Reading the City, Appreciating the Neighbourhood:
the case of Linkeroever, Antwerp

1. Reading as a way of research (Introduction)

If one thinks about the complexity of cities, often abstract concepts are used. But true complexity lies not in theories or concepts but in the daily lives and practices of inhabitants. The perspective in this paper focuses on these people, especially the ones living and working in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. How do they deal with the complexity of their environment and how do they reproduce it? What can we learn from the many ways people deal with a poor physical environment? Does it help us in understanding the specific relation between the built form and the urban live? Can we use this understanding in our urban planning and local policies?

In this paper I report about a two folded process on the Left Bank (the so called Linkeroever district) of Antwerp: (1) investigating the morphological and socio-spatial patterns in this district and (2) using this knowledge during a training of 15 professionals. The two lines interacted consciously as the research line gives information to the training line and vice verse. The majority of the trainees being fieldworkers, the training-sessions produced themselves new givens for the research. The project aims sustain the trainees in a better 'reading' of their urban environment and, in relation to that, of their position in the reality they work in. One could also mention a third line although less explicit and not a formal instruction within the Antwerp project: the improvement of the ongoing planning and development in the district itself (see also concluding chapter).

This paper suggests that the conjunction of research and training is a strong tool for a better urban policy. As participants proceeded in a closer reading of their professional environment and routines, new aspects of the local, complex reality were revealed. They learn simultaneously about themselves and the city. This two folded layout can be important for the broader context of urban planning, especially when one aims a more sustainable process of building[1]. Too often urban interventions are totally disconnected with the existing environment. Unfortunately it is no exception that a new public building or plaza remains a *Fremdkörper* in its surrounding, rarely used by people living there. This problem is not limited to pure physical interventions. Especially in deprived or disadvantaged neighbourhoods, municipalities and other organisations set up a lot of (social) programs and interventions. Social and community workers employed by municipalities, housing associations or other non-profit groups often work very hard and try their best for years and years. However, in many cases, these people get disappointed and sometimes even disillusioned. Their hard working does not lead to the expected improvement of the neighbourhood and the living conditions of its residents. A major reason for this failure is the fact that programmes are strongly problem-oriented and badly connected to the domain of the everyday life of people living there.

In this paper I illustrate some key aspects of the ongoing research and training project of Urban Research Studio (URS - Studio Stadsonderzoek)[2] in the Left Bank district of Antwerp, Belgium. The project, commissioned by the City of Antwerp and funded by federal and European money, aims to develop a more "connected" urban planning and social policy by both investigating the neighbourhood and training the people working there. The approach of the Studio is focused on the themes mentioned above: how can we read the place and history specific structure of daily live; how can we use this reading in a better understanding of the local culture; how can local actors (professionals, citizens and other stakeholders) participate in this unfolding knowledge? The Studio deals with these issues using ay a multidisciplinary approach: exploring the physical and social territory; describing the physical

objects and patterns (morphology); depicting the main events and stages during the morphological history of the district; collecting interviews in pubs and streets; visiting people (citizens and professionals) at their homes or elsewhere in the city; looking at patterns in the daily use of the environment and the appropriation of streets and squares. Even during this preliminary fieldwork, the more factual givens and 'essentials' are instantly confronted with semantic material and doing so, new and deeper questions can be asked.

A good example of this, is the fact that almost all residents in the central part of Linkeroever a good deal of their lives elsewhere in the city or the region. But if one is asked to describe his daily live, he or she starts talking about the houses and lanes at Linkeroever, often complaining about the lack of merely any shop or infrastructure. This can last for half an hour until he starts talking about the places and milieus outside the hood.

From this moment on, it is as if we listened to another person, living in another planet. As if the words get a bit closer to "the daily live neighbourhood". This "daily live neighbourhood" seems quite different from the one people have words for. This feature becomes only manifest when we deconstruct the words of the interviews with other, less semantic data, for instance daily routines, the routes and trajectories people use, the spatial strategies they are familiar with.

My perspective in this paper is one of an involved practioner. Since December 2006, I participate in the URS network of researchers[3] that works for the city of Antwerp. The commission of the City includes three neighbourhoods: Kievit - Zurenborg, Deurne Noord and Linkeroever. In this paper I limit my attention to the latter. URS developed its approach for 15 years in projects with residents, social workers and professionals of local administrations. Although the preliminary research in Antwerp questions inhabitants, schools, citizens, companies and other stakeholders, the participants of the training-sessions are only professionals form the city administration as this was stated in the commission. We will focus on this aspect in our concluding chapter.

Figure 1: The City of Antwerp with on the left bank the neighbourhood Linkeroever

At the moment I write this paper, the project passed in its second phase of 'reading' and analysing the hood together with the workers / trainees. This paper reports on this ongoing process by explaining the methodology (chapter two) and the way it is applied in Linkeroever (chapter 3). Finally we draw some first conclusions about the conditions for such an approach and the possible merits for urban renewal in general.

2. Method Studio Stadsonderzoek: reading the complex city

In this chapter I describe its main philosophy, introduce the three phases of the approach as they are applied in practice.

2.1 The patterns within tacit routines

In the discussion about 'disadvantaged' neighbourhoods, districts like Linkeroever are often mentioned in association with problems of poverty, crime, racism etc. This negative approach, often fuelled by the mass media, can become a problem of its own. It limits our ability to read these parts of the city without prejudices. I first analyse some of the mechanic of this negative labelling, then I take a look to a more "connected" analysis and reading.

People in Antwerp consider life in (the central part of) Linkeroever as extremely dangerous[4]. Though crime rates are not significant higher than elsewhere, people assume that the spot is very dangerous. More than ten years ago a child was hit by a pot of jam thrown from the tenth floor of a skyscraper. In reality the child was injured, in the outside story it died… The accident became an urban myth and persists until today. The building from which the object was thrown, got its nickname: the "Chicago Building". Since then the Chicago Block is a "pars pro toto" for the worst properties of the area… The whole spot gets a separate name: the blocks of Europark – or simply "the Blocks". In the talk of the town and especially in the more populist media, the Blocks are solely negative and local politicians claim they should be destroyed (they didn't say a word on what had to be built instead or how it had to be financed).

There are some good reasons for this exaggerated negative labelling. For centuries Linkeroever was the nearest frontier, one of the most vulnerable boundaries of the city and during times of war and crises the bottleneck for people coming in and out (both soldiers and refugees). Until the 19th century, the territory belonged to another province and in the medieval era, the spot was reigned by the counts of Flanders – a totally different sphere of influence than the reigns Antwerp belonged to. So in the hearts and the minds of Antwerp citizens, Linkeroever is still a bit abroad (see also 3.1). What do these urban myths and historical facts tell us? Possibly three things. One: in the collective memory of the city, there is no need to urbanise Linkeroever. It does not really belong to the town, it's only a spot where you go and walk: *"One goes to the Left Bank only to make pictures from the Right Bank".* Two: because the district is not urban, there is no need for urban infrastructure. Almost all the cultural, educational and commercial supplies that architects and planners designed for these area, never were built...! Three: instead of urbanising Linkeroever, it's better to use it as a kind of buffer and shed: a place where things and people end up, just because there was no place elsewhere!

Closely related to the third feature is the observation that for the last three decades almost every major investment has been a social or a welfare one. Since Europark was built in the early seventies there was not any physical, economic or other substantial initiative. On the contrary: the underground parking lots were abandoned, schools went in ruins, the repair work in the apartments of the major housing corporation were done with a minimum of efforts and costs so in fact they deteriorated. Even the fieldworkers of the city administration worked for years in humid and stinking offices, full of mould. For the last four years, a major part of the public efforts and campaigns were focused on ... a better management of the dirt and rubbish in the streets. The problem seems to be so harsh that approximately one out of five fieldworkers and other civil servants is dealing with it... One could at least question this situation – be it only for the sake of effectiveness.

On a more general level, we see that the problems politicians and professionals deal with, are not the most important things for the local people to deal with. Citizens deal with other realities. They know what really matters, but in discourse precisely this knowledge slips away – both for them and for us (researchers, trainees, planners). People might be very conscious of their ability to cope with their problems but this knowledge seems to be pre-semantic or at least it belongs to a linguistic register that differs from the formal one. So we'd better approach their reality by looking to their routines, their tactics and daily strategies. In the framework of our research, we refer to this as the "second city": the very tangible and often obstinate city of behaviour linked to a given environment; the very specific ways of doing things (routes to school, elaborated trajectories and pauses, the evening routine before bedtime, …); the places where no one goes without even knowing why; the way people do specific things on specific spots, almost in a vegetative way… This second city maintains a big part of the first (and formal known) city and provides a part of the practical meaning of built environments, indicating what people can do given a specific place.

At this point we come to a core issue in the approach of the Studio. We hypothesise that people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are closer to this "second city" than average citizens. Their urban routines have to deal more intensely with the obstinate and difficult patterns of the built form. Their cultural capital and social equipage is mostly smaller so the claims of the outside world are often harsher and less mediated. We propose now to honour (and thereby influence) this vulnerable position by honouring the knowledge of those people. Citizens who live here, have to tell us more and more specific things than average citizens. They know more about the meaning of built environments simply because they have to deal with it in a more intense way. But how can we hear them? How can we have access to this knowledge?

In fact, we do know very little about these families and citizens[5]. How do they organise themselves (economically, socially, culturally)? How do they 'read' their reality? How do they manage the threats and complexity of every day live? One of the major problems is – again – that this knowledge can not be recognised by the semantic and cognitive register; it's a lot closer to the body and its pre-semantic wisdom. It tells people how and where to find informal jobs or cheap clothing; how to mobilize help and support in family affairs. At the same time we observe that a lot of these families (especially in Linkeroever) do not trust the formal social services, in other cases they feel too proud to address them. But even these considerations are only tangible when we look at what these families *do* rather than what *they tel us*. So yes, we'll have to listen carefully, but it will be a routine-oriented listening. Urban research and planning could investigate these routines not only as a starting point but as the core activity in understanding places and identities.

We can summarize. Many approaches to urban renewal are problem- or solution-oriented. The Studio designed a method that follows the other way around. We start with a very factual analysis, exploring the basic things in the hood: not the known typologies but the physical objects themselves: halls, entrances, houses, squares, shops, playgrounds and other public spots[6]. What kind of objects do we find and - of equal importance - what don't we find? Secondly the Studio looks at the daily behaviour of people using the hood; not only residents but also people apparently using the place. Who comes there and who doesn't? What are people doing here and how, when and with whom? These very ethnographic annotations are not only of scientific relevance, they are already a cultural element in a longer process, *honouring* the place and its inhabitants. The questions we answer try to "appreciate" what people do and how they do it. In fact, how is life at Linkeroever? Why do the Christians of the adjacent neighbourhood visit mass in Linkeroever on Sunday but why don't they drink coffee afterwards (in stead they leave, take their cars and go back to drink coffee in their own community hall, 400 meters further)? Why do visitors from outside know only the borders of the hood (and it's the magnificent panorama) but never come in? Why do people dump their

rubbish illegally and why this problem is so persistent? Why is there no grocery store at Europark, not even a bakery?

In the URS team, we prefer to rephrase all these questions by "how"-questions. How does it come that there is no bakery? This means literally "what are the good reasons that people buy elsewhere?". To discover the quality of the patterns in every day live, one has first to describe these patterns (and features) as qualities. How, instead of why. It is quite radical because we ask our trainees to do the same. Can they look to the area in a way that does not solve things but instead reveals them. Our main instruction during the sessions is to rephrase the why's in how's, knowing that the "second city" is another reality that works simultaneously. In doing so, trainees become more sensitive and they pay more attention to the tacit skills and strategies of citizens. And probably more attention to the ones they are familiar with. The idea is again that these tacit skills reveal in their turn patterns, forms and meaning that is more connected with the already existing city and the logic of its history.

2.2 From analysing the neighbourhood to a more neighbourhood connected analysis
At Linkeroever the process is divided in three phases: first the analysis of the neighbourhood and four focusgroup-sessions, secondly two or three training-sessions and finally a phase of implementation in the so called platform-sessions. During these phases, the research-line goes one and the Studio continues interviewing and performing other fieldwork.

Analysing the hood (the preliminary research and the four focusgroup-sessions)
In this phase the Studio collects data on the history and morphology of the neighbourhood and other givens (see chapter 1). This is complemented by a series of interviews with residents and relevant people in the area: teachers, pastors, community workers, the mailman etc. In the group-sessions the Studio depicts its first understanding of the hood in a way new insights may occur. The moderator confronts the participants in a very early stage with their own narratives, viewpoints and hidden assumptions. The approach is rather Socratic and teases the participants: what do they mean by 'apart', who is 'they', what means 'close' or 'together'. Again and again the moderator asks for examples and more specific rephrasing from problems (why's) into observations (how's). How does it come that people act like they do? What good reasons might they have for this or that behaviour? What does this tell us about specific routines and places – here in the hood and elsewhere? Little by little, the formal and mostly problematic narrative gives way to the manifold examples, anecdotes and events of the second city. Yet there is no new narrative or coherence but at least the old ones are tumbling down.

The word for word reports from each session is used as the raw material for the next one. In between, the quotations in the report are complemented with new questions and remarks. The focusgroup examines both the relations within the neighbourhood and between the neighbourhood and the rest of the city. What place and position has the hood in the city? What place has the city in the hood? Has the city a kind of presence in the hood or is it only something (somebody) far away? As the majority of the trainees live elsewhere, they can use their own urban experience in considering the hood-city relations.

Understanding negative features as qualities (the trainings sessions)
At the end of the focusgroup sessions, the group defines some basic qualities of the neighbourhood. The multitude of examples has been rephrased to some emblematic sentences. These sentences are no metaphors but small descriptions of the mechanisms that apparently steer the second city. They have no academic appearance or ambition, on the contrary: they could be heard in pubs or during a street conversation. For instance: *"All good things here last for some years and then they disappear".* Or another one that probably covers a wider range of reality: *"they have their dreams, make their plans, talk for years and years and finally nothing is done".* Or a third one: *"They tried to set people apart in these very blocks and they have been very successful."*

We label these sentences as basic qualities even when they are formulated in a negative way. As far as they cover a wide range of social, economic and political routines (both actual and historical ones), they reveal the beginning of a deeper coherence or an essential aspect of the relation between city and neighbourhood. It is more valuable to recognise and acknowledge these relations than going on denying them. So it's crucial to acknowledge and become sensitive for what the quality could reveal rather than to argue it.

Making the basic qualities more relevant, is a task for the training sessions. During the sessions we load the qualities again with examples, but this time the examples derive from the professional field itself. If Linkeroever is the place where Antwerp puts its problem-children apart, what does this mean for local schools and their administrators? What does it mean for schools elsewhere in the city? Is there also a "setting apart" concerning football clubs and other sports in the hood? A part of this research is done by the participants themselves, simply by interviewing relevant persons in schools, sport clubs etcetera. So the trainees become researchers, documenting and questioning the presumed qualities. 'En passant' they get a broader awareness of their own work-routines and assumptions. This self-awareness is used explicitly as a tool for better understanding the city and the work people might do.[7] If for instance the apartness of people living in Linkeroever is a basic feature that they start to honour, what then could be their position and mission? Do they still have to reinforce cohesion? Probably not in the way they are used to! And maybe not for the groups they have focussed on for so long!

Acknowledging apartness could also imply that the vast green fields between the blocks, get a minimal program. This program should not guide different groups so that they pass each other smoothly. On the contrary – spatial interventions that confront users (or at least set the conditions to do so) could be of a higher relevance. If we deepen this example a little more, one can observe that the basic feature "to be set apart" has been used as a design tool. This is only possible when the feature is treated like a quality. Acknowledging negative features and transforming them into qualities, describes the same movement as we depicted earlier, talking about honouring the manifold routines and givens of the second city (see 2.1). It is a cultural gesture and quite unusual in our work. Mostly we do not qualify daily routines as the most important material for urban research and planning. We do not want fieldworkers to take a closer look to their hidden agendas and assumptions; back offices are not used to listen to what these processes may reveal. That brings us to the last phase.

<u>Looking for programmatic images and first implementations (the platform sessions).</u>
In the last phase participants pass on their conclusions to colleagues in the same neighbourhood and elsewhere in the city. At the so called platform sessions the results are presented to the municipality of Antwerp, their back offices and other civil services working at Linkeroever (housing associations, schools, etcetera). The platform sessions are initiated by the trainees themselves. They report what they have learned, what they like to continue in their daily work and what could be changed. As this phase has still to come, I will not deepen it further.

3. Learning from Linkeroever

Until now (July 2007) four focus sessions and one training session took place. The platform sessions are to be held in November and December of this year. In this chapter I give a sketch of the neighbourhood, it's structure and some important historical events. I describe the process in the sessions and present some first insights and results.

3.1 The city that never was built (the area and its history)
Linkeroever is situated on the left side of the river Scheldt (Schelde). There never were any bridges, except during the decades when the country was occupied and the Scheldt was

blocked. Even then the bridge was not meant to link but to cut off and to restrain the welfare of the agglomeration. Actually Linkeroever is composed of three residential areas with together 15.000 inhabitants. The southern part originate from the old village St. Anneke. Since centuries this small nucleus had three functions: a place of pilgrimage for people from Flanders, a place of waiting and negotiating at the ferries to Antwerp and – from the 19th century on - a military function in the form of barracks and ramparts. Especially the second function (ferries, hotels and pubs) made that St Anneke specialised itself in passage and temporally stay. This function got a kind of variant during the Bel Epoque when the high society (and later on the lower classes) discovered the more recreational qualities of Linkeroever at the Sint Annekes beach and the surrounding inns and restaurants.

When at the end of the 19th century St Anneke flooded several times, the city started to heightened the area by 8 or 9 meters of sand. This process took more than 70 years... In the early 20th century, major efforts were made to develop the area. The company responsible for this (Imalso) would work for another 70 years[8]. Two international competitions were organised to design a master plan for the left bank of Antwerp – a city where 100.000 people would live... Famous international architects of the modernist movement made plans for the territory (Van de Velde, Le Corbusier) and Linkeroever became one of the icons of early twentieth century urbanism – but only in the plans and the drawings. The urbanisation didn't take off and none of the plans ever was realised. Even when in the early thirties two tunnels were built (one pedestrian and one for cars), people didn't want to live on the left bank, except the ones who moved to some villa's in the northern part and into the catchy new dominions at the main road. After world war II, the future houses at the Left Bank are strongly promoted but again there is almost no candidate. In the fifties and the sixties the small village in the south gets its actual size as does the neighbourhood in the north. These two parts develop mainly in the private sector and without much concern of the Imalso company Schoofs Dirk, 2003). Forty years after its founding, Imalso doesn't have sufficient resources and developers to built up the waste land in between the two already existing neighbourhoods. It's only in the golden sixties when the harbour is booming, that the municipality really starts supporting the development. The Europark plan is born. Fifteen high-rises will be built, in an environment of vast green squares together with schools, Kindergarten and cultural infrastructures (e.g. a big concert hall). But then again something strange happens. During the building proces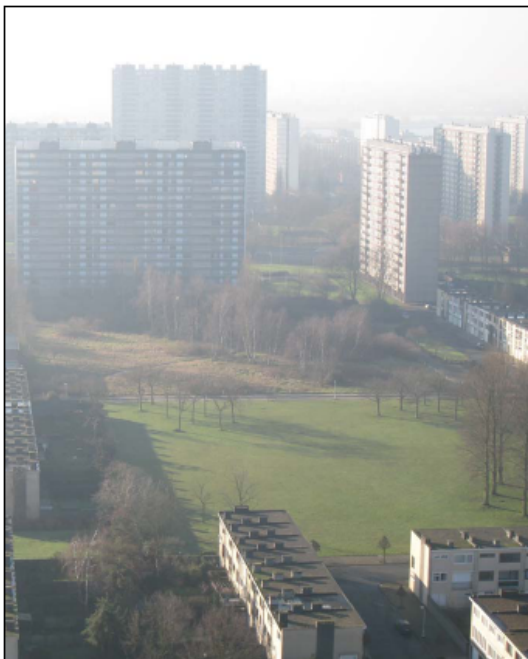s, only the dwellings remain and some of the schools. Al other infrastructure is cancelled and by the time it has to be built, there's no money anymore. Instead of city of 100.000 residents, Antwerp and Imalso fabricated a hybrid district where 15.000 people live (5.000 in Europark, for the majority social housing) and almost no urban supplies. In the seventies, Linkeroever is still famous for its St Anneke beach in the north (as it is still today) and the good restaurants there but the brand new Europark becomes a *Fremdkörper* indeed. No one goes there except the ones who live there and even they move after some years. From the eighties on, immigrant families and refugees are placed in the blocks. The distinction of the three parts gets even stricter, both physically with (the buildings and open spaces) and socio-demographically.

Figure 2: The neighbourhood Europark at Linkeroever

3.2 What the body can read, is liveable (preliminary research an fist session)

We already depicted the structure and the history of the area (3.1). Here, we only want to mention one feature that we could use during the starting session: the position of the neighbourhood at the left bank and the obstinate routines that this position installs. For centuries Linkeroever was not only the 'opposite side' but also a crossing point for people on the road. At the old Sint Anneke nucleus, there were always people from elsewhere: soldiers, pilgrims, refugees from World War I and II. And still today this place has still something to do with passage and temporal stay. Can we look at this feature as it were a quality? During the starting session, we didn't ask this question in words. Instead we designed some bodily exercises giving the trainees the opportunity to experience themselves the way history is written in the environment of squares, streets and architecture.

In one of these exercises people walked with closed eyes through the pedestrian tunnel below the river Scheldt. As a special structure the tunnel makes specific trajectories possible. It connects the two important living domains of inhabitants, the neighbourhood and the city

Figure 3: the entrance of one of the vast underground parkings at Europark

centre. It is in other words an important element in the second city, the daily world of objects and situations'. This world is familiar because people identify and understand it with their body. During 99% of the daily activities people read their environment 'en passant'. Yet this habit stops working if a situation or an environment shifts to something that our 'urban receptor' cannot identify or read any more.

One of the crucial patterns in situations losing their readability is the so called background information physical situations provide [9]. The bells at a hall (foreground) must correspond to people living in the block (background); if for weeks or months no one is responding, the background disappears and the bells lose their practical meaning. At Linkeroever there are a lot of spaces and buildings that are difficult to read, precisely because their background is no longer clear. The photo in figure 3 shows one of the parking garages at Europark. From the outside one cannot read its function or understand its background. Is it an entrance of a tunnel? Of a bunker? How deep is it? Are there other cars inside and ca I go in there? Bad architecture can lead to places that can no longer be used. The built form disconnects form daily live. In relation to the trialogue question of the congress, we have in important conclusion here: while 85 % of the municipal investments are situated in welfare and social improvements, vast dysfunctions on the readability level are not perceived and addressed. When integrated in an overall plan, these dysfunctions could be addressed and even resolved with rather cheap interventions.

3.3 Some basic qualities resulting from the focus groups

The domain of professionals and social infrastructures hardly overlaps with the relevant domains of residents
At a given moment in the process, the quality of 'being set apart' became rather crucial. During the fourth focusgroup, trainees gave the example of the "Labour for Neighbour" project (L4N), a European initiative that tried to get the unemployed back to work on a neighbourhood level. If people could imagine good jobs for their neighbours, maybe those

neighbours would find the motivation and energy to go at work again. A lot of energy was put into the project by different administrations and fieldworkers, but in the end it did not work at all... Even in this project full of goodwill, every instance followed its own logic and agenda and people stayed where they were – everybody in his own world. We used the L4N project get a better understanding of this core quality. The unemployed expected to get a paid job but in fact they were only asked to join an European 'experiment'. The Europeans didn't organise this small detail unless real jobs were organised. The European Union wanted by all means to have the method 'tested' in different European cities. The local workers on their turn had to participate, although they warned for the fact that there was no prospect on paid jobs... So almost everybody got frustrated! The local professional had to execute a project with an overkill on information and administration, no money and still a lot of work to do. After a massive campaign, a dozen of people unemployed people showed up, but when things got unclear, only three remained. The most tangible effect are the dozens of reports people have written during this to year period of testing... Linkeroever is an emblematic place where domains do no longer overlap, at least not in the ways we are used to look at.

Two tangible aspects of this failing overlap are the vast open spaces where the conditions for physical confrontation could be intensified (see 2.2 – a minimal program for the green squares in between the blocks) and secondly the fact that for a majority daily live evolves in the central city or even in other surrounding villages on the Left Bank (Burcht, Zwijdrecht, Beveren). So the basic feature that people in Linkeroever are set apart, leads us in two fields of attention that are rather new and unexpected: intensifying the conditions for interaction in the public domain of Europark itself and honouring the regional networks and social milieus people apparently have. This latter aspect has already been addressed, be it on a project bases and not permanently.

Elsewhere codes here and now
This quality relates to the former one: a place elsewhere in the city can be relevant for urban life in the neighbourhood. The codes from this relevant 'elsewhere' influence the codes of the ongoing practices in the 'here and now'. During the third focus session somebody said that "the Handelsstraat is the main shopping street of Linkeroever". This street is not located at Linkeroever but in the northern part of the 19th century belt in the central city. For many residents of Europark the Handelsstraat is so important that it gets a kind of centrality. It is part of their daily live and in fact part of their neighbourhood...! The things that one expects to happen there, the people he expects to meet there and even the events he hopes to participate in, it all influences his or her behaviour here and now (at Linkeroever). One of the most striking illustrations is that even the Moroccan bakery in the Europark neighbourhood could not survive. The bakery was – to put it a bit straight forward - not central enough.
Social and physical interventions could be more successful if they were based on this kind of knowledge. During a preliminary feed-back session with the heads of the municipal departments, somebody said: "Probably the neighbourhood manager of Linkeroever should also walk around at the Handelsstraat. But no, our policy is, 'Linkeroever is your neighbourhood, you have to stay and work there and care about problems there' (…). Probably we should think a little bit further and send him to the Handelsstraat."

At the other side of the river
Many fieldworkers at Linkeroever feel that "they there on the Right Bank (their back offices at the municipal level) do not care about us". Again we tried to transform this complaint in a how question. How does it come that we feel ourselves treated like orphans; can we make this appreciation more empirical; do we have good reasons to think like that;...? And not at least - what does history tells about it? After a while participants started to see how special the position of Linkeroever was and always had been. Some of the former pre-semantic knowledge became available (see chapter 1). Even if their own discourse told then they wanted to be treated as a more average urban district, the new knowledge told something different. *"Linkeroever is the place on the 'other side' and it always was. This is just a fact,*

one cannot jump across the river". People suddenly realised that the qualities of being situated on the 'other side'. Or in the words of a trainee: *"Here we can do our things as we do – a little bit out of the view".* These kind of observations may appear futile, but they are important steps towards other images and assumptions about the place and its meaning. By integrating them in broader cultural strategies (e.g. during the platform sessions), they might gain some public status.

Giving the informal a place
Linkeroever is specialized in giving a place to the 'informal', but in a specific, almost un-urban way. Linkeroever is the final stop of a lot of regional busses. Bus drivers have their break there. Regularly you see busses parking one beside the other and bus drivers talking with each other (figure 4). A solution oriented approach would label this as a problem and look for a restroom of cafeteria. However, a more connected approach would at least investigate if the actual situation is not richer for both the hood and the drivers.

Sometimes it is better not to organise everything or more precisely: to organise the right degree of informality so that users can both influence the program and the space meant for it. This can be important when it comes to the minimal organisation of the vast green areas in between the blocks and – of equal importance – the reorganisation of the entrances and their direct environment.

Figure 4: bus drivers at Linkeroever, waiting for the next ride

3.4 Towards a core practice for Linkeroever

One of the cultural strategies de Studio often works with, is the suggestion of a core practice. This core practice is a central proposition that integrates different qualities (see 2.2) of the social and physical history and actual reality. Some of the qualities are already near to the core practice, as the former are manifestations of the latter.

The core practice can be considered as the DNA of the neighbourhood, phrased in some very simple propositions. These proposition describe how the universal relations have found here their unique composition: how the inside relates to the outside, the private to the public, the good to the bad; how normality deals with the exceptional, how and where the common things are situated and where the strange ones begin. The unique composition of the universal elements has no alchemistic ambition.   The core practice simply reframes our knowledge of the local into the perspective of the whole city and its anthropological wisdom. Although the core practice doesn´t tell something about reality in the Cartesians way of the word, it does have practical meaning. It explains how the neighbourhood works in depth, by the multitude of place specific practices that emanate out of this DNA. The proposition and the reality it describes can have a big impact on participants in understanding their environment and its difficulties. Although we cannot give yet this unique phrase for Linkeroever, we do have a first idea: "*Here at Linkeroever we've to deal with the big dreams of (people elsewhere in) the city and the region*"

Since two centuries, Linkeroever is the place where Antwerp projected all kinds of dreams and plans not knowing if they ever would be realised. At the same time, in a third of the area, the disinvestment was rather high: the field flooded again and again and when the urbanisation finally started, the central part remain a kind of bush for more than 70 years. Even then, Europark did not became the icon of modernism it potentially could have been. Today, the deterioration of the blocks and the dwellings is vast. But again we look for a quality in these negative observations. How does it come that this part of the agglomeration specialised itself as a playground for modernist drawings, utopian master plans and all kinds of romantic or smooth anarchistic activities (barbequing, illegal camping on the beach, four wheel driving near the lake, ...) and that at the same time a part of the area functions as a kind of black hole: no outsider comes in and the few ones who do come, lose their negative assumptions and even start to appreciate the place.

How to discover a quality in all this? We have to look probably not on the level of the district but on the scale of the city and even broader. Which images and assumptions have to change elsewhere before this ambivalent attitude towards Linkeroever may shift or reveal its meaning? Probably the answer has to be looked at in the ways Antwerp as a urban community deals with the informal, with the unpredictability of everyday life itself, especially in a place where auto-organisation and improvisation is a bit higher than elsewhere. Aren't these major qualities for a city that only 15 years ago trembled in front of a populist political party? Can it become a challenge being both the playground for master plans that never will be built and at the same time being an unique area for unstable and creative urban activities? Hopefully good questions in a process that still goes on. Maybe we just should admit that Imalso (and the politicians in its board) and later the housing corporation have made a mess of it. May the urban community should take responsibility and rearrange the burden of this legacy. It is not the actual housing corporation nor the social workers who can fix this. Linkeroever is not the problem of Linkeroever.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we described a two folded project of training and research. We tried to explain how the approach can help in finding one (or several) place specific core practice(s) that could reposition a neighbourhood in its urban context; we pointed to the necessity of rephrasing problems into givens, "why's" into precise observations of the many ways people deal and manage their urban environment. The in depth study of a neighbourhood in its relation to the urban fabric, reveals features about the entirety of the town. In this sense, the name of the project is "reading the city" – and not the neighbourhood as were it something on its own. By paying attention to these relations and by documenting the so called banal routines and spatial strategies, urban research can shift to a more cultural discipline, one that honours the existing city and its history. The case of Linkeroever illustrates that this cultural shift does not discharge us from renewal, care and investments. Putting the neighbourhood first, means that we get a clearer look to what is crucial, can be continued and what is less important. Chasing the man who throws dirt on the streets is probably urgent in the short run but if this becomes the most visible presence of the local administration, the city as civil authority may lose its very authority or credibility[10].

The project ends in December 2007. We hope however that the trainees and the city administration will go on with this closer reading and with the implementation of what has been unfolded, learned and developed. A challenging question will be how the internal organisation of the local administration will influence this continuation. A slight majority of the trainees was very new in the city administration. Their mission was not yet very stable and their superiors did not always know what precisely should be done by whom. This rather fluid work division appeared to be a problem on the higher levels of the administration where programs have to me made explicit. In the local setting of the neighborhood teams, the fluidness appear often to be an advantage. One would wish that the these local themes get more support in developing local visions and programs. The installation of a network fieldworkers – a process that in Antwerp accelerated during the last five years - is only a first step, consequently these people need to have at least some means and competences to influence the regular policies of the city. We have the impression that this process had started but still is at its beginning.

Let's have a closer look to some of the benefits the method could claim. Which are they and did we reach them in Linkeroever? The first and most tangible benefit is educational: trainees that participate in the three phases, learn probably a lot about themselves. Although the start was rather difficult and the commitment of some trainees shifted, the overall motivation was high. At the beginning participants did not know how the project would work out, what it could mean to their work and if it would be effective: *"If I sign up for a computer training I know what I can expect and what I am going to learn, but in this project, I don`t know (…). But I am very curious and I have the impression that this project will bring us closer to the neighbourhood"* (participant at the end of the first session). A bit of the same is the case for the trainers themselves: we didn't know where the process precisely would end. It is therefore important that both the group and the moderator make some clear arrangements in order to frame the sessions and their ambition. We suggest at least the following ones: (1) There is discretion of what has been said, at least till participants can read and adjust their own words and thoughts in the report of the meeting. (2) It is important to brief the back offices of things that have been discovered in the sessions and in the research itself. (3) Participants do follow the whole phase (even this simple arrangement appeared to be very difficult for some trainees...) and by preference the three phases. (4) All participants are interviewed before, so the moderator knows what their job is, their perspectives and expectations.

The main question is if this two folded approach (research leading to training and resulting in its turn in research again) leads to lasting effects in the quality of urban planning and local

interventions. First of all, the Antwerp project did not aim to change the regular planning nor the social work itself. For this very reason, we do not expect short term effects on the level of tangible urban policy and projects. Secondly, the decisions in the focus and training groups have no formal competence. This was important because this format give the trainees the opportunity to confront themselves with very new perspectives. The transfer of what has been discovered and learned, is not situated in the field of the regular planning and renewal – at least this effect cannot be guaranteed. At the same time, this freedom may work as a handicap and sometimes an alibi not to implement what has been learned !

One can thirdly question if the project improves the connectedness of the daily work in the neighbourhood. Do different organisations and services work better together? Do they listen better? Is the position and the role of the major stakeholders (in Linkeroever the big housing corporation that has to deal with a heavy burden from the past) likely to shift a bit? When we look at other neighbourhoods in Antwerp and in other cities where the Studio did this work, the answer is again ambivalent. In the short run, it seems that very few insights find their way to new practices and professional routines. It could be a good idea to organise follow up meetings so the core insights and intentions can be refreshed every three months. However, if we look over a period of several years, we do see important changes in the way municipalities deal with and speak about these hoods. It takes seemingly four, five years before this kind of insights disseminate themselves and reach a certain critical level so tangible investments and plans are affected.

This brings us to a final remark concerning possible benefits. The two folded approach of the Studio claims no validity in terms of urban design and architecture, unless it would be accompanied by parallel sessions and trainings (and this should really be considered in the future). It its present format, the approach uses urban analysis as a cultural tool – or more precisely: as a shortcut to improve citizenship within planning and social work. Both professionals and inhabitants learn to read the existing city in all its opacity and richness. They get a better understanding of how they deal with the city and each other. Here lies both the relevance and the challenge for the platform sessions: can managers in the several city departments be seduced to look in a different way to their city and their work? Can they be convinced that this shift is both un case of urban planning and cultural policy?

[this version of the article was reviewed by Paul Blondeel]

5. References

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[1] We use here the concept "sustainable" not in a mere ecological way but using the signification designed by the Brundlandt commission (1987): developing policies that equally give way to environmental, social and economic preoccupations. In the framework of urban renewal, this means a better understanding of the existing city, its urban functioning with a special attention to the weakest stakeholders – the very heterogeneous group of residents and citizens using the city or working there.
[2] Studio Stadsonderzoek / Urban Research Studio was founded by Paul Blondeel in 2005. The URS approach was developed since the early nineties through fieldwork and research in the cities of Ghent,

Antwerp and Brussels (Belgium) and in the cities of Rotterdam, Leiden, Dordrecht and Schiedam (The Netherlands). Daniela Wullers works as advisor and planner in urban renewal and housing processes. She has worked together with Studio Stadsonderzoek in two projects.

[3] Paul Blondeel (Studio Stadsonderzoek, Amsterdam, The Netherlands), Daniela Wullers (Bind bv, The Hague, The Netherlands), Lies Heirbaut and Michel Albertijn (Tempera, Antwerp, Belgium).

[4] Europark, the name for the central part of Linkeroever, is hundred percent high-rise. The population is ethnically mixed but with a higher degree of migrants and refugees and other vulnerable groups. Approximately a third of the blocks are populated with solely these groups; a second third is ethnically and socially mixed and last third is ethnically white.

[5] During the focus groups it became clear that a big majority of the participants knew very little of the families they work for. Most of the 15 participants being labelled as frontline workers, only three of four of them considered themselves having sufficient time and access to these families.

[6] The second focusgroup dealt with this issue for three hours, just looking at what a given physical situations allows people to do. For each exercise we used one or two emblematic situations in the neighbourhood. Interested colleagues can ask for this material.

[7] In the second neighborhood (Deurne Noord) we got a strong example of this feature. During the first minutes of the very first meeting, the participating school director asked what the outcome would be of the sessions. But the way he phrased his question, appeared to be very crucial: "I do not know what the outcome is of this event. In my opinion there are here some people from the city administration but further on... I do not know the link between us, nor how I became involved in this. I do not feel at home when it comes to stuff like this. I come working here but further on...". This quotation appeared to contain all the richness of the latter basic features and qualities, there was only someone needed to phrase it, to mention the importance of it and further on to compare it with the rest of the findings and discussions.

[8] Imalso means "Inveseringsmaatschappij voor de Antwerpse Linker Schelde Oever" (holding for the development of the Antwerp Left Bank of the River Scheldt).

[9] The foreground - background metaphor was initially designed in the role theory of Ervin Goffman where it has a more interactional and social meaning, to describe intentions of people during face to face interactions. Here we use the same metaphor to point some basic features in the behavioral relation between person and environment.

[10] A junior researcher recently questioned people living in the "Chicago block" concerning their routines with dirt and rubbish. One of the main results is that many persons perceive the streets as a place where dirt can be put, because of the general deterioration of the adjacent building. Putting rubbish there is illegal and different municipal services take action again and again – but until now seemingly no one is taking this basic perception into account: as long as the surrounding buildings are so deteriorated, residents do consider the street as a dust-bin.