



Spaces of resistance: Re-activating archives through community exhibitions for housing justice

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Abstract

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This article examines the role of community exhibitions as both a space and a medium for housing justice efforts. By reflecting on the re-activation of community archives, this article addresses two key gaps in existing scholarship: first, the limited consideration of how community archives might expand access beyond a narrow circle of archival users to fulfill their social and political objectives, and second, the need for deeper analysis of non-academic dissemination, audience reception, and engagement within such spaces. It asks: How can community exhibitions enable community archives to transcend the limitations of institutional repositories? What role can they play in framing, connecting, and spatializing housing resistance, both past and present, within the broader housing crisis? Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a self-organized, experimental housing resistance exhibition that drew from local community archives, I explore how community exhibitions can re-mediate and re-activate community archival materials by functioning as spaces of resonance for housing activists, platforms for personal narratives of housing struggles, and sites forging diachronic and synchronic connections across time and movements. In doing so, this article sheds light on the capacity for community exhibitions to serve as potential sites of resistance and mobilization in the context of larger movement efforts, vital to cultivating housing resistance.

Keywords

Housing, resistance, community archives, exhibition, justice

Introduction

In the context of a global housing crisis that has spurred the resurgence of housing movements and the revival of longstanding ideas such as rent controls and rent strikes (Roy, 2016), it is urgent to counter the dominant tendency to foster a collective forgetting (Fisher, 2009). Expanding our contemporary imaginaries of housing resistance and just housing futures requires narratives that contest the status quo (Burgum, 2019; Carter, 2017; Keller et al., 2024). This article seeks to contribute to methodological discussions surrounding housing justice efforts and praxis by emphasizing the relevance of community exhibitions as both a space and medium for community archives within the context of housing resistance. It also offers a theoretical reflection on the definition of community archives, with a particular focus on re-activation and re-mediation. The re-activation of community archives is here conceptualized, drawing from feminist curatorial practice, as a political and social justice tactic ‘to bring awareness to the historical value of an archive by reinserting it in the present, thus turning historical memory into political memory and a matter of social justice’ (Sepúlveda, 2023, p. 178), moving beyond the mere recovery or reinterpretation of archival materials to insist upon their contemporary relevance. Closely related is the idea of re-mediation, which points to the ways archival materials are made newly accessible to a broader public—beyond expert, academic or archivist audiences—at a given moment in time, thereby enabling re-engagement with the past (Sepúlveda, 2023; Von Bismarck, 2022).

Community archives refer to collections compiled by affected communities or individuals outside formal institutions, often created ‘in opposition to the silences, misrepresentations and marginalizations of mainstream repositories’ (Caswell et al., 2017, p. 6). Community exhibitions, in turn, are proposed as curated displays of community archival materials that emphasize processes of re-activation and re-mediation. They do so by facilitating access for wider publics—including those directly implicated in or identifiable through the materials—with particular attention to questions of timing, physical location, and the socio-political context in which they are situated. Unlike the display of community archives in traditional museum spaces which tend to foster a detached spectatorialism by removing them from their original contexts (Fisher, 2009), community exhibitions hold the potential to cultivate more direct and active forms of engagement from local communities and maintain the materials’ social and political immediacy.

This article presents *Au Foyer des Résistances* (translated as *At the Home of Resistances*)—a self-organized experimental exhibition drawing upon local community archives documenting housing resistance in Brussels—as a site for ethnographic field study. Conceived and timed for the Belgian national housing protest of March 2023, the exhibition served as one of several acts of activist research through which I inserted myself in a specific struggle. It considered housing history from a resistance perspective by excavating collective moments in which inhabitants mobilized to resist displacement, dispossession and destruction. *Au Foyer des Résistances* has been presented in two editions to date, operating at the intersection of methodologies tied to community archiving, protest mobilizing, collective conscientization, but also academic knowledge production and education. Its layered outcomes, engaging scholars, activists, and local communities, shaping visitors’

understanding of the housing question, and fostering access to community knowledge on housing struggles in Brussels, are particularly relevant for discussion. This significance is heightened by the current academic and activist interest in community archives on housing (Roy & Rolnik, 2020; Keller et al., 2024), alongside broader societal critiques of traditional museum spaces and their tendencies to appropriate or co-opt local knowledge and struggles (Azoulay, 2019; Appadurai, 2020; Raicovich, 2021). First, while considerable attention has been given to the content and selection process of community archives on housing (Burgum, 2022; Dalloul et al., 2020), the question of access to community archives—beyond a typically narrow group of archival users, often highly educated and middle-class—remains underdiscussed in field-based research, despite its apparent centrality to the very definition of community archives (Caswell et al., 2017; Caswell, 2021). How can community exhibitions enable community archives to transcend institutional repositories and their prevailing critiques surrounding archival accessibility? Second, by focusing on a specific community exhibition, I aim to address a gap in scholarly debates and literature on the dissemination of lay, non-academic outputs and their reception. I do so by providing a detailed account of the exhibition's organization within a specific context, location, and space, as well as the various forms of engagements which unfolded in it. What roles can community exhibitions play in framing, connecting, discussing, and spatializing housing resistance in both the past and present within the broader context of a housing crisis?

The article is organized as follows: the first section situates community archives within the framework of methodologies for housing justice. Here I introduce exhibitions as a mechanism to facilitate the re-activation and re-mediation of community archival materials. The second section considers the context of the national housing protest of March 2023, within which *Au Foyer des Résistances* emerged, as well as the physical location and timing of the exhibition by presenting its spatial characteristics. The third section focuses on the outcomes of the exhibition, arguing that *Au Foyer des Résistances* acted as: (1) a space of resonance for housing activists, (2) a stage and receptacle for the diverse (hi)stories of housing resistance and struggle, and (3) a space for synchronic and diachronic connections between visitors and across struggles.

Being on display: re-activation of community archives for housing justice

Housing justice, conceptualized as a process ‘forged through insurgency, resistance and conflict’ (Roy & Rolnik, 2020, p. 13), is not a government hand-out to affected communities, but a transformative grassroots process aimed at dismantling practices of displacement, dispossession, and extraction. However, extraction and the dispossession of knowledge do often characterise much of academic work on housing too, which is why Roy (2016) emphasizes that ‘housing justice demands research justice’ (p. 16). Highlighting research justice shifts the focus towards how knowledge is produced with the aim of transforming structures of oppression (Roy, 2016). As Roy and Rolnik (2020) rightfully ask: ‘what does an orientation towards housing justice entail for methods for research and methodologies for social action?’ (p. 15). They advocate for emancipatory methodologies which challenge and transcend ‘the grammars of supremacy’ of traditional academic knowledge production

(Sandoval, 2000, p. 2 in Roy & Rolnik, 2020). Such methodologies centre on learning and thinking from the point of view of the urban majority, directly situated at the frontlines of contestation. These sites of struggle hold the most significant ideas on housing justice and enable to reframe housing as an imminently political problem. Moreover, housing justice necessitates a commitment to accountability toward frontline communities by questioning 'knowledge ownership and use, (...) the politics of voice and representation and (...) the possibilities of building solidarities through research' (Roy & Rolnik, 2020, p. 15). In this context, the radical use of archives emerges as one among many tools in the broader pursuit of both housing and research justice.

From the preservation of community archives...

Radical archival work has been referred to by various terms, including community archives, DIY archives, rebel archives, counter archives, autonomous archives, grassroots archives, and interference archives (Dalloul et al., 2020; Almeida & Hoyer, 2021, Burgum, 2022). Drawing on Burgum's work (2022) I will here adopt the term community archives to refer to this family of concepts. In contrast to institutional archives, community archives are typically assembled by individuals or communities affected by and presented within the collected materials, who exercise a certain degree of control over the collection (Flinn, 2009). Whereas mainstream archives often function as inert remnants of regimes of domination (Pramoedy in Stoler, 2010), community archives tend to operate in more flexible, multi-scalar, and dynamic ways as their contents are continually remade, contested, and nonlinear. Rather than recording dominant or monumental narratives they typically comprise what Stoler (2010) terms *minor histories*: accounts that are neither trivial, nor iconic, but often displaced within *major histories*. The importance of archiving as a tool for grassroots collectives and organizing has grown significantly, especially in the aftermath of the archival and participatory turns. Many view it as a form of activism aimed at redressing structural imbalances, in which certain views, ideas and voices are structurally privileged within institutional archives, while those of workers, migrants, and community organizations remain persistently marginalized (Flinn et al., 2009). This act of (re)collecting historically marginalized narratives of collective struggles contributes to the rich terrain of housing activism (Maharawal & McElroy, 2018), amplifying and contextualizing current organising efforts (Almeida & Hoyer, 2021).

Community archives are valued for their potential political and subversive power. First, they address the erosion of collective memory within social movements and the systemic and symbolic annihilation of marginalized groups in mainstream archives. Historical housing struggles, for example, are often poorly documented (Tubridy, 2024). More so, these histories are part of a calculated cultural erasure intrinsic to contemporary capitalism which, as Fisher (2009) observes, 'subsumes and consumes all of previous history' (p. 4). Second, archives allow past stories to inspire contemporary efforts to achieve housing justice (Maharawal & McElroy, 2018). Della Porta (2020) notes that 'past events are memory building blocks for the construction of collective identities' (p. 11), demonstrating that contemporary struggles are not historically isolated anomalies but rather continuations of

longer traditions of resistance. Archives of housing resistance thus serve not only housing activists but also offer the potential of communicating directly to the communities from which they came, enabling them to assert their right to remember their histories and harness these as tools in their struggle for their right to stay (Flinn, 2007; Roy & Rolnik, 2020). They can help root communities who have faced rapid, dramatic and possibly traumatic changes by providing ways to reconnect with their identity and heritage (Flinn, 2007). Such memories are powerful tools in (re)establishing solidarities (Della Porta, 2020) and building political collectivities (Maharawal & McElroy, 2018). Third, community archives play a critical role in overcoming the prevailing sense of powerlessness in some housing justice efforts by challenging perceptions of historical inevitability and political pessimism. They demonstrate how change has been achieved historically through collective action, thereby inspiring current action. Organising today from a historically informed perspective is particularly valuable, considering the immediate pressures of everyday housing justice efforts, which often leave little room for reflection (Tubridy, 2024). Dalloul et al. (2020) argue that, embarking on an archival journey, digging up parts of history, can offer an escape from the intense rhythm of activism. Finally, archival materials have the capacity to reshape our understanding of social and political realities by reorienting accepted truths and opening new possibilities in the present and future imaginaries of housing justice in the city (Almeida & Hoyer, 2021; Burgum, 2019). As Dalloul and colleagues (2020) suggest, such work can help ‘build towards a future that our communities would like to see’ (p. 35).

There seems to be relative consensus on the potential of community archives to mobilize, sustain, and reinvigorate collective struggles, as well as on ‘what a community-based archive should do, and how it should conduct itself’ (Omowale, 2018, para.1). Indeed, within the field of housing studies, several scholars have explored community archives in the pursuit of housing justice, conceptualized their role, elaborated on their political potential, and considered the creation and build-up of a community archive with a focus on the gathering and selecting process (see Burgum, 2022, Keller et al., 2024; Roy & Rolnik, 2020, Tubridy, 2024). However, while the wider public access and civic function appears to be defining characteristics of community archives that differentiate them from institutional repositories, these aspects remain largely unexamined in the existing literature (Caswell et al., 2017).

...to their reactivation through community exhibitions

Traditional archival practices emphasize preservation, prioritizing permanent safeguarding of selected materials to ensure their enduring integrity. This typically restricts access to so-called experts, scholars, and professional archivists and typifies the archive as a space for reading, reception, and interpretation. In contrast, community archives aim to operate by the principles of voice, agency, and debate, serving as spaces where people gather, resist, and produce counter-knowledge (Burgum, 2022). To both, exhibitions offer a means to facilitate their re-activation by displaying archival materials and shifting the focus outward to extend their accessibility towards diverse audiences (Von Bismarck, 2022). This outward-facing orientation of exhibitions acquires particular significance in the context of community

archives, though it is analytically relevant to distinguish between institutional exhibitions, traditionally staged in white-cube museum spaces, and what I refer to as *community exhibitions*.

In 2022, when visiting Operatie Wonen in the *Museum om de Hoek* in Amsterdam (Museum om de Hoek, n.d) and later *Prendre Place* and *Place à Prendre* in the Musée d'Histoire de Marseille (Musées de Marseille, n.d) in Marseille, it struck me to see protest material on display in white cube museum spaces. Though impressed by the Dutch housing movement's institutional recognition and the collective effort behind the Marseille exhibition, in both instances objects were removed from their original contexts. Protest artifacts and the ideologies they represented were reduced to aesthetics, promoting a disengaged spectatorial experience rather than encouraging active involvement or participation. The sterile environment imposed silence on highly political topics, converting acts of resistance into museum artifacts devoid of their dynamic, collective essence (Fisher, 2009). Institutional exhibitions are commonly associated with passive engagement, emphasizing reception and interpretation. They furthermore continue to underrepresent minority perspectives—not only in their content but also in their staff and audiences, which predominantly comprise wealthier, highly educated, and culturally dominant groups (Chien et al., 2024). In contrast, community exhibitions such as Burgum's *Making Space* (2019), which explored squatting, trespass, and direct action, emphasized close connections to the housing activist scene and worked with local community archives. Similarly, *La Vie HLM* traced the history of working-class neighbourhoods through the lens of housing. Curated collaboratively by high school teachers, historians, and sociologists, the exhibition was staged in two social housing units on the outskirts of Paris, where local residents themselves guided visitors through the displays (AMuLoP, 2024). Another illustrative example is *We Won't Move: Tenants Organize in New York City*, presented by Interference Archive in their Brooklyn space, highlighting the diverse strategies employed by tenants in their collective struggle for affordable housing (Interference Archive, 2025). Anchored in specific socio-political and historical contexts and shaped by their physical locations, such community exhibitions hold the unique potential to foster debate, agency, and voice, thereby enhancing the capacity of community archives to realize their political and social objectives as outlined above.

Furthermore, exhibiting community material, even if only a curated selection, can also render visible the boundaries of the archive and advance its status as dynamic and ever-evolving by inviting dialogue in the space (Von Bismarck, 2022). This process can help mitigate the influence of archival authority, which even within community archives, can shape whose voices and narratives are represented. Archival authority is often perceived as a form of domination, deriving its power from three interrelated dimensions—context, physical location, and time—and rooted in the assumption that archives are complete, insular repositories of truth (Keller et al., 2024). As Burgum (2022) points out, community archives are not immune to such biases. Much like mainstream archives, they frequently assert territorial authority, claiming to know better their own histories and geographies. This raises a critical question to both institutional and community archives: 'on whose authority do they speak?' (Flinn, 2007, p. 165). In the case of community archives on housing struggles, authority derives from the inhabitants themselves—those resisting the degradation of their

homes, communities, and everyday lives. This authority they seek to uphold directly counters that which planners, city officials, and investors speak from. While community archives are not inherently anti-authoritative, it is crucial to consider the forms of alternative authority they aim to assert and to explore strategies that allow them to continuously remain open, accountable and reflexive. Such strategies may involve critical considerations on the timing, context, and physical location of the archive but also of its public display. The following section will examine these dimensions in relation to the exhibition.

Building Au Foyer des Résistances

This section offers a detailed account of the setup of *Au Foyer des Résistances*, which serves as an ethnographic site for exploring the dynamics of re-activation and re-mediation of archival materials. By expanding on the exhibition's temporal, contextual and spatial dimensions, I argue these factors can play an instrumental role in contesting the archives' accessibility and authority, as well as the persistent absences and exclusions they embody.

Timing, context and archival selection: site-specific resistance in Au Foyer des Résistances

Au Foyer des Résistances emerged from a direct engagement with housing activism in Brussels. Its development was closely tied to movement-building practices in which I was actively involved in as both an activist and researcher, including mobilizing for the Belgian Housing Action Day, the national housing protest organized by a broad coalition of housing associations and collectives. The exhibition was deliberately timed with the yearly protest, which allowed for direct interaction between protestors and the exhibition. In this context, the exhibition's thematic focus mirrored the three central demands of the Belgian Housing Action platform. The national platform—though predominantly Brussels-based—mobilizes numerous associations who have agreed to push for: (1) an immediate rent reduction, (2) an end to housing evictions with regularization for all undocumented migrants, and (3) the expansion of social housing. These demands reflect the severe lack of affordable housing in Brussels, typified by ineffective rental regulation, a lack of political commitment to expand and renovate social housing, and the absence of structural measures to prevent both legal and illegal evictions (Godart et al., 2023). Additionally, the city faces persistent discriminations in the private rental market (Bauwelinckx et al., 2024), a sharp rise in homelessness (Bruss'help, 2022), and widespread long-term vacancy (Bauwelinckx et al., 2024), as illustrated by the posters in Figure 1.

The collection of archival material was sourced through my existing network in various housing organizations and activist collectives in Brussels, particularly *Inter-Environnement Bruxelles* (IEB), which maintains an extensive archive of daily press reviews, photographs, issues of specialized magazines, and their very own analyses and articles on urbanism and urban developments since 1974. While a considerable amount of this material derives from mainstream media, which often reduce tenants to passive subjects rather than active agents (Maharawal and McElroy, 2018), IEB's archival practices align with its broader mission of serving as a collective and critical counter-power, contesting and reframing dominant urban narratives (IEB, 2022). Its archives are made accessible to residents to support their



Figure 1

Political poster-making workshop led by Chez Rosi. From left to right: 7% of social housing, that's tough!; Thank you for your request, we will get back to you in 10 years; 11 legal evictions a day; Saint-Vide-Leegbeek; the 20th municipality. Source: Semaine d'Innovation Pédagogique, March 2024.

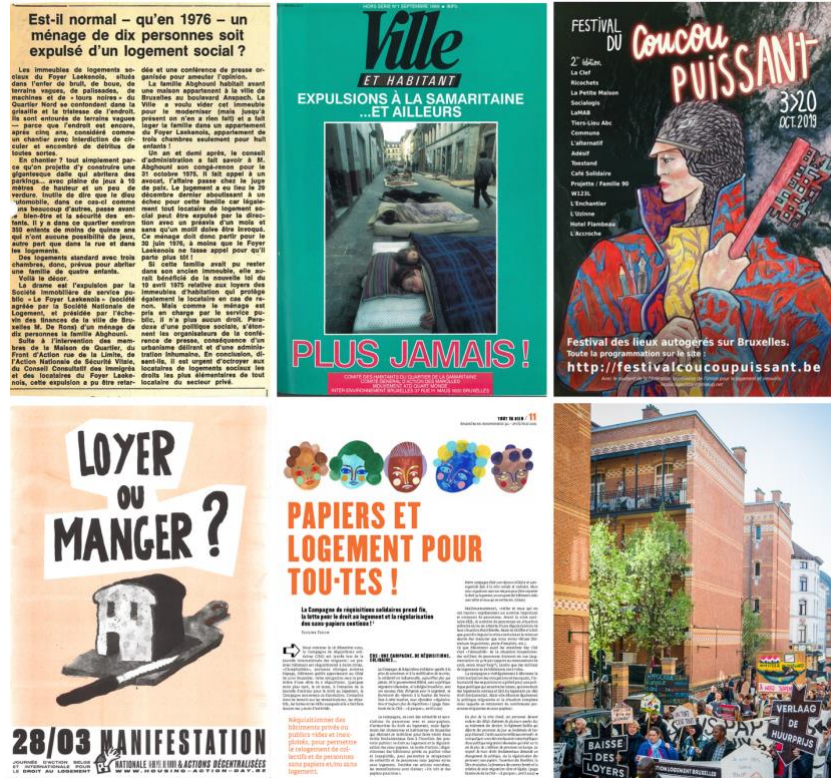
individual and collective struggles, to speak with an authority that counters the presumed authority of mainstream narratives, and to preserve histories otherwise excluded from institutional archives, constituting what I consider a community archive. Here, *community* refers to the more than fifty local neighbourhood committees represented by IEB, each composed of dozens of inhabitants respectively. Additional materials were sourced from the housing rights umbrella association *Rassemblement Bruxellois pour le Droit à l'Habitat* (RBDH) and the risographic workspace *Chez Rosi* initiated by the *Plus Tôt Te Laat* artist collective, both of which contributed political posters, scans of articles, and local magazine issues found in their office libraries and shelves. Two other organizations, *Brusselse Raad voor het Leefmilieu* (BRAL) and *Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaine* (ARAU), were contacted but their archives proved inaccessible, either due to storage in closed facilities outside of Brussels, partial loss from flooding, or lack of thematic relevance.

After selection, I immersed myself in the materials, conducted online research, and interviewed prominent housing activists about which housing events stood out for them, which archives they might have access to, and how they would imagine an exhibition on housing resistances. Out of these, I compiled visual and textual histories of housing resistances in Brussels from the 1970s to the present, which were used for both editions of the exhibition. This collection included media articles, in-depth local magazine pieces, photographs, activist posters, flyers, petitions, stickers, brochures, and protest signs, as illustrated in Figure 2.

The physical location of community archives significantly influences their accessibility and the degree of control that communities can exercise over them. Although situated in the heart of Cureghem—an emblematic and centrally located working-class neighbourhood—staff at IEB expressed dissatisfaction with the limited accessibility, visibility, and consequent

Figure 2

A selection of archival materials featured in the exhibition spans over five decades of housing history (1974 to 2024), highlighting and documenting issues such as housing evictions, squatting, housing rights, and the rights of undocumented migrants. Sources (from left to right, top to bottom): Centre de documentation IEB (images 1, 2, 4, 5), Festival du Coucou Puissant (Image 3), Rassemblement Bruxellois pour le Droit à l'Habitat (Image 6).



use of their *Centre de Documentation*. Housed in a back room of the organization’s offices, the archives are accessible solely by appointment with the single staff member responsible for its management. During my visits I consistently worked alone, learning only of occasional use by fellow researchers and activists. Similarly, in the office of the RBDH, located in yet another working-class neighbourhood in Molenbeek, a large bookshelf filled with archives is accessible to its employees and used by the occasional housing activist. *Chez Rosi*’s archives, consisting largely of political posters, were found in a forgotten pile of materials hidden atop a shelf in the back office of their workspace in the city centre of Brussels. *Au Foyer des Résistances* intended to bring these archives, many of which had been inaccessible for decades, into public view. Located in the Marolles, a centrally-located neighbourhood in Brussels, the exhibition was held in an old corner café during both its 2023 and 2024 editions.

As a neighbourhood holding a long legacy as the pocket of housing activism in the city, the Marolles’ central square has recurrently served as both the starting and ending point for the annual national housing protest and the *Carnaval Sauvage*, a folk carnival culminating in the symbolic burning of a life-sized puppet representing a real estate developer. This tradition traces its roots to the neighbourhood’s victorious Battle of the Marolles in 1969 against the demolition of several rows of housing (see documentary *La Bataille des Marolles*, Manuel, 1969). Situated within this historically charged context, *Au Foyer des Résistances* was inherently site-specific, with both content and outcomes largely shaped by its location.

Access to the previously vacant corner café, only metres away from the Marolles’ central square, was the result of professional connections linked to my academic position. This access, however, highlights a wider trend of gentrification in the area, where white, middle-class, highly educated individuals have increasingly entered this historically working-class

neighbourhood. My own identity as a white, middle-class, highly educated woman underscores these dynamics, presenting contradictions that were difficult to overlook. Nevertheless, using this space for an exhibition on housing resistances was deeply informed by the Marolles' history and inhabitants' strong commitment to housing justice.

On being a good guest and its spatial translations

Engaging with the Marolles' history and giving it a specific and prominent space in the exhibition space aligned with the conceptualization of space not merely 'as a flat area of a map', but instead 'a geology containing the various layers of political forces that make it what it is' (Lambert, 2024, p. 22). The exhibition was named *Au Foyer des Résistances*, drawing on the café's original name, *Au Foyer*, with old signs still hanging out front, honouring both the café's historical significance and the exhibition's thematic focus on collective housing resistances. Retaining the café's original name was a way of showing myself as a good guest in the Marolles, acknowledging the neighbours' attachment to the former café owner—who passed during the Covid-19 crisis—and honouring the neighbourhood's longstanding legacy of housing activism.

Small, meaningful gestures, such as offering free sandwiches at the opening, homemade waffles at the closing, and tea, tangerines, and cookies throughout its duration, were a way of creating a hospitable space. Both editions of the exhibition were, of course, free of charge and no monetary exchange took place in the space. Additionally, being a good guest also meant allowing myself to be hosted by the local community (Beeckmans et al., 2024). I was offered boxes of dates and bottles of mango juice and was invited into people's homes for shared iftar meals, barbecues, or tea. Neighbours further extended their hospitality by sharing personal stories, emailing me photographs of the neighbourhood, and contributing to the space by setting up a tea salon in the exhibition area.

In my position, both as a good guest and as a host, I prioritized accessibility and avoided the conventional, high-brow aesthetics often associated with white cube museum spaces, most often perceived by marginalized communities as 'not for them' (Dawson, 2014 in Chien et al., 2024). On the exterior, the exhibition's themes were communicated using DIY cardboard signs in French and Arabic, alongside large-scale wallpaper drawings on the café's outer walls carrying political messages in French and Dutch, to maximize visibility. The choice of reused wallpaper, wheat paste and cardboard signs, matched the materials used by activists documented in the exhibition. Inside, I ensured that the café's door remained wide open throughout the exhibition's duration. This allowed for more direct engagement with passersby and eliminated physical barriers for elderly visitors and children. Unlike traditional museum spaces which still tend to be characterized by silence and detachment, I maintained a constant presence, welcoming visitors, engaging in conversations, and fostering politically situated dialogue.

The café itself was a work-in-progress undergoing renovation which contributed to the exhibition's evolving nature. In March 2023, the café's interior walls were bare and unfinished, the ceiling open, one front window broken, and the floor permanently dusty.

**Figure 3**

A visual comparison of the exhibition's scenography in 2023 (top) and 2024 (bottom).
Source: images by author.

The ceiling occasionally released debris on the exhibited material displayed on tables. Yet the café had retained its original furniture made up of small wooden chairs and tables, a large pool table, and its iconic wooden bar. By the exhibition's second edition in March 2024, the café had changed: while still under construction, all its windows and front door had been renewed. This allowed for higher visibility yet also introduced a sense of gentrification through their material quality and newness.

The exhibition's scenography also evolved between its first and second editions, as shown in Figure 3. Beginning in 2023 as a solo effort without budget and minimal focus on aesthetics, the 2024 edition became a collaborative effort initiated by a researcher, an architect¹ and I, through an immersive workshop with over 20 bachelor's and master's students in architecture from the Université Libre de Bruxelles (*Faculté La Cambre Horta*) and a master's student in urban planning from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Ahead of the opening, we worked with students at the BOSCH community space, located directly across from the café. With a modest budget at hand, we constructed modular exhibition panels which would stand freely in the space. The scenography was imagined for mobility and adaptability, enabling the exhibition to be easily deconstructed and hosted elsewhere. Students re-used archival materials from the first edition, but also added titles, short introductory texts, and self-made political posters.

¹ Charlotte Gyselynck (doctoral researcher at Université Libre de Bruxelles, Faculté d'Architecture La Cambre Horta,) and Amos Bok (architect and founding member of Les Chantiers Battus)

Curating collective resistance

In this section I focus on the exhibition's outcomes and argue that *Au Foyer des Résistances* acted as (1) a space of resonance for housing activists, (2) a stage and receptacle for the diverse stories and histories of housing struggle and resistance, and (3) a space for synchronic and diachronic connections across struggles and between visitors. These outcomes underpin the dynamics of re-activation and re-mediation previously mentioned.

Space of resonance for housing activists

During the first edition, which took place from 25 March to 2 April 2023, the exhibition was deliberately set up to engage housing activists and participants in the national housing protest of the Belgian Housing Action Day. On March 26th 2023, hundreds of demonstrators marched from the historic centre of *Molenbeek*—an area undergoing rapid gentrification—to the central square of the Marolles. As the protest passed by the café-turned-exhibition, dozens of protesters entered, carrying banners and signs as part of their protest activities. Inside, they explored the materials displayed on the walls and spread out onto the central pool table, taking photographs with their cell phones and cameras, as shown in Figure 4. Outside, others observed the large wallpaper drawings featuring political



Figure 4

From left to right, top to bottom: activists preparing protest signs prior to the national housing demonstration; protesters engaging with the exhibition during the protest; the juxtaposition of archival materials with activists' protest materials carried inside during the protest; a video interview with Woonzaak conducted in the exhibition space. *Source*: images by author.

messages on housing rights. Many protesters expressed surprise and appreciation for the exhibition's presence along the protest route. One activist enthusiastically exclaimed: 'An exhibition during a protest. That's a first!'. I mingled with the crowd, solicited by demonstrators with inquiries about the exhibition and its content. A woman involved in literacy classes for women in the neighbourhood of *Cureghem* asked whether she could bring her group for a visit later in the week. A prominent housing activist, founder of the *Syndicat des Immenses*, the most vocal homelessness union of Brussels, requested paper invitations to distribute at their upcoming general assembly. Once the crowds had passed and the protest proceeded to the Marolles' central square, the exhibition space was repurposed into a temporary recording studio for a video interview with one of the protest's key speakers and head coordinator of *Woonzaak*, a Flemish initiative seeking to hold the government legally accountable for its failure to uphold the constitutionally enshrined right to housing. In sum, the exhibition served as a meaningful complement to the housing protest by offering a physical and symbolic site for engagement specifically dedicated to housing struggles.

In the days following the protest, many leading housing activists returned to visit the exhibition more thoroughly, engaging with archival materials which were not usually accessible. These visitors included organizers of the national housing protest, members of the local anti-eviction front, and squatters, amongst others. A head organizer of the national housing protest contributed additional posters to the exhibition, further enriching its content. A social worker from a local renters' union photographed previously inaccessible media articles documenting housing actions organized in the 1990s in the Marolles, sharing their relevance to the union's ongoing efforts. An ex-squatter found particular resonance in a political poster that reminded him of his involvement in the first mobilization against the anti-squat law in 2017, along with the arguments used by activists then, including himself. The archival material provided historical context to contemporary housing struggles, reinforcing a sense of continuity and solidarity within the broader movement for housing rights in Belgium. Moreover, the exhibition space was also used by activists to convene, converse, interact, and prepare for the protest. This function addressed a scarcity of accessible spaces for gathering often observed within activist collectives (Sellie et al., 2015).

Stage and receptacle for the diverse (hi)stories of housing struggle and resistance

Aside from housing activists, the exhibition predominantly attracted local inhabitants and passersby. Reflecting the diversity of the Marolles neighbourhood, visitors included a majority of social renters from adjacent social housing blocks, alongside private renters, evictees, houseless individuals, homeowners, landlords, and squatters, from across Brussels. Some visitors had recently moved to the outskirts of the city in search of affordable housing, while others expressed a desire to leave, citing the lack of affordable homes within the city. The exhibition also held an international dimension with newcomers to Brussels, originating from Tunisia, Peru, the Netherlands, Basque Country, and Switzerland. A young man from Amsterdam had been forcefully relocated to find more affordable housing. A woman from Lima had moved for higher wages, hoping to allocate less of her income on rent. At *Au Foyer des Résistances*, I engaged with visitors from all walks of life: social workers from

neighbourhood centres, renters' unions, homeless shelters or social integration centres, active members of the *Syndicat des Immenses*, spokespersons from undocumented migrant collectives, political photographers, construction workers, bakers, bartenders, job-seekers, ex-detainees, café owners, civil servants from public social services in Wallonia, Ghent, or Fedasil (Belgian national asylum office), and representatives of associations like IEB, BRAL, and RBDH. Visitors spanned across generations, from primary school children and university students, to long-retired individuals. The exhibition significantly broadened the access and visibility of the archival material by engaging with this diverse range of visitors.

While the café space served as a stage for exhibiting past and present stories of housing resistance, it also became a receptacle for intimate accounts of housing precarity and personal struggle as well as political discourse on housing matters, marked by frustration, despair, and at times, hope. These exchanges often intersected with the archival material on display, transforming visitors into living archives or 'historical selves in the present' (Carroll (2021, p. 53). In doing so, the exhibition unsettled the notion of the archive as static, reframing it instead as an entry-point through which past knowledge and practices of solidarity can be re-engaged in the present (Marty & Grimaldi, 2024). The concept of living archives thereby extends our understanding of re-activation as a process through which historical memory is converted into political memory through active engagement with the past from the standpoint of the present. Within *Au Foyer des Résistances*, this process of re-activation unfolded first through the act of exhibiting the materials and, second, through the conversations and exchanges that emerged within the space. Several visitors experienced moments of recognition as they identified themselves in particular stories or photographs exhibited, recalling their own memories of particular evictions or actions in the city. One visitor, for example, recounted the squatted *Gesu* church in *Saint-Josse* in the early 2000s, sharing memories of the then squatters' collective, their eviction and their eventual relocation to yet another vacant building. From one memory he jumped to the next, telling me about a time he used to climb the decades-old scaffoldings of the Justice Palace in Brussels to push open one of its windows and find shelter inside. Today he is registered on the social housing waiting list and sleeps on friends' couches.

Such personal stories were eagerly shared with me. For some visitors sharing was an urgent matter of solving a very imminent housing issue. A father of five, visibly distressed, showed me Whatsapp messages from his abusive landlord announcing an illegal rent increase. His neighbours had already moved away or been evicted. In such cases I would do my best to redirect individuals to their respective local renters' unions, local neighbourhood associations or the anti-eviction front, but also had to disappoint when being asked for registration on the social housing waiting list, registration for rent bonus, or *simply* a house to live in. In many cases, I could offer only a listening ear, which I gladly did, and a story on the systemic nature of the housing crisis as well as the collective responses set up by activists and associations striving for housing justice, hoping it would bring some solace knowing their struggle is shared and heard, even if only by some.

Sharing personal housing situations was difficult for some visitors, often heavy with emotions or feelings of shame. One woman, deeply affected, admitted avoiding such

discussions for fear of becoming overwhelmed, but showed interest in collective action, leaving her contact information on a piece of paper and signing herself as a *locataire en galère* (struggling renter). Others were seeking to compensate for feelings of vulnerability by emphasizing their social status or the level of education of fellow family members. One man, expropriated from his house and homeless since over a year, shared that his sister works for the European parliament and that his parents, his siblings and himself are all highly-educated. One woman, undocumented and cohabiting out of financial necessity, quickly mentioned she never asked for any financial help from public assistance. One man, behind on months of rent and living under the constant threat of eviction, waved off the flyer from the anti-eviction front I handed over to him, telling me he did not need it. I quickly replied he could share it with others around him. He eagerly accepted.

In fostering these exchanges, I also shared my own lived experiences, aligning with Behar's (2014) concept of an anthropology that breaks your heart whereby you write, or in this case speak with vulnerability so that others can also respond with vulnerability. The idea of sharing each other's pains and struggling collectively by wearing our heart on our sleeves (in Dalloul et al., 2020) aligns with Butler's notion of vulnerability 'as a form of activism' (2015, p. 123 in Beeckmans et al., 2024), further affirmed by Audre Lorde's assertion that 'our struggles are particular, but we are not alone' (1982, in Malson & Graziani, 2016, p. 38).

Moreover, *Au Foyer des Résistances* provided a welcoming space to take a rest and sit down, sip on fresh Moroccan mint tea, enjoy a tangerine, a date or a cookie, watch visitors come and go. An elderly lady with her dog asked to sit down at one of the café's tables to eat the soup she had just picked up from the social restaurant. A middle-aged woman desperately needed some cash and a cell phone to call someone. On a rainy day a homeless man walked in to take refuge. A handful of active members of the *Syndicat des Immenses* returned to the exhibition on several occasions, to spend time in the space, talk to each other, meet new people and join the events organized around the exhibition. While not directly related to the exhibition's content, these instances illustrate its open rejection of the usual exclusivity of white cube museum spaces by making archival material accessible to new audiences, thereby welcoming individuals who might otherwise have been excluded. As an experimental exhibition *Au Foyer des Résistances* dared to openly engage with its inhabitants and passersby, embedding itself in the neighbourhood and its daily life, not floating above it nor closing itself off from it. Creating a welcoming space where individuals felt comfortable enough to enter, but also to stay, felt like an act of care in an urban environment all too often characterized by imposed consumption and the exclusion of *undésirables*.

Space for diachronic and synchronic connections across struggles and between visitors

Similarly to how I imagined the *Au Foyer* café to once have been filled with voices, *Au Foyer des Résistances* turned a construction site into a social space used for meeting others, engaging in conversations and sharing stories, opinions, lived realities, and memories. As Sellie et al. (2015) argue, there is a critical need for spaces where communities can gather to recount and create shared histories. Maintaining a constant presence in the space, I engaged

in what Chien et al. (2024) describe as unstructured facilitation, at times through more linear conversations—initiating dialogue, posing questions, and disseminating knowledge—and at others through fluid ones characterized by shorter, back-and-forth interactions. While less focused on content transmission they proved more effective in sparking people’s interest. More than once, visitors to the space encountered one another, often overhearing a conversation and deciding to engage. These interactions would culminate in acts of collective remembering—a powerful practice against the deliberate erasure of entire neighbourhoods and communities within the city. What began as individual memories or issues became collective narratives, serving to overcome the individualized experience of housing and the isolation of personal struggles. Discussions, facilitated by the archival materials on display, spanned a wide range of topics, including rising rents, extensive waiting lists for social housing, discrimination, difficulties finding a home, substandard living conditions, abusive landlords, housing politics, corruption in social housing attribution, the political dominance of homeowners, and strategies for collective organising. One visitor observed that organising today was more challenging than twenty or thirty years ago, as individuals are increasingly preoccupied with meeting their basic needs and paying their bills. A retired neighbour shared her experiences of participating in housing struggles in the Marolles in the 1990s. Now a resident of social housing, she shares her one-bedroom apartment with her grandson, who cannot afford an apartment on the private rental market. Atop of this, she contributes financially to her granddaughter’s rent who pays 800€ for a small substandard studio. During her visit she greeted neighbours passing by, inviting them inside, providing a tour of the exhibition, and explaining how it acts as a space for housing resistances, ‘*Salam aleikum, comment ça va? Ça parle logement ici vous voyez, c’est le Foyer des Résistances!*’

Oftentimes, visitors’ stories linked housing struggles to issues such as health, domestic violence, divorce, financial instability, and childrearing. Employment and legal status emerged as recurrent themes in discussions about the difficulty of accessing affordable housing. Recognising these intersections, I tried to structurally integrate them in the exhibition’s programme, linking the exhibition’s content with a number of public events. Together with two university colleagues², I organized an evening discussion aimed at highlighting the interconnections between the housing crisis and the so-called reception crisis, referring to the thousands of asylum seekers sleeping rough in the city due to the government’s lack of political will to increase its hosting capacity. Our aim was to situate the housing question within a context of racial capitalism and its logics of dispossession and subordination (Roy, 2016). Against the backdrop of widespread mobilizations around highly politicized and mediatized squats for asylum seekers in Brussels, we invited two activists involved in organising these squats, an asylum seeker residing in one such squat, a representative from the *Comité des Femmes Sans Papiers (Committee of Undocumented Women)* and a researcher on migration. The discussion, held in BOSCH—the community space right across the street from the exhibition—was followed by a shared meal prepared by a local community member. Participants included a diverse range of individuals, including some

²Tasneem Nagi (doctoral researcher at KULeuven, OSA Urbanism & Architecture) and Heleen Verheyden (doctoral researcher at KULeuven, OSA Urbanism & Architecture)

whom I had previously encountered in the exhibition space. In 2024, the exhibition co-hosted a film screening and subsequent discussion as part of the Belgian Housing Action Week and promoted within the official program of the national campaign. The evening was kicked off in the exhibition space and moved to BOSCH for a selection of local short films further highlighting the intersection between migration and housing as well as the work of local associations providing support to individuals living through housing precarity. Additionally, an open slam night centred on housing struggles was organized by one student, who invited her network to engage with the exhibition's content, compose texts inspired by it, and perform these in the evening. These public programming efforts, exemplified in Figure 5, reflected an intention to foster synchronic connections throughout the exhibition, cultivating collectivity and solidarity across diverse struggles to ensure their longevity (Sellie et al., 2015; Maharawal & McElroy, 2018). Moreover, they provided a structured approach to bringing together a wide range of exhibition visitors while introducing new audiences to the space.

The intersectionality and networking between struggles and communities can be understood as a tool for political education, conscientization, and broader mobilization. Some visitors, initially disengaged, demonstrated significant shifts in perspective. One woman, who initially dismissed the housing crisis by answering no when asked if she felt concerned, altered her stance following a conversation about the exhibition's themes and their relevance to current issues. By contextualizing the material and linking it to her own experiences she began to recognize these challenges as part of a broader crisis. Her 30-year old son who lived abroad in a bid to find affordable housing was returning soon to Brussels to come live with her, against her wishes. She ultimately expressed a desire to join the housing movement by explicitly asking if there were any meetings or protests she could participate in. This example underscores how the normalization of individuals' everyday realities can obscure their systemic nature, preventing them from recognizing them as crises. My persistent attempt to connect the personal narratives I received with the archival materials on display acted as a strategy of politicization, exposing private experiences as collective struggles and fostering the possibility of solidarity and mobilization.



Figure 5

From left to right: an evening conversation exploring the intersections between the housing crisis and the reception crisis; a gathering in the exhibitions space preceding a film screening; an open slam night focused on housing struggles. *Source:* images by author.

Others who were not as closely affected by the housing crisis also used the exhibition as a way to get informed on past and present moments of housing resistances and the nature of the systemic housing crisis. A local homeowner was captivated by his neighbours' stories and sought to better understand the objectives and demands of the housing movement. An employee of a local association reflected on his lacking awareness of the housing crisis after exposure to the exhibition's materials. Two social work students, in 2023 and 2024, both felt enthusiastic about the exhibition. One joined the discussion on the intersection of the housing and reception crises in 2023, to which she brought friends along, the other joined an external event in 2024 on a local renters' association, followed by a political debate with local policymakers. A long-term social renter and neighbour from the Marolles who returned to the exhibition on several occasions and joined the evening discussion on the housing crisis and reception crisis, agitatedly asked, 'What can be done about all this? What can we do?'

To reinforce the contemporary significance of its archival content *Au Foyer des Résistances* included what Burgum (2019) describes as the mandatory info table. Instead of isolating historical struggles, the exhibition demonstrated that many of the housing struggles activists and inhabitants of Brussels fought for decades ago remain critically urgent today. This table featured recent movement materials—informative brochures, flyers, political posters and stickers, but also more in-depth reports and local journal issues—for visitors to take home. Doing so fostered diachronic connections between past struggles and present organizing efforts (Sellie et al., 2015). A young law student originally from Peterbos, one of the city's most stigmatized social housing estates, inquired about ways for others to get involved after recounting his own successful struggle against eviction by his landlord. He left the exhibition with a brochure from the anti-eviction front, stating he would share this with his housemates. This is just one among many instances where visitors left the exhibition equipped with flyers, brochures, information about local collectives, and details of upcoming meetings or protests to attend.

Critical reflections and conclusion

As an experimental, temporary exhibition, *Au Foyer des Résistances* explored the format of a community exhibition through the re-activation and re-mediation of community archives. It functioned as a space of resonance for housing activists and scholars, facilitating political dialogue among passersby and local residents and across struggles, while enhancing the visibility of ongoing housing justice efforts. The curation of the exhibition served as a means to create a collaborative, tangible and publicly shareable output, as opposed to isolated, individualistic, but also often depoliticized academic work (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). The experiment aimed to foreground the 'ceaseless, complex contestations through which rights to housing are conceptualized, claimed, consolidated' (Roy, 2016, p. 13-14) and to depict inhabitants as active agents, rather than passive victims of urban transformation, dispossession and displacement through their collective struggles against injustices (Carroll, 2021; Maharawal & McElroy, 2018). The exhibition's timing with regards to the national housing protest and its location within a long-vacant café in the heart of one of the city's most iconic neighbourhoods significantly contributed to the attention it

received and the resonance of its content. By inserting itself into the historical fabric of the Marolles and maintaining a low-threshold environment, the exhibition attracted a diverse range of individuals, many of whom were directly or indirectly affected or revolted by the housing crisis.

However, several critical reflections are necessary. First, community archives are often positioned as tools to recover histories that institutional archives have deliberately erased or neutralized (Almeida & Hoyer, 2021) and to document the resistance and resilience of communities facing displacement and erasure (Dalloul et al., 2020). While such archives can indeed function as sites of resistance against dominant, marginalizing narratives, they are also inevitably sites of further exclusion, omission, and forgetting (Flinn et al., 2009). *Au Foyer des Résistances* remained necessarily partial in its overview of housing resistance in Brussels, constrained by the archival materials available, the limited time at hand, and the spatial and qualitative limits of the exhibition space. It did, however, position itself as flexible and open, incorporating new and locally relevant materials and narratives over time, following Stoler's insistence on understanding archives as processual rather than static, always in the process of changing (2002; in Sepúlveda, 2023). Additionally, personal conversations with long-term activists provided some triangulation of the materials prior to the exhibition. Beyond these archival constraints, further limitations arise around questions of representation. Framing resistance through direct action materials and media coverage often overshadows the critical but less visible work occurring behind the scenes, often highly gendered with female activists disproportionately taking up the care and administrative roles that sustain resistance over time (Bishop & O'Connor, 2023). While rendering moments of housing struggle visible was in itself a critical act of bringing attention to often-overlooked realities, it nonetheless obscured the work that underpins long-term activism. These tensions resonate with Roy and Rolnik's (2020) reminder that methodologies are inevitably haunted by absence, silence, and disappearance, due to limits of radical representation. They emphasize that 'methodologies for housing justice cannot speak, with authenticity or completeness, for subaltern subjects or spaces' but can remain 'keenly attuned to the significance of absence' (Roy & Rolnik, 2020, p. 19). It is with this sensibility that *Au Foyer des Résistances* was conceived. Alongside these issues, methodological questions on custody and community control must also be raised—not only in relation to the archives themselves, but also regarding the production of the exhibition. How might the exhibition have differed if curated by a collective of activists, researchers, and tenants from the Marolles? How might its reception and interpretation have changed? Such questions bring attention to the importance of recognizing how tenants, activists, migrants, and organizers hold movement knowledge and control their own political representations.

Second, *Au Foyer des Résistances* served to spatially fix the housing movement, tracing its trajectory from a European-wide call to a national housing protest and, finally, to a corner café in the Marolles. In this way, the exhibition gave the movement a tangible and visible spatial presence, providing a face to the housing struggle in a bid to overcome the spatial scatteredness of housing activism, often confined to localized struggles in small pockets of resistance. *Au Foyer des Résistances* was, however, only temporarily appropriated as a venue for

political discussion, learning, and dialogue—a fleeting moment in the continuum of history. Resistance also requires strong, long-term physical presence. Physically rooting the history of housing struggles serves as a way to assert ‘we are here, and we are not going anywhere’ and can act as a form of resistance and memory preservation (Dalloul et al., 2020). Given the erasure of place is often a precursor to the erasure of memory, culture, and community, re-establishing memory and culture may begin with re-establishing physical spaces. This raises the question: could a more permanent and physically-anchored community exhibition on housing resistance be envisioned? This question aligns with broader inquiries about my status as a researcher, such as that posed by Maharawal and McElroy (2018): how can academic projects provide a political home for people as they fight to save their physical homes? For now, the exhibition aims to further its role as a tool for political education by being hosted in various locations across the city. Additionally, efforts are underway to develop a digital archive of the project, which may take the form of a virtual exhibition or a multimedia companion website (Carroll, 2021). Beyond the wish to valorise and archive the exhibition and its materials, a digital presence through an online repository could contribute to the agency and circulation of the archival material, turning them into politically actionable knowledge to support ongoing housing justice struggles and reach audiences beyond the physical exhibition (Almeida & Hoyer, 2021).

In conclusion, community exhibitions serve as distinctive spaces in which community archives can differentiate themselves from both mainstream institutional repositories and conventional exhibition formats. They achieve this by facilitating the re-activation of archival materials in ways that are socially engaged, contextually situated, and directly accessible to the communities represented within their content or impacted by the subject matter, with careful attention to timing, socio-political context, and physical location. Such approaches can enable community archives to be understood as ever-evolving narratives that invite dialogue, agency, and collective remembering, fostering a more reflexive and outward-facing approach to our shared memory (Sepúlveda, 2023). In this way, community exhibitions reinforce the community archives’ role as spaces of resistance, serving as powerful platforms for framing, connecting, discussing, and showcasing struggles for housing justice. By creating spaces for resonance, dialogue, learning, and action, they not only document past and present struggles but also facilitate critical engagement with systemic issues of housing injustice. Synchronic and diachronic connections function as explicit methodologies for understanding and mobilizing resistance, allowing to learn from historical experiences and fostering solidarity across struggles. Community exhibitions position community archives as living sites of resistance, functioning as strategic tools within a broader arsenal of tactics to build communities of resistance—vital in the pursuit of a radical urban politics committed to advancing housing justice.

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