HOUSING FOR WORKERS, BY WORKERS

CONTRADICTIONS IN ENGLISH AND BELGIAN GARDEN CITIES

JESSE FOSTER HONSA

INTRODUCTION

The lack of sufficient housing has been, and continues to be, a driver of development. A difficult issue that arose during the industrial revolution was how to manage the teeming masses of workers who flocked to the centres of work. Housing for these masses has become part of an explicit political project.[1] Yet even when housing is understood as a necessary part of this productive system to ensure the supply of labour, it is itself viewed as a commodity; as if the solution to housing scarcity is to simply commission more houses. If their construction is problematized at all, it is often as a technical problem of materials and assembly, rather than a social problem of mobilizing labour.[2] The reality is that housing must be built by someone, and this labour must be sustained through training, care and more housing. For all the attention paid to the workers who were to *receive* housing, the workers who were to build that housing formed a blind spot.

How has housing scarcity intersected with the overlooked issue of labour scarcity? What do housing crises reveal about the fundamental contradictions in housing production, with regards to the figure of the construction worker? This article focuses on one type of housing solution where the crises and contradictions were more apparent than in others: garden cities and their variants in the early twentieth century. First of all, making cities and suburbs from scratch required the mobilization of many workers to remote sites where there was no nearby accommodation. For all the scholarship dedicated to the design and moral implications of garden cities, there is a paucity of studies considering the practical question of how they were built. One exception in this regard is the work of Christine Wall, Linda Clarke, Charlie McGuire and Michaela Brockmann, which reveals how Stevenage New Town was the product of intersecting needs: construction workers needed a place to live and a development corporation needed workers to build the new town.[3]

Secondly, houses were built in green environments with the aim of improving the lives of the working classes, but as they were expected to be built cheaply, this inevitably entailed hardships for those who built them. As Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore explain in *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, capitalism makes things cheap by keeping the real costs of their production 'off the ledgers'.[4] Thus, the construction worker's invisibility in discourse is arguably by design.

1. Construction of the Belgian-owned Kryn factory and Lahy metalworks in Letchworth, circa 1916 (Garden City Collection, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation)

Due to the social division of labour, those who build are excluded from what they build, often relegated to living in exactly the type of makeshift, poor-quality accommodation that housing programmes were supposedly meant to eradicate.[5]

This article focuses on England and Belgium, two countries that were early to industrialize and faced parallel crises of urban overcrowding. Their paths diverged, yet they often looked to one another for answers to their problems, and they arrived at suburban outcomes, fuelled by a shared hostility to urban tenements.[6] It is useful to look at the similarities between the two cases, to consider how English garden cities and their Belgian equivalent, the *tuinwijken/cités-jardins,* faced similar challenges in caring for construction labour. This was a peripheral, yet no less present issue for those who commissioned, designed and won the contracts to build housing – as evidenced

in their records. Existing scholarship on garden cities and districts, which relies on such sources, tends to focus more on planning and policy, though some trace mentions of construction labour exist.[7] This article draws on these sources to consider if and how the hidden costs of construction labour forced themselves into the calculus of production. It also relies on the trade press and organized labour of the time, which were often more vocal about the problems in the building industry, to place such projects in the context of the labour crisis.

Below, a brief account of the historical background to the housing challenge in the two countries is followed by accounts of the development of the first garden cities in Letchworth and Gretna, the post-armistice housing programme in the UK, and the reconstruction programme in Belgium.

LABOUR AND THE EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY URBAN EXODUS

Working-class housing was not originally intended for workers in general, but specifically for industrial workers: those who concentrated around factories and mines, and who, in the words of Marx, were 'disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself'.[8] This was an imagined community, sharing similar struggles and with a pronounced presence in production centres.[9] Towards the end of the nineteenth century, in both London and Brussels, the urban overcrowding caused by industrialization prompted new experiments in working-class housing that involved relocating them to the green landscapes beyond city borders. The garden city movement was influential in both countries, promising to transform workers from rebellious slum dwellers into model citizens [simply] by changing their living environments.[10]

In Belgium, this was facilitated through the state-owned railway company, which began subsidizing workers' commuter passes in 1869 to encourage suburban living. Following a deadly riot in 1889, the state also helped workers to purchase land and build their own homes in the countryside – initiating a do-it-yourself movement and fragmenting land ownership patterns throughout the country. Across the Channel in the following year, the British parliament passed an act allowing the newly formed London County Council to acquire land by force in order to build rental housing for the working classes. It took the opposite approach to Belgium: housing was publicly organized on a large scale, whereas trains were operated by multiple private companies.[11]

In the aftermath of the Great War, both countries enacted landmark housing programmes as an antidote to turbulent conflicts and creeping Bolshevism. Belgium established the National Society for Cheap Housing (Nationale Maatschappij voor Goedkope Woningen, NMGW), which granted finance to local companies to build relatively small housing projects, often located in the countryside.[12] In Britain, the Addison Act granted large subsidies to municipalities to develop housing estates, which were often much larger than their Belgian equivalents.

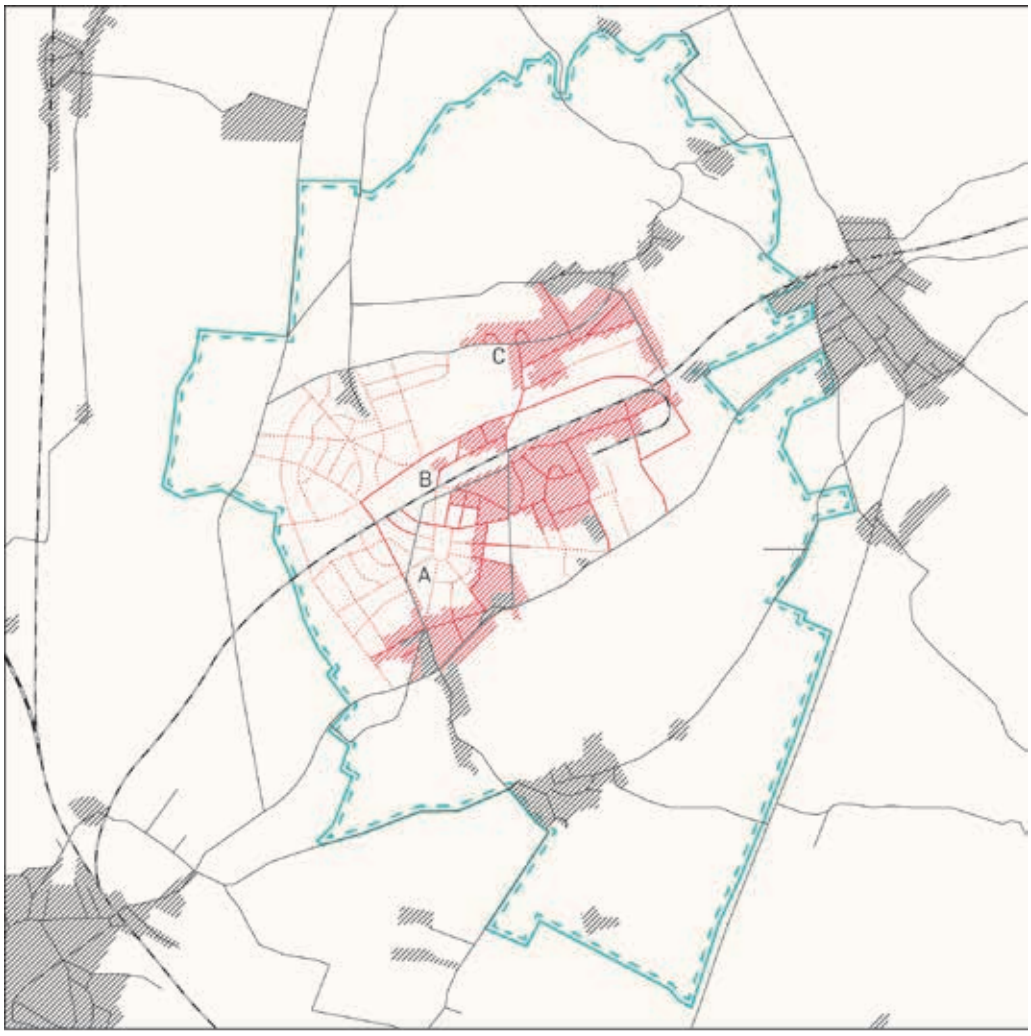
Post-armistice reconstruction was also a moment of change for the construction industry in both countries, given the great amount of work on the table.[13] Yet construction workers were rarely viewed as a threat to public order in the same way that industrial workers were. On the one hand, skilled tradespeople like carpenters and bricklayers were members of the 'labour aristocracy', enjoying somewhat better pay and a protected status. Unskilled construction workers, even when earning the same or less than factory workers, tended to organize themselves through these trades, rather than according to their socio-economic status.[14]

On the other hand, the sector was (and is) fragmented and precarious with a somewhat limited capacity to organize and disrupt. In 1910 the average size of a Belgian construction firm was a mere four people.[15] Even in England and Wales, with their tradition of 'master builders', the great majority (84%) of construction entities were self-employed, and the average firm size was also four people in 1881.[16] Every project was tied to a specific location, and the prospects of future work uncertain.[17] In both countries construction workers tended to travel long distances, as it was difficult to find housing nearby.[18] But their commute was often in the opposite direction from that of other workers: from the city to the countryside to work on new settlements, such as the first garden cities.

LETCHWORTH AND GRETNA: GARDEN CITIES 'ON A CLEAN SHEET'

Ebenezer Howard's 1898 *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* outlines a financial and organizational plan to develop new cities free of slums. Limited-dividend companies would buy large, remote and [therefore] tracts of land, build the infrastructure, and then lease plots of land to developers or individuals. The companies would ensure that development complied with set standards for density and architectural quality.[19] Howard was a fervent supporter of competition and sought to overcome the conflict between socialism and capitalism through the ideology of industrialism: a belief in growth for the benefit of society.[20] Surplus income from land rents would be invested in further urban development, multiplying garden cities across the territory.

But Howard was more interested in the concept than its implementation, explaining that 'I passed in thought rapidly over all intervening stages, and sought



2. Map of Letchworth circa 1913. Development did not begin around the planned town centre, but rather adjacent to existing villages and the railway (Drawing by author)

to picture what would happen in England if such a city were built, rather than to trace the successive steps which would have to be taken to build it.'[21] He did, however, write one passage about building infrastructure: 'on a clean sheet it will be possible and feasible to use the very best appliances' such as steam-powered excavators. These machines 'would not make their appearance in the parts where people were living, but where they were coming to live after its work in preparing the way had been completed.'[22] That is, the city would be built by automated technology, seemingly with no need for a worker behind the wheel.

Likewise, the architects who joined his movement failed to address the question of construction. For example, Raymond Unwin's famous 1912 pamphlet *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding!* was a practical argument for garden cities addressed to housing developers. It made the economic case that large-scale, low-density settlements could be built at lower cost than high-density urban terrace housing.[23] Unwin focused on how agricultural land could be purchased at a lower cost than land in cities, but said nothing about the variable costs of building – as if the costs of materials and labour were the same everywhere.

Unwin was directly involved in the creation of the first garden city: Letchworth. In 1903, Howard's Garden City Association formed a limited company to develop a town for 30,000 people some 62 kilometres north of London. It bought 3,818 acres (1,545 hectares) of land from 15 different owners, composed of farms, scattered tenant cottages and small villages. The Association reached an agreement with the Great Northern Railroad to build a temporary stop on its branch track bisecting the estate, in order to bring in materials and people from London. It raised £300,000 to finance the construction of infrastructure and public facilities, with a masterplan by Unwin and Barry Parker. To the south of the station, the architects designed a main square hosting social facilities and surrounded by houses on roads radiating outwards from the centre. However, construction in the following year did not radiate from this planned centre, but instead was concentrated around existing villages on Association's land (fig. 2).[24] Howard's utopian diagram was not actually built 'on a clean sheet', but rather on top of the existing traces of settlement. The first roads in the new

town were built by some 400 unemployed men sent by London labour bureaus, who were lodged in these villages as well as in temporary huts.[25]

In 1906, Howard acknowledged a shortcoming: while construction firms were quickly establishing themselves in Letchworth to take advantage of the many new contracts and speculative opportunities, their employees could not find accommodation in the town.[26] Houses were being built for middle-class garden city enthusiasts, but there was a dire need for 200 workers' cottages with cheap rents. 'This, besides being a serious inconvenience to the workpeople, is a loss to the Company and the community, and even casts a slur on the whole movement.' In response, Garden City Ltd. created a subsidiary company to raise capital from shareholders and to build affordable housing itself.[27]

This exposed a fundamental paradox. Howard confessed that it was difficult to build rental housing cheap enough for workers yet profitable for the limited company. 'Wages are higher, materials dearer, conditions altered entirely from those prevailing in the days when the rustic £3 or £4 a year cottage was built.' Some members of his association argued that workers' wages should be increased 'to meet the larger rent necessary to maintain a high class of architecture' expected in the Garden City. Yet Howard pointed out that higher wages in the construction sector would inflate building costs and thus cause even higher rents. This phenomenon is what economists today would call a 'wage-price spiral'. Intriguingly, Howard never suggested non-profit housing as a remedy to the problem. And he was quick to rule out any suggestion that the problem might be 'owing to increased profits going into the master builders' pockets.' His only conclusion was that the inflated costs of building were due to sluggish workers. What was needed was 'men who would put their hearts and backs into the work'.[28] Unsurprisingly, Howard did not find those men easily.

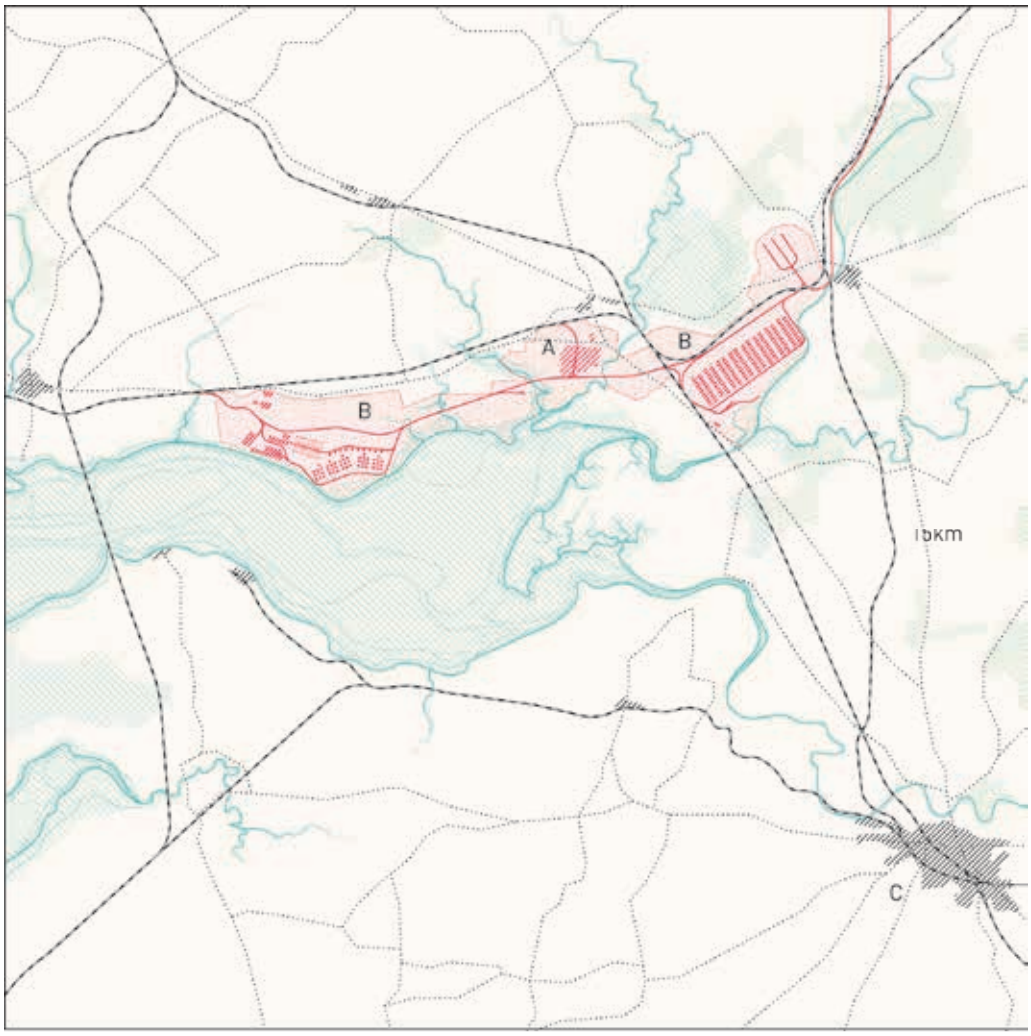
World War One brought even more construction projects to the Garden City. One of these was the 94,000 square foot (8,730 m^2) Kryn & Lahy Metal Works, owned by two refugees from Antwerp who had re-established their business in Letchworth to supply the British army with munitions. So many other Belgians flocked to Letchworth to build and work that they made up a quarter of the population of Garden City by 1916.[29] A permanent train station had finally been built to welcome visitors to Letchworth, though their first sight upon exiting was a settlement of 'villainous' shacks for workers, 'one of the most serious blots on the whole garden city movement'.[30]

Letchworth was not the only explosion of building activity as part of the war effort, as the Ministry of Munitions created several purpose-built 'munition towns'. The largest and most challenging of these was Gretna, located at a remote, protected location on the border between England and Scotland (fig. 3). Designed in 1915 by Unwin together with three other garden city architects, Geoffrey Lucas, Courtney Crickmer and S.B. Russell, the Gretna Township was to host 30,000 factory workers (fig. 4). Its rapid construction demanded an additional 13,000 construction workers on-site at the same time, sourced from across the British Isles. At first, the ministry contracted various work to different firms, but chaos ensued: given the dire shortage of young men during the war, there was competition between employers to secure labour. It was then decided to hire one firm, S. Pearson, who oversaw all projects on a fixed cost-plus-profit contract with standardized wages.[31]

As reported by one government visitor to Gretna, the site conditions 'take the heart out of the men'. Strikes and walkouts were a constant threat. Morale was low. Travel from neighbouring villages to work sites could take several hours. And those who lived in huts on-site found that 'their clothes are wet early in the day, they have no change of their own, they take them off wet when they go to bed and they are still damp when they put them on the following morning.'[32] The original plan was to build more wooden barracks, but the shortage of timber and worker discontent prompted the ministry to instead invest in solid construction.[33] Lucas designed brick dormitories to house workers temporarily, in such a way that once the construction of the town was complete, these 'shells' could be subdivided into permanent single-family terrace houses (figs. 5–6).

MUNICIPAL HOUSING ESTATES AFTER THE GREAT WAR: THE WAGE-PRICE SPIRAL

After the war, the liberal government in the UK faced a shortage of half a million dwellings, a lack of private investment in new housebuilding and rising working-class unrest, for which subsidized municipal construction was [seen as] the solution. Gretna became the design template for the hundreds of projects that would be funded under the post-armistice government programme. In the quest for economy in production, the quaint arts-and-crafts dormers and gables of earlier garden-city architecture were substituted by simplified hipped roofs on brick boxes.[34] But who would build the 500,000 houses needed? One problem was that the UK was in the midst of a long-term decline in the construction workforce. The number of skilled construction workers had halved in the previous two decades, from 720,230 in 1901 to 365,000 in 1920, as stable factory jobs drew young men away from precarious careers in construction.[35] A more fundamental problem was that those who remained in the sector objected to working conditions in the housing programme. Strikes on large construction sites were commonplace.[36]



3. Map of the Gretna munitions factory and township on the River Esk, circa 1916 (Drawing by author)

4. Map of Gretna township by the Ministry of Munitions, 1916 (UK National Archives MUN 7/257)

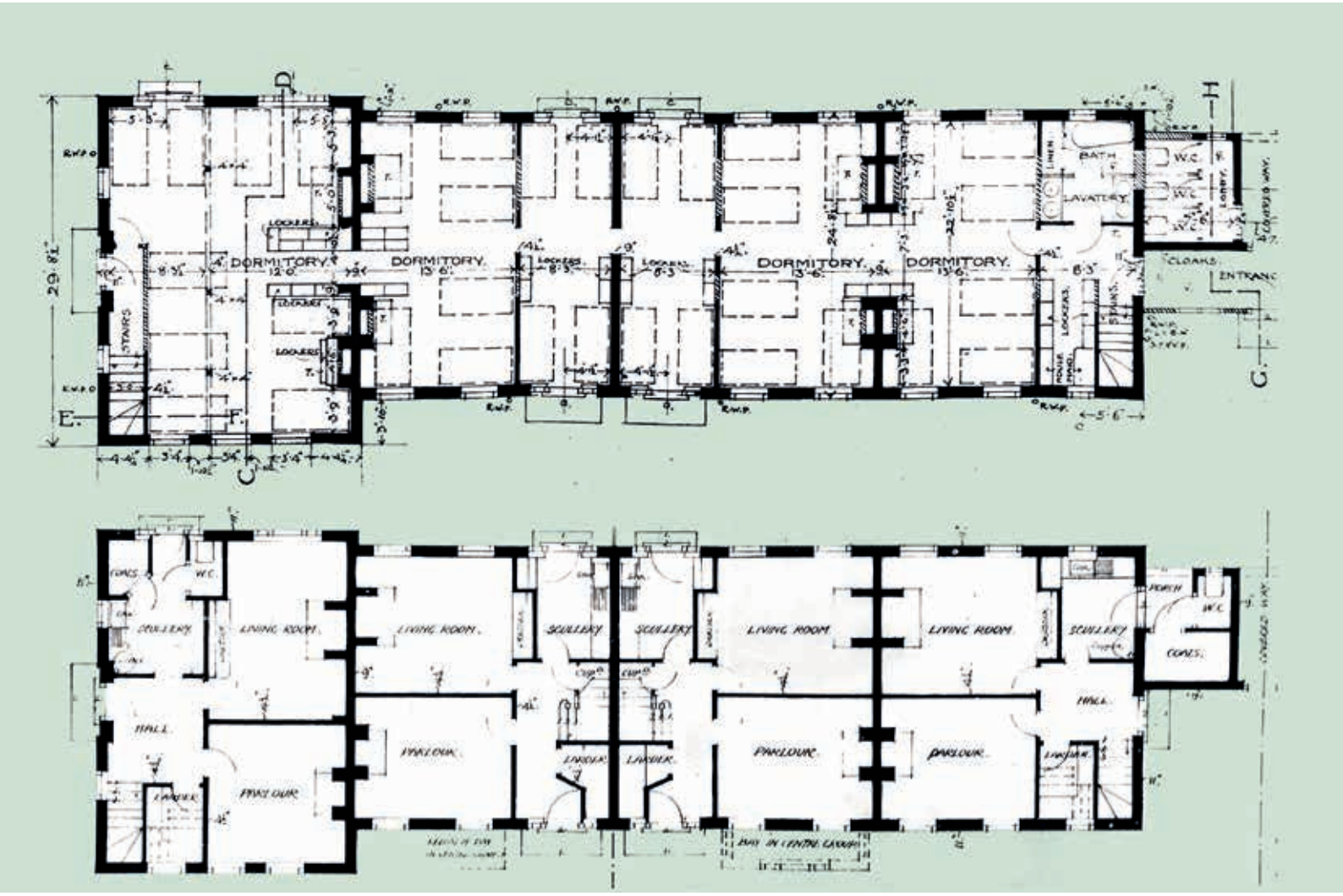
5. Construction of permanent housing shells at Gretna, next to temporary wooden barracks for workers (UK National Archives MUN 5/159/1122/7/19)

The National Federation of Building Trades Operatives (NFBTO), a labour union umbrella organization, had several issues with the housing programme. Amid the triple-digit inflation of the post-armistice years, the Federation's primary concern was wages. But employers claimed that higher wages would lead to higher housing costs – echoing an argument previously made by Howard in Letchworth. The NFBTO responded by saying that inflated material prices were the real culprit behind high construction costs.[37]

A second impasse was over working conditions: long and arduous workdays were seemingly required to deliver urgently needed housing. To stimulate productivity, employers were beginning to return to 'piece work' – compensation based on output rather than time worked – at the very moment when organized labour across Europe was fighting to eradicate piece work and to put a cap on hours.[38] In 1920 the NFBTO successfully negotiated a shorter 44-hour working week.[39] In return, workers were criticized for their supposed slothfulness. *The Builder*, a British journal that often represented the position of employers, regularly compared statistics on the speed of bricklaying before and after the war to make this point. An article in *The Times* summarized the [perceived] paradox: the government was sponsoring 'houses for working men who won't work.'[40]

A third sticking point concerned 'dilution' and deskilling. Employers, housing reformers, architects and politicians attempted to bypass powerful unions, either by employing unskilled workers en masse or by adopting new building technologies.[41] Government-promoted systems such as the steel-clad timber 'Weir House' aroused the ire of the NFBTO's organ *The Operative Builder*, which argued that members should refuse to build it, not only because it threatened to dilute their power, but because its flimsy construction would quickly become a problem for the occupants.[42]

The wage-price spiral and its related discontents exposed seemingly intractable problems in the building



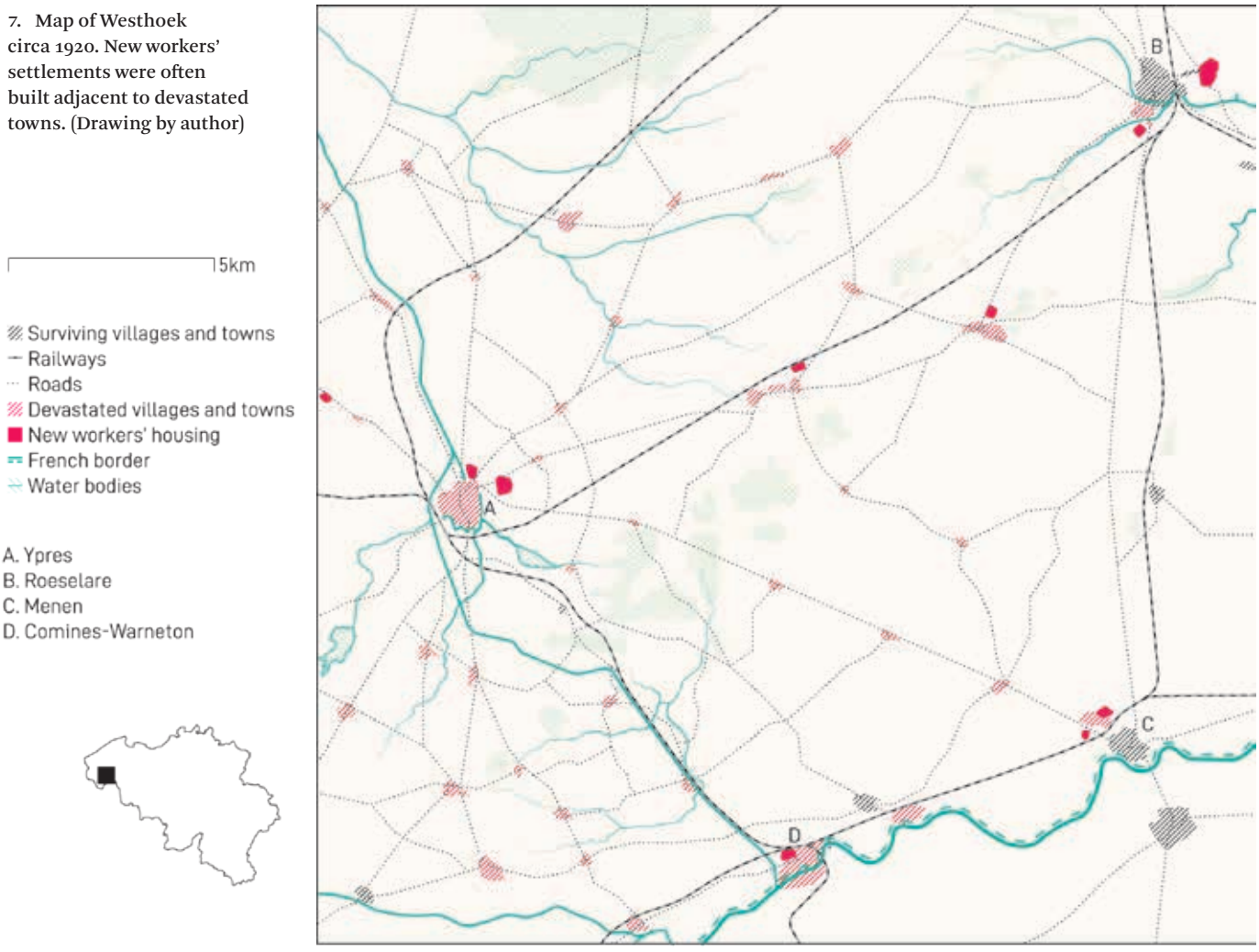
6. Housing at Gretna was designed to be used as dormitories for temporary workers (top) before being converted into single family houses for permanent families (bottom). Designed by Geoffrey Lucas, working under Raymond Unwin for the Ministry of Munitions in 1916 (UK National Archives MUN7/257)

industry, and threatened to undermine the entire housebuilding programme. But the stalemate ended once housing subsidies were axed in 1922. The decrease in projects coincided with a gradual rise in the supply of workers, effectively silencing the demands of construction labour.

BELGIAN RECONSTRUCTION: BUILD-IT-YOURSELF HOUSING, OR BUILDERS HOUSING THEMSELVES?

Many of the bombs manufactured in Letchworth and Gretna ended up on the front lines in Belgium. Conversely, garden city concepts were imported by Belgian architects who had spent the war in England, joining the Garden City Association and taking part in a 1915 Town Planning Conference in London on the reconstruction of Belgium's devastated regions. There was a widespread sentiment amongst participants that the destruction, as witnessed in Westhoek in Western Flanders and in other areas, was an opportunity to rebuild according to garden city principles. This was fuelled by a strong desire to escape the individualism that had previously engendered chaotic urban conditions.[43]

The architect Raphaël Verwilghen had spent the war in England, and upon his return to Belgium he became head of construction for the Ministry of the Interior's Department of Devastated Regions (Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten, DVG) in 1919 (fig. 7). Verwilghen attempted to use his position to plan in a scientific way, but he was often left frustrated because the political urgency to rebuild 120,000 lost homes outweighed his desire for order. There was a lack of government support for centralized planning in Belgium, and there were widespread ideological disagreements over the best course for reconstruction.[44] There was even a shortage of temporary shelters for war victims. And the press was strongly of the opinion that emergency huts, such as those erected by the Koning Albertfonds, were flimsy and expensive reminders of trauma.[45] One Belgian participant at the 1915 London conference



7. Map of Westhoek circa 1920. New workers' settlements were often built adjacent to devastated towns. (Drawing by author)

argued that instead of spending money building unsightly temporary camps, it would be better to begin immediately with the construction of permanent housing.[46]

But by 1919 there was some recognition that the workers who were to rebuild the devastated regions would themselves need housing. The Centrale Vereeniging der Bouw-, Hout- een Ameublementwerkers (CVBHA), the umbrella organization of unions for workers in construction and related fields, put it succinctly: 'provision must first be made for decent housing for those who hold the instrument of reconstruction in their hands'.[47] Even the vice chairman of the Belgian National Federation of Building and Public Works, representing the interests of employers, argued that the government's priority should be housing for workers to settle in the devastated regions.[48] The DVG duly embarked on a plan to itself build 2,000 houses for key workers, while the mechanisms governing the newly formed National Society for Cheap Housing (NMGW) to deliver social housing were still being developed.[49] Projects such as Bataviawijk in Roeselare, considered the first garden district in Belgium, were connected to the reconstruction of devastated regions.

While the UK had experienced a declining labour workforce for several decades, Belgium was witnessing a long-term trend in the opposite direction: the construction workforce increased from 100,000 in 1910 to 150,000 in 1937.[50] Nevertheless, Belgium faced a dire labour shortage immediately after the war because one third of its workers moved to neighbouring countries such as France, where reconstruction projects had been organized more rapidly. There were concerns that they might not return when Belgium finally had work for them.[51] The DVG housing estates therefore attempted to attract workers in two ways: by giving them houses, and by giving them jobs building houses.

However, in December 1919 government policy pivoted in the face of the protests of displaced residents waiting to be rehoused and because of the sluggish process of assembling land parcels.[52] The Ministry of the Interior sought to speed up reconstruction by invoking the myth of the independent Belgian *bricoleur*: that ordinary people were capable of rebuilding their own homes and did not need to wait for a coordinated, government-led response. The DVG offered subsidies to property owners to enable them to purchase build-

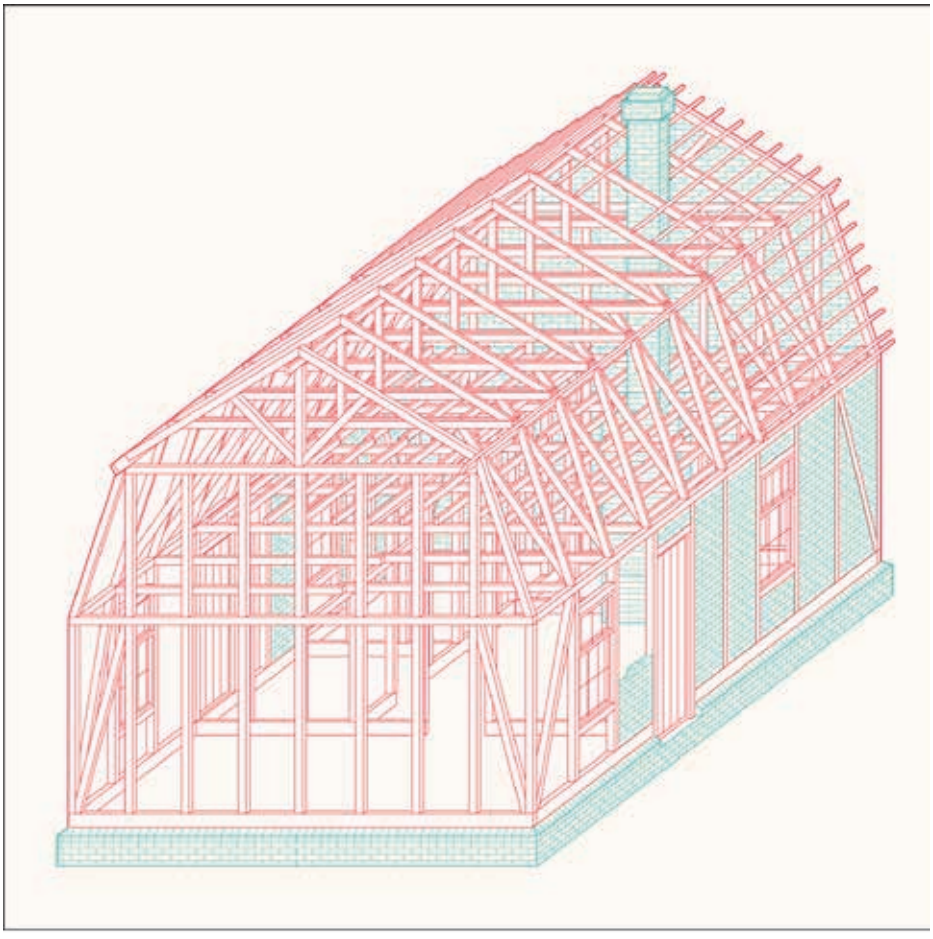
8 AND 9. Semi-permanent dwellings under construction in Ligywijk, Ypres in October 1921 (KU Leuven, Verwilghen Collection)

ing materials from a central government depot and rebuild their own homes.[53] Yet in reality, those who could afford to hire a contractor to build did so – creating competition for the scarce workforce in the region concerned. This drew the ire of organized labour, which at times refused to work on non-essential projects.[54]

Verwilghen opposed this do-it-yourself policy, as it suggested a lack of architectural control. His office offered an alternative: 'semi-permanent' houses in the form of flat-packed timber frames, doors and windows, prefabricated by the DVG and ready to be assembled by residents (figs. 8-10). But this kit-of-parts proved too difficult for non-professionals to build, and most residents instead opted for the financial subsidy. Most of the 1,300 frames languished unused for a year.[55] In 1921 DVG decided to deploy the unused frames itself, as it had finally set up projects to build garden districts for workers. The first, Cité de Brabandere in Menen, was an estate of 100 houses, of which 28 were built using the experimental system. The second project comprised 139 houses in the Ligy district in Ypres (figs. 11). Further houses were built on estates in Roeselare, Nieuwpoort, Moorslede, Comines-Warneton, Zonnebeke, Diksmuide and Elverdinge. Workers were hired directly by the DVG, and the prefabricated system was assembled with speed and economy.[56] In theory, what began as a failed attempt to help everyday people build their own homes, turned into a successful method for allowing construction workers to rapidly build their own homes in order that they could then build homes for others.

However, it is unclear if the DVG's garden districts were actually affordable for construction workers. A 1921 article in the socialist newspaper *Vooruit* pointed out that Bataviawijk's rents (at 46 francs a month) were far higher than an average textile worker earning 1.75 francs an hour could afford to pay.[57] Labourers in the construction sector made even less than this, and while skilled bricklayers and carpenters could make more, their typical wages do not appear to have been significantly higher.[58]

It is curious that the CVBHA did not protest against this injustice. Like its British comrades, it fought for decent wages and shorter working weeks and it defended its members against accusations of laziness in the press. Likewise, Belgian skilled workers were suspicious of new technology that could threaten their status.[59] But unlike in England, the Belgian CVBHA endorsed social housing wholeheartedly. For example, in 1921 its organ *De Ontvoogding* praised the social housing company *De Anderlechtse Haard* for organizing construction labour in-house, as proof that afford-



10. Framing of the semi-permanent 'Type Wilford' by Maurice Wilford, for the Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten, 1920. (Drawing by author)

11. Ligywijk, designed by, R. Verwilghen and H. De Bruyne, for the Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten, 1920. (Drawing by author)

able housing for workers could be delivered without the profit mechanism.[60] Yet the monthly bulletin did not mention that the rent (40 francs a month) was likely to be out of reach for many of its readers. To make matters worse, the NMGW's magazine on social housing, *L'Habitation à Bon Marché*, revelled in the fact that contractors on housing projects had successfully quashed their workers' demands for wage increases in 1923, thanks to the growing reserve of unemployed.[61] Perhaps construction labour supported the social housing movement out of solidarity, even though it exploited construction workers.

CONCLUSION

Friedrich Engels once argued that the 'housing question' could never be answered by housing solutions alone: cheaper dwellings only lead to lower wages, thanks to reduced living costs.[62] And, as Howard and others in our story discovered, the reverse was also true: cheap construction labour was needed for cheap dwellings, and this led to a paradox when the producers (workers) were also the consumers (occupants). The underlying problem was that cheapness obscured actual costs.

The paradox tended to be more apparent in the British case because there, at least on paper, housing was intended for *all* workers. There was far more public debate when British workers felt that the housing drive was not benefitting them. In Belgium, with its mythical do-it-yourself approach, the connections were rarely so obvious. And Belgian social housing was more fragmented, facilitated through a great variety of promotors – niche groups with special interests and shared affinities.[63] Housing for construction workers was always a problem, but not necessarily *their* problem.

The 'villainous' shacks at Letchworth and the labour they represented were like temporary scaffolds, seemingly unworthy of attention because they would disappear once the actual buildings were erected. Nevertheless, the buildings articulated their construction, at both the technical and the social level. Innovations such as the convertible 'house shells' in Gretna, or the timber frames in Westhoek, were responses to labour shortages which required not only departures from normal techniques but also changes to the production-consumption cycle. The builder became an occupant, or vice versa.

Housing discourses today assume that we need to build our way out of shortages, renovate our way out of the climate crisis, or manage housing as a 'common good' to tackle inequality.[64] But those who are tasked with carrying out this work are affected by the very same housing problems. For example, it has been widely recognized that Western European countries like Britain and Belgium need more immigrants to fill gaps in the construction workforce.[65] Yet such newcomers are rarely able to access social or affordable housing, which is heavily restricted to citizens and long-term residents, so they must find accommodation in the often discriminatory and expensive private rental sector.[66] Connecting the dots between production and consumption might help not only to address bottlenecks in housing delivery, but also to ensure that those who participate in the city include those who build it.

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DR JESSE FOSTER HONSA is an architect and postdoctoral researcher at KU Leuven, focusing on sufficiency and circularity in affordable housing. His PhD (KU Leuven, 2023) considered how scale has affected housing through case studies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century London. He has also worked as an architect on housing and urban projects in Zürich, Istanbul, Rotterdam and New York.
jessefoster.honsa@kuleuven.be

HOUSING FOR WORKERS, BY WORKERS

CONTRADICTIONS IN ENGLISH AND BELGIAN GARDEN CITIES

JESSE FOSTER HONSA

Housing programmes in the early twentieth century were meant to overcome shortages of dwellings for workers in many European industrial centres. Yet what was often overlooked was the fact that housing needed to be built by construction labour, and that labour also needed housing in order to be able to continue working. This article considers how housing scarcity intersected with the overlooked issue of labour scarcity: how the needs of construction workers were or were not addressed. It focuses on garden cities and related suburban settlements in England and Belgium – forms of development which, given their scale, required the mobilization of workers to remote sites, where workers often became the first occupants of what they were building.

The first section considers the earliest garden cities in the UK, designed by Raymond Unwin and his associates: Letchworth, founded in 1903 by Ebenezer Howard's Garden City Association; and Gretna, developed by the Ministry of Munitions during the First World War to support weapons production. The second section focuses on the post-armistice British housebuilding programme, when local municipalities were granted special subsidies to provide dwellings for workers on large suburban estates. The third section looks at reconstruction efforts in the devastated Westhoek region of Belgium, led by Raphaël Verwilghen and the Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten (Department of Devastated Regions).

In the British context, the contradictions in housing programmes were clearly articulated: cheap construction labour was needed for cheap dwellings, and this led to a paradox when the producers (workers) were also the consumers (residents). The underlying problem was that cheapness obscured actual costs. In Belgium, the connections were not so obvious: housing was promoted as a do-it-yourself activity, and even social housing was facilitated through a variety of special-interest groups. Nevertheless, in both cases, the unprecedented need for housing in both contexts prompted innovative efforts to house those who build.