

NEWS

PROJECT

ICCARus (Gent knapt op) - Improving housing Conditions for CAptive Residents in Ghent

Ghent, Belgium

TOPIC

Housing

EDIT 25 JUNE 2021

BY MARTHA GIANNAKOPOULOU

Coronavirus-Proof Community Building in Ghent

See on UIA website



How to connect people despite the current Covid-19 pandemic restrictions? Ghent Knapt Op is a pilot project that not only sets up a new financial system for renovating vulnerable citizens' homes but also tests co-implementation and participatory approaches. In addition, it introduces the concept of co-design to participants as part of the renovation process while supporting them technically, financially and emotionally.

This process requires time and skills, but in the end, it facilitates beneficiaries' **empowerment and ownership**, contributing to their sense of 'a new home'. Neighbourhood participation and community engagement have been at the forefront of the project as Gent Knapt Op's project scope is not only to renovate private houses but also to engage and activate a citizen network and create bonds with the community.

The [Ghent Knapt Op](#) initiative is in the midst of its renovation wave of improving housing conditions for almost 85 households. The importance of dignified, safe and secure housing has been starkly highlighted during last year's Covid-19 pandemic, during which most Europeans have been 'home-bound', restricted to their apartments, flats or houses for large parts of the year. The pandemic has triggered reflection on the vital role of housing but also renewed understanding of the social support and assistance needed for vulnerable citizens during this time.

Social Support Objectives of Ghent Knapt Op:

- Emotionally assist project participants through the renovation process
- Refer them and link them to other municipal support and services
- Extend their networks and link them with local groups and businesses
- Link them with decision makers and policy makers
- Improve their self-esteem by connecting them with their neighbourhood and community
- Practice language skills

Bringing people together to eat, drink and do things has been a challenge. There is a great value in connecting people to the neighbourhoods. This time has been a challenge.– Bart Gabriel, Vzw SIVI

Building Community despite Coronavirus

The [Ghent Knapt Op](#) initiative had to deal with many challenges during the pandemic: renovation delays, backlogs in material delivery, difficulties with contract signing and barriers due to social assistance. This consequently created time delays, isolation and fear for many of the project participants during a time that was already stressful in society. Partners such as Bart and Fanny are providing meaningful and creative support to Ghent Knapt Op participants, helping them build a community despite the stress of living through a pandemic. The social support objectives of Ghent Knapt Op have remained a central part of the programming.

The pandemic pushed Ghent Knapt Op to become even more creative and innovative in order to deal with such extraordinary circumstances and find ways to do community building activities in a different way, ultimately achieving trust and providing support to the participants.

A Short Introduction to Samenlevingsopbouw and Vzw SIVI

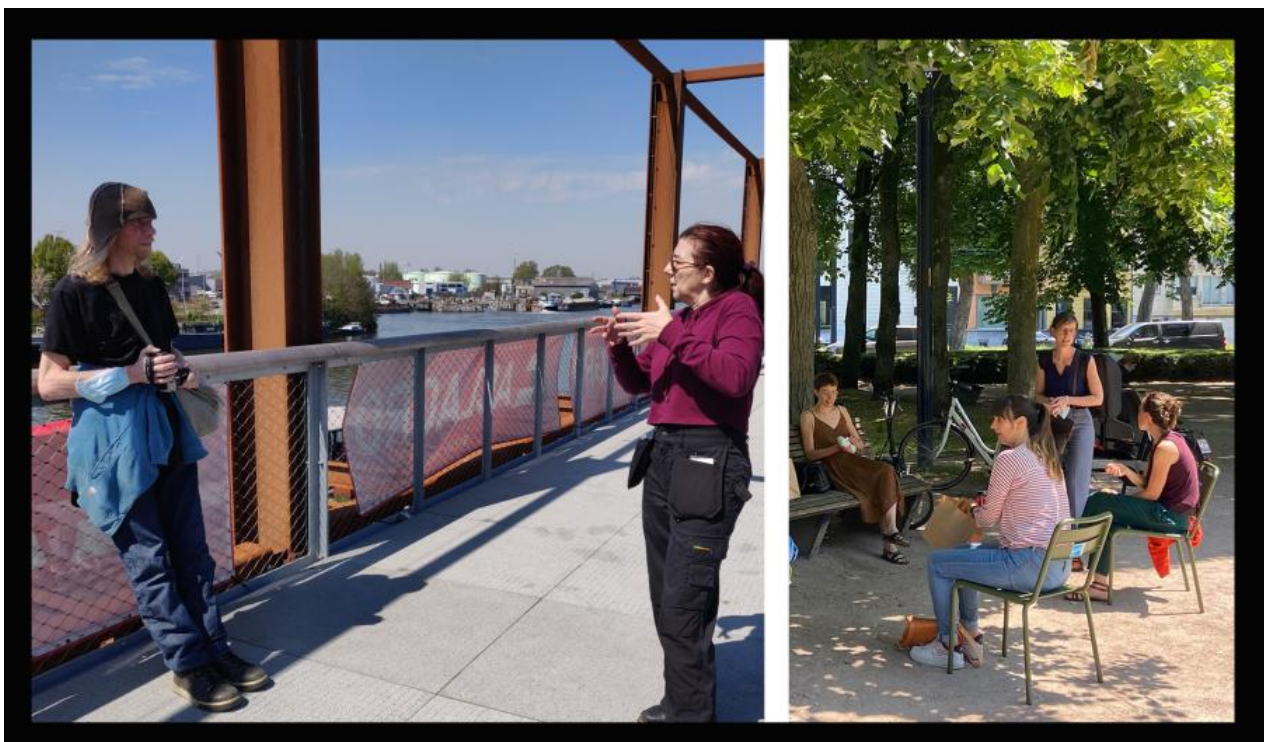
[Samenlevingsopbouw](#) and [Vzw SIVI](#) are the two non-profit partners of the City of Ghent that provide social support and community engagement during the three-year project. Both organizations have been involved from the start in supporting and building trust with potential programme participants until the renovation process is complete and the enrolled participants have renovated their new homes.

The examples below are from Fanny Cloquet from Samenlevingsopbouw and Bart Gabriel from Vzw SIVI, both of whom found ways to connect with and assist project participants during the pandemic. Samenlevingsopbouw and Vzw SIVI have a total of 85 project participants to assist and have split the responsibilities so that each group has about 40 participants to guide through the process.

Samenlevingsopbouw Gent, or 'Community Development Ghent', helps create the conditions for a just, inclusive and sustainable society by supporting communities to engage in collective action for transformative change. Ensuring social rights, Samenlevingsopbouw Gent wants to combat poverty and social exclusion through collective learning, empowerment, meaningful participation, equality and collective action for collective outcomes. The main issues Samenlevingsopbouw Gent is focusing on are housing, social services, work, education, health and community.

Vzw SIVI, a nonprofit organization, combats poverty and social exclusion. It combines individual support and structural poverty reduction by providing tools for people who live in poverty or are at a higher risk of falling into poverty and by working on policy-oriented changes in order to ensure the human rights of every individual in an inclusive society.

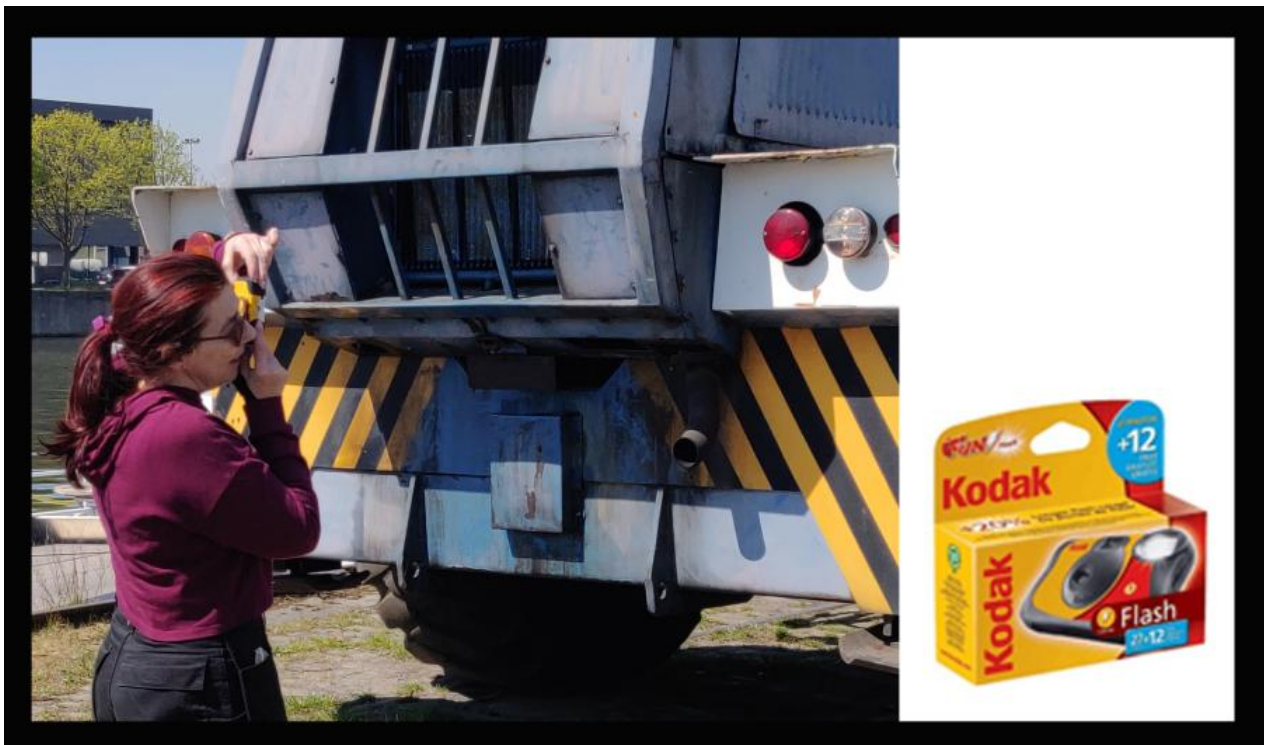
Let's meet the neighbourhood!



During the last 12 months, Bart and Fanny conducted walks in the neighborhood with the project participants. The walks included four to six people who are in the process of renovating their homes. The walks introduced participants to each other and gave them the opportunity to talk through their experiences and worries during the

renovation process. The walks included visits to the houses that are undergoing renovation so that the participants learned about their neighbor's progress, and also included lunches in the park and visits to local businesses and groups. A private Facebook group has been set up for organizing meeting points and routes.

Let's tell our story!



A photography project was launched by Vzw SIVI and Samenlevingsopbouw as a tool for project participants to map their home and their neighborhood. A disposable camera was given to each household to create a photo record either of their home or their neighborhood. The participants were split into two groups. Fanny's group of participants explored the neighbourhood through pictures with a certain theme: places they like, examples of what they want to look different, the most beautiful house on the street, the craziest house on the street, etc. Bart's group explored their sense of home by taking photographs of rooms in their houses as a way to document memories and storylines. The aim for Bart's group was to tell the stories of their houses through a photographic mapping of space and talking about the 'Life of the House'. A social-art project based on this is well underway. It is called **9 stories x 9 families x 9 rooms and describes the process and change of the homes**. It's about a story of their home and how it changes as project participants go through the renovation process and how their lives related to a room. Bart will be making 9 podcasts of 9 different rooms. Kitchen, living, bathroom, hall, sleeping room, basement, garden, toilet and attic represent a story, a memory of someone's life.

'It is important to talk about the smell, sound and memory of the house through this photographic memory of each room.' – Bart, Vzw SIVI

Let's make a picnic table!



Parallel to renovation activities, the 'building a picnic table' project was launched as a way for participants to explore their creativity through painting and writing. A wooden plank was sent to participants to paint or express their dreams on it. The group will assemble a picnic table on the first of July using the decorated planks, and they will use the table as a space for discussing issues of the neighbourhood.

'One participant painted leaves because she wants more green in her area. The next stage would be to invite a policy maker to sit with her at the picnic table and discuss the possibilities.' – Fanny, Samenlevingsopbouw

Let's have a coffee together!



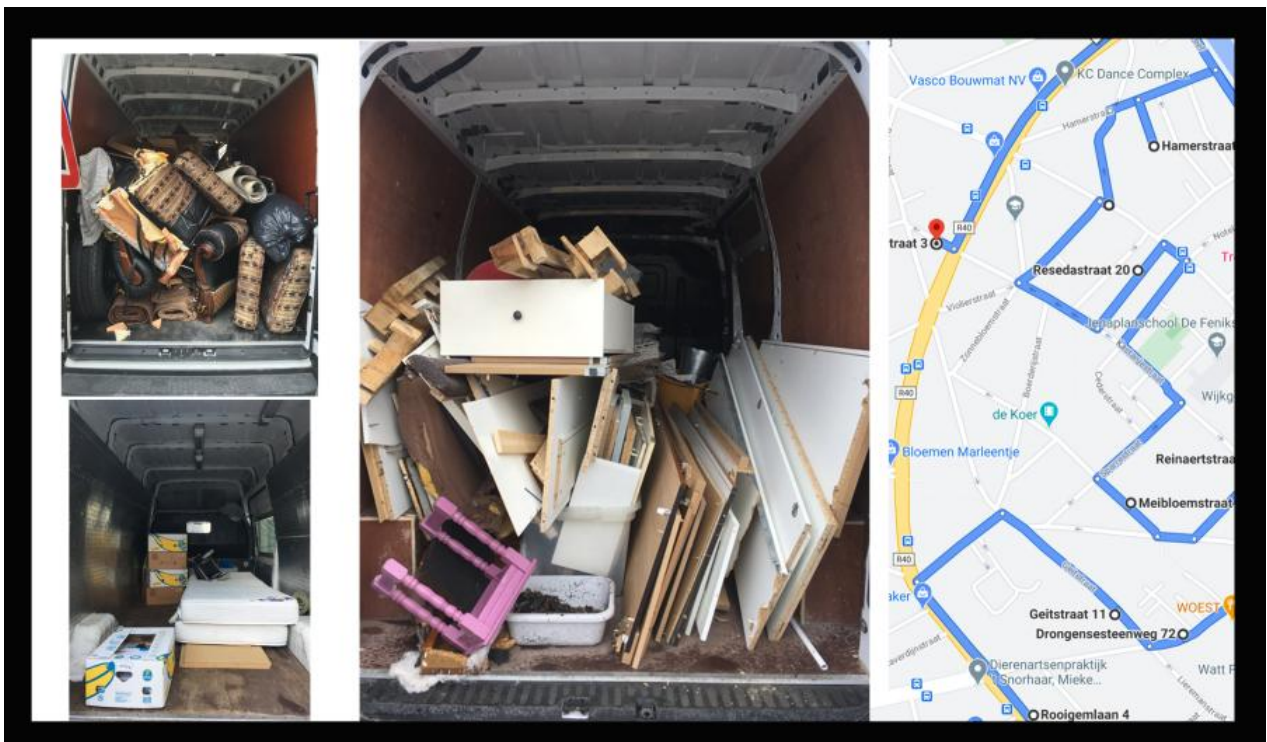
To promote a sense of community, each participant could place a coffee cup on the ledge of their window, writing on it their time availability to have a coffee outside their house or at their terrace. An interested neighbour could come at that time, bring their own coffee and introduce themselves to the participant. This actions really helped in getting neighbours from the same street to meet and get to know each other.

Let's make a wish!



Each participant received two New Year's cards. One card was a wish for them from the Ghent Knapt Op initiative team, and one was a blank card with the address of another participant to wish them well for the coming year.

Let's recycle!



'Cleaning the house is like cleaning your head' is how Bart described the process of the cleaning and preparing the house for the next stage of renovation. One of the most important activities to assist project participants was to clean out their houses. Many found this process challenging, so Fanny and Bart helped them by engaging other families to assist in cleaning their houses out. Vzw SIVI and Samenlevingsopbouw rented vans and went around to the houses that were cleaning to collect large and old objects that could be recycled at the recycling park. The van would go around with the help of the project participants to load the junk. People really appreciated this help since many families do not have a car and were finding it very difficult to get rid of old belongings.

This action started from the necessity of cleaning the houses from their stuff, especially two families [that] had so much stuff and found it very difficult to empty.' – Bart, Vzw SIVI

Housing

See on UIA website 