

# Qualitative Research and Communicative Planning: A Case Study in Ghent, Belgium

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## Introduction

This paper is an intermediate presentation of the results of a research project that is being carried out in the city of Ghent (Belgium). The project is sponsored by the Flemish government and intends to investigate the interrelation between spatial configurations in a specific Ghent neighborhood (Rabot) and patterns of behavior and discursive practices that are characteristic for this area. The research is experimental and innovative in that it simultaneously applies urban analysis methods well known to architects and urban designers, interactive techniques that belong to the toolbox of community workers, and interpretative hermeneutics that are derived from qualitative research methods in sociology and anthropology. It has two major aims: 1) to develop an understanding of the neighborhood's internal dynamics in order to distillate adequate policy recommendations (the Rabot is one of the most deprived neighborhoods in Belgium); 2) to do this by treating the inhabitants of the area not only as objects of investigation but also as subjects who actively contribute to the research process and its results.

Rabot is a poor area with a built fabric of small 19th century workers houses, three high slabs from the sixties with social dwelling units and a more recent infill of social housing projects on disused industrial sites.

Among its inhabitants are a considerable percentage of Turkish immigrants and a growing amount of refugees from Eastern Europe. The research focussed on the use and significance of public space in Rabot: streets, squares, front gardens, back alleys, public green spaces, waste land, play grounds, etc. This public space is analyzed as a scene for urban interactions – spatial practices relied upon by inhabitants, merchants, police officers or social workers to organize and interpret this environment. The researchers map these practices, they analyze them and later on they discuss them with the concerned actors. In ideal circumstances inhabitants and social workers will become co-authors of (parts of) the project: they themselves are given the opportunity to edit conclusions and recommendations resulting from the project.

The research work was done in three stages. The first stage comprised extensive fieldwork during which a multitude of heterogeneous data were collected by a variety of qualitative and participatory techniques. During several months a researcher

went to the area on a regular basis, observing interactions in public space and talking to passers-by and inhabitants, asking them about their space-use and their feelings about the area. Some of these interviews on the street turned into longer conversations, in which people also gave information about their regular trajectories (from home to the supermarket, from home to the city center, from home to a friend's home, etc.). More formal and longer interviews were conducted with social workers and representatives of certain groups, such as the shop-owners. Based on this information a scheme was developed in which the images of the neighborhood such as it is seen by inhabitants, shop-owners and social workers, were differentiated. Next to this work-in-situ a historical-morphological analysis was carried out based on historical maps and on an investigation of the role of the Rabot area within the whole city of Ghent. This spatial analysis was supplemented by a photographic documentation, which paid special attention to the uses of public space. The researchers then tried to interpret this heterogeneous set of material by confronting the narratives and observed spatial practices with the results of the historical-morphological analysis.

In the second stage of the research one part of the area was selected as a spot of enhanced interaction among users, and further observations and detailed analysis focused on this part of the neighborhood. Now the fieldwork mainly comprised house-visits and long interviews with inhabitants as well as social workers and youths hanging out on the street. Special attention was paid to conflict zones and spatial arrangements that were misused or misinterpreted (such as a balcony window on the back of a building which was consistently used as an entrance). The research in this stage also focused on the social infrastructure of the neighborhood (community centers, sport clubs, youth centers, etc.) and analyzed existing policy programs for the neighborhood, questioning their validity and efficiency. Again this stage ended by confronting the heterogeneous data with one another and building an interpretation.

During the third stage the researchers went back to the field to discuss the interpretative results of the second stage with some of the actors they worked with during the first stage. This third stage is just finished and its results indicate that this might be a fruitful method to develop a communicative planning strategy.

In this paper we will first present the preliminary research results as they were formulated in stage 1 and 2. Secondly we will discuss the ongoing negotiations which are part of stage 3, and suggest how this approach might result in a planning strategy which can be more effective and emancipatory than the conventional top-down approach.

### **The making of a riff-raff area (how Ghent deals with Rabot)**

A look at the map reveals that Rabot is a dwelling area which, like an island, seems to be cut off from the urban fabric of the inner city of Ghent.

Its location is very near to the historic center, but it is disconnected from the surrounding areas by a double ringroad, two canals and disused industrial sites, which are partly reconverted by social housing projects. During the fieldwork it became clear that there is a marked distinction between the inhabitants of the social housing slabs and those of the 19th century dwellings. Whereas the first are mainly Belgian citizens, often having their roots in other parts of Ghent, they usually have a better income than the latter, many of whom are Turkish or have other foreign nationalities. In a first conversation professional social workers do not mention this distinction. For them the area is rather homogeneously 'gray' with the exception of the shopping street which is seen as central and busy. The inhabitants on the other hand have another story: for them the social differences are recognizable and sometimes they even overstress them in the interviews.

The spatial ruptures between Rabot and the surrounding areas seem to be doubled in the dominant image that Rabot has of itself and of its development potential. It is the same image moreover that reigns in outsiders' perceptions of Rabot. For many actors – public or private bodies such as the press, or research institutions, or administrators – Rabot is 'that neighborhood at the other side of the ringroad' or 'that neighborhood behind the hospitals'. This tendency to perceive the area as something that does not belong to the city is consistent with the outcome of the historical-morphological analysis. From the very beginning – the medieval origins of Ghent – Rabot was very near to but outside the town itself. In the course of centuries it housed a cemetery, hospitals, a psychiatric clinic, a series of factories and a goods station. Since the downfall of industrial activities, which gradually happened after World War 2, Rabot has been the preferred location for the implant of residual functions for which there was no other place available: a garbage processing company, a succession of not very successful wholesale traders, a telephone firm, social housing projects. Thus it seems that a very specific way of dealing with this area has become a dominant and recurrent practice: to stress its borderlines, to use it for NIMBY's, to deprive it from significant economic and cultural activities, thus turning it increasingly into a stigmatized neighborhood. This pattern is moreover confirmed by statistics: according to the census of 1991, Rabot is the second poorest area

in the whole of Belgium.

Such discriminatory practices leave traces that tend to assume hard shapes: political defavorization, decreasing real estate values, negligence by the police, poor quality of primary school education (recently the school was even closed down). These long-term patterns of deprivation have equivalents in short term practices that were documented in the fieldwork. The lack of respect for the neighborhood is doubled by the lack of respect for conventional boundaries shown by many youngsters active in the youth center (Turkish as well as Belgian). They choose trajectories that lead through private land or over roofs instead of using the normal public route, shortcuts taken through cellars and garages are no exception, openings are forced through fences and walls wherever it seems convenient, backdoors or even windows are improperly used as main access for some buildings. The overall image that appears is one of enclosure, intrusion and unraveling. Some of these processes, intrusion e.g., can be discerned on different scale levels.

The penetration of something a-typical in the territory is recurrent on the level of the neighborhood, the urban block, the plot. It can be recognized in the way space is being constructed and re-constructed, as it is legible in temporary practices of use and appropriation (hanging out, break-throughs, house breaking, etc.)

During the last fifteen years, the authorities have been very active in this area. The 19.000 inhabitants were given a series of social workers; community centers and youth centers were installed; disused plots and inner block areas were re-developed into social housing units. During this period one can observe a multiplication of social services and institutions for relief work and crisis interventions. At the same time the amount of facilities supported by local groups – youth movements, cultural associations, and sport clubs – diminished with dramatical speed. Although this evolution is discernible in other places too, the Rabot area is much more than elsewhere affected by the process, notwithstanding the increased interest from the authorities. The Turkish community was the only group that nevertheless managed to establish some cultural provisions.

### **Political context: when urban renewal itself becomes a problem**

This research project is financed by the so-called 'Social Impulse Fund', an administration which is part of the Flemish government, and which is, since 1991, responsible for the coordination of urban policies for deprived areas in Flanders. Although the Social Impulse Fund has pumped lots of money in disfavored urban neighborhoods, it has in most cases not succeeded in reaching the goals it set out for itself. Economical actors (new investments) remain absent in most of the concerned areas and the intended strategical planning is not fully deployed.

It is our hypothesis that this lack of success is partly due to the fact that local actors (inhabitants, clubs, schools), although being consulted in the starting stage of the planning process, are being ignored in later stages. This breaks down the effect of

the deployed strategy itself. In Rabot e.g., there has been a screening in 1985 in which the inhabitants clearly formulated very specific and rather realistic wishes, such as the need for a communal space which could be used for wedding-parties or other meetings. Such proposals – repeated over the years - were never picked up by the authorities, which instead continue to treat the neighborhood as a residual, leftover area. The very idea of having weddings and parties did not fit with the predominant idea about the district as poor and dependent.

Another example of the continuing practice of presenting the neighborhood as dependent and residual can be found in the more recent policy program called LENS. This is a participatory method in which inhabitants, merchants and other actors are interrogated with respect to the needs and possible solutions for their area. This method resulted for Rabot in a list of 130 proposed measures, which were categorized as to their feasibility. Notwithstanding the participatory outlook of this method, a close reading of the proposed measures reveals that the ones considered feasible were almost exclusively interventions which have to do with social assistance or relief work. Other measures – such as e.g. the demand for a cash-dispensing machine in the area – were ignored in the follow-up. Measures in the field of culture, education or economy were indeed not withheld as being most urgent and/or feasible. Proposals with an impact on the organization of policy itself were not really considered. The area thus re-appears as a completely dependent urban quarter: the participants in the program are not treated as responsible citizens with their own political and economic agendas, but as dependent clients in need of aid, whose complaints are reduced to problems in the sphere of relief work. Thus, what began as an acute and sharp diagnosis of the overall problems of the area, is transformed during the process into reified and manageable ‘technical’ problems. The significance attributed by the participants to their complaints and proposals, is gradually but effectually erased; what remains is a list with measures which, instead of provoking an innovative policy, provides an excuse for continuing the old way.

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Why would city authorities invest so much in a process that is seemingly innovative but in reality maintains the status quo? Blaming the local administration is not a sufficient answer, for the quality and efficiency of the management and administration in Ghent is rather good. Other questions are to be posed:

- Would it be possible to design a trajectory of diagnoses and remedies in which the significance of complaints is kept valid throughout the whole process, including the final measures that are taken, even if these measures have a technical character?
- Where does the idea come from that these neighborhoods do not need economy or culture? What is needed to make this

idea disappear from the minds of social workers, technicians, and so on?

The suspicion rises that the massive investment in the status quo has a definite political and societal *raison-d’être*. The situation as-it-is, with its combination of very high density, a low amount of amenities and minimal opportunities for active citizenship or group involvement; has to be actively maintained. In a democratic European society this active production of discrimination necessitates that a comparable amount of energy be invested to create the illusion that something is done to oppose the deprivation. The credibility of this simulated effort, however, is in the long run rather shaky, as is being proved by the continuing election victories of the extreme right wing party ‘Vlaams Blok’.

This is the context within which the research project started. The hypothesis it wants to test is that, when people’s competences and practices are integrated into the planning process, chances are better that inhabitants would experience real change as a consequence of their engagement, and thus would feel more involved. This recognition of the importance of local actors’ contributions seems to be necessary, for it is rather typical that local competences are most overruled in those areas where social interventions by the authorities are most developed. In these deprived neighborhoods, local competences and discourses are often (made) invisible or inexpressible, even for the local actors themselves. The position of this research project is therefore conditioned by the readiness of local actors to participate in it, and by the willingness of stronger partners (administrators, social housing companies) to become aware of the dominance of their practices and the negative effects thereof. For such a process to succeed, it is necessary that there is enough space and time available to incorporate ‘groups without a voice’ in the investigation, as well during the collection of material as during the stages of interpretation. This is one of the reasons for the interactive techniques derived from anthropology and social research, which are used in this project.

### **Competence instead of failure: people coping with their environment**

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One of the main aims of the research project was to investigate how the inhabitants of this deprived neighborhood experience their environment and whether one could detect a correlation between this experience and the morphological characteristics of the area. Very soon it became evident that there is an important distinction between the image that social workers have of the neighborhood and the one of the inhabitants. Whereas the first tend to focus on the area itself and ignore the possibility to treat it as part of the urban whole, the latter's image is more politically charged and concerned with Rabot as part of Ghent. To put it simple: inhabitants talk about income and what is not being done, social workers focus on feelings of well-being; they stress what has already been done. The activity-space of inhabitants (the sum of their daily trajectories and destinations) is definitely not confined to the area or its direct surroundings. Some among them do visit the subsidized community centers or charity institutions, but the fieldwork suggested that many among them prefer not to deal with such bodies.

The dominant tendency in the overall way of interacting with the environment is for most inhabitants of Rabot rather paradoxical: in fact most people do not want to live where they live. A large part among them put faith in the dream of Suburbia and perceives their own environment, the neighborhood as well as the immediate surroundings of their house, as threatening and unsafe, as a jungle. In this unsafe territory the whole world seems to enter without being asked – a form of intrusion. This specific codification of the gaze seems to have been influenced by the world of soaps, which in the last decades has entered European living rooms. Within this perceptive framework all that is unknown is a priori considered negative, dangerous and to be evaded. Therefore many people in Rabot experience their own environment with its permanently changing constitution of inhabitants and youth groups as strange and threatening, instead of safe and welcoming. Nevertheless people do cope with this environment. A few respondents even succeed in reversing the pattern: instead of mistrusting and blocking off all that is strange, they rather salute it, partly out of necessity, partly to keep life bearable, partly because they enjoy it. A small group of Turkish youngsters waiting for the bus is not ignored but greeted by a certain lady. If it stinks in the public garden because too many youngsters have peed there, you just take up your chair and move somewhat further. The seductive qualities of Suburbia, where many inhabitants used to live earlier on in their life, are not only praised but also slightly devaluated. The drawbacks of the own dwelling environment are clearly recognized, but people also sum up its unexpected advantages. The rural life-style of friends in the countryside is mentioned with envy, but sometimes also

ridiculed.

The results of the fieldwork suggest that inhabitants of Rabot have in different situations different possibilities to appropriate and to control their environment. This behavioral freedom however is not in the first place determined by each person's personal features (such as level of education or previous dwelling history). It rather is influenced by what a person in a given situation can see, say and do. This triple degree of freedom is determining in how far a person can be in control of a situation. It works in a different way in different situations. Amazingly enough, however, it is not so that people feel more in control in their own dwelling environment. On the contrary, some of the in-depth interviews we did, revealed that people sometimes feel more in control in environments that seem familiar although they might be unknown (we refer here to theme-park-like or generic locations, such as the Belgian sea-side).

This observation leads us again to the interactive part of the research and the importance of communicative planning. For peoples' relation to their environment and their possibilities for auto-control can be influenced. People are definitely capable of better grasping the space they inhabitate, use or visit, if they are shown how space 'works' in their neighborhood. They can get to know their own and others' practices, first maybe in a rather hesitant way, assisted by the researches, later with more personal initiative and with the ambition to have something changed in their environment. This is why giving the research results back to inhabitants and actors, can reinforce their abilities to cope with their situation and to contribute to positive developments in the area.

### **The hidden backbone: using images to generate interaction**

In Ghent this process is started up in the so-called 'platform-group', a group of merchants, administrators and community workers. It is interesting to see that the conversations within this group reveal new things, which were previously invisible for the researchers too. These things have to do with rather simple observations, such as the fact that X has no contact with Y, X and Y standing for a merchant, a technical city service, a building manager, a housing company, a cybercafé or a sport's facility. By noting this absence of relationships, people start to pay attention to the possibility of gradually enriching the relation- and activity fields within the neighborhood. A youth center, e.g., starts to think about the possible implant of a children's farm in an inner block area at the end of an alley, surrounded by deserted sheds – exactly the spot where there have been and still are so many conflicts between inhabitants of the alley, passers-by and playing children. The animals will only be bought on condition that they have two godfathers or –mothers, a child as well as an adult. Through this spatial intervention – a simple pasture with some animals – some new relation-fields can emerge. This example stimulates the group to think about other possibilities. An extra door somewhere in a disused school can

open up a new trajectory, offering people a shortcut of about 1 km.

In this way the group developed an elaborated vision for the neighborhood. This plan was partly related to a spatial image that highlights the area's opportunities and its hidden potentials. Open spaces (old and new ones), public spots, underused buildings and new facilities – specifically in the economic and cultural sphere – are interrelated within a larger framework. Thus a partly new pattern of trajectories and activities is superimposed over the existing one. The intended effect is one of a hidden backbone. This approach generates an image as well as a possible program, but is not developed into a very concretely elaborated plan.

For the moment it consists of a series of place- and activity-connected intentions that are not yet fixed but that are recognizable for future partners or interest groups. This program/image 'programs' and 'visualizes' potentialities in the area. It makes spaces visible where activities are going on (or could be going on) that are at present not well known to inhabitants that are not directly involved in them (soccer, photo-exhibitions, parties); it makes existing but only half-visible locations accessible for the public gaze (a bowling, a fitness club, the border of the canal, an underused parking lot); it interconnects these locations and turns them available for possibly new needs or programs (musical education, facilities for indoor-sports, etc.).

This flexible programmatic whole might become a spatial reality as well as a conceptual carrier of new possibilities (e.g. for creating new relation-fields). Actors who previously did not know one another, or who did not consider one another a possibly relevant partner, are now entering a conversation. The psychiatric clinic, by far the largest institution in the area, could start to have meetings with the police about strange behavior in public space. Ex-patients of the clinic could participate in some of these meetings. Its conclusions could be integrated in an art project and an exhibition in a museum within the clinic, which covers the history of psychiatry. Sometimes such conversations could lead to major spatial interventions, as might be the case when the two large schools would enter a discussion with the local merchants. Another possibility is that management agreements or financial collaborations are elaborated among private and public partners. These examples illustrate the intentional character of the program/image. At present the contacts have not yet been established, but the intentions are open enough to allow a further elaboration by the members of the platform-group enlarged with other individuals or groups interested in the area.

This process is hopeful, but vulnerable. Proposed interventions are sometimes so futile, that one starts to doubt their effectiveness, and with that, the credibility and legitimacy of the whole process. It is still a long way to go before communicative planning will be a fact. A good observer nevertheless can see how much the interactive research process has already changed—even if nothing is built yet, one can note that the space for discussions, conversations and negotiations has been enlarged. It is in this enlargement of 'conversational space' that the utopian char-

acter of this approach resides. Individuals and social workers transform parts of public space into material for public discussion. What they do creates interactions among people and institutions that have a spatial as well as a social impact. Their own position is often not facilitated by their initiatives. The youth worker proposing a children's farm is not admired by his boss, for such a thing supposedly does not belong to his normal activities. The woman who talks to the Turkish youngsters at the bus stop, might be talked about by other women who do not understand. And so on. The method is new and still insufficiently explored. Maybe it is necessary that professionals would receive a mandate to work with such communicative planning processes. It became evident thus far in Ghent that, aside from awkwardness, the approach evokes curiosity and an effective willingness among a variety of people to collaborate within a process of communicative planning.

### **Silence, speech and conflict: changes in- and outside oneself**

During the research process in Ghent a lot of convivial proposals were formulated, stressing the need to restore interactions and relations. The dominant image guiding the desired urbanity of this area seems to be one of a good neighborhood that belongs to the city. This image results in a relative intolerance towards abnormal or deviant behavior. This guiding image is not metropolitan but rather provincial. It strikingly contrasts with what we detected in Antwerp, where a similar research project is carried out in the neighborhood around the De Conincksplein, near to the Central Station. This is a rough area, with a roaring nightlife with bars and prostitution, and a multitude of ethnicities ranging from African to Chinese to Belgian. Here the actual motor for the development process is not consensus but conflict. The problems are more of a metropolitan nature, and the issue is not whether or not to tolerate deviant behavior but rather how to deal with the existing nuisances and how to re-appropriate parts of public space.

In this neighborhood in Antwerp, people get angry with one another. There is a lot of quarreling but through these confrontations emerge new urban practices. The owner of a small snackbar for French fries has to deal on a daily basis with the homeless people who use this facility as a hang out; a bicycle-thief is grasped by a Moroccan elderly – a 'sjeikh'; the shopkeeper and customers of the local newsstand discuss the latest murder. Some of the inhabitants associate in different interest groups. Because of the intensity of the conflicts and the centrality of the location, these groups receive attention from the national press as well as from important politicians. Thus this neighborhood has a very active public life, unknown to the rest of the city. Although there thus seems to be a major difference with the situation in Ghent, it stands to reason to assume that it is only the pace and the intensity that makes up the difference between the consensus in Ghent and the quarreling in Antwerp. As Richard Sennett writes:

“... the kinds of ties that bind people together are the ties of verbal conflict, much more than the ties of agreement. I mean that this is a fundamental truth. (...) In some way, agreement is cheap. (...) (The) basic argument is that the verbal conflict is a way of acknowledging other groups, and taking a risk with the boundaries of one's identity. In social life, silence is a way of creating a sense of one self as a property which can be defended.”<sup>1</sup>

We consider the disclosure of relation-fields as such an act of entering into the acknowledging of other groups: the safe professional position is left aside for a more insecure but possibly highly rewarding position within which the competences of other, local actors are being recognized. People thus discover that it can be very interesting to open up the possibility of shifting the image of who they are or what their profession should dictate them. And the urban scene is probably the best place one can imagine to let this happen.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Sennett, “The Challenge of Urban Diversity”, in Louise Nyström (ed.), *City and Culture. Cultural Processes and Urban Sustainability*, Swedish Urban Environment Council, April 1999, p. 131

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