



# ON TEMPORARINESS AND PERMANENCE: THE ARCHIPELAGO OF THE NOMADIC ARTIST

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Temporary use of buildings has long offered artists and art professionals means to rent centrally located, larger than average urban workspaces at an affordable rate. Most artists organise temporary use through legal channels. Others take over buildings as an act of resistance against urban degeneration. Occupation of vacant spaces as artistic activism has a long history in the arts.

Recent years have seen commercial and public sector stakeholders resort to instrumentalising temporary use with increasing enthusiasm. It has grown from being an opportunity for artists, community workers, and citizens initiatives to a targeted tool for policymakers and real estate developers. In this article, I will outline how the artist deals with this shift, and how one artist collective in Brussels is working towards a more sustainable solution.

## THE NOMADIC ARTIST

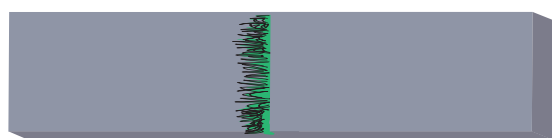
Contrary to the cliché representation of the artist as a hermit who spends years in seclusion brushing away on a canvas in the attic, most artists prefer to work in a shared environment that facilitates exchange amongst individuals. Also, a significant part of an artist's life is nomadic: Working internationally and on a project basis, with often varying needs and ambitions, the artist hops from one city and workplace to another. Temporary use offers a tailor-made solution for

this: a limited commitment that the network of the collective can easily absorb.

The first non-profit studio organisations in Flanders emerged in early 2000. Their task is to structurally organise and frame temporary use of vacant spaces as artists' studios. To this end, they work in collaboration with local governments and civil society organizations. Sometimes even private individuals are willing to offer vacant heritage sites to artists. These collaborative efforts can raise awareness around urban vacancy in both public and political spheres. In doing so, they highlight the role of temporary use can play in addressing the needs of other precarious groups, social projects, or (emerging and well-connected) citizens initiatives. And with the advent of commercial vacant services, who through the pop-up introduce new market models, it becomes clear that the demand for temporary use is gradually outstripping the supply.

For artists and studio organisations, this means more competition with commercial and service orientated visions for temporary use. Artistic activity no longer suffices as the main grounds for gaining access to vacant spaces. The buzzword becomes social engagement. Policymakers and owners expect artists to become mobilisers and service providers. They are to organise events or give workshops that inject dynamism into the neighbourhood. This approach shifts away from the meaningful interpretation of forgotten buildings and spatial facilitation of projects with social relevance to a strategy of "priming/warming up a building or neighbourhood for value appreciation and development". The latter process is where policymakers and commercial actors commonly find good allies in each other.

By introducing official tendering procedures, owners now focus their expectations for temporary use in advance. Instead of it purely facilitating a temporary implementation, they want the occupancy to serve an end, to realise concrete ambitions. While public sector authorities link temporary use to a broader urban development vision, private developers use temporary use as a "preliminary stage/an opening act" in a commercial development strategy. As a formal procedure, a tender also requires administrative skills and a reliable legal form of organization. This gives an inherent advantage to well-structured organizations that are not only capable of navigating these procedures conveniently but also fit in neatly with their necessary formal requirements. Temporary use gradually becomes a profession. Precarious or nomadic groups find it harder and harder to meet the requirements.



In Brussels we see similar trends, but with a somewhat different trajectory. In the capital, it is first the activists who claim vacant spaces for social projects and thus try to weigh in on the real estate development of the city. Toestand en Communa are two Brussels non-profits that facilitate a broad spectrum of temporary use that fulfils various social needs, including, but to a lesser extent, the arts.

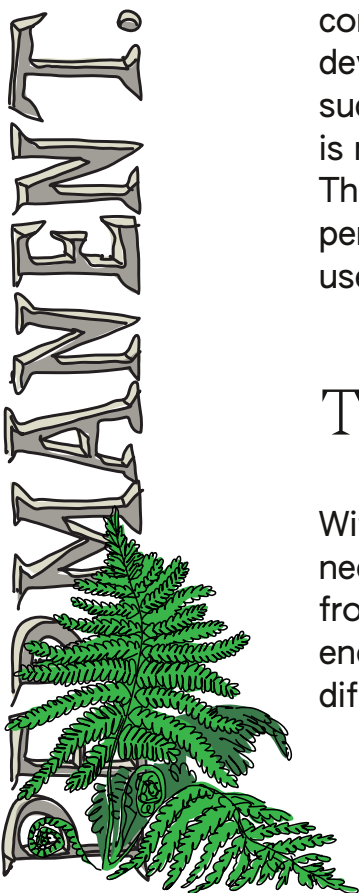
## THE SELF-ORGANISING ARTIST

Artists in Brussels for a large part depend on self-organisation. This creates specific dynamics in several artists-run studios that migrate throughout the city from one temporary location to the other: Wolke, WTC, Manchester, La Vallée, and Level Five, to name a few. But these self-organised studio collectives are finding it harder to survive. In areas such as the Channel zone and Noordwijk where many studios are located, fresh waves of urban development push artists into the hands of the market where commercial stakeholders have discovered the potential of temporary use.

These market stakeholders comprise both the commercial vacant property managers and the private real estate developers, who have built up privileged relationships with each other. Commercial vacant property services such as Entrakt offer “tailor-made” temporary use to specifications of the developer. The results are very corporate, short-term, and flexible contracts, without too much fuss and commitments. This formula also interests public real estate developers. Unlike the Flemish studio organizations or non-profits such as Condition and Communa, the customer of these companies is not the artist /temporary user/occupier but the developer/owner. This leads to temporary use with short-term and uncertain rental periods and a minimal service tailored to their interests. Temporary users pay rent but have little to no rights.

## THE CRITICAL ARTIST

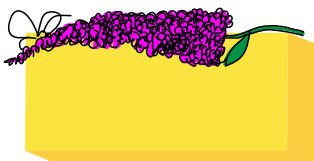
Within this context, in 2018, a group of artists increasingly felt the need to take matters into their own hands and to distance themselves from this negative spiral. The reasons originate from two similar encounters with the declining opportunity for temporary use in two different parts of the city: in Molenbeek and the Noordwijk.



In Molenbeek the region of Brussels changed the zoning for several old industrial sites in Manchesterstraat near the Kanaal into cultural infrastructure. Authorities then kindly asked the artists using these buildings to vacate them. They did not fit the cultural development plans and did not get a say in the matter. Most of the buildings are now presentation platforms for cultural activities with more public visibility and interaction.

Since 2015, another collective had been using the 25th floor of one of the mostly abandoned WTC towers, a stone's throw from the North Station. They had secured a rental lease with one of the first owners. These office towers are now beacons of the failed transformation of Noordwijk to the Brussels "Little Manhattan" for which entire residential areas had to give way in the 1970s. While the artists' collective was reviving the tower, they also had a unique perspective to witness a developer's sale operation. Without realising it, they too were protagonists in a new development narrative of the towers and Noordwijk.

In their film *WTC, A Love Story* (2019), artists Wouter De Raeve and Lietje Bauwens, part of the collective on the 25th floor since 2015, portray the complex and ambiguous interplay between public and private actors in these development plans. Through testimonials, they analyse how social and artistic projects in temporary use were used in the development strategy as "staging", without a real say in matters. The film questions the (un)conscious roles that architects, policymakers, governments, and artists play in complex urban development operations, in which commercial stakeholders control most of the land and capital.



## THE ARTIST AS DEVELOPER

When the group from Manchesterstraat and WTC towers meet in the former Actiris building in early 2019, they jointly set up the workgroup Permanent, to develop a sustainable and permanent infrastructure for artistic creation in Brussels, as an alternative to the nomadic temporary use of space.

From the beginning, anti-speculative development models from the Commons and cooperative movement were important sources of inspiration. Permanent does not just want to mitigate artists' need for space but realise this based on an alternative ownership model that makes it impossible to use the developed real estate for speculation. In this way, permanent tries to fend off the Arts as repeated

contributors to gentrification, of which they are too are the ultimate victims.

A second crucial starting point is the principle of solidarity with other groups that are also gradually being driven out of the city. As mentioned above, artists' requirements for space often unintentionally compete with other groups such as sans papiers, social workers, or small urban producers, whose existence often depends to a large extent on access to that space. More often than not, it is the "hip" creative professions that make it. In its construction program Permanent not only wants to try to mutualise the needs of these distinct groups for space but also to apply the symbolic capital of the arts to demand space for these other vulnerable groups. After all, gentrification not only manifests in rising real estate prices but also the nature infrastructure produced, and who it is for.

The workgroup started to work on the Community Land Trust-Model, in which the land remains the collective property of the community. One can only privately buy the built infrastructure on this community land (the proverbial bricks and mortar). And because the land is not part of the sale, the rate is significantly lower. Therefore, the price is more affordable. The built infrastructure can be sold on, but not for profit. In this way, it remains economical for generations to come.

Community Land Trust Brussels, who join Permanent as partners early on, are largely dedicated to developing affordable housing for very low-income segments of society in the region of Brussels. At an early stage, the permanent workgroup decides to allocate a third of the Permanent-construction program to CLTB owner-occupied social housing, for people who are currently on the CLTB waiting list. The decision is therefore made to allocate one-third to housing, one-third to artist workshops, and one-third to infrastructure open to the public which makes the building accessible to the neighbourhood: a development of roughly 9000 m<sup>2</sup>.

The dual CLT ownership model, the anti-speculative clause, and the associated financial construction are not only interesting from an ideological point of view. It also allows Permanent Work Group to approach public and private partners with a financial plan for which they only need to raise the cost of the land (about 40% of the total development cost) to achieve enduring affordability (and therefore also 100% public infrastructure). And as with the other CLT projects, the remaining development budget is raised through sales (of housing) and in this case, also through rental yield (the artists' studios and neighbourhood infrastructure). As structural partners of the project, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) will offer the relevant

scientific framework and is itself considering allocating public infrastructure in the form of a city campus.

Permanent consciously opts for a rental model of artistic workplaces, which may be designed through a cooperative plan within the CLT model. Artists are nomadic individuals who need to keep moving, and the flow of artists in and out of the collective will keep it dynamic. Therefore, Permanent does not intend to permanently entrench artists, but to entrench the spaces themselves. The legal and financial models developed for these spaces will be open-source, making them accessible to others to work on, so that other initiatives may emerge elsewhere: the archipelago of the nomadic artist. In this way, Permanent endeavours to stimulate the imagination about the artist as a contributor in the move towards a genuinely diverse, just, and accessible city.

