

# How to take care for Alfons Francken's Antwerp modernist social housing? How does it take care of its changing population?

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## Abstract

In the 1930s architect Alfons Francken designed two progressive, modernist, well equipped social housing complexes for the Antwerp social housing company *Onze woning* [Our Dwelling]. Both complexes, located in the multi-cultural Antwerp North neighbourhood, are indebted to the Viennese Housing Courtyards and the Existenzminimum defined by CIAM. The housing projects still exist and are renovated in the meantime. However, their population has changed drastically as Antwerp has developed towards a super-diverse city. The original inhabitants were supplemented by people of diverse migration backgrounds, mainly from Morocco.

What is the value of this heritage nowadays? How do people with another dwelling culture appropriate and inhabit these buildings. How do they give shape to their interiors and how do they use the surrounding public space. By means of observations and semi-structured interviews with inhabitants, housing biographies of these buildings are made. This article will show how the inhabitants further develop and build at their house and housing environment. It shows how the Moroccan home culture seems more than the native Flemish one suitable for these social housing complexes. In addition, the article highlights the importance of the use and quality of the (semi-) public courtyard on social control and cohesion and discusses some ways to lead to greater resident participation.

## Author keywords

Home culture; housing biographies; modernism; social housing; super-diversity.

## Introduction

Much of the social housing in Antwerp was built during the interwar period as a result of the acute housing shortage after the Great War. Those social housing blocks were based on a similar ideology and typology (De Caigny, 2010; van den Broeck et al., 2015). They took their inspiration from the Viennese Housing Courtyards and made their appearance in Antwerp in the 1920s. (Van Herck, 2016a; 2016b). Different modernist architects, like Jan Robert Van Hoemaker, John Van Beurden and Jos Smolderen, Hugo Van Kuyck, Gustave Fierens created social projects. These projects are currently under pressure and in danger of disappearing (Van Herck et al., 2016).

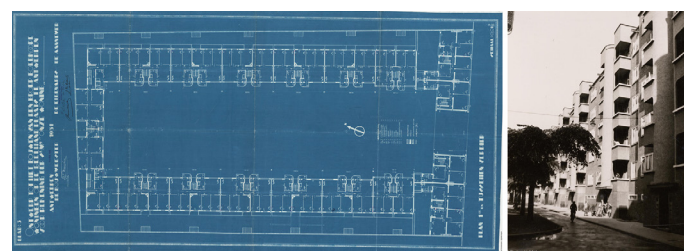
This article sheds light on two social housing projects, designed by Alfons Francken, one built in 1931 situated at the Square Stuijvenberg, the other from 1934 at the Place Geelhandplaats (Van Herck, 2016a; 2016b). Both projects, called Stuijvenbergplein and Geelhandplaats, were selected for their heritage value and their location in the super-diverse neighbourhood of Antwerp North, which serves as the city's arrival and transit district (Geldof, 2019a; 2019b). The central location and connection to public transport plays a crucial role in attracting newcomers (Geldof 2018; Schillebeeckx, 2019). Furthermore, nearby small ethnic retail stores are important pull factors for residents with a migration background (Kormakech & Jackson 2016).

Statistics from the social housing company Woonhaven show that 31.3% have a foreign nationality at Stuijvenbergplein and 42.8% at Geelhandplaats (Archive Woonhaven,



**Figure 1.** (left) Francken, A. 1929. Floor plan, Stuijvenbergplein, FelixArchief, Bouwaanvragen, 1929#35527.

**Figure 2.** (right) Klingner, K. 1937. Social housing: Stuijvenbergplein, Antwerp, FelixArchief, SA412027.



**Figure 3.** (left) Francken, A. 1931. Floor plan, Geelhandplaats, FelixArchief, Bouwaanvragen, 1929#35527.

**Figure 4.** (right) Klingner, K. 1937. Social housing: Geelhandplaats, Antwerp, FelixArchief, SA029013.



2022). But since these figures do not provide details of the migration background of residents, we can assume that the ethno-cultural diversity is higher. The Antwerp housing courtyards targeted a white working class, but various forms of migration in the latter part of the 20th century changed the resident community. This article examines the architectural qualities of two modernist social housing projects in Antwerp with Viennese courtyards and whether these are still qualitative in our super-diverse society. Archival research was used to map Francken's original design. Data collection on the residents' current use and meaning of the appartements was done through observations and semi-structured interviews. A total of 19 respondents were surveyed: 14 from Geelhandplaats and 5 from Stuienbergplein, with 6 men and 13 women, between the ages of 19 until 71. At Geelhandplaats, it was easier to find respondents due to the presence of a collective space, and its greater social cohesion.

### Francken's urban apartments

Francken was influenced by the ideas of the *Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM)*, an organization where European modernist architects joined forces to respond to architectural, socio-economic, and political questions (De Caigny 2010; Mumford, 2019; Korbi & Migotto, 2019). The second congress in Frankfurt from 1929, on the topic *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*, influenced Francken significantly (Van Herck, 2016a; 2016b). CIAM II laid the basis for European social examples of affordable housing for the masses.

The projects in Antwerp are also indebted to the Viennese Housing Courtyards. In 1921 the Social Democratic Party created an ambitious housing programme for Red Vienna, which was the colloquium name for the socialist municipality (Blau, 1998). Modernist architect Adolf Loos was appointed head of the housing department, with a staff of approximately 190 architects. The majority of architect were private practitioners, with prominent international figures such as, Josef Hoffmann, Josef Frank, Margarete Lihotzky, Rudolf Perco and others. Many of them had trained under Otto Wagner at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna (Blau, 1998).

The architecture of Red Vienna consisted of medium-height buildings around green open space. The highly ornamented, large volumes are evocative of Habsburg palaces of the aristocracy. The Viennese hof emphasised on light and ventilation to prevent germs and improve overall living quality. Balconies, loggias and pergolas ensured a connection between interior and exterior (De Smet, 1987). The flats were equipped with central heating and their own toilet. A bathroom and kitchen with running water were hugely innovative for that time. The Viennese Residential Courtyards also housed collective facilities, such as shared laundry rooms, a day-care and library. The street level was filled in for commercial and retail functions (De Smet, 1987; Chaddock, 1932).

Multiple authors point to design similarities between Viennese residential courtyards and Francken's interpretation of them (Van Herck et al., 2016; Elsen, 2016; Copers et al., 2002; Eyckerman, 1989). Antwerp's socialist city government and the release of new land on the edge of the historical city are seen as two similar factors. It is unclear whether Francken actually based himself on the Viennese examples, since they are smaller. In each case the projects arranged themselves in the building block around a courtyard designed as a green zone. Place Geelhandplaats, for instance, contained tall vege-

tation and a playground, while the courtyard at Stuienbergplein functioned as a decorative garden (Borstel, 1989; Van Herck, 2016a; 2016b). The interior facades have a monumental design and strong ornamentation based on the Amsterdam School.

At the time, the interiors of both projects were modern equipped with disposal chutes and running water (Van Herck 2016a; 2016b). Francken designed porch flats, with the staircase each providing two apartments. In each case, the entrance hall gave onto a living-kitchen, as the central family room of the apartment (De Caigny & Vanderstede, 2005). The adjacent so-called laundry space included the wet room with a washbasin and a toilet. All two- or three-bedrooms apartments had a balcony overlooking the courtyard, enhancing visual connection between the different units. Shops were located on the ground floor. The Geelhandplaats had a drying meadow, while the Stuienbergplein roof was set up as a collective roof terrace, but it was because of financial reasons never finalised. Only after the 1979 renovation at Geelhandplaats, the living kitchen and laundry room were replaced by rational kitchen and living area, creating separate functions as envisioned by modernist architects. A modern equipped bathroom and lift were introduced at the expense of a bedroom. The dimensions remained limited and continue to adhere strongly to the principles of the Existenzminimum.

The first renovation works at Stuienbergplein works only date from 1994, during which the living quarters were thoroughly redesigned; the living-kitchens were replaced by a living room with an adjacent kitchen with serving hatch. Previously, the living-kitchens overlooked the courtyard, but in the redesign, they faced the surrounding streets, consequently departing from the original concept and detrimental to the visual connection between dwellers. The balconies were replaced by an extension towards the courtyard, reducing the size in favour of larger living spaces. In addition, there are currently more variations between the different flat types at Stuienbergplein. During this renovation, the monumental brick façade was replaced by plaster, partially losing its heritage value (Van Herck, 2019b). After the renovation the original neighbourhood shops were replaced by dwellings. This is unfortunate because small neighbourhood shops can respond to residents' needs, as well as encourage social encounters (Komakech & Jackson, 2016).

### Collective spaces provide opportunities for resident initiatives

Circulation is different in both projects, which causes great contrast in experience of the two courtyards. While the entrances at square Geelhandplaats open toward the courtyard, encouraging (visual) encounters between inhabitants, the front doors of the Square Stuienberg exit into the public space, which reduces opportunities for encounters between the inhabitants. The Geelhandplaats courtyard is publicly accessible and owned by the city. As a result, it was repaved in 2010, whereby the green space was replaced by a rubber playground mat. Inhabitants indicate that this new redevelopment is considered detrimental, as it currently lacks soundproofing and privacy. The hard materials of concrete, brick and plaster create a large reverberation. Moreover, the canopy of trees provided discretion towards the upper apartments. The front doors open onto it, promoting social control and valued social cohesion.

Since the late 1990s, one apartment on the Geelhandplaats has been used as a collective meeting place, a so called 'talking flat'. It serves as a space where residents can discuss community concerns at the weekly meeting. It also provides opportunities for resident initiatives and participation. In 2005, language classes for migrants were held (Fransen, 2005). This was followed around 2010 by the organisation of an after-school childcare, which was also accessible to children from the neighbourhood. From this collective apartment and in collaboration with an artists' collective housed there, the former drying meadow was repurposed into a collective garden (*Oase in Den Droog*, 2022). The soil was softened, with some residents currently growing vegetables there. The various initiatives in the 'talking flat' encourage community life among residents. Yet not everyone finds their way to these initiatives. This is because the 'talking flat' is located on the first floor and is barely noticeable. Moreover, the language barrier makes it difficult for non-Dutch speakers to participate.

However, at Stuijvenbergplein the social cohesion is remarkably lower. This is because the staircases open into the public space and not into the common courtyard. Moreover, Stuijvenberg's courtyard was never publicly accessible. It has also been closed to residents for about three years due to noise pollution. Only Kras youth centre organises after-school childcare there on Wednesdays and Fridays, but this encountered complaints from selected inhabitants. Other collective spaces are missing. The survey shows that inhabitants rely more on the surrounding parks in the area. Nevertheless, inhabitants indicate that there is (too) little accessible public space within the area and it is poorly defined.

As a result of the limited space within social housing, young people, mostly men, seek their own place in public areas. The public domain of Antwerp North is gender-specific and dominated by a predominantly male audience (Potargent, 2020). This research shows that mainly senior residents and mothers with children who live in Geelhandplaats have a negative perception of these 'loitering youths'. Woonhaven uses 'hostile architecture' to keep young people out of the courtyard, such as a rubber light-sloped play mat to prevent footballing, a fence at night and camera surveillance (Potargent, 2020; *Geelhandplaats*, 2010). However, interviews show that young people turn to inhabitants they know, so they use the courtyard even after closing time.

### Layout of the private living quarters

The typologies of the Geelhandplaats currently consist of similar, two-bedroom units intended for small households. Statistics from Woonhaven (2022) indicate that mainly singles (59%) and couples (28%) inhabit them, which from observations appear to be mainly senior residents and single-parent families. In contrast to the Geelhandplaats, the Stuijvenbergplein has since the 1994 renovation fifteen different types of apartments. These range from one- to three-bedroom apartments and accommodate also larger families. The circulation in both complexes is unsuitable for less mobile people and seniors, as the lift and entrance doors are not wheelchair accessible. Inhabitants of Geelhandplaats report that the house is too compact. The area of the living space is 17.5 m<sup>2</sup> which hardly allows for a dining table. Dwellers who do place a dining table, are clearly the exception and lose movement space. According to the current guidelines of the Flemish Society for Social Housing (Vlaamse Maatschappij

voor Sociaal Wonen - VMSW), they do not meet contemporary living standards (*Ontwerpleidraad Sociale Woningbouw*, 2021). The living space also lacks flexibility, as there are few free walls against where furniture can be placed. Inhabitants are therefore forced to opt for a corner arrangement. The window height is 0.70 metres, causing residents to place a corner sofa in front of the window and the free wall. The house also lacks privacy, as the night and day areas merge, because the bedroom doors open towards the living room.

However, residents with a Moroccan migration background have an interesting sofa set called the 'sedari' (Habibi, 2020). A sedari or Moroccan sofa consists of a crafted wooden frame with a matching mattress (Fig. 5). Moroccan benches are placed against walls, often in a U arrangement around a *mida*, a round or octagonal table (Barkouch, 2020; Dibbits, 2009). In case of lack of space, only in a corner arrangement. The choice of fabrics is colourful with patterns and cushions. The open woodwork in the Moroccan sedari is called *Moucharabieh* and creates more seating than on the sofas mostly sold in Belgium (*Marokkaanse sedari*, n.d.). This is so because the sedari is a sign of hospitality and provides seating for every guest. Originating in Arab Andalusia, the sedari is said to have spread from the Maghreb to Turkey and Iraq (Barkouch, 2020; Dibbits, 2009). The quality of a sedari lies in the fact that you are seated upright compared to a western model. As a result, it combines eating and sitting function, saving space. After all, a separate dining and sitting area is not needed in this set-up and is therefore an appropriate solution in the minimum dwelling. They also have a third function as they serve as a bed for guests. Interviews with nine residents from Moroccan migrant backgrounds show that first, second and third generations all have a sedari or at least wish for one.



**Figure 5.** (left) Photograph by the author, 9 February 2022. Geelhandplaats, Sedari in the living room.

**Figure 6.** (right) Vandevorst, K. 2016. Courtyard Antwerpen Geelhandplaats 19-28. Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/6751>

The living rooms of the units at Stuijvenbergplein have changed in size and orientation since the renovation. However, this allows the apartments to be arranged more flexibly, which is shown by multiple seating arrangements. The entrance hall was extended and considered positive by interviewees. It now provides access to the bedrooms, a separate storage room and a toilet, a bathroom, and a living area with an open kitchen. Due to the larger families at Stuijvenbergplein, children are required to share a bedroom. This always involves a distinction according to gender. Two of the five families indicate that they eventually would like to move out to give their children more space to move around and a study spot of their own.

The bedrooms at Geelhandplaats are rather spacious compared to those at Stuivenbergplein. Here, the main and children's bedrooms are 12 and 10 m<sup>2</sup> respectively, compared with 10 and 7 m<sup>2</sup>. As a result, the Geelhandplaats bedrooms offer more room for appropriation and can more easily change in function. However, Moroccan families want to distinguish between guest area and private rooms, but lack of space makes this impossible in many cases. In two cases, the children's bedroom is converted into a private room, while the living room serves as a guest room, in both cases furnished with a sedari.

At Geelhandplaats, the kitchens are the biggest shortcoming according to its inhabitants. Observations and interviews show that the countertops and kitchen cabinets are saturated with moisture due to the lack of a qualitative ventilation system. Inhabitants use the balcony door as a natural ventilation system to prevent further humidity problems. Furthermore, inhabitants try to renovate the kitchen by themselves, but major renovation work is not allowed by Woonhaven. Residents report that there is neither sufficient counter length nor enough space to install cabinets, resulting in an active need for storage space. The living units do have a basement on the ground floor, but the survey shows that storage space within their own homes is absent. Some dwellers place a fridge in the living room or hallway to overcome this lack of space. Singles or couples occupy the spare bedroom as a storage room or pantry. For most respondents at Geelhandplaats, the balcony is appropriated as a storage space, full of closets. Inhabitants hang a curtain on it to protect these closets from heavy rainfall. It is also a place for rubbish to avoid odour problems indoor.

This research shows that older inhabitants, first-generation migrants with a Moroccan migration background have a negative perception around an open kitchen. Odour nuisance appears to be the main reason. This is in line with the typology of a Moroccan house, where eating and cooking functions are kept separate (Habibi, 2020). Three interviews with Moroccan women (under the age of 30) show that they did favour an open kitchen, which is in line with Flemish housing trends.

After the 1994 renovation, the balconies at Stuivenbergplein were replaced by bedrooms, with currently a private outdoor space missing. In both housing blocks, inhabitants complain about noise between neighbouring flats, which equally affects the liveability factor. The exterior walls of the Geelhandplaats consist of solid walls without cavity layer or insulation, which causes moisture problems. The renovation

at Stuivenbergplein improved this issue. However, the poor housing quality not only creates a barrier to receive guests in the house, but respondents also indicated that the low quality of the house encourages moving intentions.

### **How should we deal with modernist housing projects?**

Although Francken envisaged a homogeneous resident community, this is currently no longer the case due to super-diversity. The various home cultures reject a new view on today's social housing heritage. The Antwerp social housing courtyards find connection within a rich European building history. This study demonstrates the architectural qualities of both social housing projects and argues for the preservation of this modernist heritage. In doing so, an update is needed of the residential quality in both complexes. The once-modern housing projects are currently suffering from heat, noise, and humidity problems, necessitating extensive renovation.

Besides, this study shows that the minimum dwelling does not meet the housing demands of its inhabitants. In the case where the minimum apartments were extended, inhabitants have a more positive housing experience, because the units are more easily furnishable. The limited dimensions of the units make it impossible for residents to implement their home culture. The exception to this appears to be the Moroccan community, which can partially implement their home culture. Here, the sedari is a well-chosen piece of furniture, suitable for the minimum apartments, because it facilitates sitting, eating, and even sleeping in one and the same room. In addition, the 'generous' size of the bedrooms provide space for appropriation, but the apartments lack sufficient privacy because day and night area merge. Furthermore, residents point to the necessity of a balcony and storage room within in the home.

The qualitative outdoor spaces are almost as important as the interiors in collective social housing by stimulating encounters between inhabitants. Concentrating all the front doors on a semi-public courtyard creates a visual connecting between inhabitants, thereby beneficial for the social cohesion. The difficulty in this is overcoming the imbalance between age and gender differences. Furthermore, a collective space provides an ideal opportunity for residents' initiatives and participation, enhancing affiliation and a sense of belonging. Thereby, it is important to actively attract non-native speakers to stimulate inclusivity.

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