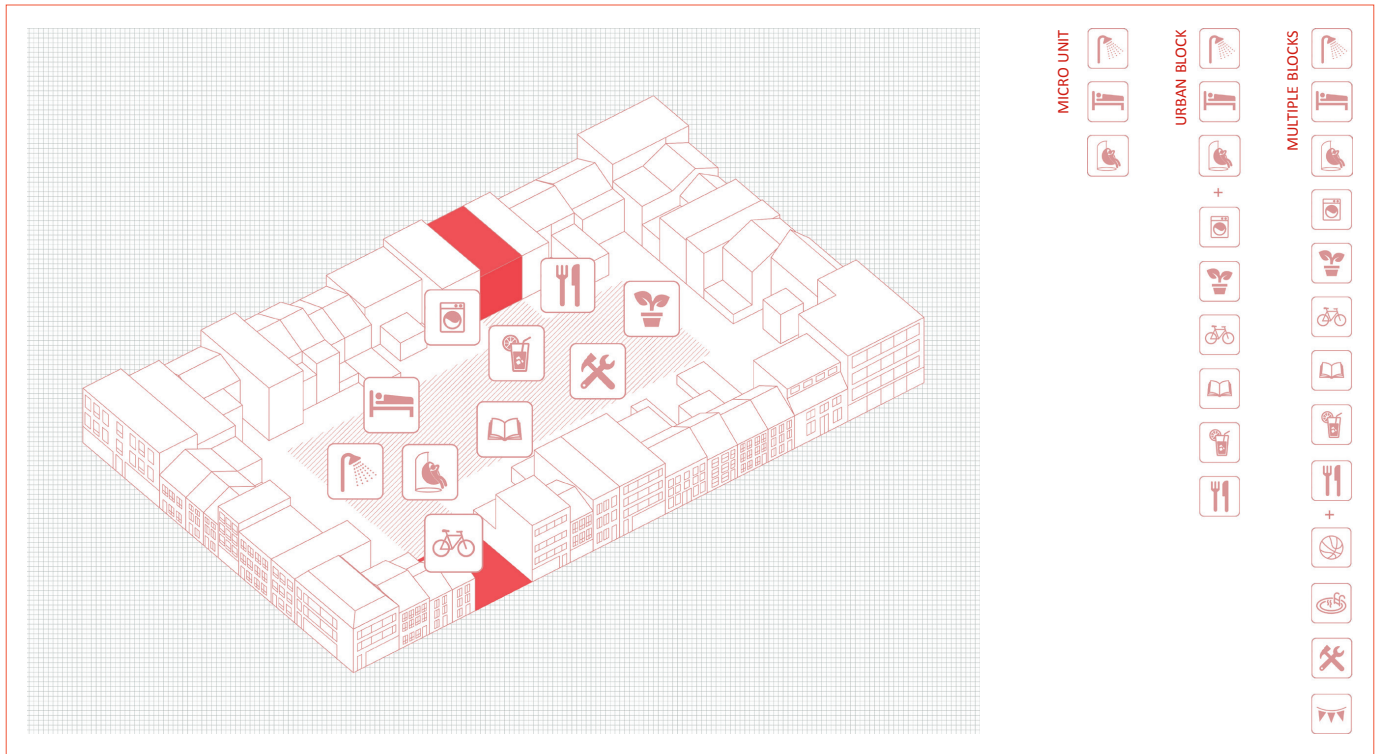
Figure 8. Imagining the common needs that surpass a single urban block. (Images made by Nathalie Casteels, edited by Sven Verbruggen)

developer-driven urbanism with collective social goals.

The project was presented to the AMS as a course lecture for local developers and was well received. It was also presented at the local private partner, Cores Development, who is in charge of developing the central site used in this research. The key questions, uttered at both the AMS lecture and by the CDO of Cores Development, focused on developing the network of residual spaces that would serve as a diversified tapestry running through several urban blocks. In other words, the proposed dissolvement of the paradoxical gridlock was received as realistic and plausible. While the design proposals seemed convincing the research hunch shifted towards a new topic to explore: what would be the set of rules, the imagined policies, and which parties would be considered as potential stakeholders to develop the available residual spaces?

THE STUDIO

The larger studio focuses on a broad framework, setting an agenda through a particular design brief, but leaving it sufficiently open that many paths may be taken. In this case, the increasing need for (and interest in) collective housing is the central binding feature between all the projects, though the approach is quite individualized. Granted, a studio is only as good as the students that take it—the same studio brief handed to different groups can end up with varying results. Yet our experience of recent studios in Antwerp does suggest that all studio briefs are not created equal. What it maintains is a balance

between collective work on a theoretical framework and problem, and individual trajectories addressing the particular design brief. While this may seem self-evident, the studio engages a combination of collaboration, with students working through a particular problem, sharing their insights with one another (bi)weekly.

A key feature within the studio is to include shifts between theory and analysis on the one hand, and design and visual exploration on the other. These shifts took place at irregular intervals, depending on the process of the students. One particularly strong moment took place nearly at the end of the year, when a workshop with students from Dessau focused on singular images as a storytelling mechanism. Yet even earlier in the studio, when the analysis—a key element in defining constraints and conditions for the design brief—reached a point that no further answers were to be found, the exercises in visualization, diagramming or even designing a particular space, provided relief from the step-by-step process of analyzing the design problem.

CONCLUSION

The projects treated in this paper were in fact individually formulated projects which were positioned as the three scales of rethinking approaches to city spaces and their dwellings. On the macro scale sits a rethinking of real estate ownership (Annelies De Langh), on the meso scale the collective enfilade as the primary defining space (Sofie Dascotte), and on the micro scale the high-quality small-footprint dwelling (Nathalie Casteels).

We feel, as such, that this studio opens a realm of possible approaches to 'city-making' through architecture, to seeking material articulations of the commons, and to rethinking what architecture may do in the face of societal and environmental problems far beyond its own scope. For architectural researchers such as ourselves, the research studio may well be the single and best place to incubate and propel our hunches and explore new possibilities. The studio serves as a safe zone for faculty design researchers—but also concerned parties external to the academic environment—to test new hunches before they turn into new research projects. Ideas need time to incubate. The architectural research studio becomes the contemporary coffee house of exploration—possibly one of the few remaining incubating environments in our contemporary society.

Notes

1. A phase coined by Reinhold Martin—to demand a more socio-politically engaged role for academics—in his article "Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism." In Constructing a New Agenda: Architectural Theory 1993-2009, edited by A. Krista Sykes, 346-62. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005. The phrase has been translated towards the studio environment by Sven Verbruggen in his article "Building a World of References; Reinhold Martin's Utopian Realism into Practice: Counterprojects Revisited," in Theory by Design, edited by Els De Vos et al. Antwerp: UPA University Press, 2013.

2. 'Metabolisme van Antwerpen: Stad van Stromen' (2018) is a report ordered by the city of Antwerp, OVAM, Departement Omgeving, Havenbedrijf Antwerpen NV, and Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, with a focus on energy, air quality, climate adaptation in relation to a scarcity of drinking water, and the ambition of a circular economy. 'Labo XX' (2014) is a report ordered by the city of Antwerp to study challenges and opportunities in urban development of the 20th century built environment with a focus on densification and reconversions to meet with sustainable goals set for 2020. 'The Ambition of the Territory' (2012) is a report produced as a contribution to the 13th international architectural exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia 2012, expanding on alternative use of commons and the necessary reorganisation of the urbanised territory of Europe.

3. See Stephen Walker, 'Gordon Matta-Clark: Drawing on Architecture', in Grey Room, No. 18 (Winter, 2004): 108-131. The MIT Press.

4. Annelies De Langh used the actual programme of demands as part of the ongoing competition to anticipate realistic demands and ratios of specific functions.