

Montages in the peri-urban palimpsest. Echographies for Leuven

Montajes en el palimpsesto periurbano. Ecografías para Lovaina

YURI GERRITS
BRUNO DE MEULDER

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Abstract

This article delves into the debate on the peri-urban condition that surrounds Belgium's cities and towns. It uses the case of Leuven as an example to unravel the territory's unique though confusing structure that until this day remains largely tailored to its rural basis. This article moves in the slipstream of Corboz' writing on "the land as a Palimpsest" and puts the focus on the intricate duality of vernacular and urban orders. More than relying on the ideals of postulated models, it explores the use of a method that seeks to rationalise the imperfection and alleged chaos, unveiling recurrent, emergent patterns of a hybrid order instead. A cartography of "Echographies" is proposed as a new tool to facilitate the indispensable deep reading and interpreting of the peri-urban condition. But it is also instrumentalised in support of a more customized approach of "architectural urbanism" that considers design as a continued transformation of what is already in place.

Keywords

Peri-urban landscape; Cartography; Bottom-up Urbanism; Incrementality; Vernacular Urbanisation; Echographies

Resumen

Este artículo profundiza acerca del debate sobre la condición periurbana que rodea las ciudades y pueblos de Bélgica. Utiliza el caso de Lovaina como ejemplo para descifrar la estructura única no obstante confusa del territorio que, hasta el día de hoy, sigue estando en gran medida adaptado a su base rural. El artículo se mueve entre el remolino de la escritura de Corboz acerca de la "El territorio como alimpsesto" y se centra en la intrincada dualidad de los órdenes vernáculo y urbano. Más que depender de los ideales de modelos propuestos, el artículo explora el uso de un método que busca racionalizar la imperfección y el presunto caos revelando, en cambio, patrones recurrentes y emergentes de un orden híbrido. Una cartografía de "Ecografías" es propuesta como una nueva herramienta para facilitar la indispensable profunda lectura e interpretación de la condición periurbana. Pero es, también, instrumentalizada como soporte de un enfoque más personalizado de un "urbanismo arquitectónico" que considera el diseño como una continua transformación de lo que ya está en el lugar.

Palabras clave

Paisaje Periurbano; Cartografía; Procesos botton-up; Incrementalidad; Urbanismo; Ecografías

Yuri Gerrits Holds a master's degree in Architectural Engineering from KULeuven (2002) and master's in science in Urban Design from the Bartlett School of Graduate Studies at UCLondon (2005). He worked on a variety of masterplans projects at the London based practice of Fletcher Priest Architects and is a partner at WIT architecten in Leuven, Belgium since 2014. He combines his work in practice with teaching at UCL (2007-2010) and KUL (2009-) and a position in the planning commission of the City of Leuven since 2014. His experience in projects at the intersection of architecture and urbanism forms the basis for his PhD. He started his research on "Stubborn Grounds" in 2021, focusing on the relationship between incremental transformation processes and landscape at the small grain of the urban tissue. ORCID 0000-0001-8623-8885.

Bruno De Meulder studied architecture at the KU Leuven where he also developed a PhD dissertation on urbanism in the Belgian Congo. Currently, he teaches urbanism as a professor at the KU Leuven at the Department of Architecture in the post-graduate programmes of human settlements and urbanism. In his research theory and practice, analysis and design, history and contemporary urban practices cross. At the KU Leuven Urbanism and Architecture (OSA), De Meulder is currently supervising design research that focuses on spatial production and consumption patterns, territorial reuse, recycling and upcycling – from Flanders, Belgium to Ca Mau, Cantho and from Saigon, Vietnam to Cape Town, South Africa. ORCID 0000-0001-6975-4140.



Figure 1. Aerial photograph of Wilsele, in the northern part of Leuven's periphery.

Introduction

From Plan to Palimpsest. From Model to Method.

After decades of steady growth and grand urban projects, many of the historical centres in Belgium have reached a point of spatial saturation. Inevitably the focus shifts towards the peri-urban landscapes, surrounding cities and towns, where vast areas are now subjected to an increasing development pressure.

A weak planning tradition lies at the basis of a territory that was, and still is, unmistakably tailored to the land's pre-industrial, rural organisation. Development is only a consequence of a pragmatic and piecemeal appropriation of this hinterland, and rarely with a holistic political project.

Today's dazzling collage of ribbon developments, supralocal infrastructures, neighbourhoods, commercial and industrial zones, residual rural land, and a multitude of domains for convents and institutions of all kinds renders a realm of ambiguity and confusion. Half urban, half landscape. Half full, half empty. The struggle of urbanism to engage appropriately is put on edge now that consecutive waves of urbanisation continue to consolidate and extend the peri-urban territory, to finally overtake the role of the traditional centres themselves as hubs for living, production and services.

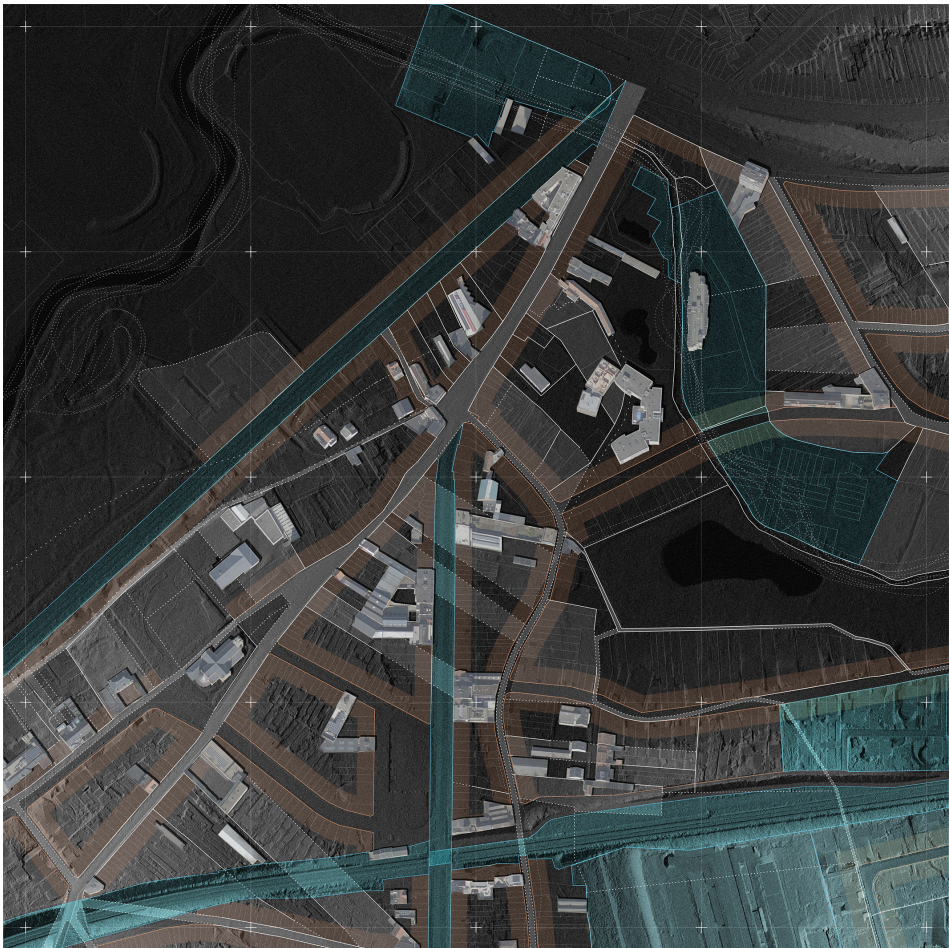
The extensive body of work on the Horizontal Metropolis, amongst others, has already demonstrated the fierce complexity of metropolitan regions but only rarely committed to provide methods for engagement too¹. This paper delves into broader research that zooms in on the peri-urban region of Leuven, exemplary for the Belgian condition, to explore an alternative approach that operates at the intersection of urbanism, landscape and architecture. The hypothesis is that much of the ambiguity and confusion in these territories may in fact be attributed to the

1 Paola Viganò, Chiara Cavalieri and Martina Barcelloni Corte, eds., *The Horizontal Metropolis: Between Urbanism and Urbanisation* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

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Figure 2. Echography of Heverlee, in the south of peri-urban Leuven: cartography developed to indicate the structure of the vernacular landscape with its early cadastral structure (white lines), the background of the topographical map (grey/black), today's urban structure of perimeter blocks (orange), supralocal territorial infrastructures (magenta), neighbourhoods and projects with an autonomous order (magenta) en the dispersion of typo-morphological anomalies.



- 2 Reference can be made to James Scott's plea against the widespread culture of policymakers and administrations to impose order and legibility. He denounces the systematical underestimation and trivialization of vital socially and culturally embedded patterns of coexistence. The devotion to rationalise and simplify society into pristine patterns of organisation, goes hand in hand with a fearless overwriting of any informally accumulated know-how and logics. James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 342-357.
- 3 André Corboz, "Le territoire comme palimpseste", *Diogenes* 121 (January-March 1983):14-35.
- 4 The "Echographies" are developed as a new cartographic tool in (unpublished) design research at the Department of Architecture, KULeuven.
- 5 The applied technique bears resemblance to the "Atlas de Territoire Genevois". It combines the topographical maps with the Napoleonic Cadastre (1806-1818) and the Plan d'Ensemble de Territoire Genevois (1935-1959) with the more recent Plan d'Ensemble from 1991, revealing the mutation in the urban tissue through categories of permanence, persistence and disappearance. Service des Monuments et sites du Département travaux publics, République et Canton de Genève and Ecole d'Architecture d'Université de Genève, Centre de recherche sure la rénovation urbaine, *Atlas du territoire Genevois. Permanences et modifications cadastrales aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Chêne-Bourg, Genève: Georg, 1993).

determination of policymakers and administrations to rationalise and simplify the environment in accordance with pre-conceived models². Symptomatic in this is the tenacious confidence in the application of the building block as the one and only concept to organise urban tissues, as research on Leuven reveals. The attractiveness of the block "as wanted" resides in its familiar and straightforward structure that also comfortably sustains the city's planning culture of order-enforcement and contingency-management.

Yet, the reality in the peri-urban condition "as found" is far more complex. Regarding the territory as a thick, stratified composition of human interventions, iterations and transformations brings us closer to Corboz' concept of the palimpsest³, than the singularity of one absolute model. This duality between "the land as found", and the normative projection of what is "supposed to be", lies at the basis of a complex dialectic relationship, if not mismatch, that is cause for concern.

And so the idea is to reverse the thinking process, from a retro-active application of established models, towards a non-axiomatic method. We therefore introduce an approach through "echographies"⁴, specifically developed to expose the "thick" historical reading of the as-found peri-urban condition. Echographies are set up as maps depicting areas of 840 by 840 meters. Carefully selected to be different from each other, yet altogether illustrative for the typical morphological organisation of Leuven's urbanising periphery. A historical and cartographical analysis per frame forms the basis. They are essentially constructed as diachronic deep-scans displaying the considered spaces in their stratified built-up. In a systematic overlay of multiple, aggregating strata from various registers and eras, the maps demonstrate the palimpsestic nature of the territory, showing matters that are and were in one place in one drawing⁵.

Set up as a tripartite, this paper will illustrate how the approach with echographies supports an in depth understanding of the depicted urban samples (Observe), how

it exposes recurrent morphological patterns that are symptomatic for the territory at large (Interpret), and finally, how it may also facilitate a method of urban design that thrives on the recuperation and recombination of existing orders and artefacts, and the precision of interventions that intensify or correct relationships between them (Transform). Such unbiased consideration induces a more careful engagement that shifts the practice of urbanism from the implementation of preordained ideas to transformations that capitalise on what already exists.

Observe. The anatomy of the peri-urban condition

Landscape – Urbanism

Nothing is even in the land. Geological and meteorological forces made up for a ground that flows, climbs, faults and descends. The land is beyond measure. Hills and plateaus, slopes and embankments, valleys, flood plains and rivers. Everything together in one vast blanket with measureless ripples and waves and folds. Etched within and on top run the earliest pathways and roads. They follow the land along the lines of least resistance, avoiding places too wet, too steep or too bushy. Connecting destinations large and small. Across the territory they weave warped webs, holding fields and pastures in their wide and permeable meshes. Much has been written about the formation of vernacular landscapes⁶. Informed by local knowledge and pragmatic intelligence, they grew closely in tune with the land. Until this day, a world that persists somehow underneath the many layers of successive development waves.

The echographies reverse orders, graphically exposing what is hidden if not forgotten. By bringing Leuven's geomorphological features to the surface, they also reveal the intricate relationships with the compliant, sequacious structures embedded in the early agricultural parcellation, scattered settlements, and the network of primary roads and pathways in between. The addition of consecutive layers of construction in the 19th and 20th century goes hand in hand with an incremental mutation of the cadastral structure. Although not consistently highlighting built form, the samples from the echography depict a steady fragmentation and reduction in plot sizes, particularly along the old lines of movement. In many iterations, a land for production transformed into a land for living. Roads and paths are gradually filled up on either side, dividing the land in fronts and backs. It is an unrelenting incremental process where ribbons cross and join, weave, warp and woof to form a loose fabric of irregular building blocks, not by intention, but as a blind consequence of enduring regimes of laissez-faire.

Research on Heverlee, on the edge of Leuven's city centre, reveals how an initially spontaneous pattern of ribbon development was eventually also subjected to a round of planning bylaws. In the 1930's, a first set of rules stipulated the position and profile for individual buildings, altogether aiming for equality and harmony in the emerging urban ensembles. The application of these planning bylaws did have an undeniable, generative force. As clinically administered bottom-up incentives, they formalised and even accelerated the consolidation of the urban ribbons in an accumulation of many small projects over time. At this point it is necessary to make the distinction between "urban blocks" and "perimeter blocks". Where urban blocks are planned as an intentionally coerced top-down order, perimeter blocks emerge unintentionally and bottom-up, as urban fragments within the structure of the vernacular landscape. Perimeter blocks as such, embody the duality in a spatial configuration that is as much urban as landscape.

Yet, the portrayed samples demonstrate a further, structural intertwining of the orders of the vernacular landscape and the urban models and projects. In a clash of scales, the formation of local, "domestic" patterns is additionally compromised by the

6 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the vernacular landscape* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1984).

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imposition of supralocal, “territorial” infrastructures⁷. From the eighteenth-century canals and national chaussées, to the nineteenth century railways, to the twentieth century express roads and highways: wherever supralocal infrastructures criss-cross the territory, they bluntly jeopardize and disrupt the already feeble emerging fabric of ribbons. The denial, appropriation and overwriting of the vernacular order is not rarely accompanied by heavy manipulations in the topography. Ripple effects on the ecological and hydrological functioning of the terrain are inevitable.

Furthermore, numerous neighbourhoods and allotments fill up the free mazes in the network of ribbons and infrastructures. In contrast with the incremental and unpremeditated formation of perimeter blocks, the stamping of well-confined urban fragments in Belgium’s urban peripheries was a deliberate political initiative endorsed by legislation that promoted home ownership. The echographies illustrate how the imprinting of neighbourhoods add another urban order onto the landscape. As a loose constellation of confined fragments, they ramp up the complexity in the peri-urban landscape. It is a bizarre patchwork where designed entities engage in undesigned juxtapositions, “*bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble*”.

Unintentional – Rational

The unintentional and uncoordinated joint-venture of various orders is largely responsible for the alleged chaos in the peri-urban territory. Corboz attributes this confusion to “les logiques concurrentes”⁸ but is also quick to add a glimpse of hope by stating that the apparent lack of harmony does not necessarily mean cacophony⁹. His essay reads as a rebellious manifest against the agency of simplification and the assumed superiority of conventional orders of urbanity. This statement seems to resonate in the echographies for Leuven that reveal an astonishing amount of perimeter blocks that are abnormally large, small, distorted and pepperpotted with points of exception. The same accounts for the apparent incompatibility between various urban fragments as much as the incongruity of orders that operate at different scales. As long as the peri-urban landscape is observed and evaluated through a lens of entrenched, imperative models, the abundance of its anomalies, inconsistencies, conflicts and unexpected juxtapositions can be overwhelming.

The echographies for Leuven are helpful to unravel the apparent cacophony. In search for a rational they aim to expose relationships between the geomorphology, the vernacular appropriation and successive impositions of scattered projects and planning initiatives. But they may also unveil systemic changes. The continuous fragmentation and recombination of ownerships, so well described by Corboz’ categories of “permanence, persistence and disappearance”¹⁰, shows evidence of the recalcitrance and inertia that accumulates in the mutation of the cadastral structure and the built environment. Also Bruno Fortier’s suggestion of “stable structures”¹¹ implies a continued manifestation of buried forms and orders as the tissue transforms. Despite its ostensibly random structure, the peri-urban landscape is largely shaped by pragmatism and opportunism, anchored upon the conditions as found. The constant recuperation and re-interpretation of the existing is de facto constituting tissues that are full of implicit relations between parts that share a similar history or order.

Furthermore, once straitjacketing models are abandoned, the maps begin to reveal particular, recurrent structures that emerge in the hodgepodge of competing orders. Unintentional juxtapositions, superimpositions and seemingly erratic re-combinations can effectively be post-rationalised to acknowledge a degree of compatibility and even complementarity between on the one hand the “slow” and persistent vernacular structures of the landscape and on the other hand, the faster, more volatile landing of coerced urban orders. These correspondences could be regarded as “iatrogenic patterns”¹² in the sense that they arise as an unintentional

7 Joan Busquets et al., Urban Grids. Handbook for regular city design (Novato: ORO Editions, 2019), 311.
8 André Corboz, Aptitudes territoriales (Nantes: Dixit.net, 2023), 18.
9 Corboz, Aptitudes territoriales, 26.
10 André Corboz, “Le dessous des cartes”, in Atlas du territoire Genevois. Permanences et modifications cadastrales aux XIXe et XXe siècles, Service des Monuments et sites du Département travaux publics, République et Canton de Genève and Ecole d’Architecture d’Université de Genève, Centre de recherche sur la rénovation urbaine (Chêne-Bourg, Genève: Georg, 1993), 4-7.
11 Bruno Fortier uses the concepts of “stable structures” and “l’archéologie inverse” to describe permanent and persistent patterns that recur in the transformation of the urban tissue of Paris. Bruno Fortier and IFA, La Métropole Imaginaire: un atlas de Paris XIXe-XXe siècles (Liège: Mardaga, 1989).
12 James Scott recuperates the concept of iatrogenic illnesses from medical sciences to describe the unforeseen, negative consequences of over-simplification in centralized planning regimes and top-down projects. James Scott, “In praise of floods”, Facing the Anthropocene” (Luce Lecture, Filmed February 2020 at Goodson Chapel, Durham, NC) video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwMQSOdLULI>.

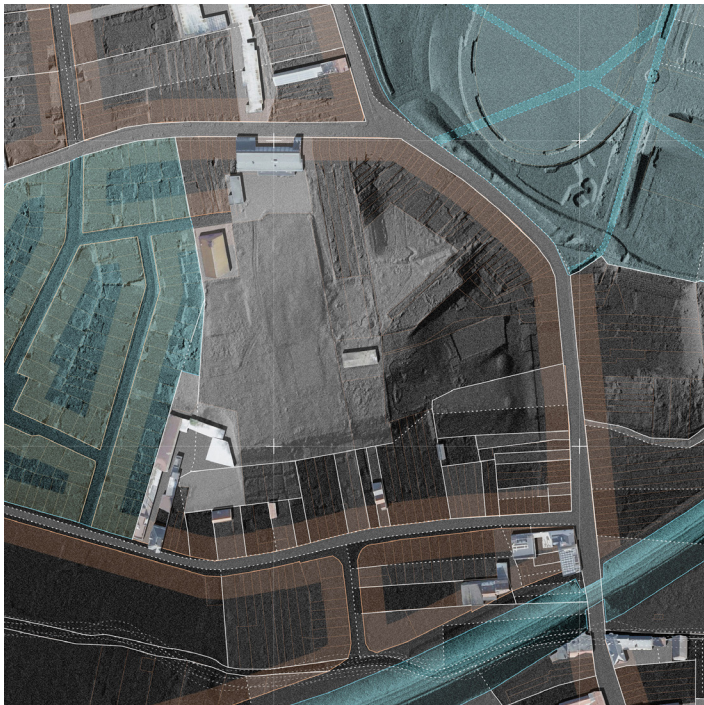


Figure 3. Extract of echography of Heverlee, illustrating fragments of the encapsulated landscape.



Figure 4. Aerial photograph.

side-effect of accumulating, mostly intentional decisions. The recognition of such unforeseen emergent structures can help to surmount the proclaimed pathology of the peri-urban landscape by rendering a more systemic and positive approach for engagement too. At this point the echographies are lifted beyond their role as analytical instruments. The map becomes a thinking-machine. The course of recuperation and re-purposing of traces, structures and artefacts as open signifiers continues in the assemblage of new narratives and concepts within the existing *tabula plena*¹³. It is an open-ended exercise that explicitly renounces the hermetic categorisation of spatial components or recipes. In what follows, three iatrogenic patterns will be discussed in more detail.

Interpret. Searching for recurrent patterns

Encapsulated Landscapes

Incremental ribbon development in an organic, post-rural structure evidently never generates regular urban blocks. As they grow, they encapsulate large fragments of the vernacular landscape within the perimeters of roads and pathways. Slowly, the situation reverses. A continuous landscape that harboured fragments of development, now becomes the residue, the negative so to speak, of a larger, built environment. The fragmentation of a landscape into “voids” is further enhanced by an administrative vacuum. The rigidity of planning bylaws for the buildings facing the streets contrasts with an astounding indifference for the leftover voids at the back, inside the perimeter block. Urbanism appears as a remarkably selective enterprise, pursuing aesthetic homogeneity and consistency in built form whilst disregarding and abstracting the open land as an ambiguous terrain vague.

Referring to “Encapsulated Landscapes” aims to counter and reverse the commonplace of “oversized urban blocks” commonly utilized by planning authorities in Belgium to describe the configuration of the peri-urban tissue. The combination of a residual vernacular landscape and its political, urban encapsulation allows for a remarkable duality. The coerced standardisation and fragmentation in smaller plot sizes along the edges contrasts with the open space that it embraces. As conservatories of the vernacular landscape, they carry typologies and spaces from a further past, but also host an array of more recent interventions with deviating scales and typologies that are not tolerated in the perimeter.

¹³ *Tabula Plena*, as opposed to *Tabula Rasa*, refers to practices that consider the urban environment as “full” of matter and meaning. Design is no substitution but a preservation and transformation of what exists. Bryony Roberts, ed., *Tabula Plena: Forms of Urban Preservation* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).

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Encapsulated landscapes epitomise the double nature in the peri-urban condition. Half urban, half landscape, their ambivalence is largely perceived as an issue instead of an asset. It is only recently that the leftover-landscape is coming back into the light, thanks to its potential to mitigate the accelerating effects of climate change. But it is also opportunistically recuperated for political purposes, if only as quick wins to “compensate” for the nuisances of growing densities and the increasing pressure on open space, so tangibly experienced during the corona pandemic. This process of revalorisation and repurposing reverses the meaning of the encapsulated landscape from a residual, unintentional side effect, towards an “aptitude territorial¹⁴”. It is an invitation for planners and urban designers to surmount the routines in which perimeter blocks are systematically treated as confined, comprehensible objects for action¹⁵. Zooming out allows to understand and re-assemble the landscape, together with its fragments of urbanity as a greater whole.

Conjoined Ribbons

In numerous places ribbons are so near to one another, that they grow into each other. One of them, mostly the eldest, is locally embedded within the vernacular landscape. A pathway along a creek or river or marshland down there, or that route on the ridge higher up. As vernacular traces they self-evidently follow the terrain. The other one, mostly more recent, as a superimposed supralocal infrastructure or a road following the more brutal projection of another geometric order. They are political projects that overrule their vernacular companions, without erasing them. Both vernacular and political lines (following the notions of Jackson¹⁶) are also armatures that incrementally consolidate into built ribbon developments. This coincidental interplay lies at the basis of idiosyncratic parallel structures. Slender figures with tightly entangled edges. Sometimes so narrow that an open space in between is hardly possible. Two buildings on either side merge into one.

At closer inspection, the combination of an inherited vernacular, and a coerced political linearity rarely leads to a symmetric arrangement. Much like the embedded duality in the encapsulated landscapes, the superimposed infrastructure established a more prestigious territorial order that marginalised the much older road or pathway along the meandering creek. In many cases, this asymmetry was further aggravated by a totally different engaging with the land itself. The vernacular ribbon as the more compliant structure within the landscape. Its counterpart as an unapologetic denial or even partial substitution of the landscape, characterized by substantial excavations and landfills to facilitate an uncompromised course. The alleged superiority of the new urban order was eventually also constituting a new hierarchy, reassigning the role of old route and the equally docile string of development in its slipstream as a refuge for more “auxiliary” spaces and buildings with diverging scales and typologies¹⁷.

This phenomenon of conjoined ribbons is a peculiar, recurring condition. Another iatrogenic construct perhaps, so typical for the urban periphery, that is without any doubt, hard to master through standardized methods. Nevertheless, also these patterns are today confined to the same planning dogma of the perimeter blocks with a house at the street, symmetrically mirrored over an unbuilt space of gardens in the middle. Desperate attempts to enforce these generic bylaws as a back-to-back operation produce quirky Janus head conditions in which the multiplication of conflicts, adjustments and unavoidable exceptions appears to outnumber the situations where projects can simply comply with the rule. And even when they do, solutions often appear as frantic and awkward misfits, and not rarely, as missed opportunities. The recognition of conjoined ribbons as a typical, emergent pattern may inform a more customized design method that treats both sides simultaneously as one project that capitalises on the reciprocity and complementarity of its interplaying pieces.

14 With the concept of “Aptitudes territoriales”, Corboz calls for an approach that acknowledges the peri-urban territory as a result of many processes of appropriation and urbanization over time. The unavoidable accumulation and intertwining of various orders must be understood as a predisposition with logic in itself, rendering new opportunities in urban design and planning. Corboz, Aptitudes territoriales.

15 The model of perimeter blocks, just like urban blocks, allows to describe and master the urban tissue as a sum of stand-alone fragments that can be treated separately. Their apparent simplicity and manageability makes them into a popular, most desirable concept, embraced by a majority of Belgium’s local planning authorities.

16 Brinckerhoff Jackson, Discovering the vernacular landscape.

17 These auxiliary spaces comprise garages, hangars, ateliers and fragments of factories.

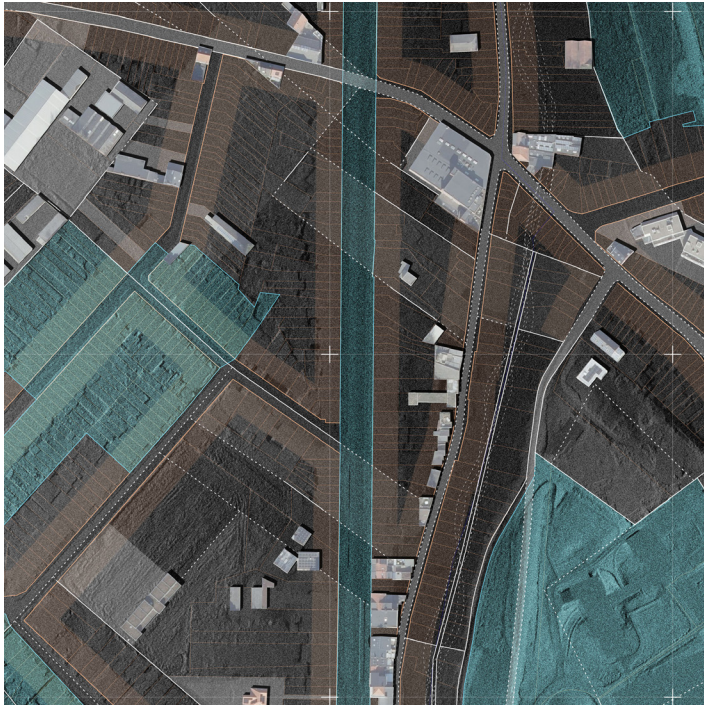


Figure 5. Extract of echography of Heverlee, illustrating fragment of conjoined ribbons.
Figure 6. Aerial photograph.



Both patterns above are examples of phenomena that occur all over in peri-urban Leuven. Both downplay the imperative idioms of urbanism, favouring the recognition and reincarnation of a long-silenced landscape-based order that resides in the background. In post-rationalizing the unintentional compatibility and reciprocity of vernacular and urban constructs, they also allow for a more systematic approach and conceptualization of a new “hybrid order”.

Promiscuous Interstitials

A third category of iatrogenic phenomena concerns the ubiquitous dispersion of typo-morphological anomalies. The hybrid order seems to deliver an excellent seedbed for all kinds of oddities that blossom on the interplay of conflicting logics. Yet they are disregarded or virtually non-existent in the prevailing planning routines. As another subversion, the echographies highlight the scattered amalgam of quirky parcels, abnormal buildings, and strange residual spaces that cannot merely be trivialized as random aberrations. Their abundance is equally emblematic for the peri-urban landscape and can be recognized as a pattern of “secondarity”¹⁸.

Part of them occur as tenacious heirlooms of the overrun vernacular landscape. Somehow they endured the homogenisation of the urban tissue. As misfits with a different scale, form or orientation they remain remarkably stable. Largely because of the persistency that is embedded in the cadastral structure, they manage to resist the smooth deployment of planning bylaws. The echographies depict examples of parking garages, small factories and plot irregularities, sternly following the orientation of the vernacular landscape, and now absorbed within the urban tissue as a quirky anomaly. Part of them are infills and adaptors that exploit the gaps and seems between otherwise more conventional built fragments of development. They mitigate the inevitable inconsistencies and colliding geometries within the hybrid order.

Much like K. Frampton’s¹⁹ concept of a “critical regionalism”, these cases of secondarity are essentially hyper-contextual. Their precise form and position do not come from any prescribed rule, but from a direct and more spontaneous engagement with their site. They mutated at their own pace, following their own promiscuous²⁰ ‘rules of engagement’, withstanding any order from overarching plans or bylaws. With buildings that are higher or deeper, or placed on unusual

18 Jean Remy and Liliane Voyé, *Ville, Ordre et Violence* (Paris: Press Universitaire France, 1981), 71.
19 Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a critical regionalism. Six points of an architecture of resistance”, in *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 16-30.
20 The term “promiscuous” refers to the idea of Denis Cosgrove, describing the ways in which landscapes are imbued with various layers of significance and how they accommodate and intermingle diverse influences and interpretations. Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

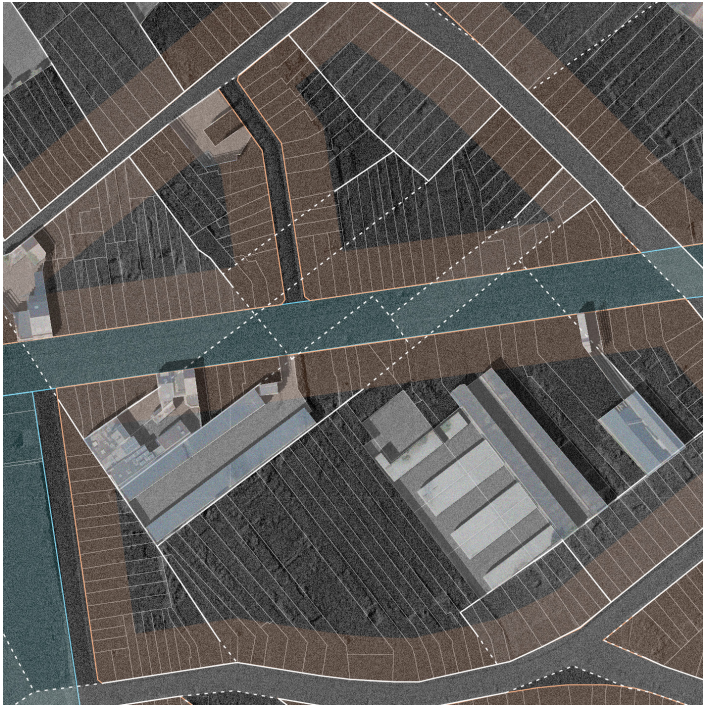


Figure 7. Extract of echography of Kessel-lo. Interstitial projects following the vernacular parcellation.



Figure 8. Aerial photograph.

positions, they reshuffle the normal of fronts and backs, the private and the public realm. But despite their non-conformist behaviour, they rarely have a destabilising effect on the parcels and projects that surround them with whom they sustain specific and often changing relationships. The echographies may even provoke the idea that they can form a diffuse connective tissue of interstitials, tying together fragments of spaces and buildings in more cohesive urban ensembles. It may be self-evident that there is a higher density of these secondary places in areas that show a greater incongruity between a persistent order of the vernacular landscape and the urban “first” orders. Secondarity is, in other words, emblematic in the condition of the peri-urban landscape.

Yet the word in itself sounds pejoratively as the lesser part in an assumed hierarchy or order. A flare-up of imperfection that is preferably reduced to the minimum. One cannot ignore that today’s planning bylaws chiefly prioritise a homogeneous, market-oriented residential development. Still these interstitial projects make for an indispensable phenomenon that is necessary for the functioning of the tissue as a whole. As a collection of deviating forms, scales, and typologies, they play a strategic role in catering for all sorts of non-residential (and different residential²¹) programs and activities that are systematically eradicated in the process of homogenisation elsewhere. Their abnormality may be precisely what also protects them in the competition with the more lucrative real estate on the residential market, allowing for less profitable social, cultural and economic initiative to survive. They exist by the grace of imperfection in the peri-urban landscape, and the inadequacy of the urban model to mould the entire tissue to its ideals. All this may raise the question whether this pattern of promiscuous interstitials could also be intensified and empowered in another praxis of planning and design.

Transform. Urbanism by Architecture

Where the echographies help to understand the intricate composite structure of the peri-urban tissue, they also unveil keys for intervention. This was demonstrated in recent design investigations²² on the edge of a geological formation, bordering the city of Leuven. The area’s steep slopes impeded the smooth implementation of the urban grid that was rolled out with great ease on the other side of the city in the 19th century. It cleared the way for a history of informal development that largely

21 In many places across the Leuven periphery, atypical, interstitial conditions beyond the standards of the planning bylaws cater for other typologies and mixtures of housing.

22 Design investigations, Master Studio “Urban Tissue”, Autumn 2023, Department of Architecture, KULeuven.

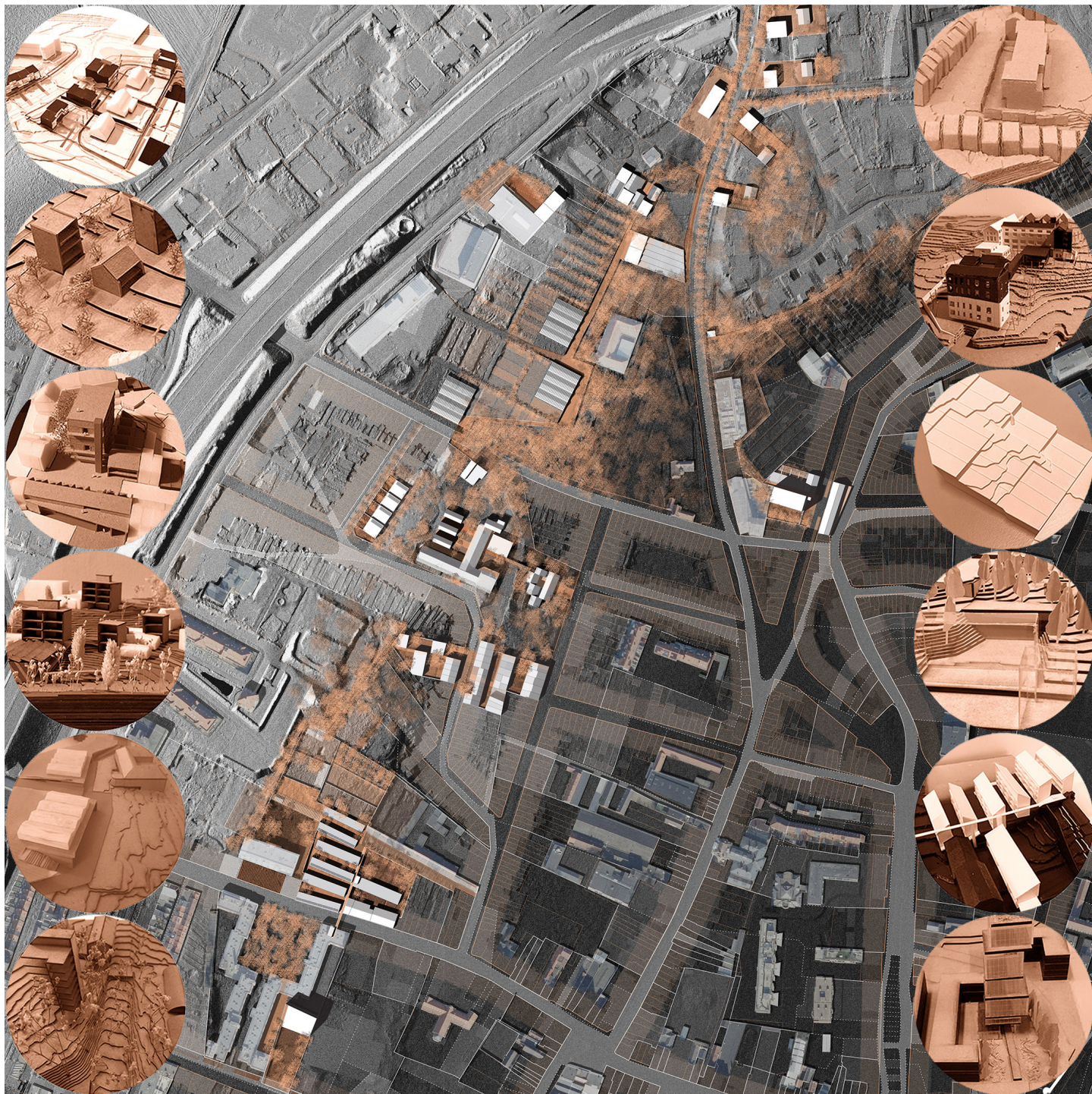


Figure 9. Synthesis design research: "A dozen benevolent dissidents". The incremental accumulation of individual architectural projects articulates a strategic figure on the slope of the witness hill. Each project accommodates besides its built programme also new places and passages in the public realm. By operating at multiple scale levels simultaneously, the architectural projects become an urban project.

complied to the recalcitrant structure of the vernacular landscape. The design research started right from the contingencies and peculiarities of haphazardly chose sites, simulating the unpredictability of small transformations instigated by today's private investment initiatives. The work was rooted in the understanding of the vernacular landscape and its emergent patterns as highlighted by the echographies.

The resulting "dozen of benevolent dissidents" demonstrate an array of bottom-up transformations, developed as hyper-contextual interstitials. All projects appear to bear a strategic transformative value, built on the discovery and intensification of dormant, yet recalcitrant logics that are hidden within the topography, the cadastral structure, and the extraordinary composition of "secondary" buildings, infrastructures, and open spaces. The approach to embrace the condition of the largely petrified landscape as a tabula plena contrasts with the conventional planning routines that dictate the model of perimeter blocks from above. Every project in this formidable realm of imperfection may initiate an instant, punctual acceleration in the evolution in the peri-urban tissue, not as a substitution, but as

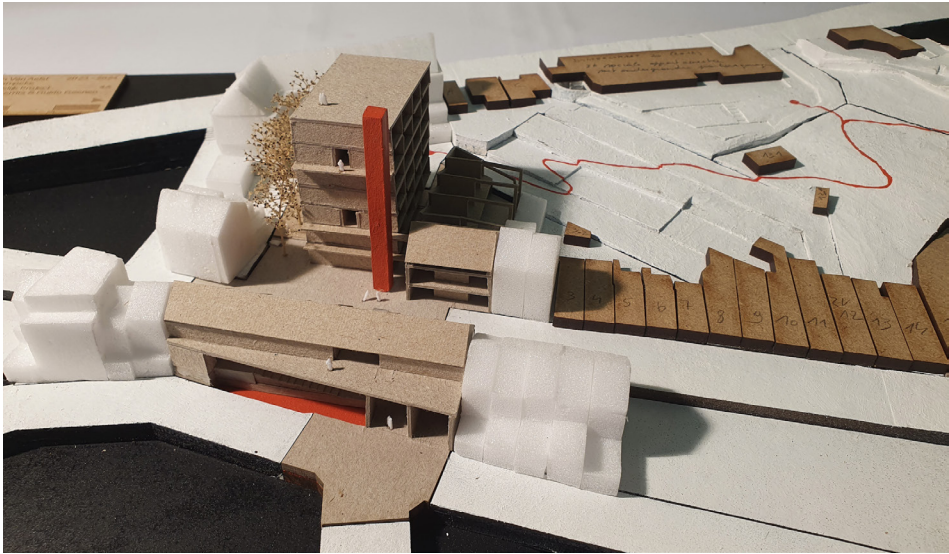


Figure 10. Design research of one “benevolent dissident”: the project reinterprets the condition of conjoined ribbons at the foot of the witness hill. An alternative configuration with new typologies of built form and open space opens the hermetically sealed street frontage of today to enhance the porosity in the urban tissue.

an incremental mutation. Yet, even despite their random selection and scattered locations, they also appeared to coproduce greater figures in their sum, essentially emancipating the vernacular order.

Today’s masterplans and planning bylaws have in common that they pursue a compliant implementation of pre-conceived, conventional ideas, forms, and configurations. Most commonly, the urban project determines the rules of engagement for a particular order or sense of coherence, prior to the architectural project that follows and conforms. The urban project manages contingencies and contains potential misbehaviour to avoid that one project would compromise the operation, the coherence, the harmony of the whole. In such context, secondarity only appears as dissidence or as a tolerance within the normative standards. These design experiments, however, explore another praxis where the common ground is no longer delivered by systems or top-down rules and blueprints but as a shared understanding of the landscape and its partnering tissue. Exactly the hypercontextual engagement of every individual project with its specific environment spawns a great variety of new typologies and configurations that are yet, altogether, tailored to the same logics, particularities and opportunities in the peri-urban landscape they are part of.

Analytical instruments like echographies can play a role in exposing patterns that emerge from the accumulation of vernacular and urban orders, but also have the capacity to provoke design itself as a continued interpretation and mutation of the tissue. In this way urbanism is above all an unpredictable accumulative process and shifts the focus from the containment of potentially harmful projects to the stimulation of the best. The architectural project becomes an urban project. Good neighborhood does not emerge from conformation to models, but as an act of dedicated customization and indispensable craftsmanship that responds to the precise moment, location, scale, and agenda of the project. Just like the “promiscuous interstitials”, inherited from the intertwining of the vernacular and the urban orders, these new projects exploit the opportunities that arise from unusual juxtapositions with adjacent sites and buildings. Despite their typological and programmatic differences, with not rarely fierce contrasts in scale, they seek to valorise their relationships as “friends with benefits”, aiming for mutual exchange and complementarity.

One could wonder whether the complexity and multiplicity in the peri-urban condition could not benefit even more from such opportunity-driven methods of *Urbanism by Architecture*. They may be better suited to engage in the ever more volatile realm of investments and transformations, but surely, they also raise questions on administrative manageability. Customized approaches seem to require processes of

customized evaluation that are far more complicated and time consuming than the established routines of checking rules. This is exactly the point where the concept of the palimpsest may offer some reassurance: there is never one method, nor model that must be extrapolated as the *passe-partout* solution to fit all. Urbanism by Architecture may be utilized as only one strategy, one urbanism, amongst others, to steer the peri-urban condition through a sensible transformation.

Conclusion

George Didi Huberman describes his oeuvre as very personal engagement with the history of art as a peculiar, dialectic and open-ended journey. The slow and lengthy process of observing, followed by the instant joy in discoveries and intuitive assemblages, followed by storytelling in precise, concise narratives: his work is more method than model and is an inspiration that widens the scope of the echography too. Likewise, the comparing, tracing and systematisation of historical maps and archive material is a time-consuming, almost mesmerizing activity. A handicraft that must take time and cannot be automatised. Every line is a decision, whether to draw, or not, and how. There is no singular way for making them. Their value resides in the ongoing digestion, selection and interpretation of information. More important than the maps, is the process of making them and their capacity to inform new interventions and narratives that engage with the condition as found. The reading and thinking machine now becomes a design machine too.

The use of a new method with echographies has now been explored for cases in the peri-urban context of Leuven. As a vehicle to observe, interpret and transform, they prove ultimately *apt* to act in the ambiguity and apparent chaos of the peri-urban landscape. They help to understand the territory in systemic and recurrent patterns but also sustain a genuine disposition that values the existing as a resource for continued mutations and montages at the scale of smaller architectural projects, with great precision.

All this supports a method for urbanism by architecture that refrains from rhetorical models, masterplans and grand gestures as the sum of many projects that are tightly anchored in specific morphological patterns and a common landscape has the ability to induce greater, coherent structures and compositions. This should offer hope against a looming scepticism that may arise from the promiscuous and undeniably unpredictable design, timing and location of new projects without an order that is imprinted top-down. It goes without doubt that such approach means a profound shift in the planning culture of Leuven, and Belgium by extension, that requires strong governance to direct and canalize these processes of incremental urban transformation.

The echographies are much like the territory they depict. As synoptical montages they not only adopt and reproduce the palimpsestic nature of vernacular and urban orders they represent. They also share that intricate instability and fragility as an inexhaustible realm of open ends, far away from prescriptive postulates. They are selective, always unfinished, sporadically subjective and ultimately subversive. The table for dissection AND montage²³. They shine in exaggerations, celebrating the recalcitrant, the unwanted, the almost invisible, propelling imagination and design.

Imperfection is only a judgement in the eye of the beholder. The unavoidable contingencies in the peri-urban landscape are no flaw or sign of weak governance but simply inherent to its very condition: a sublime tapestry of opportunities. Half-full and half-empty. Urban and landscape. Vernacular and political. Primary and secondary. Unintentional and rational. Plan and palimpsest. Model and Method. Design in the peri-urban landscape is above all an engagement with the inevitable dualities and dialectics of the land. And the discovery and montage of meaningful narratives.

23 Huberman describes the Mnemosyne Atlas of Aby Warburg as a method that seeks meaningful associations and correspondences between various cultural artefacts from different places and different times. More than the singular "tableau" that comprises an autonomous, hermetic narrative of one piece of art, the "table" is a "fecund apparatus" that facilitates the analysis of multiple pieces at the same time, and the assemblage of transcultural, transhistorical montages. George Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

YURI GERRITS
BRUNO DE MEULDER

Montages in the peri-urban palimpsest.
Echographies for Leuven
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Ecografías para Lovaina

Autorship

Conceptualisation: BDM and YG; Methodology: BDM and YG; Validation: BDM and YG; Formal Analysis: BDM and YG; Research: YG; Data curation: YG; Writing (Original): YG; Writing (Review and Editing): BDM; Visualisation: YG; Supervision: BDM.

Figure Sources

- Figure 1: Aerial photograph, © Henderyckx Luchtfotografie, commissioned and approved by City of Leuven.
- Figure 2: Cartography by author.
- Figure 3: Cartography by author.
- Figure 4: Orthophoto, <https://www.vlaanderen.be/DataCatalogRecord/418e8e4a-12c1-80a8-8306-fcf4-799c-581d-c4e38594> (consulted on 15/09/2023).
- Figure 5: Cartography by author.
- Figure 6: Orthophoto, <https://www.vlaanderen.be/DataCatalogRecord/418e8e4a-12c1-80a8-8306-fcf4-799c-581d-c4e38594> (consulted on 15/09/2023).
- Figure 7: Cartography by author.
- Figure 8: Orthophoto, <https://www.vlaanderen.be/DataCatalogRecord/418e8e4a-12c1-80a8-8306-fcf4-799c-581d-c4e38594> (consulted on 15/09/2023).
- Figure 9: Cartography by author, (Synthesis Design Research, Master Studio “Urban Tissue”, September-December 2023, Department of Architecture, KULeuven).
- Figure 10: Student work Milo Van Aelst (Master Studio “Urban Tissue”, 2023, Department of Architecture, KULeuven).

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