

# Street-smart, or how age-old problems require new solutions

Following an impromptu meeting in a Brussels-bound taxi with a young architect trying to actively include the plight of homeless people into his thinking, Evelyn Simons looks into three utopic but nonetheless promising ideas – from a disused building in Ghent to a temporary roof in Brussels – that straddle fashion, design, art and architecture and wonders if they can rise above mere stage to provide real, workable solutions for the men and women on the street.

Writer EVELYN SIMONS



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#### CLEO DE LAET, ANTWERP/GHENT

Cleo De Laet's graduation project at the University of Ghent last year freely interpreted the notions of architecture, and counts as her first crossover to the world of fashion. Indeed, Cleo designed a multi-functional backpack and coat for homeless people that could be transformed into tents, sleeping mats or sleeping bags, thus bridging the gap between two of her passions – architecture and fashion. The project intertwines the creation of so-called 'research objects' and conversations with homeless people, which she met through street workers in Antwerp and Ghent. "I didn't want to address psychological issues with these people, that is not my domain," she says. Rather, Cleo used her preliminary designed objects as triggers to discuss practical issues that accompany life in the streets such as theft, violence, waterproof fabrics, storage space and the likes. The objects evolved over the course of the research, proof of the complexities that were revealed with each exchange of ideas. In an attempt to create some order in the chaos, she discerned four types of

locations where homeless people reside: outdoor in nature, outdoor in the city, indoor in public space (train stations etc.) and indoor in private spaces (squats and construction sites). Her designs were based on these typologies, and evolved from house-like carts (too big and bulky) to clothing. Indeed, many of her talks revealed that people with differing needs can't possibly all benefit from the same designs, with every person having his or her own habits when temporarily claiming private space in the public realm. And even though not every homeless person wants to be helped, she definitely thinks we're not heading in the right direction with our level of acceptance and 'tolerance' towards homeless people in our cities. Cleo was for instance shocked when noticing policemen harassing some of the people she was chatting with during her research in Antwerp, literally "bullying and arresting them because they were drinking a can of beer and had three more in their backpack. I never had to open up my back pack!" She stresses the need for structural but local aid in the form of institutions where people get supported physically (housing) and psychologically: "I'm talking new types of shelters conceived by collaborations between psychiatrists, doctors, street workers, the state, anthropologists and architects." Her backpack was put on hold when a project developer in Hong Kong wanted to commercialise her designs for the 'modern urban nomad' somewhat leading to Cleo's realisation that she intended to deploy design and fashion as a platform to trigger discussion and raise awareness on human rights, rather than creating unnecessary luxury goods that only saturate our consumerist attitudes.



#### CHÉPAS, BRUSSELS

Brussels duo Chépas consists of visual artist Lola Daels and architect Sebastiaan Willemen, who place thought-provoking interventions throughout the city landscape. Other than sharing love and life, they jointly seemed to be frustrated or inspired, depending when you ask them, by similar peculiarities life in Brussels has to offer. Mattresses spread out in the streets, weird constellations of domestic objects to reserve parking spots or public spaces that seem to cause nothing but trouble. “Dysfunctional cities are actually very inspiring for us,” laughs Sebastiaan. They basically see the city as a backdrop or playground for quirky and multi-layered artistic interventions, that raise awareness for urban challenges that need to be revised. Their utopia is a re-appropriation of public space for a multitude of users, not just for cars and consumers. “Through our work, we also aim to be as inclusive as possible on the challenges of our city. For us it’s important that people don’t feel left out, so we tend to shy away from the pompous vocabulary that you get in the traditional art circuit,” states Lola. For the same reason, the installation process is of great importance for their projects. Even though the surprise-effect is quite crucial because of the illegal nature of their guerrilla-actions, at the same time they trigger curiosity with people passing by. “We get direct feedback, and talk about the topics we address with people from the neighbourhood. These topics range from the imbalance between cars and pedestrian zones in the city, undervalued potential of for instance the canal zone in Brussels, and now currently homelessness.” Contrary to other European cities like Amsterdam, where homeless people are driven out of the city centre, Brussels is characterised by their presence. Though rather than acknowledging their existence, the city takes on a more ‘indifferent’ attitude according

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to Chépas. Yes there are street workers and there is food supply, but everyone knows the problems when winter comes and shelters don’t have the bed space. In steps Bed Bench, a hinged roof attached to city benches that provide people spending the night outside with an actual ‘roof over their heads’. The project is ironic, naturally, since the duo doesn’t really intend this to be a long-term, viable solution, but it serves more as a conversation piece and at the same time helps to raise awareness for the cause. The initial idea was to attach sleeping bags to benches, but they quickly realised they would get soggy, dirty and eventually only pollute. So using Sebastiaan’s technical background, acquired through his architectural engineering education, they’re now exploring more sturdy and sustainable materials that fit within the budget at hand so they can start installing soon. Chépas isn’t street art, but it shares the same democratic and critical values – to do something for your city instead of for your own artistic advancement. Lola and Sebastiaan are currently undertaking these projects on their own terms, meaning they also don’t have to justify their acts professionally. However, “in the long run we’re hoping to work more structurally with partners, so we would have the possibility to create more durable interventions and long-lasting impact.”

∞ [loladaels.com/chepas](http://loladaels.com/chepas)





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VICTOR LEDURE, GHENT

Freshly graduated architect Victor Ledure used an abandoned cotton mill in Ghent as a case study to reflect on the diversity and make-up of communities occupying public space and the way they managed to co-exist. He initially was intrigued by the architectural qualities and heritage values of the site, but quickly came to discover its unofficial inhabitants, shaping his graduation project into a more anthropology-orientated research. "I was mostly on site playing around with the kids, and trying to observe the habits of the homeless," he recalls. The site was bought by the city of Ghent, but the current state of abandonment is just a temporary phase before the building gets cleaned up. Victor is convinced of the necessary presence of sites like this in the city though, where multiple types of users (families, children, dealers, the homeless) establish a self-controlling ecosystem that allows for diverse needs (strolling, playing, working, sleeping) to co-exist. In his project, Victor suggested a series of subtle hypothetical interventions on the site that would encourage multiple and diverse uses. There is one room with an old abandoned couch for instance, which he noticed being claimed by kids to plan conspiracies, by dealers to do their business or by homeless people to take a nap. His idea to install a door that can only be locked from the inside reflects on the possibility to fully

privatise the space for a segment of time, but not to actually own it. When you leave, you can't lock the door for other users. This actually mirrors the reality of homeless people privatising public space – they install a bed – but only up until the moment they get chased away again. Here, they have the keys to the door, until they leave that is. Another intervention involved putting up a gutter to ensure a permanent flow of water in the cellar (reminiscent of Istanbul's cisterns), and extending the roof to maximise the mesmerising effect of water reflection. Whilst this addition doesn't necessarily bring any functional comfort to the building's temporary residents, it definitely serves to "reinforce the unexpected beauty already present on site," says Victor. And this is not to be overlooked, as quality of life also often means unexpected bouts of beauty. Underpinning Victor's research though was the notion of public space and the freedom for homeless communities to operate within them. On this subject, Belgian architectural philosopher Wim Cuyvers expressed the need for 'transgressed public space' that'd allow fringe communities to momentarily step outside the set of norms and values that define individual and collective everyday life and allowed them some much-needed respite, something Victor would definitely like to see more of too.

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