

'Captains of industry' of the metropolitan nexus

Private mass housing development in twentieth-century Belgium

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Abstract

This paper focusses on the production of the two major commercial residential developers, Jean-Florian Collin (Etrimo) and François Amelinckx (Amelinckx N.V.), who constructed over 70,000 apartments in the metropolitan agglomerations of Belgium between 1924 and 1985. Their short-lived, but large-scale, production defines an 'invisible city' of which we know very little but which can be used to analyze key aspects of the process of 20th century metropolization in Belgium. By applying a production perspective on planning history, the actual projects that these developers realized are considered a combination of the 'space' that was given to them and the 'space' they claimed. This perpetual interplay between the actual conditions and the actor coalitions that included developers is defined as a 'metropolitan nexus', in which the process of metropolization is perpetually being redefined. The production of Etrimo and Amelinckx N.V. may seem generic at first, and does not conform to conventional narratives concerning the formal qualities of buildings. However, a strategic mapping of this production reveals how both developers were 'champions of a game of their creation,' as they applied precise strategies in constructing specific circumstances that seized the latent potential of development (that hovered over the capitalist metropolitan landscape) into concrete, often opportunistically defined, built commodities. This production perspective makes it possible to look at a processes of metropolitan expansion and twentieth century planning in Belgium from a different angle, starting from the actual built reality and the 'captains of industry' that this urban reality was grounded upon. A perspective which has been little-applied in the Belgian case, and is particularly pertinent for interpreting development patterns in a context like Belgium that lacks a strong planning culture and is historically compromised the absence of an emancipated scene of developers ready to take on the urban agenda.

Keywords

project development, twentieth century expansion, metropolization, Amelinckx, Etrimo

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INTRODUCTION

Jean-Florian Collin (1904-1985) and François Amelinckx (1898-1975), founders of respectively Etrimo (*Société D'Etudes et de Réalisations Immobilières*) in 1935 and Amelinckx N.V. in 1936, were two major commercial residential developers who defined the market of apartment production in post-war Belgium. Taken together, they constructed over 70,000 apartments, accommodating over 200,000 people between 1924 and 1985, making them the Belgian champions of the upscaling of commodified housing in the mid-twentieth century metropolis. They were not only the first to construct the specific high-rise apartment building typology in Belgium, but also the first to occupy the metropolitan fringe of middle and large cities. Their production can be studied as the benchmark of a practice which would later become mainstream.

This research inscribes itself in an emerging body of scholarship that moves beyond the negative appreciation of commercial residential architecture as banal mass production or an erosion of early twentieth-century modernist ideals.¹ Combining political-economic agency with the processes of spatial planning, it challenges definitions of architecture as a liberal profession that continue to frame the study of architecture. The narrative I bring, highlights the specific choices embedded in a particular development model, analysing therefore the specific interpretation given to the metropolitan space for real estate development that Amelinckx and Etrimo were able to tap into on a large scale over a relatively short period of time.

Looking at the activities of these two major commercial residential players, their architectural and development models can be studied as a consequence of the 'space' that was given to them and the 'space' they claimed. I define this as the interplay between the actual conditions and the actor coalitions that included developers, calling it a metropolitan nexus in which the process of metropolization is constantly being redefined. Studying this interplay offers valuable insight in the specific 'embeddedness' of this production, both in time and space.

The specific choice for a high rise apartment production in the metropolis is the main reason to study these two developers. Although real estate is often seen as naturally linked to cities and urbanisation, its specific connection to metropolitan dynamics has been overlooked, with an exception of Alexia Yates, who convincingly argues 'from the mid-nineteenth century, modern cities have undertaken a marked evolution, from a time when real estate provided a stable backdrop for urbanity to one when the economic development of real estate became a core function of the metropolis, even a driver of the national and international economy.'²

Amelinckx and Etrimo can therefore be studied as an outcome of dynamics of metropolis formation on which they were dependent, and at the same time formed themselves. Metropolization was essential for their sales strategy (certainly for Etrimo's housing parks), as the need to be able to sell a lot of the same dwellings simultaneously could only work in the context of the metropolitan region, where they could tackle both the urban and the suburban clients at the same time, doubling the demand. Their expanding operations could thus only work in these agglomerations of Brussels, and on a smaller scale Antwerp, which was the key action radius of Amelinckx and Etrimo. Partly due to envisioning a 'city that never was', both perish during the 1970s-1980s, mirroring the declining of the desirability of the apartment typology in the metropolitan fringe.



Fig. 1. Apartment building of Etrimo in the southern border of Antwerp, ca. 1980.³

There are other reasons to specifically focus on Amelinckx and Etrimo besides their choice to develop apartment buildings for the metropolis.

Although they were not the only residential developers in Belgium, they were the first (starting early 1920s, after the law on Joint Ownership was installed in Belgium) and remained active the 1970s-1980s, when they went bankrupt due to similar changes in building conjuncture and economic crises. This makes them the biggest, but more importantly, the longest active housing developers in Belgium.

Collin and Amelinckx had a similar financial model when procuring the capital for their production. As they had little starting capital, they had to obtain and renegotiate funding for each individual project, which was the complete opposite of real estate agents with noble origins popping up around the same time.

Finally, they can be considered Belgian and European pioneers in the field of 'developers of private mass housing'. Jean-Florian Collin and Amelinckx were founding members and at times presidents of both the Belgian professional organization (*Union Professionnelle des Créateurs de Lotissements et de Logement*) and the European Professional organization of project development (*Union Européen des Constructeurs de Logements, secteur privé*) in the 1950s, organizations that still today protect the interests of project developers in Belgium and in Europe.

No coherent archives were preserved of Amelinckx N.V. and Etrimo. In the 'Archives of Modern Architecture' in Brussels, the documents concerning Jean-Florian Collin's activities remain limited to his interwar production in art-deco style, and Amelinckx is not even mentioned. I therefore choose to follow the 'paper trail' of the building activity of the developers.

Considering every (constructed or unconstructed) building as 'testimony' of their success, I aim to reconstruct the specific choices and enabling conditions that led to these 'successes'. This logic is supplemented with other traces of their entrepreneurship in advertisements, interviews with a few remaining former employees, and traces of their lobbying work (locally, nationally and internationally).

I use Immanuel Wallerstein's *Historical capitalism: with Capitalist civilization* as a lens to understand how project developers tried to influence and control the different aspects of the chain of commodified housing in a changing context.⁴ In particular, Wallerstein describes how individual entrepreneurs could 'find themselves pushing in one direction for their own enterprises (for example, by reducing their own labour costs), while simultaneously pushing (as members of a collective class) to increase the overall network of purchasers (which inevitably involved, for some producers at least, an increase in labour costs)'. This contraction is particularly interesting to analyse the operations of Amelinckx and Etrimo in the context of processes of metropolization.

In order to analyse the relation of both developers to the city, I use Logan and Molotch definition of a specific type of 'place entrepreneur' called the 'structural speculator'.⁵ Structural speculators 'intervene in the future': they speculate on their own ability to change the relationships of a given place to other places, that is, 'they attempt to determine the patterns through which others seek use value from place'. These entrepreneurs seek to alter the conditions that structure the market, strategizing to create differential rents by influencing the larger arena of decision making that will determine locational advantages. Their actions are therefore supralocal and cosmopolitan. Given the extraordinary impacts of government actions, structural speculators pursue both redistributive rents and monopoly rent, not merely serendipitous or differential rents. Being a structural speculator takes substantial skill, resources, and ongoing vigilance to sustain political decisions that preserve a given set of spatial relations.

AMELINCKX AND ETRIMO AND THE OPENING AND CLOSING OF METROPOLITAN DYNAMICS

If we consider Etrimo and Amelinckx champions of twentieth-century commodified housing, the question arises how they realized the latent potential in the newly opened metropolitan space. I argue they were 'successful at a game of their own creation', not only following a market, but also actively influencing and even creating (parts of) the market during a specific stretch of time in this specific metropolitan space.

Housing became a direct bearer of economic value in itself in the late 19th century, during which the Belgian government encouraged social housing at arms-length via indirect housing policies. Grosjean's *Urbanisation sans urbanisme* discusses this in-depth, in particular the laws regarding labourers' housing of 1889 and 1892, which allowed a state Savings Bank to offer low-interest loans to developers for the construction of workers' housing or for the purchase of buildings to be leased for the same purpose.⁶



Fig. 2. a Interwar production of Jean-Florian Collin (Etrimo), Brussels.



Fig. 2. b Interwar production of François Amelinckx, Brussels.⁷

For the purpose of this paper, I start from the Interwar period, and in particular the instalment of the 1924 “Law on Joint Ownership” in Belgium that introduced financial and legal modalities for co-ownership and stimulated the first owner-occupied apartment buildings. The Interwar period brought about an increase in the availability of excess capital in the bourgeoisie, which led to a rising housing need that could only be fulfilled by constructing apartment buildings, which were less expensive than bourgeois hotels de maître and attractive to the new entrepreneurial elite. A new generation of housing developers, among who Amelinckx and Etrimo, took up this brokering role by trying to eliminate the in-between solicitors and local landowners. They advertised to their future clients directly, often before obtaining a building

permit. Remark that the architect-developer divide became only clear-cut in Belgium with the law of the profession and the protection of the title of 'architect' in 1939. Until then, the practices of these 'brokers in urbanity' overlapped and depended on the profiling of the developer, who called themselves at times 'architect' (Collin) or 'developer-contractor' (Amelinckx).

Etrimo's and Amelinckx' operations truly took off from the 1950s onwards, echoing the post-war context of ever raising wages, a policy of full employment, and the broad availability of capital in the (lower) middle class. Although WWII left Belgium with no real housing shortage, the boom of available capital ensued a high demand of owner-occupied housing.

The majority of large scale housing estates in Belgium, remarkably, were not built by the public sector but rather by commercial players such as Etrimo and Amelinckx. Their production emerged thus outside the contours of the dominant political frames and was not aligned with the dominant anti-urban agenda that has been appointed to Belgian national housing policies. The unfolding Welfare State paired with the explosion of road transport and large population growth led to a specific demand for a new type of urban living in the metropolitan space, which Etrimo and Amelinckx were the first to specifically tackle. Although Etrimo focused more on constructing large apartment complexes in a green setting in the Brussels' agglomeration and Amelinckx diversified his activities in scale and land positions, both their operations moved towards large-scaled, repetitive high-rise apartment buildings during the post-war period.



Fig. 3. Apartment blocks of Amelinckx and Etrimo in the southern border of Antwerp, 1960s.⁸

The late 1960s' economic and societal shifts marked the end of the 'Glorious Thirty'⁹ and eventually lead to the bankruptcy of Etrimo on the one hand and a severe shift of Amelinckx' activities on the other hand, the latter from the pure production of apartment buildings towards a commodification of services. The end of the appreciation of the metropolitan apartment typology combined with a building crisis in the early 1980s ultimately made Amelinckx file for bankruptcy in 1985, to which I will come back later.

COMMODIFICATION PROCESSES IN PRACTICE

Although together Amelinckx and Etrimo defined the market of private housing production in the post-war period, their different backgrounds led them to take up different positions in the field, live up to different ambitions, and cater to a somewhat different clientele. In the next part of the presentation, I would like to discuss the difference between Amelinckx' and Etrimo's commodification strategies. What are they explicitly selling? Where, and for which part, did they intervene in the total commodification chain of twentieth-century metropolitan housing?

LAND

- Etrimo was well-known for constructing 'apartments in a park' that offered a new type of metropolitan living in a green setting close to the city. Gery Leloutre has referred to these dense housing complexes set in systems of green spaces combining public and private parks as a 'Green Corona', a clear border to the Brussels agglomeration.¹⁰ This development model thrived, but also needed, large plots of land just on the border of the Brussels metropolis, where Collin could address both the urban and suburban potential clientele.

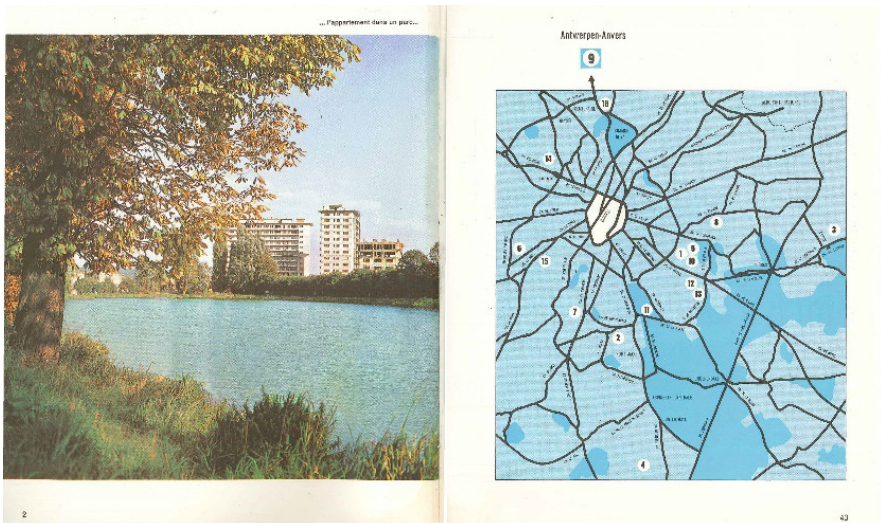


Fig. 4. 'Apartments in a Park' by Etrimo, Brussels, 1963.¹¹



Fig. 5. An Amelinckx apartment block along the unfinished ring road of Antwerp, Borgerhout 1968.¹²

- Amelinckx appropriated sites that were already (partly) urbanized, or well on its way to become urbanized, capturing residual land values by explicitly choosing for easily accessible plots. The land Amelinckx constructed on was therefore highly diverse, both in the city centres (for instance by using the Slum Clearance law to get cheaper land), as well as on secondary radial roads in the twentieth-century belts of medium and large cities.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT IN LAND

- The Floor Area Ratio of Etrimo's housing parks was fixed as 1. This fixed occupation of the site made for an easy development model, that searched its added value in the development of the surrounding park. Collin usually obtained land that was difficult to develop, such as brownfields, swamps, or landfills. He projected his park strategy on these plots as a way to bring those into development at once, while simultaneously make these housing parks part of the context needed for development model itself.

- In contrast, Amelinckx' straightforward goal was increasing density as much as possible, spreading his land positions over a large variety of different, smaller projects, some on more expensive sites in both the inner city and in the more metropolitan fringe, which they sold for a higher price as being more 'luxurious'.¹⁶

RATIONALIZATION OF THEIR OPERATIONS

- When we look at the building plans, Etrimo constructed 13 almost identical housing parks, which can also be seen in the firms advertisements that depict little to no surroundings of these projects. The standardization of his design reduced his development costs and labour costs, as they employed mainly engineers and designers, and the construction was done by subcontractors.

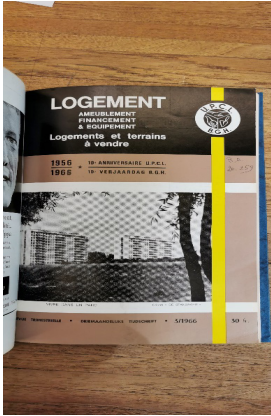


Fig. 6. 'Living in a Park setting', Etrimo's housing parks, 1966¹³



Fig. 7. 'Some people live close to their work, and you?' Advertisement of Amelinckx NV, early 1970s.¹⁴

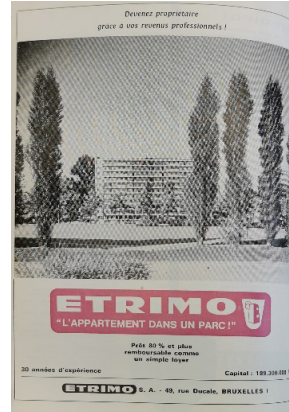


Fig. 8. The Apartment in a Park! Advertisement of Etrimo, 1966.¹⁵

- As a son of a family which had a business in building materials, Amelinckx core business was focused on building. He invested as much as possible in keeping the construction activities within the company (or companies cluster), erecting subsidiary companies specialized in kitchen building, Aluminium windows and doors (Alumico) or elevators (Gelicom).

By 1970, the firm employed 2200 employees of which 200 white-collar employees, 1500 in-house construction workers, and 500 subcontractors. A large part of the subcontractors were consulting agencies, such as stability engineers, while the construction itself was done by blue-collar employees of Amelinckx NV. The firm made profit by buying most construction materials in large amounts, decreasing the material cost,¹⁸ and a continuous optimization of its construction sites, reducing the 'temps mort' of his employees and streamlining the production of one apartment to 125 working days (thus lowering the labour costs).

SECTION OF THE COMMODIFICATION CHAIN

- Etrimo's searched for ways to influence the front end of the commodified housing process, leaving the actual construction of the housing parks to subcontractors. The most innovating of Collin's strategies is his ideal of 'making every Belgian a homeowner' by facilitating capital access for the lower middle class so every potential buyer could obtain a mortgage up to 100% of the total sum of the apartment. Etrimo unburdened his clients of subsidy applications as well. The main employees of the firm were thus white-collar, such as managers, engineers, architects, and administrative and sales employees.

- In comparison, the operations of Amelinckx resulted in a broader variety of housing products, from a basic to a luxurious finishing, from inner city to metropolitan slabs, although all of them with a premium access by car or public transport. Certainly as time passes, the diversification of Amelinckx' operations expands, including a marketization of more and more services such as management,

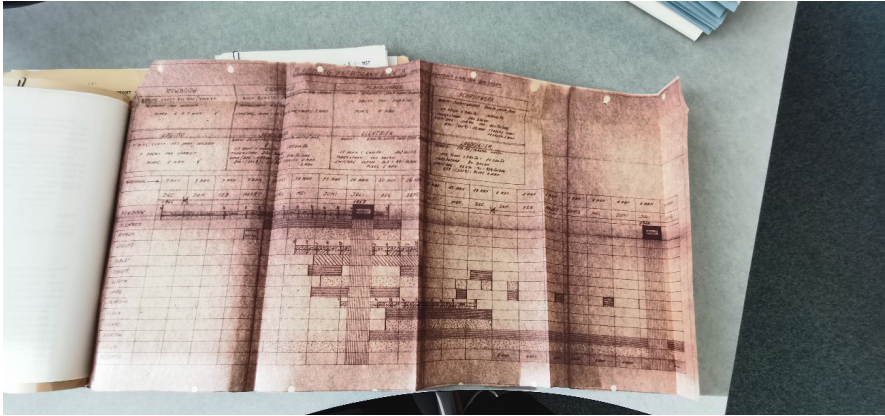


Fig. 9. Planning of the construction teams in one project, Antwerp, 1967.¹⁷

NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT

- Owner of Etrimo, Jean-Florian Collin was a co-opted senator, mayor of Faulx-les-Tombes in the province of Namur, and (co-)founder of both the national as European professional organization of private housing developers. He actively spoke out in public (such as his famous speech in the Parliament in 1969) against the legal exclusion of private developers to construct social housing, and for the need for a more inclusive housing policy for the lower middle class.

By contrast, his operations evolved more and more towards conceiving housing parks as isolated 'islands' with little to no connection nor negotiation with the local government administrations. This can be considered a reflection of Collin's frustration with the local and national governments in aligning with his ideological framework of high rise apartments in the metropolis, an ongoing argument in the previous decades.

- The operations of François Amelinckx, and his successor Renaat Blijweert, were more intertwined with an active and personal dialogue with heads of trade unions, majors, ministers of public works. They corresponded explicitly on creating the conditions needed for constructing cheap apartments for the lower middle class, such as tax shifts, juridical suggestions, or interesting places for future mass housing development.

THE END OF THE 'GLORIOUS THIRTY'

The heavy financial crisis of the early 1970s demonstrated the limits of the *laisser-faire* capitalism¹⁹ of the decades before and launched a period of disruption, uncertainty and catastrophe in major parts of the world, ultimately leading to the end of the 'short 20th century'.²⁰ Within these shifts in economic regimes and institutional constellations, the cracks in the pillars of the Welfare state became visible, especially seen in the government's failure to provide hous-

ing for the lower (middle) classes. Additionally, 'right to the city' movements emerged over the globe, with local actions against the demolition of inner cities as part of modernization, slum clearance policies and functionalist planning.²¹

In Belgium, this period of 'hesitation and challenge'²² brought about the end of the mass availability of private capital and a specific home-ownership regime. From the late 1960s onwards, the construction activity decreased by a combination of an increase in construction costs, wages, and interest rates on loans.²³ In 1970, this led to the abrupt bankruptcy of Etrimo. The firm had been specialising in developing apartments in a green surrounding, which required large programs, a long return-on-investment cycle, and a heavy capital investment in large plots of land in the secondary belt of Brussels.²⁴ As the demand for apartments lessened from 1967 onwards, Etrimo tried to slow down its production, but 'the train was too difficult to stop'.

When the main financial institution denied to offer Etrimo a credit line for liquid assets, it meant the end for the firm. The government also refused to purchase the land reserves of Etrimo, afraid to set precedence for the other construction companies by intervening in the private sector. However, they did renege this stance with other development firms several years later, one of them Amelinckx. The Belgian Minister of Housing explicitly identified other difficulties leading to Etrimo's bankruptcy at the time, such as the collusion between finance and politics (Collin was an out-spoken senator) and the 'Frenching' of the Flemish-speaking municipalities bordering the capital.²⁵

We can relate this explicitly with Wallerstein's analysis of the importance of bankruptcies in selecting the dominant model of capitalism.²⁶ On the one hand, Etrimo and Amelinckx helped determine both the 'development model' and the 'rules of the game', and at the same time, they got stuck in them – Etrimo with no fall-back option, while Amelinckx' much more diversified business strategy and shorter return-on-investment cycle offered him the ability to pause parts of his activities and focus on specific spinoffs on the edge of the former activity, moving towards a further commodification of services.

The firm moved towards a further commodification of services, erecting various subsidiary companies in management, maintenance, repair services, insurance and loan services, and even investment companies that rented out apartments after buying them from the mother firm at a price well under the market price.

The declining desirability of the apartment typology in favour of suburban single-family housing combined with a building crisis in 1983, meant the end of the production of apartment buildings for Amelinckx. Its 'bankruptcy' in 1985 was however a well-expected result of Amelinckx' overproduction of apartments in relation to the demand, and its evolving strategies towards offering a further marketisation of services. Most subsidiary companies remained active after 1985, often under the direction of former directors and employees of Amelinckx.

n.v. GERIM s.a.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● BRUSSEL 1020 Avenue Jean Dubrucq, 82 ● ANTWERPEN 2000 Dambruggestraat, 306 ● LUIK 4000 Rue Forgeur, 24 ● GENT 9000 Frère Orbanlaan, 1 	<p>02/28.60.58 - 59</p> <p>03/31.75.11 - 12</p> <p>04/32.26.20</p> <p>09/23.30.75</p>
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GEMEENSCHAPPELIJK BEHEER

Stel U voor...
100, 200 personen, 100, 200 families die tot nu toe van elkaars bestaan niet afweten, zullen in het zelfde gebouw leven, gebruik maken van dezelfde commoditeiten (liften, verwarming, warm water, groene zones) en genieten van dezelfde diensten (huisbewaarster, onderhoud).

Stel U eens voor...
dat elke bewoner individueel hiervoor het nodige zou moeten doen.

De N.V. GERIM heeft de taak op zich genomen al deze taken en behoeften te coördineren en het wonen in gemeenschap wonen te organiseren.

PRIVATIEF BEHEER

Dit zal speciaal de investeerder interesseren !
Indien U te zelfdertijd te Antwerpen Luik, Gent, Brussel, Hasselt, Nijvel, enz. wilt investeren en toch geen tijd verliezen door het zoeken van huurders en het toezicht houden op uw eigendom, is dit mogelijk dank zij de nieuwe dienst van GERIM die zich steeds uitbreidt (200 % in 1973) :
« Het privaatief beheer ».

GROEPERING VAN DE BEHOEFTEEN = GROOT-HANDELSPRIJZEN VOOR DE GEMEENSCHAPPEN

EEN NIEUWE ORGANISATIE OPERATIONEEL IN 1974

GEMEENSCHAPPELIJK BEHEER of PRIVE BEHEER.
Hierop geeft één van de vier GERIM-burelen een antwoord.

PRIVATIEF BEHEER Indien U wilt investeren en uw geld wilt laten renderen zonder HOOFDBREKERS.

EEN DOELTREFFENDE WACHTDIENST STAAT GANS HET WEEK-END TEN DIENSTE VAN AL DE GEMEENSCHAPPEN.

N° 02/28.60.58 voor het franstalig landsgedeelte.
N° 03/31.75.12 voor de 'nederlandstalig landsgedeelte.

Fig. 10. 'Communal maintenance', advertisement for Gerim, 1973.²⁷



Fig. 11. 'Evolution in the Building Style', advertisement of Amelinckx, 1980.²⁸

CONCLUSION

The production of Etrimo and Amelinckx set the benchmark for the mainstream project development in the 20th-century Belgium metropolis. I analysed a specific phase in the commodification processes, using it as a lens to reconstruct the specific meaning and embeddedness of these developers' commercial production. The production perspective attributes to a much-needed understanding of the evolution of twentieth-century commodified housing and processes of metropolization, as well as the agency of project developers in both.

This research is particularly pertinent for the Belgian context, which is known for a strongly developed owner-occupied housing market and a progressive denial of structural roles to large scale property developers throughout the twentieth century. As the Belgian society indirectly circumvented the creation of a more emancipated development scene ready to tackle the urban agenda, a reconfiguration of the collaborations between state and developers is crucial, especially now, when this production is rapidly 'becoming history' and we are facing the challenges of redeveloping the metropolitan area and this production.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ENDNOTES

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