

The Research Group
Cosmopolis

has the honor to invite you to the public defense of the PhD thesis of
Nele AERNOUTS
to obtain the degree of Doctor of Sciences

Title of the PhD thesis:

Housing the social. Investigating the role of 'commoning' in the development of social housing initiatives

Promotors:

Prof. Dr. ir. Arch. Michael Ryckewaert
Prof. Dr. Bas Van Heur
Prof. Arch. Benoit Mortiz (ULB)

The defence will take place on
Friday December 15 2017 at 10h30

in U-Residence, Green Room, at the Campus Humanities, Sciences and Engineering of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2 - 1050 Elsene, and will be followed by a reception.

Members of the jury:

Prof. Dr. ir. Arch. Kobe Boussauw (chairman)
Prof. Dr. Fabio Vanin (secretary)
Prof. Dr. Inge Bertels
Prof. Dr. Christine Schaut
(Univ. Saint-Louis Bruxelles)
Prof. Dr. David Madden
(London School of Economics)

Curriculum vitae

Nele Aernouts is an architect and holds a Master degree in Human Settlements.
Since 2013 she has been conducting research in the Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research on collective dwelling forms that addresses the housing needs of underprivileged groups. She obtained a scholarship to do so through the program Prospective Research of Innoviris.
By focusing on the Brussels Capital Region, her main interest is to uncover the complex interplay between cohabitation, design and planning processes and spatial configurations of social housing initiatives.

Abstract of the PhD research

Eroding state support for social welfare, a growing social-spatial divide and increasing problems of affordability in cities have led to new social housing initiatives as alternatives to both privatization and state provision. Their inspiration can be found in a long tradition of housing initiatives that focus on the mobilization of shared resources. In the Brussels Capital Region, historically marked by a weak regulation of the housing market and homeownership support, these initiatives have (re)emerged due to an on-going housing crisis.

This PhD research brings together legal, political-economic and social-spatial perspectives to examine the socially inclusive capacity of such initiatives. It looks at the way social and spatial professionals give shape to these initiatives and projects, and how their diverse characteristics relate to the social inclusion of underprivileged groups. Targeting these issues, this study builds on the notions of 'the urban commons' and 'commoning'. These notions are conceptualized and studied through action research in two case studies in the Brussels Capital Region; a recently established Community Land Trust project and a post-war cooperative garden neighbourhood. Their conceptualization allows to give a critical reading of the strategies and measures applied to promote the de-commodification of land and the co-production of dwelling space.

The findings reveal that such co-production generates benefits that go beyond the housing domain, building social capital and empowerment among deprived groups. The focus on the commons however does not ignore top-down/bottom-up tensions and raises questions about the development of strict design rules for the 'success' of the commons within traditional commons literature. Moreover, the research reveals that a focus on differential ways of building commons - safeguarding and expanding collective access and control over housing in varying ways, degrees and extents - might be more pertinent to tackle contemporary urban challenges and to offer meaningful alternatives in the here and now.