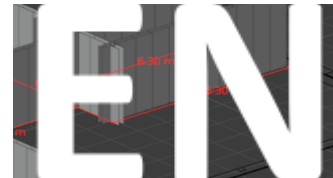


# PLAN ATELIER

## Artists Working Space



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Good afternoon all,

I am Greet Vlegels and work as general director for Morpho.

Morpho is a visual arts organisation in Antwerp that supports artists in the development of their artistic practice. On one hand, this is done by providing workshop management and policy and, on the other hand, by organising residency programmes for local and international artists. In the residency house, we annually host about 20 artists from Belgium and abroad whom we support in their trajectory for 3 to 5 months. As a workshop provider, we manage 14 buildings, from which we rent affordable space to more than 200 artists.

Our workshop and residency work are connected and mutually reinforcing, but today I am focusing mainly on the atelier work and reflecting from my own experience on the different questions we deal with together today.

### WHY WORKPLACES ARE NEEDED FOR ARTISTS

Artists usually live and work from cities, which is where they meet, where there is support and where most production and showcasing facilities exist. Like other urban workshop initiatives, Morpho promotes a dynamic and sustainable context for artistic work by providing affordable workspace, sharing a network and creating development programmes.

The aim is to give artists time and space to work, to fail and to develop. For (visual) artists, having a workspace is often the starting point to develop their artistic practice professionally and build a network. Especially at the start of their careers, visual artists are faced with high production costs combined with one of the most precarious income situations within the artistic sector. It is therefore essential that this workspace be very affordable.

### WHY ARTISTS ARE IMPORTANT TO THE CITY

On the flipside, cities value an artist community. Artists drive a vibrant and diverse arts scene; they create artistic productions in their ateliers, workshops, studios and rehearsal spaces that fill museum galleries, public auditoriums and theatres. As a result, they provide a living supply of art, culture and nightlife, while strengthening other sectors such as youth, economy and tourism.

Artists make a city vibrant and creative and therefore attractive. The city develops and that is when there is a turning point. For artists who were at the root of the revival of a neighbourhood or district, the rent becomes too expensive. If the affordability threatens the artistic practice and autonomy of the individual artist, they will suddenly leave. The result is a sensitive impoverishment of that neighbourhood and its social fabric.

### CHALLENGES IN CREATING ARTISTS' WORKSPACES IN AN URBAN CONTEXT

This is called gentrification, a known dynamic between a city and an artist community. For decades, both parties recognised it as a trade-off where the use of temporary vacancy infill was a win - win solution. Over the last 20 years, however, Belgian cities have become more popular. An increasing number of people are finding the city attractive to live in again. As a result, space, both in terms of availability and affordability, is under increasing pressure. In the pursuit of appropriate space, the housing market is clearly the strongest economic force.

Temporary vacant space infill is no longer as attractive to artists. They are still asked to occupy them, but the terms are getting shorter and there are requirements such as doing community work, organising workshops for children, ...

The aim of vacant property owners, public or private, is not to support artists in their development by providing affordable workspace. That is merely a consequence. The real goal is to bridge the period until the building permit is approved and attract positive attention to the neighbourhood of the future project. Artists are thus instrumentalised to increase the value of the final residential project even before construction has started. Win - win for the developer, but no more for the artists.

This forced and structured form of gentrification is much more drastic and comes at the expense of affordable space for all residents and functions that cannot keep up with the purely economically driven housing market. Without counter policies, certain functions and less wealthy residents will be pushed out of the city at a rapid pace.

Another problem is the follow-up from the administration. Workshop organisations are under the responsibility of an urban cultural policy. Not entirely illogical since we support artists, are intertwined with the arts field, and set up

development programmes from our position. But from the perspective of a culture cabinet, the space issue is difficult to tackle. Ideally, not only a culture cabinet would be involved in our operation, but also the urban development cabinet. Even more ideally, the issue of affordable space should also involve the youth, economy and social affairs cabinets, as youth and social organisations and small creative enterprises also need affordable space, reinforce each other and together shape the social fabric of a city.

In addition, when looking for solutions to the issue of space, we collide with the limits of an urban policy. The regulations and legislation needed to develop frameworks to bring about real change are often at a Flemish or federal level.

## ARE THERE SOLUTIONS?

The real solution therefore needs to be city-wide, cross-policy and long-term. It requires cross-cutting social choices and legal adjustments at different policy levels. Such as no longer marketing the public patrimony, but offering it to workshop organisations, or other initiatives with a social purpose, while imposing longer deadlines and no additional preconditions.

An urban policy should aspire to such a socially valuable use also for privately owned vacant properties. This by deploying smart incentives such as vacancy taxes and collecting these more actively, and imposing minimum terms and maximum prices for vacant property management.

As mentioned earlier, focusing only on vacant space is no longer enough. For workshop organisations such as Morpho, the ambition is to acquire space, thereby removing a minimum supply of affordable atelier space from the housing market for good. Ideally, this space is centrally located in the city and considered by policymakers to be as necessary and valuable as, say, a museum. Acquiring such a space is financially impossible without policy support. This support need not only be financial, but can also be provided by developing frameworks, initiatives and incentives that value a social return. In this way, a negotiating position is created for social players against financially more powerful players.

Sometimes these urban planning instruments already exist and we have to convince policymakers to use them for culture as well.

For example, there is the urban development charge. This instrument allows an urban policy to impose conditions when granting a building permit for larger projects. These conditions then stipulate that the developer must bear the cost of the social needs created by the project. Currently, these sums are used to build new green areas or schools, but this could just as easily be used to meet the social need for affordable space for artists. Especially if it happens in a location where just that group is to disappear at the expense of the new project.

The “bouwmeester” (town architect) of Ghent suggested another urban planning measure that offers opportunities. In Ghent, they counteract the increasing density of inner areas by putting brakes on residential development of rear properties. This will withdraw these houses/buildings from the housing market and make them more affordable. This is a course of action that I think can also apply to other patrimony. Just think of all the churches and monasteries that have become vacant.

Another solution is to support workshop organisations differently from other arts organisations. Morpho receives its operating subsidy annually, and each year it is paid out in four tranches. We would have liked these funds (which we have been getting for 15 years now) to be paid out per policy period. That way, we can really undertake and invest, and in the long run provide our own income. This idea is not far from a rolling fund, a system that has already been worked out in the Arts Decree.

There are also examples abroad and in other sectors that need to be further investigated and can be deployed for the benefit of an artist community: e.g. the Port of Antwerp, which operates as a landlord port, and housing cooperatives in Alpine regions, both showing how the ownership of land can be separated from the use of a building.

In the Port of Antwerp, available land is always granted on the basis of a survey procedure in which you, as a potential concessionaire, have to meet the requested requirements and are selected on the basis of a project application. This is to ensure that the functions remain complementary to each other, but also to have the possibility of putting innovative features ahead of income. This is necessary to remain relevant as a port and therefore more profitable in the long run.

## CONCLUSION

There are plenty of solutions to ensure affordable space in a city for artists. Above all, it is a choice that has to be made. In many cases, choices are not made until it is demonstrated what the consequences are, or if the sense of urgency is clear. Morpho, together with five other studio organisations including Level 5, founded UFO, out of a mutual feeling that it is now or never. Together, and very willingly with even more stakeholders, we want to demonstrate the social and economic value of a thriving artist community for the city and help urban governments convince artists to settle permanently in their cities.

After all, how colourless would it be otherwise? Every city deserves ateliers for artists.

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