

THE CRITICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLLECTIVE SPACE AND COLLECTIVE USE

The case of the Flemish *beluiken*

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Abstract

The design of housing complexes with shared collective spaces, such as courtyards, inner yards or small playgrounds has been subject to a long standing architectural and sociological debate. On the one hand, within the design practice the conviction prevails that certain housing cluster typologies are more sustainable as a socializing space than others, in the sense that they have the ability to facilitate changing social use more easy over time. It is believed that the degree of social interaction and collective use of space is strongly related to ‘depth’ – depending on a complex configuration of proximity, permeability, integration values and delimiting boundaries on a physical, visual and territorial level (i.e. Habraken; Hillier & Hansson; Scheerlinck). It is also believed that other spatial features such as ‘architectural unity’, ‘scale’ and ‘context’ have a socio-psychological impact on the perception of ‘collectivity’ among both inhabitants as outsiders. Unfortunately, this focus on the ‘probabilistic’ relationship between certain spatial features and the degree and quality of social interaction and collective use often seems to blind designers for the impact of other, non-spatial parameters such as ‘maintenance structure’, ‘ownership structure’, ‘socio-economic and cultural background of individuals’, ‘habitat selection’ and ‘government policy’. On the other hand, post-occupancy research by social scientists often (unconsciously) does not take fully into account the relative impact of the specific spatial conditions mentioned above, since ‘collectivity’ is often studied here within stable and hermetically closed club territories where self-selected and homogeneous socio-economic groups of users develop, share, use and/or manage certain features together in the first place. According to us, these studies also lack appropriate analyzing techniques such as abstract architectural drawings of spatial configurations, accompanied with accurate projections of visual territorial productions by users.

In this paper we aim to establish an inter-disciplinary position in the analysis and evaluation of ‘collectivity’ as an urban, dynamic and constantly changing condition, depending on the interaction of various territorial productions by different actors operating in public space and also in time (Kärholm). Therefore, we present empirical research on the Flemish “*beluik*”.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the *beluik* – a cluster of small workers houses arranged around a common courtyard - emerged out of efforts from factory owners and other private speculators to use unproductive inner areas of urban blocks more intensively. Despite their history as strongholds for horrible living conditions, and the fact that they fail to comply with current housing standards and legislation, *beluiken* are highly valued on today's housing market. More than one hundred residual and renovated typo-morphological variants are still inhabited in cities as Ghent, Antwerp, Kortrijk and Leuven. Different household types such as students, young couples and elderly seem to appreciate the quiet, picturesque and (relatively) low-priced collective atmosphere nearby the city centers.

In many *beluiken*, we observed that the collective – often legally public - courtyard has completely been territorialized by greenery, pick-nick tables, chairs, vegetable gardens, garbage and bicycle storages, etc. Although it is tempting to assume that the ‘critical’ spatial configuration of the *beluik* (most of the houses only have one exposed façade, mainly without a private outside space) undoubtedly forces inhabitants to extend their private realm into the collective space, a clear relation between collective space and collective use was at least nuanced. Comparative case-study research revealed very divergent territorial productions within similar configurational and morphological features.

In addition to common research methods such as on-site observations, photo reports and in-depth interviews, also accurate architectural drawings (of configuration and visual territorialisations) were systematically used as both analytical and communicative research methods.

Key-words: collective space, collective use, spatial configuration, territorial production, beluik