

Thursday 13 March 2014 - Session Two - Paper Five

'Between commonness and utopia. An inventory of social housing in Flanders'

Karina Van Herck (Researcher in Built Heritage, Flanders Heritage Agency)

Since October 2011 the Flanders Heritage Agency has been conducting a systematic research of the heritage-value of all the social housing in Flanders (the Northern Region of Belgium) that was built before 1985 and which is still owned by a housing company¹. The project is a joint initiative between, on the one hand, the Flanders Heritage Agency and, on the other hand, the Flemish Social Housing Company. This paper provides an overview of the motives, the goals and the methodology of this research. As the research is only scheduled to be finished in August 2016, this paper depicts a "work in progress".

SOCIAL HOUSING IN FLANDERS

As in other European countries, in Belgium social housing was one of the great achievements of the Modern Movement and has often been a playground for leading architects and planners to experiment with new building materials, new architectural forms and new concepts of living. In the pre-war period a series of internationally acknowledged garden districts emerged, such as "Small Russia" ("Klein Rusland", architect Huib Hoste) or the Unitas District (Deurne, architect Edouard Van Steenberghe). Following the Brunfaut Act, which regulated the financing of grouped building (1949)



Fig 1. Unitas District (Antwerp, architect Edouard Van Steenberghe, 1924-1932) © OE – O. Pauwels

¹ The research is carried out in collaboration with Evert Vandeweghe, Joeri Mertens and Dirk Pauwels. Parts of this paper have previously been published in: Van Herck, Karina; Meganck, Leen, "Can we afford to save the heritage of affordable housing", in DoCoMoMo, "The Survival of the Modern – From Coffee Cup to Plan", (Proceedings of the 12th International Docomomo Conference, held in Finland, August 7-10 2012), 295-303.

some prestigious high rise districts were realised, and gained international attention. The districts designed by Renaat Braem, such as the "Dwelling Unit" at the Kiel in Antwerp or Sint-Maartensdal in Leuven are, in particular, milestones in the history of modern architecture and urbanism in Belgium. The 1970s, in turn, gave rise to some outstanding projects such as the structuralist low rise neighbourhood Den Elst in Herent (architect Paul Felix), or "reconstruction of the historical city" projects such as the Vleeshuis in Antwerp (architect R. Groothaert).



Fig 2. The Kiel 'dwelling unit' (Antwerp, architect Renaat Braem, 1949-1958) © OE - Kris Vandevorst

At the same time however social housing in Flanders has some highly specific, if not idiosyncratic characteristics. Already, in the nineteenth century, the Belgian Government had opted for a liberal approach to "the question of housing", encouraging above all individual dwellings, private initiative and private property. Social housing companies were also involved in this overall dwelling policy: at times they built up to 50% for immediate sale, and even the rental housing sector is characterised by small scale, decentralisation and the ideal of the individual house with its own garden. Most social housing in Flanders is based on suburban or peripheral housing schemes, with small rows of houses or semi-detached houses. The 1950s witnessed the growth of middle-scale neighbourhoods on the periphery of cities and communities, expressing modernity in their overall lay-out and floor plans, but not in their architectural outlook. After the middle of the 1960s, and rising to an absolute peak in the mid-1970s, rather large peripheral standardised neighbourhoods were built, often by local prefabricated-construction companies. These distinguish themselves from the surrounding environment by their uniformity (mostly based on two or three dwelling types) and often large open spaces. In this way, the social housing companies contributed in

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a specific manner to the creation of Flanders' post-war "middle landscape".



Fig 3. A typical 1950s neighbourhood (Vosberg, Wezembeek-Oppem, arch. Robert Schuiten, 1954 © OE)

For the first inhabitants, however – often moving out from the slums - both ends of this spectrum reflected "utopia": a better place to live. As such, social housing foremost symbolises the 20th century welfare state and the emancipation of the worker. Moreover, as social housing has provided some of the rare planned environments in Flanders with heritage status, this heritage is not only of architectural and urbanistic value, but is also of great cultural and social significance.

INVENTORISING SOCIAL HOUSING: THE PROJECT STRATEGY

Nowadays, as in most European countries, the heritage of social housing in Flanders is under a high degree of threat. On top of the legal minimum standards for dwelling comfort of rental housing set by the Flemish Dwelling Code (1997), came the rising demands for high energy efficiency. The Flemish government, supported by the European Union, has set out to renovate all affordable housing by 2020 to meet with new standards of energy efficiency (a deadline later adjusted to 2023). As such the Flemish Social Housing Company – overarching the local housing companies - decided to develop a strategic renovation program with a substantiated multi-year plan. As the first insulation regulations were imposed in the early 80s, 1985 clearly functions clearly as a pivot point, with most

of the social housing built before that date needing a thorough renovation.

As the current trend is to reduce heat loss by adding outside insulation, this requirement is drastically altering the appearance of social housing. This is especially the case for post war modern architecture, with its large glazed surfaces, experimental concrete structures and brutalist architecture – nowadays merely referred to as "cold bridges". Moreover due to financial cuts in budgets for renovation, building companies most easily opt for replacement of the buildings by new ones, or they decide to sell valuable heritage to private developers.

In recent years, this situation led to some intense discussions between building companies, local administrations and Flanders Heritage, often only at the moment when building companies were applying for a permit. In order to align this renovation programme in a proactive way with heritage values the Flemish Social Housing Company in 2011 asked the Flanders Heritage Agency to carry out systematic research into the heritage value of the housing stock of the local social housing companies. So at the core of the assignment lies the expectation that a systematic inventory will avoid uncertainty, delays, and unnecessary cost in the building process, which is the case when heritage value is only recognised late in the planning process.

As such the assignment represents a rather unique collaboration between two agencies of the Flemish authorities. The main task of Onroerend Erfgoed (Flanders Heritage) is to inventorise and protect valuable buildings, landscapes, archaeological sites and maritime heritage in Flanders. Furthermore, it supports heritage management and carries out policy-oriented research. The Flemish Social Housing Company, in its turn, encompasses 120 recognized local housing companies. Its main task is the planning and management of financial resources and quality control, the latter carried out by their own regional architects.

The final goal of the project was defined as a representative selection of social housing to be added to the *Inventory of built heritage in Flanders* (see below). Moreover, this screening was intended to result in a management-oriented evaluation: a kind of "guideline" for renovation that clearly spells out the heritage values and the material elements that constitute this value. This will enable the social housing

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companies to take into account heritage value from the earliest stages of the planning process. For the same reason, the project is divided into three phases, starting with an indicative list based on desktop research (October 2011-October 2012), followed by a definitive list based on field work (November 2012-December 2014), and, in a final stage, the elaboration of the management oriented evaluation (January 2015-August 2016). Subsequently, after this third phase, a very stringent selection will be made of housing projects to be listed and well-preserved as monuments.

Due to the quantity of the heritage involved and the fact that it is still in use as social housing (and needs to meet contemporary standards of dwelling quality), and the complex issue of management, this assignment is a big challenge, and calls for a broadening of the usual methodologies, instruments and heritage perspectives. The survey covers the total surface of Flanders, involving more than 6000 social housing groups. Moreover, these represent a variety of historical periods and building types. As pre-war housing makes up only 15% of the housing to be screened the focus is largely on the post war period (with 50% falling between 1970 and 1985). We are, in other words, confronted with the task of developing frames of reference for rather "young" heritage and often large peripheral schemes.

THE INVENTORY OF BUILT HERITAGE IN FLANDERS

The main instrument for carrying out this assignment is a long-established programme, the Inventory of Built Heritage in Flanders. This inventory developed an offshoot in the 1960s in the form of a series of books (*Building throughout the centuries*). In 2005 it became an online database in which each heritage object is indicated in a GIS-layer (*Geographical Information System*) and provided with exact address components, a characterization and a description (<https://inventaris.onroerendergoed.be/dibe>). The main goal of the Inventory is to provide a scientific overview and documentation of the built heritage in Flanders, easily available for everybody involved. Since 2009, however, buildings and ensembles that figure on the scientific Inventory of built heritage in Flanders can periodically be added to the so-called "Legal Inventory" ("Vastgestelde Inventaris"). This confers four legal benefits on these buildings:

- 1) in the case of an application for demolition local administrations are obliged to ask the provincial advisers of the Flanders Heritage agency for non-binding advice;
- 2) a change of zoned use that conflicts with the legal zoning of the area becomes easier;
- 3) exceptions concerning energy efficiency standards are possible;
- 4) in the case of affordable housing, the housing societies are not obliged to demolish and build anew if the renovation of the existing buildings costs more than 80% of a new building (which is the general rule in the social housing sector).

As regards our research it is important to point out at the distinction between "relicts" and "built ensembles" in the inventory. Whereas the first term refers to the more "traditional" singular object, the second one refers to clusters of buildings that spatially and/or functionally belong together. In other words, it refers to sites where the individuality of the buildings is less important than the overall unity. Ensembles can also be defined as groups of buildings and open spaces (or heritage elements in general) which have a complementary relation. As such, for the inventory of social housing, the consideration of the ensemble is crucial. Until now however, this category is under-represented in the Inventory of Built Heritage. Whereas the Inventory includes about 81.000 relicts it only includes 177 built ensembles. And while many pre-war social housing districts are already figuring in the inventory, post-war social housing is largely absent. So the Inventory of social housing will be an important expansion of an existing Inventory that has been largely focused on older singular buildings.

In the case of protection, a distinction is made between "monuments" and "heritage ensembles" – corresponding with the difference between "relicts" and "built ensembles". Listed monuments are subject to several restrictions but are eligible for public grants. With regard to social housing, currently only four houses in a well-known pre-war garden district are listed as monuments (with a pilot restoration currently in progress), and one pre-war garden district is listed in its totality as a "heritage ensemble". No post-war social

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housing whatsoever is listed.

MAIN OUTLINES OF THE METHODOLOGY

A thematic and typological approach

In order to deal adequately with challenge of the quantity and diversity of social housing in Flanders, the general scientific basis of our approach is necessarily "typological" in character. Here we are not aiming at a full taxonomy of social housing, but at a so-called "pragmatic" typology that makes it possible to determine heritage value and to make a selection on the basis of well-defined criteria for each type. This typology takes the form of a "matrix" of types with heritage value, that forms the background for the evaluation and selection, and, later on, also for the description. Against the background of this matrix, social housing of the same type, developed in a similar context (spatial as well as historical), can be weighted and compared in order to determine the most valuable, the most representative, the best preserved, or (for instance) the earliest examples. This typological framework is being implemented in the second phase of the research and will be further elaborated during the third phase. This approach not only guarantees the representativeness of the selection, but offers, as well, the possibility of selectivity and of telling a captivating story of social housing in Flanders, on the basis of a limited amount of concrete examples.

This analysis has foregrounded a number of clear types of ensembles: for instance the early Garden Cities (beginning in the 1920s) or the inner city

apartment blocks modelled after the example of the famous "Wiener Höfe" (in the 1920s/1930s) In the post-war period, typical examples of social housing include the decentralized semi-rural quarters within 15 minutes walking distance of railway stations in small communities and villages (1950s), or the densely-planned "structuralist" designs developed as a critical response to the uniformity of the modernist estates (1970's). For each of these types we will make a short characterization and define specific criteria and values for selection and description.

This typological framework, in addition to structuring the initial research, also forms the basis for the management-oriented evaluation. Except in the case of a few extraordinary ensembles, the guidelines for renovation will be based on examples representing a whole range of similar buildings and neighbourhoods. In this way the study will be equally applicable to social housing that was not selected to be included in the Inventory, but which, for instance, might have local importance, or might be in a less well preserved state. In this way, our efforts will hopefully provide an effective instrument for judging the heritage value of the entire social housing stock, and for gauging the impact of renovation measures. This instrument can be used by housing companies, the provincial advisors of Flanders Heritage or by local administrations. This 'guideline' will be combined with a stringent selection of social housing to be added to the legal Inventory.

Evaluation methodology

In Flanders the heritage value of an object, both for listing and for adding to the Inventory of built heritage



Fig 4. Wiener Höfe (Geelhandplaats, Antwerpen, architect Alfons Francken, 1935) © OE

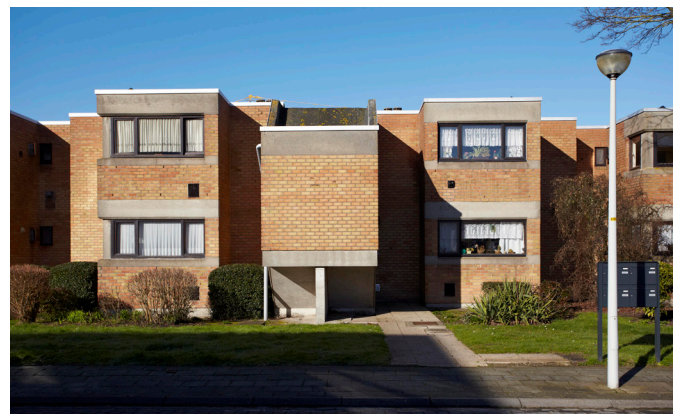


Fig 5. Structuralist dense 'tissue' (Gelijkheidstraat, Oostende, Architect Groep Planning, 1970) © OE - Kris Vandevorst

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in Flanders, is determined by six values, which are enshrined in the legislation:

- historic value (which incorporates art-historical or architectural-historical value);
- artistic value (e.g. the work of a great sculptor, or beautiful craftsmanship in an interior);
- industrial-archaeological value;
- 'folkloric' value (e.g. a building which plays a key role in public memory, oral history etc.);
- scientific value (e.g. use of a new type of concrete structure);
- and socio-cultural value.

In addition, buildings and ensembles always have to be weighted by the following more general criteria and values: rareness; integrity (the degree to which the property retains its physical and historical characteristics); authenticity; representativeness; value as an ensemble; and value in a larger context. As mentioned above, these values and criteria are defined as specifically as possible for each type.

We are also employing some additional criteria that are not at the core of the definition of heritage value, but that might make it possible to anticipate issues of conservation and management: these criteria include geographical scope (coinciding with the operational areas of the regional housing companies), renovation planning (which is relevant to the actual state of the renovation plans), technical state of the buildings, dwelling quality and so on. These additional criteria cannot in themselves determine the heritage value of an object or ensemble, but can play a role in the choice between comparable objects.

One of these additional criteria concerns the number of houses in an estate that are still owned today by the housing company. As part of the overall national dwelling policy of encouraging home-ownership as the preferred tenure, social tenants have, under certain conditions, the right to buy the house they rent after 5 years (except, importantly, in the case of apartments). This means most social housing quarters have a complex ownership pattern, often with the privatised houses already altered in radical ways but the public spaces still belonging to the municipality or the city. The more

houses still owned by the housing company, the higher the possibility that the uniformity of the site can be preserved.

In this whole matrix of values and criteria the focus of heritage concern must be the question of any estate's value as an ensemble. This means foremost that an integrated evaluation on different levels of scale is necessary, ranging from issues of planning (localization), to the overall spatial scheme (morphology), building typology and dwelling types, and finally, in some cases, to the architectural detailing. Therefore, the focus shifts from the materiality of the singular buildings to the ensemble, to open spaces and their furnishing (small heritage), (street)patterns, and (structural) greenery as characteristic assets.

Dealing with the heritage value of modern ensembles however is not always a straightforward matter. The 20th-century quest within the social housing sector in general and the Modern Movement in particular for a renewal of the dwelling environment and the construction of affordable housing for the masses, often by means of industrial production and standardization of building elements, has led to an aesthetics that radically differs from earlier concepts of "beauty". As Le Corbusier argued in *Towards an architecture*, the "beauty" of modernist architecture and urbanism was claimed by its advocates to stem from functionality and rationality, and from a spirit of optimism. And whereas the value of architectural ensembles of earlier date is often understood to be based on principles of harmony and images of the picturesque, one of the main characteristics of post-war social housing is the uniformity of the built ensembles, with repetition, mirroring, or slight variation as specific composition techniques.

Dealing with this kind of heritage also means dealing in a different ways with issues like authenticity and integrity, challenging one of the most important principles in the contemporary heritage sector: the preservation of the physical object in its original materiality. A key notion in this discussion is the notion of "authenticity". In the case of modern ensembles with standardized serial elements an important question is whether a building can only be authentic if it is strictly kept in its original materiality. And furthermore: when does the integrity of the structure become more important than the materiality of the buildings? Should we include, or exclude, sites where the buildings have

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Fig 6. Prefabricated high rise (Klein Heide, Antwerpen, architect M. Denkens, M. Appel, J. Weslau, 1970) © archive VMSW

been radically renovated but where the urbanistic structure, or the original ideas, are intact? In our evaluation we take as an offshoot the relative balance between urban structure and buildings.

The issue of data-management

In developing a methodology for our project, the issue of data governance has been a big challenge. Due to the quantity of the data and the phasing of the process, the working tools had to be dynamic and open, with the possibility of growth and change throughout the whole process. The data management process is based on two dynamic tools. The first is a continuously updated report of each site, comprising basic documentation and a synopsis of the most important information (notes of the visits in situ, information provided by the housing company, literature and archival sources, and so forth). Secondly, the data generated is embedded in a GIS-environment (*Geographical Information System*). All social housing that forms part of the research is demarcated in GIS in different steps (in accordance with the different phases of the project) and on different levels of accuracy (in accordance with the heritage value). In the last phase of the research all social housing with heritage value will be given an accurate operational demarcation based on property plots, with a precise indication of areas with heritage value.

This link between the inventory of social housing and a GIS-environment gives the research an important added value. To start with, it is a key tool for the planning of the visits in situ and for a clear object-based

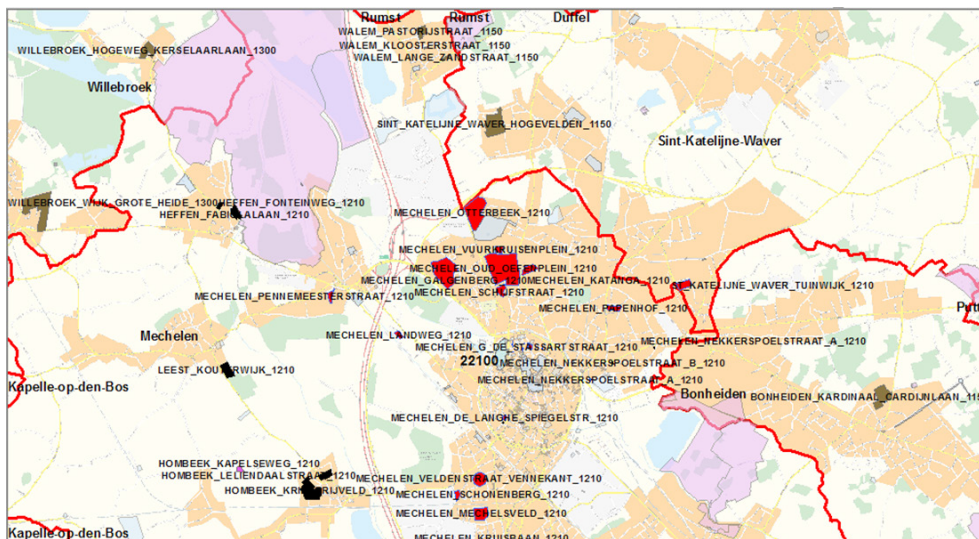


Fig 7. Extract from the GIS-project © OE

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communication of the examined and selected areas. Moreover, adding layers such as contemporary and historical maps, and aerial photographs, contributes to the visual and historical analysis of the quarters. In other words, the inventory gains a spatial dimension that makes it possible to present and interpret it in a synoptic and visual way. The final research results can also be compared directly with other compatible data sets.

STATE OF THE ART: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED PROCESS

The first phase (October 2011-October 2012)

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the assignment was divided in three subsequent phases. In order to align the renovation programme at an early stage with heritage values, the first phase of the research (October 2011- October 2012) was defined

as a "quick scan", based on desk-top research and resulting in an indicative list of housing with heritage value. The starting points were an existing patrimony database of the Flemish Social Housing Company - comprising more than 6,000 dwelling groups - and an archive with very precise layout and site plans (drawn by the central registration of immovable property of the social housing companies). The core of the work in this phase consisted of gathering the available information in a structured way (on basis of the tools mentioned above). All dwelling groups were clustered together into spatial coherent units, provided with a preliminary demarcation in GIS, and a unique code that is used in all other working tools and communication. This work resulted in a reduced list of 2,000 sites to be researched. Using basic documentation (implantation plans, aerial photographs, street views) a first indicative evaluation was made, using a code system ranging from A (already inventorised) to F (no heritage value).

The outcome of this evaluation indicated that around 10% of the estates possibly possessed heritage value but were not yet inventorised. These indicative results, however, were not communicated in a top-down manner after the first phase, as was the original intention, but have been communicated during the second phase via individual contacts with the building companies.

The second phase (November 2012-December 2014)

During the second phase the patrimony of the social housing companies is being documented more thoroughly, on the basis of fieldwork, literature, archival research, and consultation of the social housing companies and experts. We are also collaborating with universities and other scientific institutions. At the end of 2014 this should result in a scientific list of housing with heritage value, embedded in the thematic-typological framework mentioned above.

As a first step in this second phase of the research a documentation platform was established that can easily be consulted by all researchers. Important sources are contemporary architectural and urbanistic magazines, magazines published by the housing sector, and presentation books published by the local companies themselves to celebrate their anniversaries. On basis of this documentation and the results of the first phase

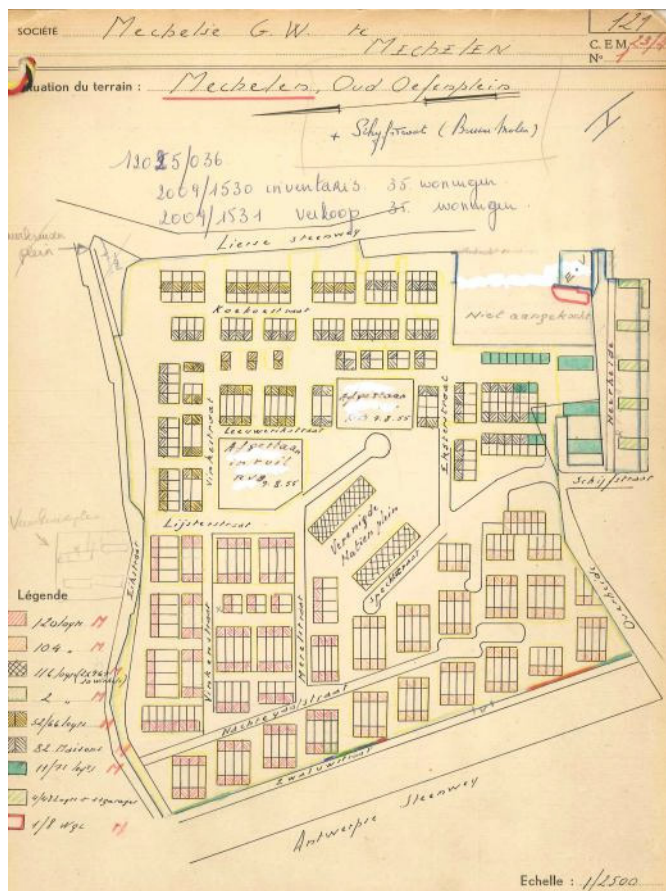


Fig 8 . Archival location/site plan (Oud Oefenplein, Mechelen, architect J. Chabot, J. Faes et al, 1950s) © VMSW

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of the research, we made a pre-selection of sites to be visited. During such a visit we undertake an initial 'rapid survey', which involves the following tasks: taking photographs; precisely establishing the site boundary; taking notes on the estate's present-day condition; and making a short characterization (not a description). If necessary, we consult the original building permit in the archives subsequently, to check the estate's original condition, and in the case of an immediately threatened housing estate of significance, we make a full photographic record.

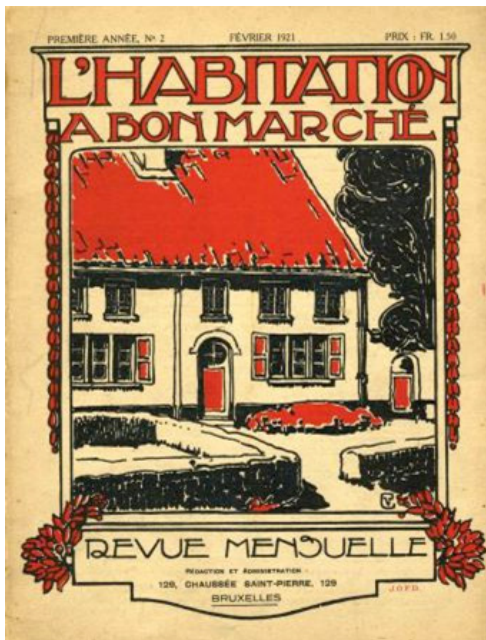


Fig 9. Cover of *L'Habitation à Bon Marché*, monthly magazine on social housing

In order to collect information on the housing stock, but also with the purpose of analysis and dissemination of the preliminary results, a line of communication with the building companies and the regional architects of the Flemish social housing company was added to the project. In this way, we aim at balancing a top-down and a bottom-up approach. A key point to mention is that, due to the complex issue of management and renovation of social housing, we intend to clearly distinguish between the scientific list that will result from the second phase of the research, and the policy-orientated list that will be delivered at the end of the third phase: the latter will include a conservation based interpretation.

The third phase (January 2015-August 2016)

This scientific list will form the jumping-off point for the last phase of the research, consisting of the full recording of the selected areas, and the writing of descriptions and the "management oriented evaluation" (including specific description of heritage values and material components for each type). The final goal of the research is a graded list, that can be represented schematically as a pyramid. (see figure 10). Also important to mention is that, during this phase, we will add parallel research trajectories focused on management and policy aspects of the social housing heritage. In parallel with our purely scientific research into heritage value, a research strand on the problems and best practices of social housing will be pursued, as well as research on the possibility of aligning norms on dwelling quality and energy performance with heritage values. In this way, we hope that the final result of all our efforts will be a graded list that can be supported by all actors involved, and which offers the heritage of social housing a realistic chance to be preserved for future generations.

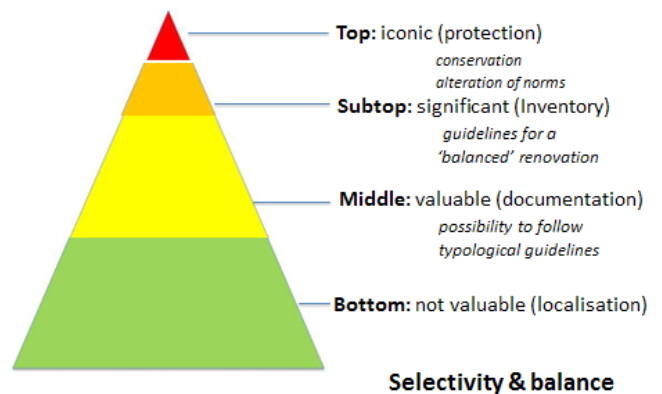


Fig 10. Graded list according to a pyramid model