

## LANDSCAPES OF LIMINALITY

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**Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, private developers formed the helmsmen of innovative housing types in cities such as Ghent and Budapest. Whether it was the most hardcore speculation on working-class housing or bourgeoisie palaces: in both cities the search for higher density has produced landscapes of robust liminal spaces that stood the test of time as social spaces.**

### **Speculation galore**

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, many European cities had fallen prey to an unprecedented population growth. The resulting housing needs for various population groups soon provided the ideal breeding ground for extensive speculation on housing. Depending on the geographical and political context in which they were created, they took different forms. For example, in Belgian industrializing cities such as Brussels, Liège, Antwerp and, not least, Ghent (as the center of the cotton industry), countless ensembles of workers' houses were crammed onto vacant and often capricious open spaces in existing perimeter blocks. These were initially developed by small private landowners and consisted of cramped single-facade houses clustered around a dead-end alley.

There is no more opportunistic way of distributing as many rental units as possible over a piece of land; some clusters were indeed so small that they barely received a ray of sunlight. In this way, a hidden landscape of in-between spaces with tiny, damp houses and without paving, water supply and sewerage was created, and then is spread over the entire historical city center. Because these 'open sewers' were initially closed off from the public space network with gates – hence their Flemish nickname *beluiken* (literally 'sealed spaces') –, the miserable living conditions remained hidden from the outside world for a long time. Only when the government recognized these radical forms of housing around 1850 as hotbeds for epidemics such as typhus, cholera and smallpox, the evolving building

regulations started to combat *laissez-faire* condition. This has created a second generation of more hygienic workers housing settlements, with better equipped and lit homes arranged around wider streets and courtyards. Some of these ensembles even looked like picturesque *beguinages*, where the open space was used by residents as a communal vegetable garden.<sup>1</sup> Smaller developers were therefore making way for more professional enterprises who were building larger open lots near the factories outside the city centers. These so-called *workers cités* were of a higher construction quality, and also contained houses with a small private outdoor space called *koer*.<sup>2</sup>

In Vienna and Budapest (before 1870 still Buda and Pest), the Austro-Hungarian counterpart of *beluiken* construction developed in the wake of enormous economic growth and housing needs. Within existing block perimeters once developed for village houses on former agricultural lands, aristocrats and wealthy merchants began to erect a new form of rental housing. Because the plots were narrow and long, they could only be built on with U- or O-shaped constructions around a courtyard. Well-lit apartments were only provided on the street side, while the rear units could only draw light in on the courtyard side. In Pest, this very reproducible form of land occupation initially targeted the urban bourgeoisie who wanted to reside in the center close to its economic activities. This typology sometimes formed a real *palazzi*, in which luxurious apartments were combined with shared amenities such as household help, kitchens and laundry rooms – as this was also popular in other European cities.

Although the typology of these so-called *gangos bérház* (*gangos*: courtyard; *bérház*: rental) is closely related to that of the Viennese *Zinshäuser* (tenement houses), for economic reasons the residential units were opened up by a limited number of stairwells and covered galleries. Because of increasingly expensive plots, their palatial shape soon started to

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<sup>1</sup> A *beguinage* is an architectural complex of houses around a communal yard. It originated in the Low Countries (now Belgium and Holland) from medieval times onwards and was created by lay religious women who lived in community without taking vows or retiring from the world.

<sup>2</sup> For a nice overview concerning the *beluiken* history: <https://stad.gent/nl/wonen-bouwen/nieuws-evenementen/de-gentse-beluiken-verleden-heden-en-toekomst>.

evolve. Whilst apartment numbers multiplied, the courtyards dimensions were taking on critical forms and therefore a reduction of sun accession to the lowest floors.<sup>3</sup>

### **Unpredictable changes**

With living cells unilaterally oriented towards a long corridor or courtyard, the comparison between the organizational principle of *beluiken* or *gangos* and [Jeremy Bentham's ideal plan for a prison](#) does not seem exaggerated. In the nineteenth century, local authorities only had to stick their head through a gate from the adjacent street to be able to oversee the often crowded interiors of these typologies. What they saw in there is partly guesswork, but we can imagine on the basis of historical images that the spaces in-between were definitely social spaces.

Due to a fundamental lack of living surface in the *beluiken* houses, collective spaces automatically became vibrant microcosms where people cooked and washed together, where crafts were practiced and where small children could play. Until the 1970s, the *beluiken* were still inhabited that way by mostly impoverished elderly people and Turkish working-class families.<sup>4</sup> Driven by changing demographics and residential-cultural needs, the intensity and content of the collective use of alleys and courtyards – of which in Ghent about 130 survived the various sanitation waves – has evolved dramatically. Today, the liminal spaces are often used as relaxation areas to compensate for the lack of a private garden or terrace. The coal bins and zinc washtubs that had characterized the street scenography for decades have disappeared almost everywhere. The cars in the images from forty years ago have often made way for bicycles, picnic benches and greeneries.

Take the Cité Muyskens, for example, where eleven small houses flank a five-metre-wide alley. In the early 1980s, when the ensemble was threatened with demolition, it was bought by a group of committed residents and subsequently renovated. Some houses were grouped together or divided up according to the purchasing power of the various

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<sup>3</sup> Lélek, V. É., & Psenner, A. (2019). The origins of the 19th century residential building typology in Budapest and Vienna. In AISU Bologna 2019 (Ed.), *La città globale. La condizione urbana come fenomeno pervasivo/The global city. The urban condition as a pervasive phenomenon* (p. 7).

<sup>4</sup> Berteloot, R., Boncquet, D., et al. (1978) *Onderzoek naar de Gentse beluiken: Bouwfysische, Sociologische, Historische en Kunsthistorische Evaluatie*. Gent.

households. To keep the project affordable, the alley space was turned over to the city, which provided it with new utility lines and proper paving. Today the alley is therefore public property and accessible to everyone, but it is managed by a community of residents. Similar to many other *beluiken*, people appropriate the liminal as part of their home: plant pots, tables, chairs, garden gnomes, waste bins and other items are placed against the facades and thus generate a little personal space within the liminal.

In parallel with the *beluiken*, the *gangos* in Budapest have also experienced a fascinating user evolution over the past 150 years. Many of these buildings were initially populated by diverse households comprising practically all social strata. While aristocratic and wealthier families lived in the large apartments in the front building, working-class families resided in smaller two-room units situated around the courtyard. The darkest units of the ground floor or *parterre* often housed craftsmen and household staff (from the families living in the front building). But since all residents were distributed over the whole building via the same gateway and courtyard, there must have been social interaction between different classes. For example, it was once completely normal for children of residing families to play on the ground floor of the enclosed courtyard, and for neighbors to chat frequently upon the galleries. After the First World War, however, the *gangos* gradually lost popularity. After all, a common feature of many completed buildings was their less favorable dimensions and limited light entry into the courtyards and surrounding apartments. Of course, these were no competition for the more modern apartment buildings that were developing elsewhere in the city.

During the communist period, general decay also occurred in the buildings where mainly poorer families lived at the time. Not only the lack of government investment, but also the opening of the nationalized courtyards to the street undoubtedly put pressure on the quality of life well into the 1990s.

However, the (foreign) private investments of the past decades seem to have changed this perception again. Today, the *gangos* typology once again has a predominantly positive connotation. The fact that these buildings are the essential components of Budapest's urban fabric, makes them one of the main tourist attractions. In various buildings the *parterres* around the inner courtyard are filled with publicly accessible shops, cafes or

office spaces. Other *pallazi* have been completely converted into luxury hotels or attractive *Airbnb* clusters where the original casco has been refurbished with more compact units. It is no surprise that this tourist-oriented infill leads to inner city neighborhoods that are devoid of residential city life, because the residents have been pushed out. However, still a large arsenal of other buildings has been refurbished with more compact units for locals. Although gentrification processes always lurk around the corner, they are permanently inhabited by diverse household formations and social classes. Sometimes resident groups even manage to collectively maintain greeneries inside the courtyard, whether or not behind closed doors.

### **Robust casco's**

Both the *beluiken* and the *gangos* are the result of hardcore market mechanisms that fostered the opportunistic money-making rebuilding of existing settlement structures parcel by parcel. Despite the justified criticism concerning unlivable spatial downgrades that *laissez-faire* conditions have produced, many of these housing developments also mirror the potential that radical clustering of dwellings around a shared open space can offer. They not only guide us towards more sustainable uses of vacant space, building materials and energy as valuable *common-pool resources*. Moreover, collective spaces such as *cul-de-sacs* or courtyards can facilitate intense forms of neighborliness and mutual solidarity, as an important antidote to economically difficult times or dormant loneliness. Furthermore, in an urgent quest for strategies against urban heat island effects, recent studies have pinpointed *beluiken* and *gangos* as potential 'natural airco's'.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the evolution of these collective housing forms also clearly showcases an unpredictability often ignored by designers: complexity and tragedy that common use and management of space can entail in the longer term. From working-class ghetto's to lukewarm and green residential alleys for young couples, or from majestic gated

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<sup>5</sup> Beluiken: Engels, R., Haesendonck, D., Heirbaut, H., Lypkens, G. & van den Berg, M. (2022) *De Gentse beluiken - een vergelijkende erfgoedstudie*. Gent. Gangos: Lilla, S. (2021) *The potential of ventilation corridors to mitigate urban heat island effect*. Zürich.

communities to decrepit courtyards that are accessible for all; in the longer term, social, economic, cultural and political changes have always played an important role concerning the resulting living quality within the *beluiken* and *gangos*. What I want to draw attention to, however, is that despite back and forth evolutions between 'intimate', private communality and more open and complex publicity, the social value of these liminal spaces has remained guaranteed in the long term. Because these 'structuring' liminal voids equal a *conditio sine qua non* – or an inescapable spatial stage between the front door and the street – its social potential can hardly be lost, regardless of the management model and program chosen at any given time.

It is remarkable how close this description of robust social use value is related to the definition of 'collective space' that Barcelonian architect and urban planner Manuel de Solà Morales formulated in the early 1990s. He equated the concept with all spaces that are neither public nor private, but both at the same time: public spaces used for private activities or private spaces that allow collective use.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this discourse also creates a twilight zone. For example, there is something intrinsically defensive in the urban design of *beluiken* and *gangos*, which can be sealed from public space with controllable accesses. In that sense, they are very easily 'appropriated' by a group of residents or private investors as 'club spaces', where you need an entrance ticket to benefit from the containing quietness. But whether they are anti-urban densification types by definition, remains to be seen. After all, such typologies add 'territorial depth' to the public space they are connected to. A large tree or playing children in a communal yard that is visible from the street through the gate, offers an appealing physical quality that transcend the legal boundaries of the building plot. Whether the gate that provides access to that liminal space is open during the day or not... designers have little or no control over that. However, a smart design equals the possible application of various management and program configurations without ever compromising the social use of space de Solà Morales was proclaiming. And a fence is placed just as quickly as it is removed again, as we have seen in the robust historical examples above.

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<sup>6</sup> de Solà-Morales, M. (1992) 'Public and Collective space: The Urbanization of the Private Sector as a New Challenge. On the Transformation of the Metropolis', *Oase*, 33, pp. 3–8.

Although these robust liminal qualities are easily designable, it is fact that they are not always easily feasible because of several building codes (fire regulations, accessibility for all, minimum surfaces, ...). Of course, a sustainable legal climate should keep the balance between rules that protect society from capitalist greed and rules that make room for bottom-up innovation. But doesn't the objection that the fire brigade cannot drive through a *gangos* narrow gate sound very cynical in the light of the London's Grenfell Tower debacle that was easily accessible from all sides? In other words: could a little more controlled regulatory relaxation, in combination with policy mechanisms that keep land prices under control, not push us back in the direction of a new generation of robust liminal landscapes for all groups in society? Talking about innovation is of little use if we tend to forget where we come from.

*Good dwelling is closely related to various spatial and non-spatial conditions. Architecture contributes to good dwelling if it gives individual users a structure wherein one can develop a territory with possibilities to both interact with as withdraw from others in a search for a balanced social life.*

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