Reading and (re)writing the city: the use of the *habitus* concept in urban research and development

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This paper illustrates how the *habitus* concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu, can be used as tool for urban research and – in a further stage – for urban renewal and development. The *habitus* can be defined as a set of unconscious schemes that structure our situation-specific ways of thinking, perceiving and acting. The set is acquired during childhood, at home and in school and later on during the professional lifetime. *Habitus* structures and encodes praxis, but praxis can mould the *habitus* as well. Bourdieu calls it a structuring structure: people (and organizations) 'make' their social, emotional and psychical environment but in doing so, they reproduce the already existing patterns and structures. They externalize what successfully has been internalized. It's obvious one could use the *habitus* concept within the map-metaphor: we 'read' and 'write' the city as we have learned to think, speak and behave in (class- and culture-)specific ways.

In this paper we describe how we used and modulated the concept of Bourdieu towards a more place specific and less deterministic concept. In our own research, we discuss the provisional findings (the rough maps) in small groups and as the investigation evolves, this interactive line gets more important. The final phase of each research project consists in three or more focus groups. In these reunions people with different beliefs, interests and assumptions can puzzle out a new 'map' or/and look for a minimal set of assumptions they still can confirm. This layout proved to be a good scenario for deconstructing all kinds of beliefs peoples apparently have and give birth to a more 'neutral' approach of themselves and each other.

We give first a short summary of our approach (1) and describe briefly Bourdieu's theory especially in the field of urban studies and urban analysis (2). We then illustrate the approach with the anthropological and morphological research we did in the late nineties in the city of Ghent[1] (3). This work was completed with very good morphological work carried out by our

[1] Until now, we did not publish about this research. The different scientific reports of the research in Ghent and Antwerp, can be ordered at the research group OSA, department of architecture at the KULeuven. More details in the bibliography.

colleagues at the KULeuven[2] and providing us with an extra tool during the focus-groups (4). In the final paragraph we discuss the use of the place-specific habitus in cultural and social work in general and in the field of urban transformation and renewal. We then give some illustrations from the other cities we worked in[3] (5).

1. The map we believe in, is the one that functions [but not the only one]

The *habitus* proved to be a good *read grating* while interpreting very diverse and heterogeneous givens in our fieldwork. The past fifteen years we elaborated – during in depth research in seven cities in Belgium and the Netherlands – a more spatial and a more localised variant of Bourdieu's concept. We'll call this variant the "founding assumption" or "core practice"[4] of a given neighbourhood. This practice is named 'core' as it structures and organises in a certain part of a city a multitude of routines and daily practices, not only of occupants but also (the perceptions of) passers by, (the behaviour of) tourists and even a good deal of the plans and intentions of professionals. In reverse, the core practice only can be revealed by investigating and comparing this very broad field of observations. If one limits the research only to policy makers, the founding assumptions will be limited to this group as well.
The approach we present deserves a certain degree of craft work and intensity. Before we discussed the (first presumptions of the) core practices, we already have investigated a certain amount of daily routines, we looked at the organisation of the dwellings, the morphological growth, the policy plans of the last fifteen years, the daily activity space, the trajectories people used, the investments of merchants and entrepreneurs, … We have visited the district both day and night and if possible in the weekend or when there's a festival. In each neighbourhood we interview at least twenty people in an in-depth setting. The broader the observations one can make, the deeper a future core practise will be.

In the neighbourhood near the central station of Antwerp, the assumption could be formulated as follows: *"the very rich and the very poor share this same district but they'll never share the same places and*

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[2] Bruno De Meulder et al. *Historisch-morfologische analyse van het Rabot (Gent)* report of the morphological analysis in Rabot - Gent, 39 p. , illustrated, with maps, July 2001, KULeuven 2001 (Department of Architecture)

[3] From 1992 till 1997, we worked in the district of old Molenbeek, one of the poorest and most deprived neighbourhoods in Brussels. The research was sponsored by the Beursschouwburg, the Kuleuven and later by the Flemisch Government in Brussels. The case in Ghent and Antwerp were investigated during a three year research project we coordinated at the Kuleuven (1998 – 2000). The Dutch cities where we did anthropological research were Dordrecht, Leiden and Schiedam (2003- 2005) in a project of the province of South Holland. The investigations in Rotterdam Delfshaven (2003-2005) was ordered by the Project bureau *Mathenesserkwartier* and financed both by municipal and European funds. More details in the bibliography at the end.

[4] The term *assumption* focuses to strongly on the cognitive aspect of the *habitus*. The central assumption must be derived form very different givens, mainly from events: told events and built events. It is important not to reduce the 'founding assumption' to the cognitive field. Therefore the concept 'core practice' is more appropriate. Indeed: what people and organisations apparently do and repeat doing, seems to be structured by some of even one logical rule, not logic in the epistemological sense but as a practical (and as Bourdieu says a "useful') knowledge. If one acts this way, that will happen. Bourdieu calls this *the subjective expectation of a objective outcome.*

spaces (pubs, houses and even services…). We'll always stay apart and we'll have to". In the Ghent district 'Rabot - Brugse Poort', the core practice was at a given moment this one: *"all good things come from outside the neighbourhood, what comes from inside, can not be good".* The founding assumption in Spangen (Rotterdam) was at the end of our research this one: *"only we know what it is like to live in Rotterdam. You don't know it if you don't live here"* and in a kind of sub-statement, people believed the same as in the Ghent-case but the other way around: *"all good things that exist here, don't get out; our lives and our neighbourhood are constantly brought in discredit; we became a sort of invisible to other citizens".*

The core practice is not 'a truth'. Neither is it a static statement about a Cartesian reality somewhere outside the ones who define them. It can only be revealed by means of both investigation and discussion. So the process is partially interactive: as the researcher presents his findings in the focus group, the participants become little by little co-researchers. They convictions about their own lives start to shift. They start deconstructing their believes, just as the investigator preliminary did on the district scale. This process is not an educational one[5]. Participants just start to look more critical to what they're doing and how they're doing it and what this has to tell about their environment.

The focus group does not strive for personal or even social change; at stake is a better understanding of the city and how people deal with it. One could call it a form of community research. This involves de- and reconstruction, an integrating part of the research itself. The discoveries of the participants do correct and deepen what we – the researchers – first thought being crucial. Furthermore the discussions give the core practice his local validity – the only one they can ever have. The map does not exist if it's only the researchers map; it has to become a map people use and believe in, at least for a given period of time.

The past twelve years we learned that if the group is well mixed (volunteers and professionals, occupants and policy makers, civilians and decision-makers) the transfer outside the group can be deeper and wider. Until now, this transfer proved to be one of the toughest problems. Not the occupants but mostly the professionals tend to be afraid when their own convictions or prejudices come to terms and they sometimes block the process. We'll discuss this issue at the end of this article.

We like to stress here that the investigating part of each project is worth being performed for itself, even when there's no visible link with any urban renewal or outcome transformation. Also then we discuss the results with local people but not with the intention of changing the ongoing programs. The cultural and societal impact can then even be bigger, as was the case in Brussels

[5] The focus group does not deal with manners or virtues, although we learned not to invite people who were probably not able to listen or who could at least participate for two hours in an intense discussion. All other conditions seem less relevant. Because the platform focuses on facts, events and observations, one can invite people with a very different view, also in ideological terms or in terms of professional interest.

where we collaborated with a the city theatre and arts centre 'de Beursschouwburg'. Especially in our complex and fast changing society, people and communities may be provided with a better understanding of their environment. The new insights and 'readability' will probably affect decision-making in a more invisible way, as yeast in a paste. The formulation of a core practice can become a phase in an ongoing process of self-reflection and –investigation of a neighbourhood – to us a cultural process and a tool for strengthening local and active democracy.

2. Revealing the assumptions: why do people behave (dwell, think, speak, …) in the specific ways they do?

In the scope of this article, we only can illustrate the *habitus* in a very rough manner. We use the case of Ghent to give some methodological stepping stones that seemed important in revealing the core assumption(s). Again we wish to stress the necessity for empirical and deep fieldwork at least if one tends to formulate a 'map' that can be recognised by more than one group or profession. Because the founding assumptions are so well hidden, one is easily seduced to speculate about them or to simply ask this very special occupant or professional who should be able to help us. We think this is not the way to handle it. Good advice and even specialist branding does not bring us nearer to the assumptions that organise an urban community or neighbourhood.

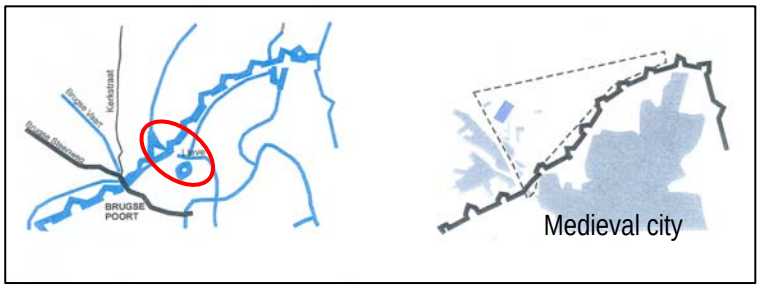
In our approach we focus on very daily and even banal events. Where do people walk? Where do they come? Where don't they come any longer? Are there restaurants in the neighbourhood? Can you by stamps? Are there machines to withdraw money? If an assumption organises a neighbourhood, we'll have to look for a very broad range of facts, givens, actions, perceptions, stories, events and so on – both formal and informal, both occasional and reiterated, … This means thorough empirical research and comparing again and again data that at first sight are not comparable.

The founding assumptions and core practises do not belong to the world of cognitions. They do organise the verbal world but as they are assumptions, they lay a way underneath the deliberate speech-registers, underneath the policy-programs, underneath the explanations people give about their own lives and environments. Even during the in-depth interviews, statements are not valuable when considered on their own. It's only when the field of observations becomes wider and deeper that one can discover emblematic reasoning. And even then, the most valuable is often what has been said by accident. In a slip of the tongue or the use of a wrong word. Precisely when the cognitions fail and the person starts stuttering, something crucial might have been said. As the old man greeted me in the Ghent neighbourhood when I told him I had to go to the (nearby) city-centre. *"Greet them in Ghent"* he just said, not even intending it as a joke. It is totally absurd to put it in this way and no occupant ever names this neighbourhood as a separated part of the city. But this time he did name it that way and from then on, these four words helped

us to reveal an important aspect of the locale *habitus* : *"What comes from the neighbourhood, can not go to the official world; what comes from the official world outside, does not fit the neighbourhood".*

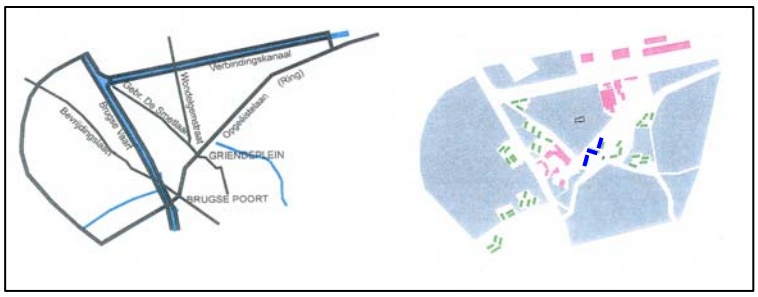
3. There & here, good (outside) & bad (inside), them & us [The example from Ghent]

The Rabot district derives its name from the former 'rabotlock' – the medieval and quite primitive lock helping the boats when bridging the level difference between the city canals and the old river 'de Lieve'. The neighbourhood was situated at the north-western outskirts of the city. From the 16th century it was a swampy territory that proved to be a good buffer zone against enemies. Against enemies of all kinds, apparently: the zone became the place for the main cemetery, the houses for the victims of the plague were built at the boundaries of the swamp and later on all kinds of polluting functions and industries. Because there was nothing of value there, Ghent learned to dump everything that could be harmful in the within the city itself.

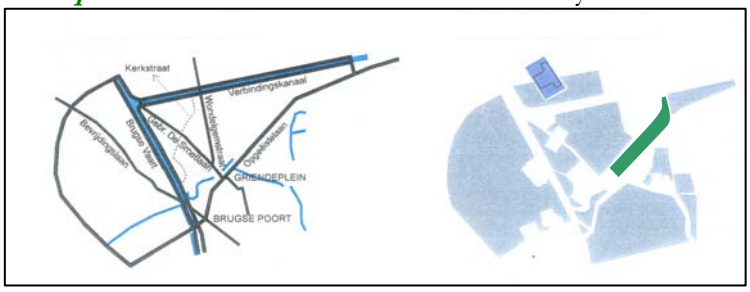


It was only in the second half of the 19th century, when Ghent rapidly transformed in an industrial metropolis, that the entrepreneurs built their working class houses. In only 15 years, almost the whole of the actual Rabot and a good deal of the neighbouring district Brugse Poort were filled with rows and rows of small dwellings.

Today, the two neighbourhoods are loved by students and starters who can find here cheap dwellings nearby the very centre of the vibrant city of Ghent. They live among Turkish immigrant families whose suns and daughters already moved to other parts of the city. A third kind of occupants are the older white people, living partly in ***the three high-rises*** situated on the former industrial station. Some of them lived from their youth on in the neighbourhood, a slight majority moved in from elsewhere in Ghent and even from outside the city. The apartments date form the late seventies and had a that time rather good reputation. There's yet another group to be introduced: the white and



mostly older people with a good salary, often shop-owners who grew up during the golden age of the neighbourhood: the fifties and the sixties of the 20th century.
During our fieldwork (1998-2000), the remaining area of the railroad tracks laid there as ***a vast and open area***. The railroads were taken away and what remained was a plot of grass, small trees and wild pastures. What once was a rampart and later a part of the industrial urban machinery, had become a open and undefined space, at first sight badly appropriated. It appeared to be a place for discussion and disagreement. The city plan to build there a kind of recreational centre, was stopped after fierce protest of the united occupants and shop-owners. It was the only time we could discover a theme that united almost all of the local population. This unity seemed a bit strange. A hundred meters further, there was a community centre to be built, partially with the same functions and without any disagreement. Two hundred meters further there was already of dancing hall that nobody experienced as harming. The fear for the new function apparently did not relate to the function itself but to the significance of the place – a vast domain for informal practices such as informal parties, children building all kinds of cabins and cottages, ball playing, dumping rubbish and even large periods of guarding sheep by a Turkish family.



It would go beyond the nature of these activities to define them as counterstrategies. It's more likely to consider the place itself as a kind of riffraff area, but one with an important history and significance. The majority of the older inhabitants still speaks of a municipal plan to build there better houses, urban villas and low-rises. The plan dates from the fifties but because Ghent - as every other city in Flanders - suburbanised during the sixties and the seventies, the houses were never built. One of the ladies we interviewed referred to the open space as to 'the devastation' [*"de verwoesting"*] - a word that couldn't refer to the visible external reality as there was almost no deterioration. The same lady said: *"buildings are always better than open spaces, where there's building there's no decline"*. Although a (non elaborated) municipal plan can not be 'compared' with the use of the words 'devastation' for decades later, we do compare them. We consider both the plan and the interview-fragment as two events. Both are consequences of a practical logic that we still don't know but that nevertheless steer (a part of) the practical map the lady and other people in Ghent make use of.

During interviews with older people and especially with the shop owners, it became clear that the experience of loss was crucial for the way these people looked at themselves and their district. This got a broader relevance when we discovered that in only 15 years, eighteen (of the 20) cultural and social associations did quit. In the same period (1981 – 1996) the number of (professional) organisations in the field of help and social work, increased from two to twenty-two. For the older occupants that were economically better of, the decline of the neighbourhood

never would be stopped by the velvet invasion of social workers and problem-solvers. But that was not what they told us! In fact, they didn't speak at all about social workers; they didn't work with them and since five years, there was even a soft boycott of their activities. The yearly festival of the local community was no longer sponsored by the local merchants federation (where at that time no Turkish shop owner had a seat in). When the district had to take sides in an urban dossier, the merchants always had a separate declaration.

What were now the assumptions of all these people? To get an answer, we took a closer look at all kinds of routines, also some very strange ones. There were three ladies living in the first high rise and who told us (separately from each other) that when they went out for recreational purposes, they always took the exit-door situated at the city-side of their building, even when that meant a serious detour, even when the recreational destination was situated at the north of their dwelling. For the daily shopping (food and non-food), the opposite door was used, described as the 'backyard exit'. The neighbourhood was apparently experienced as a backyard and not so much a place for recreation and wellbeing.

During a trajectory analysis of some Belgian and Turkish women, we found that both 'groups' – although for different reasons – didn't make much use of the inner streets in the district. Turkish ladies preferred the two main roads and the streets at the canal side, places where the social control of (Turkish) men and family was said to be weaker. A lot of the Belgian women did the same, avoiding – as they said – all kinds of youngsters with bad or unpredictable intentions. It seemed again that the neighbourhood itself was not the place of big pleasure or social cohesion. In reverse: the same ladies told us they didn't wish to visit the neighbourhood house because of other women always complaining about themselves and about… the neighbourhood. During a later phase we found that almost every adult had his of her preferred destinations outside the district. Cafeteria where one could sit for hours without having to order a new consumption, where quiet popular: the Dutch supermarket Hema, the bar of the university and other public buildings.

To put it roughly, the neighbourhood was especially loved by students who used it as a mere place to sleep and to drink their beers; for all other groups the district seemed to be evaporated…! What structured their social space was the very close residential environment and some specific places in the city and even further. This latter territory seemed even appropriate in generating emblematic situations, events that could be transferred to their daily life in Rabot. So the remote urban life provided assumptions that proved to be adequate for daily life in the hood, especially for coping with unpredictable behaviour. Or in the words of a lady: *"when you see those youngsters, it's important not to be afraid. We were once in Amsterdam and there you saw all those punks, with their coloured hairs and so. It was really nice you know."*
And another lady: *"We were at the seaside walking on the boulevard. There was a lot of people and suddenly two youngster stood there in front of me. I said one of the: 'Hey lad, what do you want. Can I help you, tell me quickly...' And he started laughing and then he asked if he could give me a kiss and he kissed me. Imagine that."*

A good deal of this local habitus was built up with experiences and competences people acquired (and still were acquiring) in the broader city. The neighbourhood was for the big majority of these occupants not the place for urban experience and cohesion. People had their good friends outside the district and when it came to visit each other, they preferred a meeting spot outside Rabot[6]. If one had to summarize this, one verbalise as follows: *"the good life is not here but, elsewhere, at least in places with more vivacity and urbanity".* This partial habitus is in total contradiction with the local community-workers that focus on local strategies and animation. Their founding assumption would be more or less like this: *"All the positive things already do exist in the neighbourhood itself; the development has to be initiated by the actual inhabitants themselves."*[7]

In a final phase of the project (but still before the focus groups took place) we discovered that the (Belgian) shop owners didn't make promotion any longer in the neighbourhood itself. Their flyers and leaflets were only distributed outside the district…. Was there a practice that could illustrate in a more clearer way the dislike for their own environment? Their habitus seemed to be the reverse of the one the social workers adhered to: *"all the positive things (and clients) come from outside (the neighbourhood), we cannot make any profit with what's inside."* In the focus group we brought both groups together: the inhabitants and the shop owners at the one hand and the professionals at the other hand. Before we can discuss what happened then, it's useful to describe the historical and morphological analysis we made. This analysis gave us a much deeper insight in the meaning of the assumptions we had formulated at that time.

[6] Within Ghent the neighbourhood has not a bad reputation. There had been some problems a year before our fieldwork but it were minor frictions and not at all comparable with problems in Dutch cities.

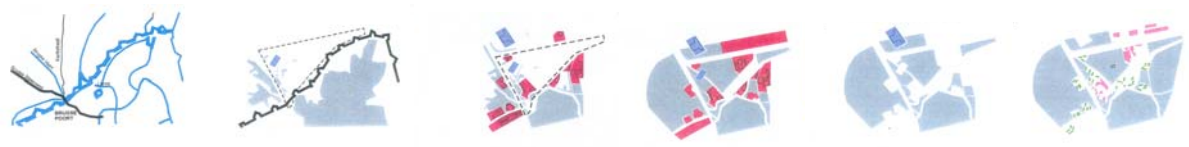
[7] At the time we did the research, the fear for gentrification was higher than today also because there were plans to built a Palace of Justice on the old railroad tracks. The plans were approved and the community got more guarantees so to prevent gentrification. Nevertheless, we think that the assumption the neighbourhood being self-reliant, was firmly exaggerated.

4. Developing a more localised 'habitus' [the built environment as interaction-paths of former generations]

When we considered the routines and practices of the students, the other youngsters, the Turkish women, shop owners, teenage children and older people, it was hard to believe that all of them would organise their daily lives according to their class- or culture-specific habitus. This would be a consequence of the habitusconcept as Bourdieu initially designed it in the seventies and the early eighties: a set of perceptual, communicative and behavioural rules which people learn by growing up each in their own environments. Although the concept was focussing on the possibilities to actively organise ones environment, the whole idea remained rather deterministic. People had few possibilities to design and use other maps than those of their social and cultural milieu.

What we saw in our fieldwork was quite different. Within one group the differences between assumptions, appreciations and practical concepts were often bigger than between some people of different groups. Furthermore, people could be seduced to look closely to the maps other people used. It was precisely this that made the focus groups so intense and interesting. People really started to recognise their own assumptions and their very doubtful reliability. At given moments in this process (in Ghent but also in Rotterdam, Dordrecht and Antwerp) we could see how a given worldview started to shift. How could this be integrated in the habitus notion?

There was yet another reason to modulate the habitus-theme unto a place-specific tool. Bourdieu speculated that the internalised schemes are successful because earlier generations already made up specific interaction-paths. So these paths are pre-established and narrow even more the existing degrees of free moulding ones live or environment. This determinism disappears for a great deal when we limit these interaction-paths to the world of tangible artefacts: the level of the built city. This reduction means that we can analyse the urban fabric as a complex sediment of what earlier generations decided to do. Their multiple interactions created layered textbook, a palimpsest of multiple texts written above each other. We do not have to speculate about meanings and internal arguments, because the sediment is still there. The bridges and the streets tell us about tangible paths and ways of cultural and economic exchange; boundaries give an



1700 1870 1900 1960 1998

The morphological evolution of Rabot as a *palimpsest*, a layered text that each generation writes above the existing text.

indication where properties or activities stopped, lots that remained vacant for more than a generation can tell us dressing up a kind of no man's land; …

The pace of the built city is mostly slower than the decisions individuals and households make, but not necessarily. The cultural life in Rabot – as elsewhere in the city of Ghent – proved to be strong, even when the morphological, demographic and economic conditions already had changed. In the sixties, when the big industrial machinery came to an end, the vast lots of fabrics and railroads remained empty [see illustration p.9]. It took more than three decades before this vacant lots were rebuilt. But on the social and the cultural level, the hood was still alive in the early eighties. It's only five or ten years later that the social and cultural tissue shifted and finally collapsed. At that time the hood was inhabited with people from elsewhere: Turkish families, inhabitants of the high-rises and students (see the last drawing in the strip on p. 9]. The Rabot community was no longer a typical and in majority catholic neighbourhood of working class people but a mixed and quiet urban community of groups from a bit everywhere. Making a new and appropriate 'we' or 'here' would only be possible if one was willing to think about 'them' and 'there'.

Looking at the urban landscape in this 'historical' way, enriches the habitus. The so called 'internal' strategies, tactics and practices' suddenly appear in a built world with its continuity and its history. In Ghent we get another understanding of what's *'inside'* and what's *'outside [the neighbourhood]'* once we see that from the very beginning, the Rabot-zone was a the place were the city dumped every thing that was seen as harmful or dangerous: the continuity of this self appreciation still functions in the social and spatial distinctions people make for themselves. It would be naive to expect that a spatial distinction that existed for centuries, can be abolished, forgotten of deleted.
The place-specific habitus also reveals why the boost of social workers and organisations during the eighties and the nineties could not be appreciated by the majority of the occupants (while the individual quality and competences of these professionals was in average very good !): it was a denial of a much deeper knowledge in this community, the conviction that the neighbourhood did not fit into the formal world of policy makers and of the city centre.

There's another advantage when we use the habitus in the suggested way. Because we initially have investigated routines, convictions and assumptions, we now have a panoramic view on the who's, the what's and the how's in the area. We know what people do, what they think and believe and finally how they behave while organising their lives. These ethnographic givens can now be used in adjusting and partially rewriting the "common map". In a very first phase, one shall discover that this map itself is subject to a dialogical process and sometimes a process of deconstructing the superficial assumptions people have about themselves and their surrounding milieu. So what do we really mean by 'common map'? There is no stronger belief than the maps each of us uses in daily life. But when one discovers that his or hers assumptions no longer can underpin what he of she is doing, it becomes difficult not to change. Mostly it only takes some

minutes, not to admit the new (part of the) map but at least to understand that the map you believed in, is partially or even mainly false. This process works so quickly because the arguments are routines, facts and givens that people can not deny – often these givens came from themselves during the initial phases of the research.

In Ghent there was one shop-owner who did not focus on clients from elsewhere. Yes, there was a good percentage of strangers visiting his supermarket. But when years went by, he had understood that the community changed and he started to think about multiple target groups that could strengthen each other. He had see n that some products were very popular to Turkish families, also because the other Turkish shops did not offer these goods. For the many student in the neighbourhood he'd started a campaign that gave them price reductions on Monday (the food) and special offers on Thursday (the beers)… I depicted these strategies during a reunion with the other members of the merchant-federation and the first reaction remained very chilly (the successful entrepreneur wasn't at the meeting). But later on it became clear that the self-perception of the merchants had changed, together with their initial assumption. They couldn't deny any longer that within the Turkish community, a lot of people had good earnings and did spent a lot of money. At least not everything (everybody) in the neighbourhood was negative…

In a further phase and after several mixed focus-groups, we could formulate a more operational habitus, maybe not common but at least a map that could be red by very different people with very different interests. We present he here as such, without discussing her in depth. The most important ideas were the following ones:

- The actual situation in Rabot is for a good deal a consequence of a broader bipolarity in the city of Ghent – so the problems of the district touch to the problems of the city as a whole
- The many vacant plots are remains of an industrial area but also of a city neglecting this part of its territory. This plots now became alleys, yards, pastures and vague terrains. These multiple zones form a important part of the informal city.
- The informal city has to be recognised as worth full and an integrating part of the urban fabric. Documenting these spots (their form, their use, their potentials) can be a first step in revalidating the every day city we live in (see illustration).

The strip [orange dotted line] opens the neighbourhood from the inside so that functions and activities from the outside can become compatible with the already existing city and neighbourhood. The spatial relation is not radial (towards the centre) but tangential, repeating the old trajectories of people not going inside (and in social terms: not conforming to standard behaviour or life paths)

- many of these plots could give birth to activities and functions that may have a realm to the whole city or region. In one industrial building, there are plans to develop a youth cultural centre with a lot of production facilities.
- The youngsters that we see in this neighbourhood may be perceived as harmful or annoying, but this is also a consequence of the fact that the interesting and active youngsters do not have any infrastructures – we loose them to other parts of the city.
- The qualities of the neighbourhood must be prevailed but this will only be possible if these qualities make coalitions with qualities and needs on a supra local level. The facilities mentioned in #4 and #5 can be seen as first operational concretisations. .
- According tot #6, the 'good things form the inside' must be enriched with the 'good things from the outside' [so the habitus is totally reformulated !]
- Enriching the local level, has spatial and practical consequences. The most important thing is not to overwhelm the local place of activity. In spatial terms, the neighbourhood has to be opened in a lateral way, not in a radial one (see illustration).
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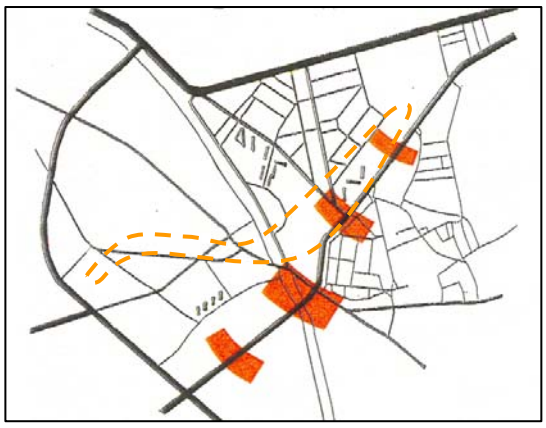
At the end, we (the researchers) designed a kind of strip that gave a first image of this eight priorities. The innovative thing about this strip was that it incarnated the newly formulated habitus in terms of possible projects and that at the same time it sat out some conditions for further elaboration. Totally new was the idea that Rabot (and Brugse Poort) didn't have to be glued on the city centre but that the urban tissue needed a kind of opening from the inside (see drawing on the left and the map above]. These ideas were presented during a press conference in the future youth cultural centre. The participants of the focus groups and other people of both the neighbourhood and the city took part in it.



5. Looking for the quality within the problem [appropriate 'reading' often is the opposite of problem-solving]

In this approach, one of the toughest tasks is the reformulation of problems into 'givens'. This difficulty has more than one antecedent. The occupants themselves don't like givens, they prefer problems. As every citizen in the Western world, they learned to look at their environment in terms of change, evolution and renewal. Also the content of what they think and feel about themselves and their environments, is not neutral; mostly it's affected by the thoughts of opinion-makers, journalists, professionals and different types of specialists. Those registers form the outside are always there; even when they're rejected they prove to be rather strong. It is also for the researcher himself quiet difficult to discover the given under the problem. Yes, one can deconstruct, but many urban realities can not further be deconstructed. In fact, some problems or that big that one does not know if a situation has to be accepted or – indeed – solved.

We learned this lesson especially in Nieuwland [Schiedam]. For over two years, our research had shown us the core problems: a neighbourhood with a overkill of traffic infrastructure but with a hardware that makes almost no integration with the small scale of daily life. It became clear that the investments of the past 15 years tried to put 'Nieuwland on the map' but in doing so, *the reality of the city itself was neglected.* That reality was mainly one of loss and decline but because there was for almost two decades a practice of renewal, the physical aspects of the decline had become invisible. But not the memory. Not the history. Not the urban fabric in it's built form. On all these levels there were big feelings of unease, but why should one complain? And about what?

That was precisely the situation I had learned to know: a community that was very involved and active but when in came to terms, did not have the words to indicate precisely what's was wrong or needed. One man for instance said: "I'm proud to be a Schiedammer" and 20 minutes later he said "I'm so ashamed to be a Schiedammer" and both were seemingly true. In the presence of all these good and beautiful buildings, in this neighbourhood with abundant green and open spaces, in this city where the criminality had dropped, people had big difficulties in describing them selves.

As a researcher, I had to be aware of this. The least I would do was imposing my insights and categories. But quiet ironically, I found myself during the first two focus groups preaching and analysing what was wrong and what could become better. Most of the participants stared at me, one of these multiple specialists they saw passing trough the neighbourhood… What in fact had this one to tell…? Oh yes, there were new insights and even thrilling ideas, but on a deeper level, the participants simply didn't believe me. It was just a new kind of story.

Only when I stopped trying to change all this, something very strange happened. After te interruption of the second focus-group, I just showed an interview-fragment. It was a beautiful piece of speech from Lutvi Merali, a young Turkish man depicting his trajectories trough the neighbourhood: the road to the suburb station and to Rotterdam, the way he takes to the local mosque passing the house of his uncle and the school of his sister. Maybe there was a kind of love and sensuality in the fragment but there was also that peculiar sentence. "*You know",* said Lutvi Merali, *"here in Schiedam there no big thing. Some shops, mostly cheap. When I want to see my friends I go To Rotterdam".*

When I asked if they recognised the fragment, there was a surprising and very big "Yes !". To my first astonishment, the 'yes' related tot the small sentence *'in Schiedam there's no big thing'.* Finally ! Finally someone had been allowed to simple state this idea. Had taken the space to say that the neighbourhood and even the city is quiet boring. That the big renewal has not been able to change that. And then I simply asked them: can we look at this boringness as if it were a quality? And than again they shouted: "yes, it is a quality. It's boring but we like lo live here and nowhere else." Again, to my own astonishment, the most important was said almost by accident. Or more precisely: when I as a researcher stopped analysing and became surprised again. The reality (or map?) that was denied for so long, could take words again.

Epilogue: readability in stead of liveability

One must agree with the French theoretician: growing older than forty, we discover that our behavioural or even perceptual standards only slightly differs form the set our parents used and believed in. We all draw (and thoroughly use) the maps that we learned to believe in. The world outside might be a very individual thing (as it is actively produced by ourselves) but because this 'thing' already existed inside, the active produced outcome proves often to be rather conformist. Our freedom ends there were we believe we're good in free mapping. But this restriction is at the same time a enormous possibility, if we start to critic our maps and and to share them. If this could become a cultural practice. We think it is crucial that people in general can find the right words to describe their lives and environment. That they can read the city thy live in.

This will be a quiet difficult project as the broader culture in our society does not tend towards more platforms for self investigation and authentic speech. So let's create those platforms, scientific and other ones. Partners in the field of urban renewal could make more coalitions with the artistic, cultural and social work (there are good examples abroad). Coalitions not to change lifestyles or neighbourhood-reputations but simply to get an understanding of what a local community can be today; what it means to live together in a society that does not value this. How distinction and cohesion can be organised in a given part of the city. Where in Ghent began 'the outside'? Where did the neighbourhood end and where started the city? Did they have an overlap? Who were the 'they' or the 'them' people spoke so often about? This work is in fact both social and cultural, probably it's also a kind of political work.

The maps we try to reveal may be used as only one tool. Artists, novelists, community-workers and other scholars surely will use other ones, as do real estate people, architects and politicians. But all of them may discover that for a given place or district, there's a map (practice, coherence, continuity) that at the same time shifts and grounds the believes one had until then. It is indeed a never ending story.

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