



# **Hacking Hostile Architecture**

Gentle Disobedience in Neoliberal Public Space

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This master's thesis came about (in part) during the period in which higher education was subjected to a lockdown and protective measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The process of formatting, data collection, the research method and/or other scientific work the thesis involved could therefore not always be carried out in the usual manner. The reader should bear this context in mind when reading this Master's thesis, and also in the event that some conclusions are taken on board.

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## 0. Abstract

Hostile architecture is part of the securitization trend currently underway in many cities, often implemented in relation to urban renewal projects and to a *safe and clean* discourse on the city. Its most evident aim is to avoid that specific social groups could use certain part of the cities according to their habits, but this phenomenon expressly influences the life of everyone living in the city, because the implementation of such design rises questions about the political meaning of public space, the rights to the city of different social groups, the differentiated access to the public realm imposed by authorities and the kind of control to which everyone in society is subjected. In many cities people started to react to such design strategies, fostering a discourse that challenge planning injustice, scarcity of housing and the commodification of the public realm. This research aims to investigate the evolution of a group of activists struggling against hostile architecture in Brussels, the collective Design For Everyone, in order to contribute to the academic discourse on public space, rights to the city and surveillance through design. The investigation was carried out through participatory action research and reflexive ethnography methods, as a consequence of the author's choice to position himself critically within the academic environment as activist-scholar, to contribute to the development of the researched group in the frame of social struggles, and to recognize the researched group as an active subject. The research highlights the political meaning of public space in relation to the Lefebvrian concept of the right to the city and it tries to redefine in political terms the controversial practice of tactical urbanism implemented by grass-roots organizations, underlining the importance of shared disobedience, identified in the challenge to the normative discipline of neoliberal public space, as vector of community bonds in a fragmented society. A particular attention has been given to the methodology applied, the risks it raised and the difficulties it posed, providing reflections on the way an investigation can be conducted during direct action in the streets and on the possible role of the researcher in social movements.

# 1. Introduction

In July 2017 in Brussels, a small group of people went to take a shower under the porch of the Musée des Egouts<sup>1</sup> in Porte d’Anderlecht. Strange as it may seem, the museum had installed in its porch some showers that were activated by a motion sensor, bathing anyone underneath them. Although at first the Alderman for Public Cleanliness of Brussels Karine Lalieux had stated that this was a system to irrigate the plants that were quite roughly placed under the shower in three big flower boxes, in reality those showers had another purpose, that was suddenly clear to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood: to prevent homeless people from sleeping in the side porch of the museum. This initiative had not passed unobserved to a group of Brussels citizens who had decided to challenge the installation of the anti-homeless showers with a playful and mediatized action. Probably embarrassed by the media pressure created by the action of activists, the authorities had to withdraw the unpopular anti-homeless showers. However, shortly afterwards, the museum completely closed the access to the portico with supposed temporary iron grates, typical of construction sites, implicitly declaring that the showers were not for watering plants, but to prevent access to people seeking shelter for the night. For the first time, the question of hostile architecture hit the mass media in Brussels<sup>2</sup>.

Since ‘90s, starting from US cities, new and not so often perceivable features of public space have spread around the world. Known as hostile architecture, unpleasant design or defensive architecture, it consists in a series of physical elements that attempt to control through urban design what are considered undesired or anti-social behaviours. Hostile architecture uses a quite broad range of elements (some examples in Brussels are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3): from the most common spikes under shops windows to benches designed not to lay on or where it is difficult to seat for long time<sup>3</sup>, from fences and walls impeding the access to urban corners, to more sophisticated deterrents like “mosquitos” (producing a disturbing sound that only under 25

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1 the municipal Sewer Museum.

2 It is interesting to note how the debate around anti-homeless devices was already in vogue in the nearby France for many years now (Paté, 2009).

3 It was particularly prominent the case of the Camden Bench in London, which was designed to be uncomfortable and received the “Best practice street cleaning” award in 2010 by the Keep Britain Tiny charity and the “Best practice for reducing crime” award in 2012 by the Design Council charity.



**Figure 1**

*Spikes under the window of the travel agency Connections in Rue du Midi, Brussels*



**Figure 2**

*Showers in the Musée des Egouts porch at Porte de Anderlecht, Brussels (Vandenbulcke, 2017)*



*Note.* From *Des douches anti-SDF installées à la Porte d'Anderlecht ? "Bien sûr que non!", dément l'échevine* [Photograph], by Vandenbulcke, P., 2017, RTBF, ([https://www.rtf.be/info/regions/bruxelles/detail\\_des-douches-anti-sdf-installees-a-la-porte-d-anderlecht-bien-sur-que-non-dement-l-echevine?id=9659005](https://www.rtf.be/info/regions/bruxelles/detail_des-douches-anti-sdf-installees-a-la-porte-d-anderlecht-bien-sur-que-non-dement-l-echevine?id=9659005))

### Figure 3

*Armrests on benches in a metro station, Brussels (D4E1, 2018)*



*Note.* From *Dispositif anti-sdf* [Photograph], by Design For Everyone, 2018, in *Expo Design for Everyone: Un état des lieux*.

years old can hear) or special colourful lights that obstacle the drug users injection (blue) or put in evidence skin imperfections on young people (pink). An even more invisible kind of hostile architecture is the induced lack of public facilities that usually allow people to enjoy a comfortable and rich urban space such benches, public toilets, drinkable water fountains, or, on the contrary, the positioning of some facilities to avoid any other use of a determined location. In 2018, it became renowned the case of Seattle municipal bike-racks put under a bridge to avoid homeless people to sleep there, and it is quite interesting the case reported by Manuel Delgado around a public square in Barcelona where the urban furniture has been modified constantly over the time to prevent people to sit there, until the benches finally disappeared (Baiges, 2010).

Implemented often in relation to urban renewal projects, hostile architecture is part of the securitization trend currently underway in many cities, along with the increasing number of CCTV cameras, the rising number of gated communities and the policing and patrolling of public spaces. Even if the most evident aim of hostile architecture is to avoid that specific social groups could use certain part of the cities according to their habits, this phenomenon expressly

influences the life of everyone living in the city, exactly because the changes it implies are in public space. This rises questions about the meaning of public space, the rights to the city of different social groups, the differentiated access to the public realm imposed by authorities (public and private) and the kind of control to which everyone in society is subjected. Hence, it is not unexpected that, as a physical representation of the power exercised to model the city life and social behaviours, hostile architecture has being criticised by many citizens, urban planners, activists and political groups. Articles in newspaper about this issue have appeared all around the globe, while in many cities where this kind of policy have been more or less silently adopted some people started to react. If sometimes the reaction has been addressed against a specific intervention in the city, the issue of hostile architecture has been generally used as a starting point to open a discourse about planning injustice, scarcity of housing or commodification of public space. Diverse artists have worked on hostile architecture issues, purposely to make the debate on it emerging. The approach of artists has been often satirical, drawing from the Situationist tradition of *détournement* and playing with or modifying the furniture in public space. The video-performance *Fakir's rest* by Gilles Paté in Paris (Paté, 2009), the *Archisuit Library* creative clothes by Sarah Ross in Los Angeles (Ross, n.d.) and the DIY furniture by Leah Borromeo in London (Borromeo, 2015) are good examples of such approach. In this sense, activists too, in order to address social issues and make their action visible and appealing for media attention, have often detoured the elements of hostile architecture for their scopes. In Hamburg in 2011, a successful campaign against anti-homeless fences used the same fences as support for sit-in and demonstrations (Hintz&Kuntz, 2011). Since 2012 a Catalan collective creates long benches joining public single chairs with twined wool, while an organisation working for the homeless based in Barcelona started a collaborative mapping of the hostile architectural devices in town (Deb van Dee). In Madrid in 2015, a collective of young militants, recorded and shared video showing how to dismantle anti-homeless armrests from the benches of a bus stops (Distrito 14, 2015). In Rome in 2018, an organization for migrant rights denounced the lack of housing policies, cutting out from a public bench a recent installed anti-homeless device (Dinamopress, 2018). In 2019, a large number of Brussels organisations gather together to launch a regional campaign for the end of homelessness and promoting the right to housing. In that frame, the

collective Design For Everyone implemented tactical urbanism actions to denounce through symbolic interventions how the spread presence of hostile architecture in the city is limiting the access and the use of public space to marginal groups (Design For Everyone). All these actions in different parts of Europe had at least a local resonance on media and activated a debate. Ad hoc pages on this topic have been created on every social media for interest, denounce or simply for fun. In France even, the Abbé-Pierre Foundation has recently established an annual prize called *The Golden Spike* to reward the worst examples of anti-homeless devices, with the intention of denouncing their widespread presence in public space (Fondation Abbé-Pierre, 2019). Hostile architecture seems to be more perceived nowadays than ever.

Reaction towards hostile architecture is a current topic. We should not consider it only a debate between citizens and authorities, but a subject that involves and affects different social groups and the diverse ways in which they deal with it, since they present various relationships in respect to public space, many times in conflict among them. The temporal appropriation of public space through the detournement of the urban landscape rises discussions about whose is the right to the city, how public space is governed and surveilled and who seem to be the privileged by the neoliberal policies of urban renewal. Nevertheless, even if academic literature on public space, social movements and right to the city is abundant, hostile architecture has not been approached by many scholars and literature on this topic is barely focused on the description of the form of design and its possible ethical implications. Academic field work on the topic has not been done yet, neither a research on people who are questioning hostile architecture, acting directly in public space and exercising their right to the city, negotiating its meaning and claiming right to inhabit or intervene on it. Another topic that seems barely researched by scholars is the kind of politicized tactical urbanism carried on by activists. The term *tactical urbanism* generally refers to some alternative urban policies, often identified as a retreat of the state from its public service functions. If we investigate the origin of this practice, we can find instead forms of contestation, often linked to artistic practices, that claim a more inclusive and attentive urban planning to the needs of local inhabitants. This reveals the critical and political potential of this practice when it is conducted independently by grass-roots organizations. Therefore, the attempt of this research is develop a discourse on public space, rights to the city and surveillan-

ce through design, investigating from the point of view of that part of social movements who act directly on the urban environment. Hence my choice to closely investigate the evolution of a group of activists struggling against hostile architecture in Brussels: how does the direct action on public space influence the evolution of a group of activist in terms of vision, strategy and tactics? What do they learn from, and what are the consequences of, their own actions in public space?

The Brussels activist group I've been focusing my research on is the collective Design for Everyone (D4E1). The collective was born in 2018 as a spin-off project of the association Articule, from a group of people with the will to question the management of public space. The members came in part from groups that practiced actions of civil disobedience and had a critical view of the results they got, and the collective, which grew in size during the research, was initially composed of two people around whom several accomplices and sympathizers revolved. It is therefore a small group of people well integrated in the network of associations and political activists in the city, who are trying to broaden the scope of their action. In a few months such small group of activists brought the debate about public space management to the public space itself and to the mass media. To do this, they started to organize a media campaign supported by DIY tactical urbanism actions on anti-homeless devices all around the central zones of Brussels. Their first actions were almost immediately highlighted in the media, first in Facebook and then in online newspapers and French-speaking television channels at national level in Belgium as RTBF, DH, LeSoir, FranceTvInfo, PositivR, LaLibre, etc.. I conducted this research throughout 2019, as an activist-scholar member added to the collective, through methods of Participatory Action Research and Reflexive Ethnography.

The thesis is structured in five parts. In the first part I elaborate a theoretical discussion on the topics addressed by the research and elaborated by several authors. The theoretical discussion presents a literature review of the texts that have been deepened during the investigation. First, I analyse the links between urban spatial processes and the hostile architecture they generate. Secondly, I highlight how various academic positions around the Lefebvrian concept of *right to the city* and, in relation to it, I attempt to redefine the practices of tactical urbanism carried by grass-roots political groups. In the second part I discuss the methodology used in the research,

and how it has evolved over the course of the investigation. After having elaborated a reflection on the academic and political sense of Participatory Action Research (P.A.R.), I highlight the problems I encountered in dealing with the path of P.A.R. as a student, the solutions I adopted and the insights I gained from its practice. In the third part, I present the narrative account of the fieldwork conducted over the course of 2019 with the collective D4E1, reworking the notes taken during meetings, actions, reading of newspaper and interviews in a single story, following the chronological order of the main events. The fourth part is the discussion of the data collected in the fieldwork in the light of the theoretical reflections investigated in the first part. In the fifth and last part, I collect the conclusions of the research, I highlight the limits of the investigation carried out and I propose ideas for some possible developments of future researches.

All members of the D4E1 collective and the people interviewed gave permission to use their name. In cases where the first name of several people was the same, the initial of the surname was added. Regarding the translation from languages other than English, I proceeded in the following way to facilitate the reader: the dialogues and extrapolations of the interviews made directly by me during the fieldwork were reported directly in English, the titles of publications, book, conferences and events are reported in English in the text and in the original language in the footnotes, equally the literal quotations of texts and articles are reported in English in the text and in the original language in the footnotes. The names of urban places in Brussels such as streets, squares and stations are kept in French, one of the two official languages of Brussels, which is the language mainly used by the D4E1 collective, with the exception of Manneken Pis and the Kaaitheater, which have been maintained in their Flemish name. I used *italic* to report quotations by participants to the research, titles of books, publications and events and to highlight keywords that express concepts used by authors analyzed in the research, as well as the definitions of some concepts I personally developed in the theoretical part. When not otherwise indicated and accredited, the reproduced pictures are to be considered the work of the author of this thesis.

## 2. State Of The Art

This research is focused on one group of Brussels activists that question the hostile design of certain urban furniture, campaigning against the exclusion of some specific social groups from the city's public space. Although this thesis focuses primarily on the evolution of the activist group through the practice of direct action, the urban context in which their actions of civil disobedience are carried out cannot be overlooked. Therefore, it seems important to introduce the spatial processes that have led to the creation of this type of urban public space and to illustrate the recent academic debate around hostile architecture. Then, I discuss how different scholars underlined the political meaning of public space in relation to the Lefebvrian concept of the *right to the city* and I try to redefine the controversial practice of tactical urbanism implemented by grass-roots organizations in political terms.

### 2.1 Spatial processes: designing public space in the neoliberal city

*The spatial practice consists in a projection "over the ground" of all aspects, elements and moments of the social practice, separating them and without abandoning for a single moment the global control: realizing the subjection of society as a whole to political practice, to the power of the State<sup>1</sup>. (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 69)*

In 1977, in the pamphlet *Ciudad y Sociedad Capitalista (City and Capitalist Society)*, Garcia and Oliver analysed the general functions of leisure within the capitalist society: labour reproduction, consume, social control and social integration. They indicated leisure as a false moment of freedom, in which the political ideological control by the dominant social groups can be very intense. Even more, social integration is defined as "transmission of cultural models, of pattern of behaviour positively accepted by society, of ideology of order"<sup>2</sup> (p. 46). Nevertheless the authors stated that in leisure time, more than during working time, people can find and

1 Originally in Spanish "la practica espacial consiste en una proyeccion sobre el terreno de todos los aspectos, elementos y momentos de la practica social, separandolos y sin abandonar durante un solo instante el control global: es decir, realizando la sujecion del conjunto de la sociedad a la practica politica, al poder del Estado."

2 Originally in Spanish "la transmision de los modelos culturales,..., de las pautas de conducta positivamente sancionadas por la sociedad, de la ideologia del orden"

experiment different trajectories and social encounters and have the opportunity to invent and practice activities that can change their attitude towards the consume culture based on exchange value. Since urban public space is definitely a leisure place in the everyday life of a large part of urban population, it seems a privileged observatory where the functions of social control and integration can be pointed out and where resistance and negotiation to neoliberal policies by citizens can emerge.

Some authors have pointed out that the production of public space at local level can reflect the larger-scale trends fostered by the current mode of production. Retracing the history of the theory that gave rise to the Situational Crime Prevention (SCP), Raymen (2016) argued that the arrangement of public space through Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) can replicate on a small scale the processes of withdrawal from the social imposed by neoliberalism in the western metropolises. In the same way, in 2012 Anna Minton carried a field analysis on the neoliberal trend in the management of British public space in her book *Ground Control*, where she addressed conservatives and new labour policies towards the privatization of public space through a discourse on *clean and safe* city, imported from US during the '90s and fully developed during the 2000s. Similarly Tulumello (2017), comparing the evolution of planning in Lisbon and Palermo, pointed out how the fear discourse is central in urban planning policies, suggesting that public policies had shifted “towards repression and even justified the suspension of basic rights”. Hence, it can be argued that a public discourse around fear, an increasing social fragmentation, and an extra push towards securitization of lives are the characteristics at the base of what we can identify as neoliberal public space. Where has this kind of urban landscape been implemented?

Tulumello (2017) classified four trends that work together in a general frame of securitization driven by the fear discourse boosted by media and authorities: Enclosure, Barrier, Post-Public Space and Control. The author defined *Post-Public Space* as the process of “privatisation and fortification of public space(s) and buildings” (p. 55). Many authors agreed that the prototypical form that originate such implementations is the private shopping mall (Sorkin, 1992; Minton, 2012; Raymen, 2016), designed “to give value to the act of buying per se” (Tulumello, 2017). These reflections seem to suggest that there is a clear connection between the commodification



of public life and the securitization of public space, and that both trends go along with processes of neoliberal urban renewal that invested a variety of public spaces in many parts of the world. Chellew (2019), highlights how this kind of urban features is mainly present in all neoliberal urban redevelopments, representing one of the typical form of neoliberal public space. More than that, it is not exclusively adopted in city centers or business districts, but also in peripheral residential neighbourhoods. The author pointed out that even if the feature of such urban landscapes are not implemented in the same ways, however the same logic and paradigm are visibly in action. This means that the design of neoliberal public space can adapt its diverse features according to the functionalities of the specific place in which it is implemented. In this regard, it seems useful to recall that the Newmann's definition of *defensible space* (Newmann, 1972, as cited in Raymen, 2016), which gave origin to the theory of SCP that took the name of broken window theory, it was originally designed just for residential spaces, but it has now expanded to the public realm.

We have seen how the neoliberal public space has originated from the securitization of private residential spaces, how it is constantly expanding in the public realm, characterized by trends of commodification of public life and supported by a discourse of fear advocated by the media and authorities. Therefore, this kind of public space is designed to favour certain uses and at the same time exclude specific functions. What are the material consequences of these characteristics in the generation of different urban landscapes? In recent years, the so-called hostile architecture has proved to be one of the physical and material feature of SCP's tactics. In the following, I'll try to illustrate the recent academic debate around its definition and the consequences of its implementation on the users of public space.

## **2.2 Hostile architecture in neoliberal public space**

*a steady hum of the spatial prohibitions and threats (Raymen, 2016, p. 9)*

Neither the naming nor the definitions of hostile architecture are precisely determined in the recent academic debate. It seems acknowledged that it can not simply be related to objects, furnitures or architectural devices. Since even the removal of urban furniture is seen as a form

of hostile architecture, a stance in the construction of public space defined by absence, by a desired and programmed void, the definition of hostile architecture or design does not indicate only objects or devices, but the practical arrangement of space.

Chelley (2019) defines *defensive urban design* as “an intentional design strategy that uses elements of the built environment to guide or restrict behaviour in urban space as a form of crime prevention, protection of property, or order maintenance” (p. 3). Rosenberger (2019) introduces hostile architecture as the “practice of designing public-space objects in a way that discourages certain uses, and that has the effect of deterring the presence of particular people” (p. 1). In a second moment, he specifies that “this refers to objects within public spaces that have the effect of targeting vulnerable groups” (p. 2), underlining the power relation inherent to such design. Raymen (2016) makes a more comprehensive socio-historical reflection on defensible spaces that derive from crime deterrence planning strategies, specifically tracing this type of urban feature to Situational Crime Prevention logics, that evolved with the emergence of neoliberal ideology. This origin clears the idea about what kind of forces and meanings those measures imply: “these spaces are characterized by subtle forms of aggression, power and threat through an array of SCP measures buttressed by financial and legal authoritative punishments” (p. 9). This subtle aggressive character of hostile architecture is highlighted by the fact that many times it remains unperceived for groups not targeted by it, even if it is at plain sight (Chelley, 2019). Hence, it is widely accepted the fact that some urban architectural features are designed to make a space more adapt to certain uses in disfavour of others and to be selective in terms of functionalities and social groups as consequence. It seems also established that those *certain uses* are considered unwelcome if not criminalized by urban policies in public spaces where hostile architecture is implemented. We must take into account that in different urbanization periods, architectural systems aimed to prevent specific behaviours have always been put into practice to prevent certain uses. An example are the systems that prevent urination on the edges of churches in the city of the nineteenth century (Bader, 2020), that is to say hostile architecture presents itself as a recurrent phenomenon over time. Since this research is focused on the frame of contemporary European metropolitan city and its logics, it seems more correct to define more specifically the hostile architecture I take in account. From the literature con-

sulted, we can then try to define the *hostile architecture* analysed in this research as *the set of architectural strategies that respond to the logic of exclusion and criminalization in neoliberal public space*. In this way, we can connote over time hostile architecture, without falling into misunderstandings of past hostile architecture devices, which have excluding and preventive functions, but they were subject to different logics.

A large variety of names have been used by academics to define the design that prevent or dissuade people to use in certain way public space: hostile architecture, defensive architecture, unpleasant design, defensive planning, excluding architecture (De Fine Licht, 2017). In general there is a shared agreement about the discriminatory aims of this kind of design (Reyman, 2016; Rosenberger, 2019; Chellew, 2019). Many architectural reviews have dedicated space to such issue too, often in very critical and concerned ways (Bader, 2020; Micallef, 2019; Starolis, 2020; Witwham, 2019), questioning the role of professionals in designing urban furniture or the planning on purpose of cities where “diversity (of race, class, ideology, etc.) is sacrificed for security” (Bader, 2020, p. 50). However, it can be noticed that, depending on the position of each author on the topic, the term used to define it change: scholars address to it as *defensive architecture* when they focus on acceptable reasons to justify its implementation, while they use *hostile architecture* when they want to indicate its prejudicial and unfair scope. Savic and Savic (2013) adopted the different denomination of *unpleasant design*, that seems to me a too aesthetic definition, moving the issue of discrimination to the background. Since this research attempt to investigate groups of people acting directly against this way of designing public space and its consequences, I will use the generally recognized names of *hostile architecture* and *hostile design*.

The adjective *hostile* is referred to the fact that the discrimination induced by such design is realized in public space, that for definition should be the space where everyone can find a place, even a conflictual one. Hence, it seems legitimate to understand what are these undesirable behaviours, and who are the people acting in ways that are not considered appropriate by who enforces the adoption of hostile architecture devices. Mould (2019), speculating on the effects that objects have on humans’ action, states that some (objects) can be seen as “critical actors of public space” (p. 479), having implicitly a “great deal of political agency” (p. 480). Going fur-

ther from the simple layout of objects present in public space, it can be said that if marginality is a political and social construction, the emerging of harder social and physical boundaries in the spatiality of cities points out the importance of public space and its management at a political level.

### **2.3 The political meaning of public space**

*the public is universal -including all the citizens- and homogeneous -because all people living in it are apparently considered free and equals-<sup>1</sup> (Cota et al., 2013, p. 22)*

In the idea of democratic system in which we are living, public space represents the place of meeting of the entire community. According to the analysis conducted by Evans (Kinna & Gordon, 2019) on radical left movements and their action, in public space we can observe two tendencies apparently in contrast one with each other: the gather and the conflict. “The idea (of public space) encompassed in the title of ‘the commons’” (p. 268), being the public space a shared zone that favours the gathering and makes it desirable, but at the same time the idea of public space presents a “messier conflation of different powers, actors and messages” (p. 268). This has been very well explained by Mitchell in his seminal *The Right to the City* (2003), where he drew on the original concept by Lefebvre (1968) and highlighted the importance of being present in such space and not to be expelled, at risk not to have democratic representation in the societal life. Being the society divided and ruled by power relationships, Mitchell described public space as a political space where these relationships materialize and are negotiated: “public space is always a negotiation, to remove some people from the negotiators’ table redefine public rights so that only some may have access to them” (p. 190). Thus, who can decide norms, rules and physical layout of public space can exercise a great influence on what can happen in it. In this regard, Reyman (2016) suggested that a space that favours the absence of encounter is produced and replicated, because the human encounter outside the logic of consumption is an obstacle to the development of capitalist forces. On the same line, Mitchell (2003) pointed out

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1 Originally in Spanish “lo publico es universal -incluye toda la ciudadanía- y homogéneo -porque toda las personas que viven en su interior son aparentemente consideradas libres e iguales-“

that urban corporate planners use to limit and control the social and spatial interaction in public space, underlining the decline of public sphere as place of debate and struggle in favour of the “legitimation of a brutal political economy” (p. 191). Therefore, it can be argued that hostile architecture is a possible materialisation of the power relationships present in society and the attempt to implement physical strategies of control.

Considering this, the dispute of public space is what makes it actually meaningful. The political and social (sometimes conflictual) negotiation among groups find in public space a representation. Hence, public space is the result of the encounter/conflict between diverse levels of reclaiming, starting from the most simple: to be recognized as part of the society. Mitchell provide the case of homeless to point out a denied citizenship, since basic need for natural life cannot be satisfied in public and homeless don't have a private place that legitimate their needs (2003). Rights are reclaimed in public, because the protest is meaningful in public space, hence public space is where the right to the city can be reclaimed and exercised. Some scholars noted that rights to the city can be multiple (Margier and Melgaço, 2016), and it is interesting observing that some groups see their right to the city satisfied at the expenses of someone else's. In light of this, hostile architecture turns out to be a tool of control, divisive and discriminatory, obstructing the rights to the city of certain groups. However, as observed by Chellew (2019) and Arnold (2019), people are quite adaptable and inflexible designs can be overcome. It is understandable that actions contrasting and questioning the hostile architecture can be interpreted as a reclaim of the right to the city that this discriminatory design deny. In this regard, Arnold (2019) highlighted how some radical artistic practices can be seen as a political question around the meaning of public space and its use.

It is important to underline the differentiation that Reyman (2015) states between the reclamation of “a right to access services or individualistic interests” (p. 8), and the exercise of the right to the city. In this regard, he observe that “urban movements such as guerrilla benching, urban exploration or parkour are not enacting ‘the right to the city’ (in the Lefebvrian sense)” (Reyman, 2015, p.9). According to the author, the activities that are consumption-based or that “involve a retreat into the individualistic interest” (p.9) don't question and challenge the hegemonic power represented by the rulers of urban development, neither generate “communal

social spaces based upon a collective sense of sociability” (p.9). I understand his argument, however in the case of the activist that detourn urban furniture with political aims I suggest a different interpretation. I argue that if actions carried by grass-roots organizations and aimed to interact with the urban public realm are part of a strategy that brings a broad reflection on the meaning of public space, we can certainly speak of *right to the city* claim in Lefebvrian terms. On the other hand, I suggest that social subjects who daily negotiate their existence in public space to affirm their individuality and existence in front of spaces and places that are transformed regardless of their own decisions, are already the bearers of a request for their right to the city. Specifically, interventions against hostile architecture can be looked as political actions, because they translate the lack of political debate on the creation of hostile public spaces to direct action.

#### **2.4 Tactical urbanism as political tool for direct action**

*Yes we have dismantled the barriers.. it is fun for the militants, but in the end it did not bring much in terms of reflection, of visibility of certain devices that exist in public space.. If we take the device off, people don't realize that there was that element. (Laurent , D4E1)*

Direct action by grass-root movements and social groups can be seen as that kind of intervention that act straight on the issue questioned, that is to say on the materialization of power discrimination they want to address, often to detourn it. Action by these groups in public space has some space in academic literature, but it is not so investigated. In the recent publication *Routledge Handbook Of Radical Politics* by Gordon and Kinna (2019), the authors classified the different kind of people that engage in public space practice in “artists thrown out on the street and activists looking for opportunities to undermine corporate power and engage the public in social issues” (p. 267). We can consider the group of people attacking hostile architecture mainly as artist or activist that want to highlight social justice issues. Usually their approach can be similar to what Furness (2007) described in its work on Critical Mass, explaining that kind of grass-root initiative as an heir of situationist theories. That kind of approach and definition of performative critique seems to fit in other types of direct actions too: the common features of

DIY attitude, empowerment of activists, playfulness of the action and the satire on the injustice. More specifically, we saw how actions aimed to directly change the urban environment can also be understood as politicized forms of tactical urbanism.

The scarce literature on tactical urbanism generally address this topic in relation to alternative institutional policies (Silva, 2016, Nogueira and Portinari, 2016), evidencing how that practice can be in continuity with neoliberal policies (and that it is certainly true for a large part of it nowadays). As Nogueira and Poltrinari (2016) very clearly highlights, “actions such as these are against, or voluntarily in the service of, a State that increasingly withdrawing from its tasks”<sup>1</sup> (p. 186). If today we do not recognize a possible political claim in the definition of tactical urbanism, it means that we should either redefine what tactical urbanism is, or identify in its use a tool of political claiming and a possible practice of activism. Even if many actions are not defined as such by activists, they have all the characteristics of tactical urbanism. Moreover, tactical urbanism seems to originate from citizen engagement and was developed in 90’s artistic politicized practices of detourned public space (Cirugeda, 2007, Talen, 2015). That is why I choose to concentrate the research on politicized direct action through tactical urbanism, not investigating participation processes or collaborative architecture in terms of institutional conflict management. In short it can be stated that *politicized tactical urbanism is a form of direct political action that aim to modify the places people live in, in order to make social justice issues emerge and to give space to different and excluded rights to the city.*

More than one scholar has recently put out the importance for municipalities to developed design guidelines to govern the use of hostile architecture (Chellew 2019, Arnold 2019), acknowledging that “many forms of defensive architecture do not work as intended” (Chellew, 2019, p. 13). This call for rules appears in part to be justified by the fact that hostile architecture is “integrated into the design process, before any conflicts arise over spatial uses” (p. 13). This reformative position is of course not so popular among activists, who find themselves more in line with other thinkers, as Labbé (Edin, 2019), that advocates for the cancellation of its use: “this type of furniture will not solve any problems of precariousness or isolation, and yet it is

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1 Originally in Portuguese “ações como estas estão se colocando contra, ou voluntariamente a serviço de um Estado que cada vez mais se exime de suas tarefas”

more and more present”<sup>1</sup>. If, according to Mitchell (2003) our ideals of public space frame how we struggle and to what end, it seems interesting to understand who are the bearers of these desires, what idea of society they have and how they act in public to negotiate not just what is present, but also what can be possible to imagine to do in it and what can legitimately be the uses of public spaces. This raises important questions about how public space is managed and produced today, and about who has the power and the legitimacy to change the reality in which we live and that we find ourselves sharing as components of a society. In her text around democracy, Mouffe (1999) assessed the importance to understand that in a society is not possible to achieve “a consensus without exclusion” (p. 757). That is exactly the reason why she found necessary “to keep the democratic contestation alive” (p. 757). Rosenberger (2019) said that a “form of resistance can be seen in projects that raise consciousness of hostile designs” (p.7), and these forms of resistance call into question who are the beneficiaries and who are the victims of urban public policies.

The case study I have chosen, Design For Everyone (D4E1), brings forward a reflection on public space and its meaning, a situational practice against the elements of hostile architecture, a “gentle” criticism of the neoliberal urban regeneration process. A research around activism against hostile architecture critical towards the exclusion of marginal and vulnerable social groups from urban public space has not been done yet. Some practices are started to be investigated, however there is no literature (at least within the literature I searched during last 18 months) about how these groups evolved through their interventions and how direct action affects those kind of movements that are basing an important part of their practice in constant intervention in public space. Research that is mainly qualitative and in close contact with the researched group needs investigation tools borrowed from the field of ethnography and sociology. In the next chapter I will describe in detail the ethical and methodological choices on which the research has been based.

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1 Originally in French: “ce type de mobilier ne va régler aucun problème de précarité ou d’isolement, et pourtant il est de plus en plus présent”



### 3. Methodology

In this chapter I will discuss the research methodology used in this Master's thesis, and how it has evolved over the course of the investigation. Since I had to enter in close contact with the group I was investigating and therefore take part in their activity, a Participatory Action Research (P.A.R.) seemed to be the more appropriate method to carry on the research, because of the clear advantages it presented: a direct experience of actions I was intentioned to investigate, a deeper qualitative data gathering and first hand material which I can elaborate from. Here I don't intend to write what a P.A.R. is, but rather what it means to conduct a P.A.R., to discuss my point of view on it, why this choice was made, the strengths of its methods, the risks it raises and how I chose to conduct it and cope with the difficulties it posed to me as a researcher.

I will express my personal considerations on the subject, also influenced by the recent literature produced around P.A.R. in different studies and field surveys (Fuentes, 2011; Hamm, 2015; Langdon & Larweh, 2015; Sandwick et al., 2018), that are based on previous considerations elaborated by other scholars around participatory research (Park, 1993; Torre and Fine, 2011; Choudry and Kapour, 2010). Although most of this type of research has been conducted within marginality, minorities and oppressed social groups, my research case study focuses on a group of activists. Also, this is a Master Thesis research, therefore the extent of this P.A.R. is reasonably small compared to PhD research or investigations conducted by a university research center. Given the limited time available, I thought to adopt a hybrid methodology using principles and methods taken from P.A.R. (Hay, 2000) and reflective ethnography (Davies, 2008) to investigate the evolution of the Brussels collective Design for Everyone (D4E1) in relation to their practice of direct action in metropolitan public space. The choice to conduct a P.A.R. derives from the recognition of the subjectivity that the researcher chooses to investigate, from a reflection of the researcher with respect to the subject of study and his role and positioning in the social structures in which he finds himself, and to the will as a citizen who chooses to be an active subject as a researcher. More than one academic has observed that participation often risks being used as a tool of domination rather than an instrument of emancipation (Hamm, 2015; Langdon & Larweh, 2015), to the point that the word *participation* itself could be considered a

container to be filled according to the intentions of those who practice it. This is why ethical and political considerations about the role of participation in research and the power dynamics that can be implemented during a P.A.R. cannot be ignored, especially when conducting research on/with movements for social change.

It is the objective of this chapter to discuss the theoretical issues that actually had a fundamental importance in the practice of research within the case study: academic privilege, power dynamics and shared and/or imposed knowledge. I will try to define P.A.R. as a conscious instrument resulting from a personal political, social and academic stance. Then, I will briefly describe how I have structured P.A.R. in the practice of investigation, and flexibly adapt it to the case study. Then, I will elaborate a focus on the importance of a methodology of the researcher's body when it comes to being involved in the direct action within a group of activists. Finally, I will summarize the positions taken, my personal choices and the insights that the reflection made on the theoretical texts and on what practiced have highlighted regarding the methodologies of investigation applied.

### **3.1 P.A.R. as ethical and political academic stance**

The origin of P.A.R. as an alternative methodological path of research can be situated in few fundamental question: should the academy ignore the subjectivity of the object of study? what is the role of academic research within society? And more specifically, how scholars should position themselves within the research around movements for a social change? (Sandwick et al., 2018) From my position as a beginner researcher, it was immediate for me to choose to address a topic that I am interested not only as a student, but also as a passionate citizen and individual part of a political community. The very choice of the researched group can partly reveal my position on the topic. I think that it is not possible for a critical individual to forget one's own political and social history, especially within an educational path such as university, and it certainly can be argued that we are not indifferent to our own interpretation of the reality around us. At the end, the critical skills that a path of studies such as Urban Studies helps to form, turn out to be tools that can help us in our ability to discern between oppressors and oppressed, or at least between winners and losers of the system in which we live and that we contribute to perpetuate

and transform in our everyday lives. This condemns our supposedly objective and neutral gaze, it shortens the distance between what we observe and ourselves as active subjects in research. If we also consider it right that the objects of our research are themselves active subjects, it would be a very questionable choice not to consider their voice and their contribution within the research. In order to do this, it is not enough to analyze second-hand data, already filtered and remodelled by other subjects (who also carry their bias and positions that are not completely neutral), but it is necessary to favour as much as possible the direct interaction between the researcher and the subjects being researched. The observation in itself changes the observed, and if at the same time we give to the research object the status of subject we cannot think of passing ourselves unharmed in such a process. Research thus becomes a moment of transformation, through the generation of awareness and consciousness, of mutual production of knowledge. It is a matter of accepting that the researcher is not an element isolated from society, but participates in it and that knowledge is produced not only by the academic world, but by all the active subjects participating in the investigation. It is about being able to recognize the evolution of the relationships between the different subjects, to be aware of the dialectic that underlies, with all the risks of the case, the relationship between the investigator and those under investigation. Personally, I felt that participation in the research is not a goal in itself, but it offers a series of tools that could allow on one hand to make the relationship with the subject of academic study effective and efficient, on the other hand to empower all the actors involved in the research.

As a student, I find it very interesting to note that for decades now P.A.R. has still been seen as an alternative path that “challenges academic traditions” (Sandwick, 2018, p.477), that takes into account the university “social responsibility” (Hamm, 2015, p.18) and that it can be an instrument of social transformation of the civil and academic community (Fuentes, 2011). In this sense, I choose to take a clear academic stance, acknowledging the non-neutrality of researching, and reflecting in my investigation my own political and civic positions. The “double-role of activist-scholars”, described by the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010, as cited by Hamm, 2015, p. 8), is clearly a very difficult position to maintain, but it seems to me a more than acceptable compromise to investigate a part of the social reality I was interested in. Knowing to be part of such social reality, even the mere observation of the subject under study

can cause a change in the subject's condition and consequently in his behaviour. Therefore, it seems logical that the researchers take responsibility for their contribution to the evolution of the reality they are investigating. At the beginning of this path, it is necessary to accept our own partiality, both as a social condition and as a political choice, in order to know how to get involved trying to consider the conditions of power and privilege that the academic position brings with it. A curious and critical gaze to reality cannot consider itself the only bearer of knowledge, that is why it is important to put the subject of study at the center of the research and co-protagonist of it.

Many authors agree in considering the production of knowledge and access to it the main nodes that characterize P.A.R., although they stressed this argument with different nuances. Whilst Sandwick (2018) focused on knowledge production as public good for communal life, Hamm (2015) claimed that a participatory research can mobilise *the everyday knowledge*, driving the P.A.R. towards the production of a *practical knowledge*. Langdon and Larweh (2015) underlined the importance of the creation of “spaces of mutual meaning-making” (p. 3), places and moments of dialectical exchange between researcher and society, where knowledge acquires its democratic value and where each stakeholder finds the experiential meaning of the knowledge produced. Fuentes (2011) considered the P.A.R. as “a site of knowledge production, resistance and struggle” (p. 6), explicitly linking the potential role of research in social struggles and, building on Park (1993), she recalled the importance in this approach to question the dominant discourse, which “places legitimate knowledge within the confines of academia” (p. 6). To undertake a P.A.R. seems first of all an exercise of responsibility on personal and collective level. On the researcher's side, it means starting a path that should seriously take in account the relationship with the other subjects with whom the knowledge produced is shared. This kind of relationship can lead to situations of great complicity and can establish strong ties that cannot be taken for granted or disregarded once the investigation path is over. In my case, choosing to undertake a P.A.R. has strongly linked me to the people of the D4E1 collective, and the relationship with them has been prolonged until today, with discussions, interventions and common reflections. I would feel like betraying their trust if my participation to their activities suddenly ended with the end of this research, and this feeling underlines the responsibility of

the researcher to make this choice.

Precisely to avoid ambiguities that could undermine the relationship of trust between the researcher and the other participants, it is central to the research to structure it well and present one's position unambiguously. However, it seems also necessary to act in a flexible way by agreeing to the needs and objectives of the researched group, adapting to the reality encountered, rather than bending reality to one's own needs. In the following part of the chapter I will try to illustrate the structure of the research conducted and the ways in which I considered applying the P.A.R. methodology to the case study, how I dealt with the issue of knowledge production in relation to my position as an activist-scholar and engaged citizen within the group of activists and how the *practical knowledge* Hamm (2015) wrote about is a product of the collective practice of direct action and communal reflection that follows.

### **3.2 Planning the P.A.R. and flexible adaptation to reality**

When I started looking for a case study and studying what a P.A.R. effectively was, I was planning to apply methodically the path suggested by Jason (2004) in his manual. The work was supposed to be developed in three very distinct phases: first, getting in contact with the researched group and establishing the agreement through a Memorandum Of Understanding (M.O.U.); second, negotiating roles and sharing the plan for research and action; third, implementing specific actions and therefore elaborate a discussion on the data gathered. Actually, all the three phases happened to be quite blurred, above all at the beginning, because the collective I choose to investigate already had an own program of activities related to an indefinite lifelong non-academic action-research.

Since I found myself struggling in applying a manual method to a group that was following an uncertain but already started path, I decided to implement a flexible application of both P.A.R. and reflexive ethnography methods (Davies, 2008). This allowed me to start immediately to collect data while I was already understanding my position within the group, even in the initial uncertainty of the direction in which the collective was heading. At the matter of facts, few months passed between the first contact by email in November 2018 and the first personal meeting in February 2019 and at the moment of the official agreement around a M.O.U., I had

already participated in few meetings and in one night-time action with D4E1. During the first meeting in February 2019 the collective was informed about my intention to conduct a research around their activity, but only in July 2019 we discussed together the M.O.U. I had been preparing, although the collective and I have talked and speculated about it informally in many occasions, establishing a mutually agreeable and realistic time frame. Actually, the time between February and July was important for me to reflect on power relations between us and to build up a more solid partnership and a mutual trust relationship with the people within the collective, and this allowed both the parts involved to contribute reciprocally to our respective research. Since I considered necessary a certain amount of time investment in order to build a meaningful relationships with the group, the choice to implement an hybrid qualitative approach allowed me to adjust the research frame according to the rise of mutual trust over time. Ultimately, I realized that I planned a P.A.R. path flexible enough to develop my investigation along the actual evolution of the collective activity.

The collective D4E1 have planned actions to be implemented from Spring to Autumn 2019, hence I decided to extent the time of my research for all the year 2019. The most intense part of the fieldwork happened during the second half of 2019. This phase consists also in taking feedback, evaluating what have been done and establishing agreement about the dissemination of information. All along the phases I made extensive use of direct observation and unstructured interview by story telling approach, drawing up a notebook of my understandings and impressions during the meetings and suddenly after each action I participated. I conducted 3 semi-structured interviews, one with the collective that lasted around 2 hours, and two with participants and external *allies* that lasted around half an hour each. I decided to interview those people only when a reasonable level of reciprocal trust have been established, after meeting them in some of the actions we participate together. In all, I have been member in around 8 different direct action groups (counting actions of preparation and inspections), 4 meetings and 3 debates the collective participated, collecting around 30 hours of direct observation. I am not considering here the email and messages exchange I had with the members of D4E1 all along the research, although informal digital communication had certainly a role in the relationship building. To contextualize the research, I collected visual data through photography and video

recording. Also visual data produced by other participants has been a valid source to gather more information on the topic. This rose issues of privacy and the necessity of an agreement about what kind of picture can be taken, what kind of tools has to be used (smart phones, digital or analogical photo camera, videocamera, etc.) and what visual data not produced by me could be used. Regarding the pictures that are present in this text, I decided to disseminate only pictures taken during the actions that were supposed to be public interventions claimed by the collective and thought to circulate on social media.

Basically, a good deal of the fieldwork involved my participation in the actions conducted by D4E1. Since their interventions have the aim to foster a public debate and they are realized to be recorded and spread on different media, all the interventions are planned quite in detail before, with a clear division of roles within the group. In such cases, the common agreement on what were the limits of my action as researcher has been useful, and the members of D4E1 understood quite well the balance that I tried to maintain, in this sort of ambiguous position between academy and activism. In the next paragraph I will elaborate more around this personal positioning that strongly influenced the way I approached the research.

### **3.3 Personal balancing between academy and activism**

In order to better understand my position within the collective, I must premise that this research overlapped with the process of lifelong learning that the collective had already undertaken before my arrival. In a way the P.A.R. I conducted is a particular case that does not strictly correspond to the canons of a P.A.R. as defined by the manuals (Jason, 2004), because it is the result of the interaction between a research in progress without a precise time limit already started by the collective and a research path prepared by me in collaboration with the members of the collective that limited the investigation to 2019 and that has been included in this master thesis. To clarify my personal position, it is certainly useful to add that I have intervened not only as a student of urban studies, but also as a professional architect and militant for over eight years in direct action practices and tactical urbanism. This has made me a proactive member of the collective, but at the same time it has raised issues of academic and professional privilege for me, which could risk making the results of the research irrelevant for the participants

(Hamm, 2015) and resulting in an approach against the interests of participants, focused only on my own research.

The great willingness of the collective to include new members put me in a position where I could take advantage of my academic, professional and militant knowledge, for example imposing key words in communication, or forcing ways of doing and analysis that I had already made my own. For this reason I decided to step back from my positions, trying at the same time to contribute constructively to the activities of the collective. I attempted to translate this reflections into a position of active listening and dialectical construction of knowledge during the group's internal activities. As for the external communication made by the collective on various media (television networks, newspapers, and their facebook channel), I decided to be always in the second line and not to appear as spokesperson of the group, letting other people take the floor. During the direct actions in the public space I was an active subject within the collective, however I always tried to choose positions and roles that could give me the possibility to have a wider vision of the action and informal interaction with the people participating. This attitude of mine has been perceived by the collective, which often presented me as "*the architect who is doing research on us*" (Charlotte R.). However, within the common meetings they considered that I was "*to all intents and purposes a member of the collective*" (Laurent). This ambiguous position is a difficult balance to maintain, based on the ability to build a relationship of trust and avoid taking advantage of one's own power/knowledge/ability in the end of the privilege given by one's own position, putting oneself critically at the service of the group. This in practice has meant declining this attitude in different ways according to the different situations I coped with.

Here are some examples. In the internal dynamics of the collective, I tried to be a pro-active element by taking advantage of my building experiences and the knowledge I acquired through study. I have tried capitalize on some opportunities that came up during my professional activity as an architect and self-builder and as a master's student, by making them useful to D4E1. In more than one occasion I recovered and distributed to the collective the remains of materials from the work I did as a self-building architect, in order to reduce the material costs of the actions, since the interventions would have lasted only a few hours. On other occasions I



shared with the group texts or articles I found interesting and that could stimulate a reflection on our common practice, although more often they themselves researched and highlighted articles on the subject, giving some credit to what Hamm stated (2015): “activists did not need me as an expert to ‘empower’ them through a participatory action research project - they were busy enough with their own research” (pp. 23, 24). In public situations, however, I always chose to step-back. On the occasion of presentations and conferences I chose not to be the group’s speaker, but rather I placed myself in the audience, letting other members of the collective express the positions and topics we had discussed together before. I recognize that the moment of my contribution is important (even if not necessary), and I chose to always express it internally to the collective, never directly from the collective to the outside. Sometimes I intervened from the audience, but always with questions, avoiding teaching the others when the collective is called to present its work. During the direct actions in the public space we have had many interactions with unknown people, curious, simple passers-by or people irritated by our actions. In those cases stepping back meant letting the members of the collective talk to passers-by while I listen to their conversation (maybe while I was preparing a structure). Since one of the collective’s goals is to interact with people, few times it was me who started a conversation with the passers-by, trying to include other people from the collective and let the conversation continue without my other contributions. During the assemblies and discussions, in expressing my opinions, I give my personal position when explicitly requested, but I prefer to intervene with open questions so that the group together can reflect on the issues. Ultimately, I tried not to have attitudes that might seem manipulative towards any member of the collective, and at the same time I tried to be clear in my explicit position as observer/actor and accomplice. The collective immediately assumed an open attitude and accepted this position of mine, I can say that the personal dynamics within the group facilitated me in this.

Since a great deal of fieldwork happened during direct actions in public space (as it will be exposed in chapter E), it seemed important to reflect about how much our own body and our own appearance as academics get a certain importance when we have to cope with direct action or civil disobedience acts. In next paragraph, I elaborate about this issue, inspired by my personal experience as activist and by Wacquant (1998) reflections on the body as *a tool of inquiry*.

### **3.4 Methodology of the body: the researcher in the space of direct action**

Drawing on Bourdieu, Wacquant (1998) stressed “the necessity of a sociology...(that)...deploying the body as tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge”(p. viii), acknowledging that the researcher should “put his own organism, sensibility, and incarnate intelligence at the epicentre of the array of material and symbolic forces that he intends to dissect”(p. viii). In this sense, investigating the evolution of a group that practices direct action means being willing to take part in it, and negotiating the limits of one’s action according to what one is or is not willing to do. Direct action in public space is fundamentally about putting our bodies into play. We can look at the body as the place where the discipline ultimately is applied, but also as a tool that can question the norm and the dispositives of public space control. Knowing this, I tried never to go beyond what the collective would be willing to do, limiting my body and my actions to what we had previously agreed together. I found myself reflecting on how to move during the actions, what roles to play from time to time, in order to actively participate and be useful for the success of the collective’s interventions and at the same time to have a certain overview (as far as possible) of what was happening. This was achieved in practice by never putting myself at the lead of the action when the group was moving together, almost never being in the front line during the most media actions, i.e. being in the position to have at the same time an internal and a lateral look at the situations.

I have also become aware that the perception of one’s own body by others is an element that can be discriminating, especially when the participants in the actions are quite variable and you hardly know all the others. In order not to be perceived as a stranger, during the actions I always wore clothes that didn’t make me notice in the group and at the same time I was dress in a way that would allow me to position the structures we built in a comfortable and fast way. In the case of the actions in which the self-construction happened in public, I chose to wear proper work clothes, and in one case, where the action was done in broad daylight, just for the time of the installation I wore a work vest (Figure 1), which has two advantages: it identifies you as a construction worker in public space, so you are visible but ordinary, to most activists does not make you look like a university researcher that came to observe what happens, resulting in a

## Figure 1

*The Researcher with D4E1 Members Detourning a Flower Box. (D4E1, 2019).*



Note. From *Design For Everyone* [Photograph], by Design For Everyone, 2019, Facebook

(<https://www.facebook.com/Design4E1/photos/a.231002160900324/393840694616469/?type=3&theater>)

more inclusive position within the group. Taking care of your appearance is something that has to be evaluated time by time according to the situation you are in.

The position of one's own body in the space of direct action and the aspect of one's own presence within a context of civil disobedience are two variables that must be adequately considered during the research on the field. This methodology is therefore applied to the body of the researcher, resulting in what we could call the *methodology of the body*.

### 3.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I discussed the methodology of research used in this Master's thesis, and how it has evolved over the course of the investigation. Starting from the consideration that if we believe that the object of our research is itself an active subject, that the analysis of the case study is based on a qualitative approach in close contact with the researched group, and that the research process between researcher and researched group is dialectical and aimed at the production of a common knowledge, the P.A.R. can represent an academic posture that responds

to a precise ethical and political choice of the researcher within society. I illustrated how there was the need to adapt the theoretical method to a variable and moving reality, adopting both P.A.R. and reflexive ethnography methods and investing a lot of energy in building personal relationships within the D4E1 collective. I realized the importance of time, as a period necessary to produce shared knowledge and trustworthy relationships, expressing the choice to maintain a continuous and prolonged relationship with the participants, emphasizing the responsibility of the researcher in maintaining the relationships built even beyond the research time. I pointed out that in the research it was important to pay attention to different levels of investigation, starting from the personal one, to the collective, to the social context. The personal level is particularly important for the researcher to reflect on his or her position within the group and context. In the specific case of direct action in the public space, it has been useful to think about research methods that took into account one's own presence in the action space and one's own aspect inserted in the ethnography of the activist world, realizing what I interpreted as methodology of the body in the space of direct action.

The fact of conducting the research in such close contact with the case study has certainly favoured the collection of data, but also the mutual exchange between the two parties. In the following chapter I will discuss in detail the fieldwork carried out through this methodology, from the first contact with the collective until the end of the research period, following the evolution of the group and my participation as an activist-scholar within a collective acting in Brussels public space.

## 4. Fieldwork

This chapter is the result of around ten months spent within the collective Design for Everyone (D4E1, as they named themselves), based in Brussels. I chose to write this part of the research in the form of a diary, reworking the notes taken during meetings, actions, reading of newspaper and interviews in a single story. I believe that this mode of writing can make the best storytelling of the participatory action research conducted, highlighting at the same time the things that happened, the qualitative data and information found and personal impressions that I had. The story follows the chronological order of the main events, starting from the first contacts with the collective in November 2018, until the end of the autumn 2019 campaign, and it is divided in six main parts. Some data were then updated up to 2020, such as information on the map produced by D4E1, actually published in April 2020. In the next chapter I will discuss the data collected and analyze more in depth possible findings of the research in relation to the research question.

### 4.1 Get involved into the collective

When I decided to get in touch with D4E1 it was November 2018. I was looking for groups in the city that would use architecture and design as tools for political claims and the news in the newspapers about the interventions of that group of people seemed promising to me. Their answer came within a day and was positive! They, too, were trying to expand the group of people in the collective and were interested in my profile as an architect and self-builder. The first scheduled meeting did not formalize due to various problems, but the first contact had been made and, already after the winter exams session, in February 2019 we had a first meeting. To their credit, D4E1 already had about five actions completed, with a considerable media effect compared to the size of the intervention. The symbolic scope of the collective's activity was clearly perceived by the media, and also by myself.

At that time, I already assumed that it might be interesting to include in my master research a Brussels' collective fighting for a less exclusive public space. In the meetings they told me that they had plans for possible actions during the summer and autumn 2019 and this could

well have been in keeping with the timing of my course of study. After a consultation with my supervisor I decided to undertake a Participatory Action Research<sup>1</sup> on how the collective could possibly evolve, change and learn through direct action in public space. Our first meeting happened on 23rd February 2019, when I met for the first time the solid core of the group that was formed by Laurent and Charlotte R., third sector workers engaged in social change movements. Over time, I realized that around them a number of figures appeared with less constancy but were present: Gaëlle, who has always taken charge of photographing everything that happened, Jerome who often appeared at meetings and actions, a group of students (ranging from 5 to 7 people) who joined D4E1 with their parallel project *Public Privé Commun* (PPC), and Charlotte B., a critical designer who has become a stable and permanent member of the core. My approach was gradual, first an email contact, then a first meeting. During that first meeting, I participated in a working group held by D4E1, where I introduced myself and I advanced for the first time the proposal to insert the activity of the collective within my university research. In a second moment, my informal visit to the photographic expo organized by D4E1 convinced me completely. Our relationship has become more intense since that time and before the beginning of the summer, when of a Memorandum Of Understanding was agreed between me and the solid core Laurent and Charlotte R., who willingly accepted my proposal to be at the same time active participant and observer/ researcher within the collective.

In March 2019, the visit to their Expo at the Garcia Lorca club near Porte d'Anderlecht was decisive. I immediately found myself in line with what I could read from the selected photos, and at the same time I found a possible convergence with my almost ten-year experience as a militant architect on the one hand and the things I was learning and studying as a student of urban studies in Brussels. I realized that the collective was within a city network that was not limited to activists and that was trying to reach a large audience of people. The reflections D4E1 wrote in the text associated to the exhibition resonated within me, and I saw the premise of a meaningful exchange.

## 4.2 The first action

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1 A presentation of the methodology used can be found in the Chapter 3. Methodology

*I remember this one. When we did this action that had failed with the history of ‘electricity, there’s one who filmed us putting the sign, that was just a piece of plastic-coated paper, and said “ah, it’s electrified!” and filmed, took pictures, etc... (Charlotte R., D4E1)*

The first time I participated in a D4E1 action, the collective was still at a stage where it acted in the evening, in extra-working hours, with quick getaway tactics in order to draw little attention during the action and to focus on media resonance. The goals of that action at the end of winter 2019 were the grids installed in different places in the center of Brussels to prevent anyone, but mainly the homeless, to shelter. I thought that in a rainy place like Belgium, it was certainly not a kind thought to prevent people to get a sort of roof. We were only four, Laurent, Charlotte R., Chahr and I. Laurent had prepared plastic signs that simulated the signal of electricity hazard. The idea was to place the signals on the grids, attempting to realize a fake exclusionary system even more violent than simple grids (Figure 2). The description told how the electrified grid would allow a more effective deterrent towards the homeless, a detourne-

## **Figure 2**

*Warning signs posed on the grids of the Erasmushogeschool in Rue T’Kint.*



ment with a certain black humour behind it. The locations chosen were quite isolated, with the exception of the grids under the Gare du Midi railway. During the action, a person started to film us and was concerned about the initiative of the municipality to electrify the grids. I was quite surprised, because it was obvious that we were handling supposedly electric grids with bare hands, without suffering any consequences. Usually the collective added D.I.Y. wooden structures to the targeted urban furniture, in order to detourn the hostile architecture elements, and this had quite often some nice media feedback (Guilbert, 2018; Lauro, 2019), however this time the action was a bit different and less visible from the previous ones. According to the program, the following days we would have to contact some media by sending emails or anonymous messages as citizens and waiting for a fake news story to break. The thing was probably a bit too elaborate and relied very much on the reaction of traditional media. It can not be said that it was a successful action, none of the media contacted responded to our citizens' reports. There was, however, a plan B in which the D4E1 Facebook page would create a post about the grids using photos taken by us the following days.

Despite the action failed, there were two positive matches. The first is that in some places, such as the grids at the Sewer Museum, the signs remained for months, up to when the same grids end up replaced by a proper well design piece of hostile architecture. The second is that I found myself suddenly involved in the collective, walking together the urban space between one place and another of the *hostile geography* of Brussels. During the evening walk through the dimly lit streets of Annessens, Laurent, Charlotte R. and I chatted informally for the first real time, the first of many. Sharing together the time of action proved to be essential to consolidate the relationship between us, to exchange opinions, to debate what has been done, to compare the results, to have ideas for new possible interventions or to elaborate more precise concepts around the public space and its disposition. The first action, although not having had the expected outcome, was the first step of the common path, a turning point in the way interventions have been carried out, and an increase in the number of participants. The following actions I was engaged have been really more participated, involving people from a wider network of activists in Brussels.



### 4.3 24 hours action: in the activist network

*we'll give a house to our Manneken Pis.. also the Manneken Pis is entitled to his small home  
(Charlotte R. during the live facebook at 24 h Right to a roof)*

The *24h of Right to a roof*<sup>1</sup> has been a day of mobilization that publicly launched the campaign to claim the elimination of homelessness in the city of Brussels. It was organized by some 15 of Brussels association, and although it took place on May 10, 2019, the first major open organizational assembly was planned 23rd February 2019 at the Kaaaitheater. The short-term goal was to create an awareness movement at the upcoming federal and European 2019 regional elections and to call for structural policies aimed to fight homelessness. D4E1 actively participated in the construction of this day, for obvious reasons of proximity to the theme addressed, bringing their reflection on public space and their mode of action in a context of fragmented citizen movements that have gathered for this protest. This has produced an expansion of the network of active people in cities that have come into contact with the collective, has multiplied the media effect of the actions of D4E1, and has allowed the collective to grow. Charlotte B. has in fact entered as an active member since the assembly of 23rd February, which gave rise to a working group that had the objective of carrying out many actions in various parts of Brussels that had the largest possible media coverage. The actions of the *24h of Right to a roof* also made possible the first of the collaborations between D4E1 and the collective of students Privé Public Commun (PPC), which continued until the end of October 2019 on the occasion of the campaign of autumn. The actions of 10th May were planned and prepared the previous weeks, both from the logistic point of view and from the communicative one. There was a coordination meeting with the students in early May, to prepare the materials and divide the tasks. That is when I first got in touch with the PPC collective. The presence of television was also prepared beforehand, agreeing with the journalists the timing and the place of one of the interventions. In order to foster even more the media effect of some action, it was planned a live recording on Facebook to be spread on the pages of other organizations involved. It reached 9 thousand views approximately.

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1 Originally in French *24h de Droit à un toit*

The actions were organized to move from the south of the city to Place de la Monnaie, where at 5pm would begin the sit-in that would last until the morning of the next day. In the order the interventions took place at Porte de Halle, at Gare du Midi, and on two statues of the historic city center: Manneken Pis, international symbol of the city of Brussels and Madame Chapeau, a less known statue, representing a historical humorous character of the Belgian theatre. In addition to the interventions of tactical urbanism, in every place posters and stencils were placed with the inscription *drive away the homeless or give them a roof?*<sup>1</sup>, so as to make more evident the connection with the day of the event to those who would come across the installations.

The first intervention at Porte de Halle was the set-up of a device designed by the students, an elastic bench made of recycled bicycle tires tied between two individual seats. This was aimed to underline the fact that there were no benches for more than one person in the park of Porte de Halle. The criticism was towards the type of bench that provided only for individual use and that prevented the meeting and casual interaction between people, but also the impossibility of lying down for anyone, including the homeless that are very present in that square. The second action (Figure 3) at Gare du Midi was chosen to be filmed by journalists, both because it coincided with the production times of the news on TV, and because it was easy to achieve, being the repetition of one of the first actions of D4E1: the completion of a seat where you cannot lie down due to metal armrests through a reclaimed wooden structure made to fit, installed and attached to the existing bench with plastic tie. During the intervention, the presence of journalists attracted the attention of the people present waiting for the bus or tram, but they did not ask questions or interact with the collective. The third intervention was the most at risk, because it involved the placing of a small wooden house on the Manneken Pis, simulating a shelter for the statue. We were feeling it more risky, because in the very city center, probably with a concentration of many people in front of the statue, of whom it was not known to predict the reaction and very close to a police station. The action contemplated crossing the barriers around the statue of the fountain and climbing in a relatively uncomfortable position, under the eyes of the police cameras. This was supposed to happen as quickly as possible. The group decided at the moment who would conduct the action (Laurent and a student), the one who would

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1 Originally in French: *chasser les sdf ou leur donner un toit?*

**Figure 3**

*D4E1 and PPC prepare the structure for the Gare du Midi action.*



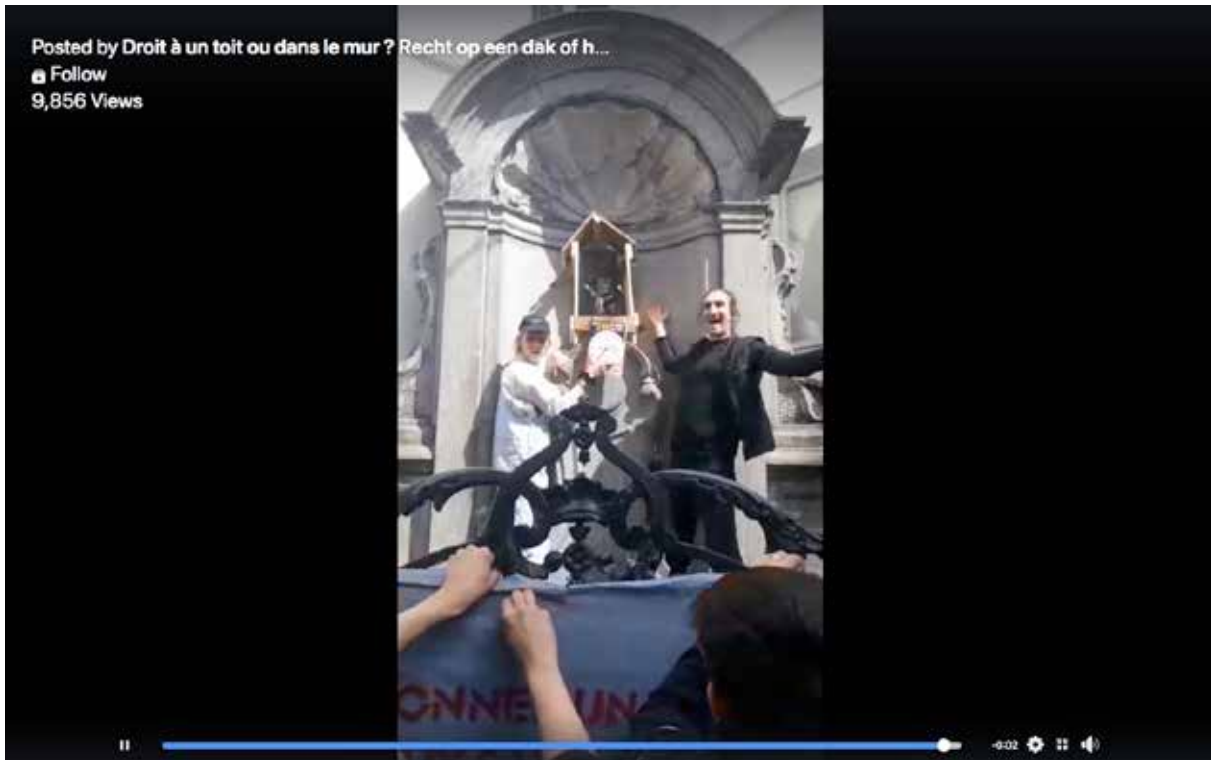
shoot to do the live facebook (Charlotte R.) and who would hand out to passers-by the flyers explaining what was happening.

As a participant and researcher, I helped to bring the materials but I asked not to be one of the two people to perform this action, because it would require concentration in the execution losing me the context, preferring to analyze what happened in the process. Once we prepared the materials two blocks away, we walked towards the symbol of Brussels, not too quickly, as if we were a group of scattered people. The fountain was actually surrounded by tourists who limited themselves to watching and making videos with their mobile phones, as it is their habit of public space consumers. Meanwhile, some of us were handing out flyers about the day of mobilization and explaining to people what was going on. In less than two minutes the action had been made, the live broadcasted (Figure 4), no policeman had come to stop us and we had already started towards the penultimate goal of the day: Madame Chapeau.

The statue of Madame Chapeau would have suffered the same treatment as the Manneken

## Figure 4

*Live broadcast on Facebook during the action on the Manneken Pis. (D4E1, 2019).*



*Note.* From *Design For Everyone* [Video], by Design For Everyone, 2019, Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=2084642734995167>

Pis; the idea was to give a shelter to the popular statues of Brussels city center. The difference is that while the Manneken Pis is less than half a meter tall, the statue of Madame Chapeau is life-sized, so the prepared structure was quite big. In order to bring it to the place from home we had to prepare disassembled, and realize it on the spot by screwing the various parts together. On this occasion I asserted my ability as a builder, and while I made the wooden house with Laurent and few students, others covered the walls of our wood shelter with inscriptions and stencils related to the day of protest. The time execution was longer this time, almost 10 minutes in total and several passers-by stopped to wonder what we were doing. It was the first time that while we were building a construction in public space, someone stopped to ask questions. If on the one hand the speed of action certainly guarantees the execution of the intervention as expected and the effective communication in the media, on the other hand, a more dilated execution in time can provide an opportunity to exchange ideas and opinions with real people

in the very moment of the action, reaching a different type of audience, surely external to the bubble of the Facebook page of the collective. According to Charlotte R., this appeared to be in line with the aims of D4E1:

*There is the question of the media impact and make sure that the largest number of people know the matter. That's why we chose to do a "media campaign" in quotation marks, because we wanted to make sure that a lot of people asked questions about this and that it left the usual circle of militants (Charlotte R.)*

The day of mobilization continued to Place de la Monnaie where D4E1 set up their photographic exhibition and participated in the remaining *24h of Right to a roof* activities. The morning actions were positively evaluated, both for the media feedback obtained and for their material success and the feedback of the people around us. The bond with the collective of students was strengthened and an appointment at the end of summer was fixed to organize the logistic of the autumn campaign. The resonance of the event relatively increased the popularity of D4E1 within the activist network of Brussels. The synergy between the collective and the associations active in the city on the themes of poverty and social injustice was then consolidated in the actions of the autumn campaign.

#### **4.4 Attacking the shops**

*Laurent: we had a media attention to the fact that they are kind actions of civil disobedience*

*Charlotte R.: ...of gentle disobedience*

On the occasion of the *World Day for the Eradication of Poverty*<sup>1</sup> in Brussels, it is organized the event *Making Visible the Invisible: The Big Social-Climate Mess*<sup>2</sup>, organized by about 16 Belgian organizations that address the problem of poverty from multiple points of view, including that of poor-phobia, that is the hostile attitude towards those who live in poverty or precariousness. 17th October 2019 was a date already set in the calendar of the collective,

1 Originally in French: *Journée Mondiale de Lutte contre la Pauvreté*

2 Originally in French: *Rendre Visible l'Invisible : Le Grand Bazar Social-Climat*

which decides to prepare two direct actions, in addition to exhibiting part of the photographic exhibition at the market of Saint Geri. The interventions were prepared in advance and were part of the autumn campaign of 2019, in which D4E1 had decided to invest its energies to take advantage of very visible city events to actively participate and bring his speech within larger group of people. The same month of October 2019 was also the month in which the student collective of PPC would operate in different public spaces of Brussels creating urban installations and questioning the use or abandonment of some places. D4E1 decide that they will participate in the action of 5th October planned by PPC with a little construction site activity of DIY urban furniture, which would serve more purposes: to activate the *urban living room* set by PPC in the square of Gare du Midi, to prepare the material for the actions of 17th October in Saint Geri, to come back to Gare du Midi not with a quick getaway action, but with a longer-term practice that would allow members of the collective to get in touch with passers-by and foreign citizens to try to spread their speech on the street. Obviously the social communication part was also planned, but for this occasion it was decided to invest more on the physical presence extended in the same place, to take advantage of the kind of situation that had already been created during the construction of the house for the statue of Madame Chapeau.

The week before the action, we went with the members of PPC to the chosen place to survey and analyze the square where everything would take place. During the visit, contacts were made with the Bulle Association, a mobile laundry service for homeless people, which was met by chance on the spot. Inspections can also be moments of discovery and networking with other realities that converge on similar issues.

The 5th October left us satisfied, because during the open construction site we had exchanges with different types of people, students and workers. Laurent and Charlotte R. had the opportunity to chat a little more with passers-by when I decided to take care of the small construction site. They had chat with a couple of passers-by, with a group of young people and then in particular with a homeless man, of Moroccan origin, with few teeth in his mouth, who told us a story of hostile architecture that happened at Gare du Midi. During the station's redevelopment works a few years earlier, the benches that were located at the outlet of the jet of hot air (that is, the exhaust of the air conditioning inside the station) had been removed, and the

homeless had found themselves without a point of reference where to find refreshment during the winter nights.

The face-to-face encounters during the actions were proving interesting to understand how their own action was perceived. Charlotte R. told me that something similar had happened a few months earlier in Paris, where D4E1 had gone to give a lecture on his work at a design university.

*we discussed in Paris with an old homeless that explained us this issue of the flower pots, which they put in a place where he had the habit of sleeping, and in the day he had to go around, and when he came back at night and there was a huge pot of flowers in his place, “imagine the face I made! Who am I to them?” the man hold it personally obviously, they wanted to kick him out, it is a violent thing (Charlotte R.)*

In another occasion, Laurent told me about another exchange they had with a homeless person in Gare du Midi during one of the first fast actions of 2018, that demonstrates that not always their interventions were well perceived by homeless:

*he asks us “why have you not directly removed the armrests?” and we said “because it is not our goal.. we want to question public space more globally” “but then what is the use of what you do?” (Laurent)*

If the interaction with homeless has been quite different according to each individual, the frictions with the *victims* of D4E1 detournements have also proved to be interesting and revealing of different approaches.

The 17th October I arrived in Saint Geri around lunchtime. That day I had a class at the university in the morning and in the afternoon, so I had agreed with the others to carry out the actions from 12:30 to 15:30. The market of Saint Geri was surrounded by stands of different associations, the atmosphere was lively, with intense passage of people. One of the stand is for D4E1 that had set up the ever-present photographic exhibition, informative material and were

**Figure 5**

*Preparing the intervention in front of the D4E1 stand.*



completing preparations for the action. The preparation of the installations was an opportunity to attract many curious passers-by (Figure 5). I met for the first time Cédric F., a guy who joined the collective and will then write an article on this day in an online blog dedicated to designers (Fettouche, 2019). It could be felt a sense of cheerfulness, the contemporary presence of a lot of active people creates a certain pleasant atmosphere of complicity. Charlotte R. was waiting for the journalists with whom the collective has agreed to shoot, Gaëlle prepared the camera, Laurent talked with Jerome and some activists while I devoted myself to finishing the last details of the structure, realizing that I am becoming a bit the renowned builder member, especially regarding the technics of installation. It is a role that I favoured, especially it was useful during the moments of preparation immediately prior to the actions and it helped to stay slightly apart and observe calmly what happens around, being at the same time useful to the group. The two actions were planned to take place in the main centre of Brussels. The first would be an *attack* on the planters around the McDonald's in front of La Bourse, whilst the second would be the



detournement of an anti-homeless device under the window of an old acquaintance of D4E1, the travel agency Connections in Rue du Midi, previously the *victim* of one of the collective's first attacks.

Given the potential great availability of people, we decided that before leaving it was appropriate to take a tour of the market of Saint Geri to see if someone else wanted to join us. The tour turned into a small procession and managed to animate in addition to us about twenty activists present there, including one armed with megaphone and cartel, who gave a speech on exclusion and poverty for the entire duration of the action. Strong of such support, we all headed together for la Bourse square and installed a bench on one of the flower pot, surrounded by the fellows and the many curious who had stopped to watch what happened. It was the first action of D4E1 so blatantly public in broad daylight. The flower boxes really seemed to be placed there to prevent people from sitting under the windows, they did not even have a plant inside to justify their function, only earth and a few cans of finished beer. From inside the shop, the customers looked at us curious. The manager of the shop looked displeased at what is happening and came out to complain. Cédric F. reported "(he) does not seem to appreciate the initiative, out of rush, he directly - and unjustifiably- accused us of having cracked his window."<sup>1</sup> (Fettouche, 2019). Laurent tried to talk to the manager, but there was not much room for dialogue and a guardian of peace passing by intervened. Despite this, all the activists were very serene, the boy with the megaphone continued his speech, Gaëlle took last few photos after the installation was completed with an ironic touristic-style sign claiming *World Heritage of Inhumanity* and after a few minutes we came back to Saint Geri.

We chose to wait an hour before the second action, because we wanted to check if there were some police patrol around, maybe warned by the guardian of peace. We also had to finish preparing the second structure, which required a little more organization in the assembling. Time run quickly and we reflected together on what just happened. Laurent and Charlotte R. were not so much agitated by accusations of damage to the window of the shop. It was clear to everyone that the glass was not even touched and we came to the conclusion that it was just a pretext for the manager in the attempt to stop the action. We wondered what the next store owner's or

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1 Originally in French "n'a pas vraiment apprécié l'initiative puisque, sorti en trombe, il nous a directement -et injustement- accusé d'avoir fissuré sa vitre "

worker's reaction would be. Eventually, the next victim considered the attack to the shop as a personal offense, but in a different and less aggressive way.

Connections is a travel agency in the center of Brussels, which has has the peculiarity of having anti-homeless devices installed under its windows. These hostile architecture elements are constituted by a horizontal pole with small spikes welded on, so as to prevent both the use of space to lie down and to sit on the pole. It is one of the most obvious and evident examples in the city center of hostile architecture. The idea of this intervention was to build on it a real wooden bench, part of which was covered in transparent material to make visible the hostile architecture below. To do this, we designed a bench composed by several parts that we would assemble on the spot. Before screwing all the sections, we tied a part of the bench to the iron pole with plastic clamps, to avoid that the removal could be too easy. After all, it costed us a whole day of work to prepare the structure. The wood used was recovered from the disposal of a temporary structure in Porte d'Anderlecht that I had helped build for a work in March, and that the city of Brussels would have thrown away. It seemed right to us to reuse publicly owned material to denounce the hostile public space of the city.

As for the previous action we made a tour around Saint Geri market and a dozen people joined us. Once we arrived at rue du Midi, as soon as we started the installation, one of the workers from the shop came out to talk to us (Figure 6). The installation continued and was completed without problems. Gentle tactics have the effect of preventing ordinary people from physically impeding us from placing our structures. The worker, although complaining, puts herself in a dialectical position with the group trying to justify her personal position in this regard, sounding embarrassed and irritated at the same time. Cédric F. reported "(she) went out and complained about not being warned, using a little clumsy vocabulary referring to homeless"<sup>1</sup> (Fettouche, 2019). After few weeks Charlotte R. and Laurent remembered how they perceived this issue:

*C: ...it was the first time we were confronted with the reactions of the shop workers...*

*L: But it was the shop we were dealing with...*

*C: yes, we don't attack the merchants, but the shops! but we found that the people who wor-*

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<sup>1</sup> Originally in French "est sortie et s'est plainte que nous ne l'ayons pas prévenu, alliant un vocabulaire un peu maladroit à propos des personnes sans abri"

## Figure 6

*Laurent arguing with an embarrassed worker in front of the travel agency. (Fettouche, 2019).*



Note. From *Design For Everyone* [Photograph], by C. Fettouche, 2019, Opoiesis

[https://www.opoiesis.com/2019/10/design-for-everyone/?fbclid=IwAR1p\\_3f5F6HM-K3DYcEXwhDGE5Z94088wB-qhokOux4Mk8HzNfW-ozCgDqVo](https://www.opoiesis.com/2019/10/design-for-everyone/?fbclid=IwAR1p_3f5F6HM-K3DYcEXwhDGE5Z94088wB-qhokOux4Mk8HzNfW-ozCgDqVo)

*ked in the store felt personally faced by the device that we put...as if we indicated them as the 'responsible for the existence of the thing, which is absolutely not true*

*L: and therefore they have an almost violent reaction*

*C: yes, from the pathetic to the violent. When we came to one who said "yes, but we have our own contracted homeless" .. see, it is pathetic.. (Charlotte R. and Laurent)*

While Laurent was talking to the shop worker, we were able to talk to each other and passers-by who were asking questions, and rather positively welcomed D4E1 position and initiative. Twenty minutes later I had to leave to go back to class, but the general feeling was that there had been an increase in the awareness of the collective towards their actions. The different results also gave an opportunity to reflect on what happened. While the facility in front of

McDonald's was removed in less than 20 minutes, the bench at Connections lasted more than a week. Only the sign *World Heritage of Inhumanity* has been removed quickly. We thought that probably when the criticism is too explicit and written it bothers more. We would have instead verified for the first time that the reaction of the public authority could have been much more resolute than the response of the private owners, as demonstrated by the intervention in Saint-Josse few weeks later.

#### **4.5 Action and reaction escalate**

*First of all, if it is the frame we question, we have to exit the frame. (Charlotte R.)*

Every year in autumn, the association Bruxelles Laïque organizes the *Festival des Libertés*, as they stated in their website “to offer an overview of the state of rights and freedoms around the world, to point out lurking dangers, to encourage resistance and to promote solidarity” (Bruxelles Laïque, n.d.). For the closing day of the festival, the organizers contacted D4E1 because, as Cedric T. explained in an interview, they wanted to end the event with an act of collective symbolic civil disobedience, in the attempt to to give a public and political follow-up to the festival through a militant action. The idea was that at the end of the debate *Social Policies: Organized Chaos?*<sup>1</sup>, among workers of the third sector, the collective would informally invite those in the public who wished to join in a symbolic action. It was obviously an unscheduled event in the festival and only some organizers knew about it. The objective of the action was displayed precisely on the occasion of the day of previous actions on 17th October. Exactly during the *World Day for the Eradication of Poverty*, the municipality of Saint-Josse, with admirable timing, had prevented the access to the Gesù church porch installing a system of fixed grids nailed to the staircase and not removable (Figure 7). The porch of Gesù church, abandoned for years, was a daily refuge for a variable group of 5/6 homeless, that used it as a shelter to spend the night and leave their few possessions. The church itself had been occupied after 20 years of abandon, first in 2007 and then since 2009 by about 200 homeless people, including minors, many of them without papers, making it a national press case. At the same time, the pro-

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1 Originally in French: *Politiques sociales: chaos organisé?*

**Figure 7**

*Grids preventing the access to the porch of Gesù church in Saint-Josse.*



perty proposed a redevelopment project to make it a 5-star hotel, a project that a city councillor already in 2013 condemned as probable operation of real estate speculation. Vacated in 2013, the place therefore occupied a particular place in the symbolic imagination for a certain part of the city. The fact that on the day of the fight against poverty the municipality of Saint-Josse decided to close the public space of the porch for the few homeless who still found shelter there was considered a provocation on the one hand and a reason more than valid to make it the final goal of the autumn campaign. The members of Bruxelles Laïque and D4E1 agreed together on this choice. The logistics of the action were also facilitated by the fact that the festival was held 10 minutes walk from the Gesù church.

This time the collective decided to take a step further in the mode of intervention. While the tactics of acting collectively with the volunteers of a public event such as the festival des libertées and of practicing civil disobedience in broad daylight were confirmed, this time a part of the hostile architecture would be materially eliminated. It was decided to act on the grids

and transform them into the walls of a new urban refuge, cutting a part of it and placing in the openings made a door and a window made of wood that allow those who want to enter and exit and to maintain the privacy offered by the grids, which had meanwhile been covered with tarpaulins by the municipal administration to prevent the viewing of the porch to passers-by. The final effect would have been that of a semi-private house where everyone could enter and exit, making the grids an element of privacy instead of inaccessibility. It was a much more invasive intervention than the usual overlap of one structure on another, but it was evaluated by us as the most effective method to cope with the grids, eliminating the separation logic, detouring an inaccessible cage in an open shelter. That corresponded to what Charlotte R. intended when she said “*you gotta get out of the frame*”, overturning the meaning of the architectural elements in order to give them an alternative functionality. This time also, the material available had been prepared before, after a couple of inspections and measurement that I did in couple with Laurent and alone, as I was the member of D4E1 who lived closest to the porch (a few hundred meters). Once again, we used the wood recovered from the temporary furniture project dismantled at Porte d’Anderlecht to make the door and the window.

I went to the French-speaking national theatre towards the end of the third sector workers’ debate. Laurent and Charlotte R., who participated in the debate as workers, eventually took the microphone and explained what they were going to do and tried to motivate people to join the action:

*putting grids to prevent access to people who have no place to go is inhumane! Voilà, so we do a little briefing here, we will tell you exactly what we will do, we hope you will be numerous to accompany us (Laurent)*

About five volunteers came with us, as well as some members of Bruxelles Laïque. In total we had a dozen quite motivated participants, even the ones that never did something like that before. When I asked one of them why she came, she answered “*I feel it’s right, it’s something that speaks to me!*”. Laurent had parked the car with tools and materials a few steps from the church since morning, someone else had taken care to cut one of the grids of the right size for

**Figure 8**

*Adding spray lettering after creating a door.*



the intervention. The entire operation didn't take longer than fifteen minutes. In addition to the door and the window, stencils and inscriptions were painted on the tarps that covered the grids, the same stencil down used for the *24h Right to a roof*. The lettering with the spray (Figure 8) was also a way to make the volunteers participate by making them do something not too demanding and technical, but also engaging and make them feel not just as spectators. The atmosphere was on the one hand tense, also because a few meters from the other side of the avenues is located the federal police station, on the other hand there was an air of celebration, and the feeling of being doing something right and also fun. Brussels Laïque made a video of the action that to date has more than 1800 views (Bruxelles Laïque, 2019).

Among all the tactical urbanism actions carried out by D4E1 this was the one that definitely lasted longer, almost two weeks. Over those two weeks, there have been signs that someone has used the urban shelter for their needs. Probably because the reaction times of the administration

### Figure 9

*The new camera installed to control the porch of Gesù church.*



for such a thing could not be so quick as the one of a shop owner. But the reaction was not so slow to arrive, with an unexpected novelty for our group. In addition to removing the door and the window, and replacing them with a new grid, the municipality of Saint-Josse has installed a new camera that directly controls the porch (Figure 9), increasing the level and number of hostile devices in that space. It had never happened before that the *victim* of an action of *gentle disobedience* had given way to an escalation of security as a response. Laurent commented “*but no! they didn’t understand anything!*”. Probably if we had just written on the tarps this escalation would not have happened, but given the history of the place, the economic interests but also the political image of the place, we can imagine that the breaking of the grids led to a security response of this kind. I interpret this as the action in which control of public space, real estate/ financial interests and social marginalization are most clearly intertwined. Cedric T., member of Bruxelles Laïque and among the organizers of the action, noticed that this was not a problem in itself for the protest, as a response from the authority seems inevitable, stressing the importance



of not stopping in the face of such obstacles, but continue to try to make visible the injustice on the one hand and the resistance on the other.

#### 4.6 Changing tactics but not the strategy

The multi-stakeholder management of public spaces and the intertwining between public and private authorities had manifested itself clearly, questioning the action of the collective, which has found itself to reflect more deeply around its understanding of the reality filtered by hostile architecture. A new phase has thus opened up in the life of D4E1. On the one hand it contributed to the public discussion on the value of public space, participating in conferences such as the one on 2 December 2019 organized by JOC Brussels *Take back the street! Self-defence artistic-urban practices*<sup>1</sup> and spreading on their Facebook page in-depth articles such as the interview with the author of *Taking Back Place: Against the Architecture of Contempt*<sup>2</sup>, the philosopher Mickael Labbé, or articles from various online magazines. At the same time the collective began to collaborate in neighbourhood-based projects in the quarter of Anderlecht, leading DIY workshops and reactivation of public space activities together with other associations and inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The practice of detournement of hostile architecture through tactical urbanism actions has been put aside at the moment, because a different tactics were preferred to accompany the strategical media campaigns of the collective.

After spending energy to *hit* so many different points in Brussels, it was felt the need to begin an open mapping of hostile architecture devices in the city. The objective was not to intervene on all the devices actually present in the city, but to generate and foster a debate on public space and its meaning, through a vision that could make clear what appears invisible to the majority: the exclusion of social groups and inequality in access to different uses of public space. The online version of the map can be updated by anyone interested in doing so<sup>3</sup>, in the meantime the collective worked on the semantic, graphic and practical detournement of a real Brussels tourist guide named Brussels Prout Map, critically alluding to the urban marketing campaign *Sprout to be Brussels*. The role of a critical designer as Charlotte B. and her skills have been funda-

1 Originally in French *Reprends la rue! Pratiques artistiques d' 'autodéfense urbaine*

2 Originally in French *Reprendre place: Contre l'architecture du mépris*

3 The editable open map can be found at: [http://umap.openstreetmap.fr/fr/map/design-for-everyone\\_360830#13/50.8365/4.3399](http://umap.openstreetmap.fr/fr/map/design-for-everyone_360830#13/50.8365/4.3399)

mental for the good outcome of this project. In the map, about forty devices are collected. They are named anti-social devices by the collective, which has developed a personal taxonomy to classify the different elements of architecture hostile in the Brussels public space. After several months of elaboration, in April 2020 the map has been published and distributed in different parts of Brussels.

16th December 2019, I had a quite long and entertaining interview and discussion with the collective in the temporary occupied space of LaMAB. It took stock of a series of issues that arose during almost a year of practice of direct actions and media campaigns. The discussion has been quite long and many of the quotes in this chapter have been selected from that debate. Before moving on to my considerations on this research, I would like to quote Laurent and leave him the floor to summarize in a sentence the result of so much thought and action, in the phrase I felt it was good point to start to evolve and think around new actions:

*we have well understood that public space must remain a conflictual space,... there is no one who can use 100% public space, which must remain a space of conflict, but as inclusive as possible (Laurent)*

## 5. Discussion

This research aims to develop a discourse on public space, rights to the city and surveillance and exclusion through urban design, investigating the point of view of that part of social movements who act directly on the form of urban environment. The fieldwork carried on strongly resonates with the recent literature produced on the subject of hostile architecture. In this chapter I attempt to produce a theoretical discussion using the concepts presented in the literature review<sup>1</sup> drawing on the practice resulted from the months of research spent within the D4E1 collective<sup>2</sup>. Starting from the analysis of the consequences that practice has brought to the theoretical reflection of the collective, I discuss the role of hostile architecture in the discipline of public and social space and the political meaning that the grass-roots resistance towards this form of neoliberal public space assumes.

### 5.1 The self-narrative of the collective in the neoliberal city

From what emerged in the fieldwork, it can be deduced that the collective carried out a double and simultaneous operation: to observe the urban reality outside the collective in order to act on it and to look at the effect of their actions to understand which changes it was more useful to adopt inside the collective and develop a better positioning on the issue. This dialectic between direct action and theoretical reflection of the group has been a constant throughout the period in which I carried out the research. The reflection was carried out both by the members of the D4E1 core group (Laurent, Charlotte R. and Charlotte B.) and by the other participants (Gaëlle, Jirome and Cédric F.), although in different ways. There was a perceptible evolution in the content proposed by the collective interventions, in the ways in which the actions have been planned and conducted, in the very form of the direct actions carried out and finally in the development of the relationships of the members of D4E1. All these elements are necessarily linked and have influenced each other.

Since the main goal of the collective was to bring the debate on the implications of public

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1 The literature review on the topics of the research can be found in Chapter 2, the literature review on the methodology can be found in Chapter 3

2 The detailed count of the P.A.R. fieldwork can be found in Chapter 4

space management to a wider audience than the small circle of militants, building their own narrative was necessary. This narrative has evolved and structured over time; if at the beginning it was limited by the posts on the Facebook page of D4E1, it also took the form of a photographic exhibition and then a live presentation in form of a lecture presented both in a French university and in some debates organized by the associative network of Brussels. As Charlotte R. reported “*the fact of telling us forced us to reflect and ask ourselves, what we did, why, explain and organize our speech*”.

This narrative produced by the solid core has been complemented by interventions brought by the “peripheral” members, who, with varying degrees of depth, have produced texts for dissemination and critics of the design of public space (Cedric F., 2019) and the political value of direct action in the public space of the commodified city (Frères, 2020). In particular, the recent text by Frères outlines a broadening of the collective’s vision, putting out the contradictions of a changing city that in its general plans has ecological and participatory intentions, but actually finds itself gradually more securitized and commodified. It is logical to think that resistance to an element arising from neoliberal urban policies has broadened to a critique of the neoliberal city itself. In this, Raymen’s (2016) observations on the origin of hostile architecture are reflected in the actions of the collective, which without having studied the history of CPTED, was able to recognize and identify hostile design as an element of a political and social trend. In this respect, the members of D4E1 have developed their own designation of anti-homeless devices, which they call *anti-social devices*. This definition echoes the reflections of the philosopher Labbé (Edin, 2019) on the effect that hostile architecture has on the whole body of society and represents a clear stance on the rhetoric of the *clean and safe* city denounced by Minton. The rhetoric of clean and safe city can be seen as the other side of the coin of the *rhetoric of fear*. The discourse on fear reproduced by the authorities in the exercise of power (Tulumello, 2017) is also applicable to civil disobedience, as it disturbs and challenges the status quo. This means that, within the frame of the dominant discourse, even direct action can generate *fear* in certain social groups, because it unmask certain conflictual aspects of reality that are not perishable in the same way by the entire population. In this case the message is that a clean and safe city is not the synonym of a just city, on the contrary the same discourse of fear brought forward by

clean and safe policies have determined more injustice.

## **5.2 Social and political patterns of hostile architecture**

If in free and leisure time people can find and experiment different trajectories and social encounters and have the opportunity to invent and practice activities that can change their attitude towards the consume culture based on exchange value (Garcia and Oliver, 1977), this appears to be in marked conflict with the neoliberal trend of public space management. A political conflict. With the passage from isolated and nocturnal actions by D4E1 to actions carried out in broad daylight, with desired visibility and within a broader network of activists, this conflict was clearly manifested both with private business<sup>1</sup> and with public administration<sup>2</sup>, but not in all places with the same intensity. Whilst anti-homeless devices may appear to private shop-owners to be a punctual solution, aggressive towards people and protective of their business, the management of public space by authority seems to indicate that there is an intentional design strategy as commented by Chellew (2019). This is particularly perceptible when analysing the change of public space over time. The story the homeless told us at Gare du Midi, the succession of anti-homeless systems at the Musée des Egouts and the increase of security devices at the church in Saint-Josse suggest that, even in the absence of a planned strategy, there is at least a repeated pattern in the approach towards the street population.

The experience in the field seems to suggest that this design strategy has precise targets, because it does not affect everyone's life in the same way and even in some cases, such as certain retailers, their business has an advantage from their point of view. There are clearly winners and losers within the regulation and management of public space. Even if the main targets are specific, it seems fair to argue that the hostile architecture has an effect on all citizens as secondary targets. The action of D4E1 aims to raise the awareness of secondary targets that do not perceived themselves as affected by these devices, or do not even perceive them at all. One of the most interesting criticism that the collective makes to certain public spaces is the function that the design seems to have of trying to avoid the possible interaction between different social groups. The interaction is prevented both by the physical separation of some spaces

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1 The count of the actions against the McDonald's and Connections shops can be found in Chapter 4.4

2 The count of this action against the grids closing the porch of Gesù church can be found in Chapter 4.5

(grids and nets) and by the creation of spaces that exclude the presence of some groups from the public realm (anti-homeless and anti-skaters devices for example). Since the interaction between different social groups is seemed to be increasingly hinder, this seems to be in favour of maintaining a status quo where the dominant discourse is the one that has the greatest (and sometimes unique) chance to express itself. Mitchell (2003) provides the case of homeless people to express the concept of denied citizenship, but it is not the only case. If we observe that the hostile architecture targets a variety of social groups, all of them will have difficulties to be recognized as part of the society in certain areas of the city. The example of the Porte de Halle park, where only individual chairs have been installed, can be indicative of a space that is a deterrent both to homeless people who cannot lay down on the benches and to groups of people who are discouraged to gather in a place where street furniture is designed just to provide a short break. The political agency of objects in urban space (Mould, 2019) seems to resonate in these cases. Organized groups respond to this political agency with political action.

In the case of D4E1, political action is taken with a certain creativity, adopting methods derived from artistic practices that use tactical urbanism in order to overcome inflexible design. In this sense the tactical urbanism can be seen as a possible political tool for grass-roots struggles, acquiring a different value from that identified by Nogueira and Portinari (2017), detaching itself from the continuity with neoliberal policies. It is important to notice that such tool is never used alone, but accompanied by an extensive use of media, production of articles, exhibition, etc.. Tactical urbanism appears as a necessary but not sufficient element of the media campaign, which is the actual action of the collective at urban level. However, the practice of tactical urbanism has made it possible to highlight the convivial and constructive aspect of the struggle, in a much more evident way than digital narration. The low-tech approach of tactical urbanism managed to involve an audience that is not usually proficient in building or construction. Moreover, their approach to gentle disobedience implied by the simple detournement of street furniture brings with it a playful aspect that is easily placed in the artistic sphere rather than the protest, so as not to be immediately perceived by passers-by as a form of struggle, even if in fact the participants are violating the rules of use of the public space.

### 5.3 The indiscipline as factor of community building

It is interesting to dwell on the meaning and consequences of this shared practice of disobedience in relation to the participants in the actions. If we can affirm that this type of disobedient practice presents not only a conflictual aspect but also a gathering aspect, represented by the collective effort to reach a common goal, even disobeying rules that are not considered right, it is important to underline how illegality (in this case actual, but not perceived by many as such) is an important factor in the dynamics of the action, because each participant assumes and shares responsibility for the action. In this sense, the members of D4E1 have been able to observe a gradual increase in awareness, and to take more and more risks. It seems that the practice is strengthened in gradual action, even if it has to be said that the collective never faced a real direct confrontation with police control or repression. In this, the role of the public space is confirmed as necessary for the grass-roots political activity, even if the immediate feedback in terms external to the group is minimal, the effect within the group is very strong and immediately palpable, relations are consolidated and the bonds of trust are strengthened. My experience within the collective suggests that doing together encourages and nurtures thinking together. In this sense it can be argued that the collective and organised disobedience to the rules, the indiscipline, can be a factor of community bonding within the groups that practice it.

The practical experience carried out in D4E1 has confirmed the idea that public space is a space of conflict where the negotiation for the rights to the city takes place both on a symbolic and material basis. Moreover, we can add that materially overturning the symbolism present in public space means rejecting a certain *disciplinization* of public realm itself. According to Foucault (2018) a society based on the norm implies “a permanent classification of individuals, a hierarchy” (p. 98), hence the norm “becomes the criterion of division between individuals” (p. 98). The disciplinary effects of the implementation of the hostile architecture on society cannot be denied. If the disciplinization of public space corresponds to the set of rules and norms established officially by the authorities and not officially by the dominant common discourse that regulates it, breaking this discipline for political reclaims can represent a form of democratic protest, which Mouffe (1999) writes about when she speaks of an “agonistic model of democracy” (p. 754). I argue that in the actual neoliberal system that tends to fragment and

supervise society, sharing practices of indiscipline that resist these tendencies can be a tool for community building.

Keeping available the space and time of protest, of indiscipline, recovering the right to disobedience and insubordination against what is considered unjust, seems to be not only an exercise in the practice of claiming social rights, but also a path of building solidarity within groups that struggle for common goals. The struggle within society can generate new communities. And if the battle of communication and dissemination of information is played out in the digital world, it is in material space and time where action finds the basis for the creation of bonds based on processes of collective meaning-making (Langdon and Larweh, 2015). This research reaffirms the substantial importance of the possibility of disobedient political action in urban public space, especially at a time when urban rent and the commodification of the public realm tend to take over at the expense of non-consumption-based uses.

#### **5.4 The role of the researcher**

Some brief final considerations on the role of the researcher in this type of experience can be made, comparing what has been learned in the light of the texts studied with the material practice of research<sup>1</sup>. Even if we can give some credit to what Hamm (2015) stated with scepticism around activists been empowered by a Participatory Action Research, I still found the importance of my contribution to the collective as a beginner activist-scholar. As Charlotte R. and Charlotte B. explain in the following interview excerpt, having a person in the group who makes theoretical contributions to the practice of the collective is a factor that enriches the group's capacity for investigation and activity.

*C R: for me you bring certain concepts, (then) we have reflections, you bring simple questions sometimes or words that summarize, sociological concepts that allow to enrich and complex the reflection.*

*C B: or simplify it*

*C R: yes, to complex, not to make complicated (Charlotte R., Charlotte B.)*

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1 An extended literature review can be found in the Chapter 2.



The use of P.A.R. And reflexive ethnography methodologies have been effective to the extent that they have been put at the service of the collective, as Laurent well describes: “*we are part of a process, each member of the collective is part of the process and it is really building something together thanks to the contributions of each one*”. However, in my search for a balance between activism and academy, I still have the impression that my contribution as a critical activist has been more decisive for the activities of the collective; being engaged and willing to share common efforts and making myself available to the group has meant knowing how to be a team player. Building trusting and meaningful relationships are the most important things I think I have achieved through the practice of this research. If at the beginning of the research path I could count just on my personal sensitivity, reading texts from other people who approached the research in a similar way helped me to direct my role, giving centrality to relationships, trying to go beyond the strictly academic environment and practice, in the attempt to position myself as a beginner activist-scholar.

## 6. Conclusions

This research, developed in 2019 and written in 2020, aimed to investigate the evolution of the collective Design For Everyone, a group of activists struggling against hostile architecture in Brussels, in order to contribute to the academic discourse on public space, rights to the city and surveillance through design. The investigation was carried out through Participatory Action Research and reflexive ethnography methods, as a consequence of the author's choice to position himself critically within the academic environment, to contribute to the development of the researched group in the frame of social struggles, and to recognize the researched group as an active subject in the research. The elaboration of this kind of inquiry has been a process of growth and self-training in the not simple position of activist-scholar. Studying during the time I was an active part of the collective, I was able to verify the impressions I had from analysing and reading the texts. This contributed to elaborate a deeper understanding of the reality I was investigating, more than would have happened with the study alone or exclusively through direct action practices.

The research, starting from the reference framework elaborated with the study of the analysed texts, has produced insights on antagonism democracy, social movements and public space in the neoliberal city. The public space has proved to be a conflictual space, in which the negotiation for the various rights to the city is continuously implemented by social groups. In this negotiation, hostile architecture is an active factor both physically and symbolically. Its elements carry a political agency, that can be identified as a pattern of an active and exclusionary approach towards the street population, which has its origin in neoliberal policies of public space management. This political agency is targeted by the actions of the collective, within a more general media campaign, aimed at raising awareness among a wide audience and making visible the role of such anti-social devices in the securitization and commodification of public realm. These actions have highlighted the political potential of tactical urbanism as direct action on the urban environment, autonomously carried out by activist groups in violation of the rules governing the use of urban space. The breakdown of this discipline, the indiscipline as a form of protest and the disobedient political action become factors of community ties among protestors,

and give public space the political meaning as a place for the possible realization of “agonistic model of democracy” (Mouffe, 1999, p. 754).

The research has also provided reflections on the research method, highlighting the problems that a strict and manual application of the P.A.R. method can raise in a situation of scarcity of time, and bringing out insights about the participation of the researcher in direct action practices. I illustrated how there was the need to adapt the theoretical method to a variable and moving reality, investing a lot of energy in building personal relationships, emphasizing the responsibility of the researcher in maintaining the relationships built even beyond the research time. If I tried to answer the questions asked by Langdon and Larweh (2015) whose knowledge counts and how this knowledge is used in P.A.R., I can venture to answer that the dialectical process between the researcher and the collective has produced a common knowledge, useful in the group’s practices of action and theoretical elaboration. In this sense the research has been participated in the true meaning of the term, resulting in “a synergistic addition to movement processes” rather than “an extractive process for academic purposes” (Langdon and Larweh, 2015, p. 283). The personal level of investigation has proven to be particularly important for me as researcher to reflect on my position within the group and context. In the specific case of direct action in the public space, it has been useful to think about research methods that took into account one’s own presence in the action space and one’s own aspect, developing what I classified as *methodology of the body*.

This research, by its very nature, is limited to a qualitative analysis of the topic dealt with. A mixed qualitative and quantitative investigation into the geography of hostile architecture in the public space of Brussels could provide new insights into how public space is produced and managed by public authority.<sup>1</sup> It can be noted that the sample of people interviewed around the topic is restricted to the group of militants inside or close to the collective and a few passers-by. A more extensive survey that takes into account the point of view of the shopkeepers victims of the actions, of the law enforcement agencies prepared to supervise urban public space and of the political authorities that decide the management of public space, could certainly give a more comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of hostile architecture as an active element

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<sup>1</sup> The collective D4E1 has started to do something similar with the project Brussels’ Prout Map published in April 2020. See Chapter 4.6.

in the negotiation for the rights to the city. In the same way, a more extensive research conducted with the main targets of hostile architecture (e.g. homeless) would certainly have provided additional elements of reflection. Another fact to underline is that, despite the numerous actions, the collective has never been subject to direct confrontation with police officers during the interventions. This raises further questions about which subjects have the privilege to act in the public space. Does the lack of confrontation and therefore the relative freedom of action derive from the tactics of gentle disobedience adopted by D4E1? or does it also derive from the social condition of its members? Moving the geographical focus to other locations could also be an element of evolution of the research, to reflect on hostile architecture practices compared between different cities with similar socioeconomic trends. Comparative research could take place at different levels: a comparison between European metropolis in different geographical areas, or a comparison between a metropolis and a peripheral city within the same country, or a research comparing urban developments within different areas of the same city such as between the centre and the suburbs<sup>1</sup>. Ultimately, there are many possible developments that this research can take. The public space has a dual aspect of gathering and conflict. Hiding the conflict does not resolve the tensions that originate it, instead bringing the conflict to light and making it live in public discourse is the task that as an activist-scholar I have tried to carry out. The history of hostile architecture in Brussels is far from over.

Autumn 2019. The iron grids that the Musée des Egouts had installed after the removal of the anti-homeless showers lasted just over a year. They were left there after the unsuccessful night-time action of D4E1<sup>2</sup>, however, they were a solution that hardly suited those trying to present the museum as a *clean and safe* place. In November the same grids ended up replaced by a proper well design piece of hostile architecture, composed by 3 high glassed doors in a white steel structure (Figure 10), that now close the porch and protect a closed area furnished with two small benches in correspondence of the lateral fixed windows, while the central door is supposed to be an emergency exit. Nevertheless there seems to be something wrong. From the interior of the museum the access to such space is closed, and the emergency door cannot work, because the frame of the door has been welded on purpose to the fix structure (Figure 11),

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1 Chellew (2019) has recently started a similar path.

2 The action in question is described in detail in Chapter 4.2.

therefore it cannot open. A pure aesthetic embellishment has been created with the pretension of creating a clean and safe space that no one can use. Ironically, such brand new arrangement

**Figure 10**

*Transition from temporary to permanent hostile architecture.*



**Figure 11**

*Welding spots, an emergency door that can't be opened.*



of its porch has made the museum honoured with the *Golden Spike 2020*<sup>1</sup>, the prize assigned yearly by the Abbé Pierre Foundation rewarding the worst anti-homeless devices signaled by citizens. The city of Brussels keeps on producing hostile devices that target undesired people, excluding them from public spaces. The securitization trend of neoliberal public realm appears to be well underway and not so many people seem to be aware of it. That is why it is important as researchers to pay attention to how urban space is produced and to investigate the fracture lines and contradictions of its material reality. While as activists, using Gaëlle's words, "we will continue to draw attention to the need to re-articulate the social, environmental, aesthetic, political and cultural notions that must coexist harmoniously in order to create a healthy and supportive public environment"(Frères, 2020)<sup>2</sup>.

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1 Originally in French: *Pics d'Or 2020*

2 Originally in French: "nous continuerons d'attirer l'attention sur le besoin de réarticuler les notions sociales, environnementales, d'esthétique, de politique et de culture qui se doivent de cohabiter harmonieusement pour créer un environnement public sain et solidaire"

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