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Fig. 18 Case study Kontich: proposed development.

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In Coproduction with:

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Architectuur

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In 2013 Labo S, in collaboration with Labo A (Laboratory for Architecture, Ghent University) and the architectural office Bovenbouw Architectuur, was selected by the Flemish State Architect to participate in the pilot study for collective housing. The intention was to work towards a framework for innovative housing projects with an emphasis on mixed and collective housing typologies.

Approach: A Picturesque Perspective

The study of Labo S and partners proposed a renewed alliance between the Flemish landscape and the way people live in that landscape. As such, landscape was not approached as an abstract or technical subject nor a mental, ecological or hydrological construction. Instead, landscape is addressed as an exponent of a low eye-level perspective, bringing together built and unbuilt elements within a singular scenic arrangement. The territorial background of the central portion of Flanders has a long history of settlement dating back to medieval times. Settlement came early and was relatively easy, with productive soils that could be cultivated intensively and would be endlessly subdivided, and a fairly dry landscape of sandy soils upon which it was easy to build. With this territorial background came a landscape that consisted of relatively small elements, such as trees, houses and pasture land, that could easily accommodate further changes without much further ado.

The slow accumulation process which took place in these territories historically produced, almost by default, a picturesque landscape which contained multiple complexities, and managed to seemingly effortlessly rearrange its elements in a pleasant play of foreground, middle ground and background. For a long time the landscape held together a complex choreography of trees, houses, pasture land, clouds, mirroring bodies of water, dirt roads and fences. In many parts of Flanders however

we see how the process of urbanisation has pushed this complex choreography beyond a point where these elements can be understood as picturesque. The tableau loses what used to hold it together. The middle ground gives way to a world dominated by the loud gestures of an urban landscape that exists in a disconnect with the rural background with which it cannot entertain a meaningful relationship.

In this project we proceeded from a picturesque framing of the peri-urban landscape to imagine a way of building that could produce a new relationship to the landscape. Through the picturesque lens we tried to imagine a form of housing that could break the consumptive cycle of a suburban housing production which draws part of its value from its proximity to the landscape, yet destroys that landscape in the process. Can we define new collective housing situations that produce a new public landscape in which the surplus value of the urbanisation process can be accumulated and stored within a neo-picturesque order?

Six Typologies

A number of figures or types offered an alternative way to approach this potential. Their logic is threefold:

1. They define an open space the scale of which is related to the agrarian plot structure.
2. They take speculative logic into account. The surplus value of generating a higher density upgrades the surrounding landscape.
3. They incorporate all the peripheral elements that come with the suburban way of life such as private gardens, parking and driveways within coherent spatial arrangements.

A Renewed Alliance

All typologies mobilize collective gains: greater density, more compact buildings, less land consumption, adequate parking solutions, an interesting range of outdoor spaces, potential for sustainable water management and joint energy production. The systematic nature of the proposals presented by Labo S and partners aspired to create an attractive and more intensively inhabited landscape. The agrarian chambered structure produced as a by-product of the new residential developments contributes to an increased capacity of the suburban fabric. As the linear logic of suburban densification has reached its saturation point, a grid logic could prove to be a valuable alternative. The chambers thus allow for a gradual densification and a closer interconnection between the landscape and the life unfolding in it.

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