

# Rebellious Heritage. Collecting Activism to Capture Debates on Urban Change

**Information about the author:** PhD, historian and art historian, Curator at STAM – Ghent City Museum (Belgium)

**Informacje o autorze:** dr, historyk i historyk sztuki, kurator w STAM – Stadsmuseum Gent [Muzeum Miejskie w Gandawie]

**Abstract:** This article examines a participatory collecting project carried out by the Ghent City Museum STAM between 2022 and 2024. The project focused on contemporary activism and civic engagement in Ghent, Belgium. Working closely with local activist groups and neighbourhood committees, the museum documented protests, campaigns, and acts of civil disobedience related to urban debates, with an emphasis on material and visual expressions.

The project did not aim to collect activism for its own sake. Rather, it sought to explore urban change through the lens of grassroots organisations. It captured how policy decisions are negotiated, contested, and shaped by citizen participation. The resulting collection includes over 600 items, such as banners, posters, props, digital media, and other ‘rebellious objects’. These reflect diverse activist practices and the performative and material dimensions of protest.

By placing these materials alongside policy-driven developments, STAM presents urban transformation as a dynamic, multi-voiced process. The article highlights the urgency of documenting activism in real time, the importance of participatory methods to build trust, and the challenges posed by the ephemeral nature of protest objects and the hybrid character of digital activism. Ultimately, it positions grassroots civic engagement as central to urban change and demonstrates how museums can mediate complex histories of contemporary cities.

Dziedzictwo buntu. Tworzenie kolekcji aktywizmu dla utrwalenia publicznej debaty wokół przemian obszarów miejskich

**Abstrakt:** W artykule omówiono projekt zbiórki artefaktów przeprowadzonej metodą partycypacyjną przez Muzeum

Miejskie w Gandawie (Belgia) z udziałem lokalnych społeczności i aktywistów w latach 2022–2024. Projekt muzealny skupiał się na zagadnieniach współczesnego aktywizmu i zaangażowania obywatelskiego na terenie Gandawy. Współpracując ściśle z miejscowymi grupami aktywistów oraz komitetami dzielnicowymi, Muzeum dokumentowało lokalne protesty, kampanie oraz akty nieposłuszeństwa obywatelskiego związane z dyskusjami społecznymi dotyczącymi życia miasta ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem widocznych w tkance miejskiej materialnych oraz wizualnych przejawów tych działań.

Celem projektu było nie tyle samo kolekcjonowanie artefaktów aktywizmu, co raczej dogłębna obserwacja przemian zachodzących w obszarze miejskim przez pryzmat oddolnych działań lokalnych organizacji. Udało się uchwycić, w jaki sposób decyzje polityczne są negocjowane, podważane i kształtowane w procesie partycypacji. Pokłosiem projektu jest zbiór przeszło 600 artefaktów buntu, takich jak m.in. transparenty, plakaty, rekwizyty, zawartość mediów cyfrowych, które odzwierciedlają różnorodność praktyk aktywistycznych, a także performatywnych oraz materialnych wymiarów protestu.

Zestawiając te materiały z inwestycjami determinowanymi przez przyjęte regulacje, gandawskie Muzeum prezentuje transformację obszarów miejskich jako proces dynamiczny, w którym wybrzmiewa wiele głosów. W artykule podkreśla się potrzebę dokumentowania aktywizmu w trakcie trwania samych wydarzeń, znaczenie metod aktywnie angażujących społeczności w budowanie zaufania, a także sygnalizuje się wyzwania wynikające z efemerycznej natury przedmiotów związanych z protestem oraz hybrydycznego charakteru aktywizmu cyfrowego. Ostatecznie autor umiejscawia oddolne formy zaangażowania obywatelskiego w kluczowym miejscu przemian obszarów miejskich i pokazuje, w jaki sposób muzea mogą przekazywać złożone historie współczesnych miast.

**Keywords:** activism, civic engagement, urban change, contemporary collecting, disobedient objects

**Słowa kluczowe:** aktywizm, zaangażowanie obywatelskie, transformacja obszarów miejskich, współczesne kolekcjonerstwo, artefakty buntu

In mid-2022, the Ghent City Museum STAM launched a participatory collecting project focused on contemporary activism and civic engagement in Ghent, Belgium.<sup>1</sup> The project was developed in close collaboration with local activist groups and neighbourhood committees. Together, we documented protests, actions, and acts of civil disobedience connected to urban debates, paying particular attention to visual and material expressions.

The aim was not to collect activism for its own sake, but to examine debates around urban change through the lens of organisations that emerged in response to specific policy decisions. Activist groups voice concerns, propose alternatives, and make conflict visible in public space. Their actions reveal how urban transformation unfolds through friction and negotiation. By documenting activism, STAM presents the city as a multi-voiced and contested environment, shaped as much by citizens' engagement as by formal planning processes.

## Ghent: a city in transition

Ghent is Belgium's third-largest city, after Brussels and Antwerp, and is home to approximately 270,000 residents representing around 160 nationalities. Historically a centre of textile production and trade, the city later developed into an industrial and port hub with a key role in regional transport networks. Today, Ghent is a university city and an important centre for employment, healthcare and culture. In recent years, it has also positioned itself as one of Europe's fastest-growing technology hubs, with more than 100 AI start-ups active in the city by 2026.<sup>2</sup>

Ghent has been experiencing rapid population growth for some time. Over the next decade, a further increase of around 8 per cent is expected. Projections indicate that the city may exceed 300,000 inhabitants by 2040. This growth is not confined to the city alone. The wider region is also becoming increasingly dense. The population of Flanders is forecast to grow by approximately 5 per cent by 2033. Population growth is already placing significant pressure on housing, public services and infrastructure, and this pressure is likely to intensify in the coming years. As a central city, Ghent also absorbs demands from the surrounding

region, including residential mobility, accessibility, employment opportunities and social services.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, Ghent faces multiple and interrelated challenges: balancing growth with the provision of affordable housing, reconciling urban development with the need for open space, and ensuring accessibility while maintaining sustainability. At the same time, the city is working towards becoming climate-resilient by 2030 in order to address increasing risks associated with climate change, including heat, flooding and extreme weather events. Meeting these ambitions requires an integrated approach that takes into account not only efficiency, but also quality of life, safety and environmental sustainability.<sup>4</sup>

Growing social diversity adds a further layer of complexity. In 2024, slightly more than half of all children under the age of nine in Ghent had a non-Belgian background,<sup>5</sup> and current trends suggest that by 2040 the majority of the city's residents may have migration roots. The scale of multilingualism, cultural diversity and international connectedness in the city is unprecedented. These developments make inclusive policies, equal opportunities, and democratic civic participation essential to ensuring that Ghent remains a city for all residents.

## Activism as a perspective on urban change

As the City Museum of Ghent, STAM documents current urban issues. This reflects our mission as a museum of both the past and the living city, as well as our national role in examining "urbanity" – what defines cities and distinguishes urban environments socially and physically. Contemporary collecting is a key way in which we carry out this role. In this context, Ghent serves as a case study of urbanism in Belgium, as many other cities face similar challenges and are looking for new ways to renew and improve their urban environments.

Urban change sparks debate and leads to shifts in policy and perspective. Visions of the city's future emerge through the interaction of multiple actors. Policymakers and researchers play a key role, but residents are equally involved in rethinking the city. STAM aims to capture this diversity of voices. The museum documents physical transformations

<sup>1</sup> This is the written and revised version of the presentation delivered at the conference *City. Museum. Change. Twenty Years in the European Union* (Museum of Kraków, 1–2 May 2024). I would like to thank Dr Michał Niezabitowski for the invitation to the conference and for the proposal to publish this lecture here. I would also like to thank my colleagues Esther Beeckaert and Lars De Jaegher for their valuable suggestions, and Bram Janssens and Frederik Verstraete for their assistance with image editing.

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Kirsten: *Eén godfather, een paar serie-ondernemers en véél unicorns: hoe Gent het Silicon Valley van Vlaanderen werd*. "Nieuwsblad" [online]. Available online: <https://www.nieuwsblad.be/binnenland/een-godfather-eeen-paar-serie-ondernemers-en-veel-unicorns-hoe-gent-het-silicon-valley-van-vlaanderen-werd/124652429.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Stad Gent: *Gent in cijfers* [online]. 2024 [accessed on 29 January 2025]. Available online: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/over-gent/kaarten-cijfers-en-data/gent-cijfers>; Stad Gent: *Een omgevingsanalyse voor Gent* [online]. 2024 [accessed on 29 January 2025]. Available online: <https://stad.gent/nl/media/875458>.

<sup>4</sup> Stad Gent: *Ruimte voor alle Gentenaars. Structuurvisie 2030* [online]. 2017 [accessed on 29 January 2025]. Available online: <https://stad.gent/nl/media/802077>.

<sup>5</sup> This implies that the child, or at least one of the parents, held a different nationality at the time of birth. Stad Gent: *Meer Gentenaars met wortels in migratie* [online]. 2024 [accessed on 28 January 2025]. Available online: <https://hoeveelin.stad.gent/tendensen/wortels-in-migratie/>.

and policy decisions, alongside the discussions that accompany them, showing how ideas about the city emerge, clash and evolve.

Residents participate in debates about the city of tomorrow in various ways. In this project, STAM focused on a specific form of civic engagement: local activist groups and neighbourhood committees. We chose this approach because their actions leave visual and material traces that provide valuable sources for museum collections. Activist groups offer a distinct perspective. They do more than oppose interventions; they bring issues onto the political agenda and advocate community-driven alternatives. Their influence on urban policy can be significant, yet their voices are often underrepresented in historical records and museum collections. By documenting these expressions of civic engagement, STAM builds a richer story of the city that goes beyond official policies.

One of the clearest ways activist groups express their civic engagement is through the objects they create. Activist or “disobedient” objects are not merely illustrations of protests and demonstrations. Research on activism shows that such objects carry and communicate the protest itself and actively take part in it. Their form, materials and use are charged with meaning and emotion, while also creating bonds between participants and reinforcing the collective. Disobedient objects allow ordinary people to exercise “counterpower” and to effect change.<sup>6</sup> Because they condense ideas, emotions and actions into tangible forms, activist objects are particularly relevant in a museum context. They do more than offer visual entry points into wider debates; they convey the spirit of protest itself and keep discussions about how the city, in all its complexity, should take shape alive.

As Flanders’ largest student city, Ghent has a substantial young and highly educated population. Combined with a strong tradition of social-democratic movements and a progressive cultural and intellectual reputation, this has fostered a vibrant civil society. Collaboration between the city government and civic organisations is deeply embedded in Ghent’s political DNA.<sup>7</sup> This local context makes the documentation of activist groups and their objects in our collection particularly meaningful. It reflects the city’s tradition of civic engagement and shows how urban policy and development continuously evolve through dialogue between government and citizens.

## Visualising debates: themes and actors

Between mid-2022 and 2024, STAM collaborated with Ghent-based activist groups to map the contemporary landscape of civic action. This process was grounded in sustained dialogue. Through repeated meetings, relationships were built and mutual trust established. These conversations explored the groups’ motivations, causes, organisational structures and methods. Together with the activists, we identified objects that embody their values and objectives.

The resulting overview of Ghent’s contemporary activist landscape revealed strong engagement with issues such as mobility, safety and liveability of neighbourhoods, affordable



Fig. 1. Jacket with Tooter, an animated character from the cartoon series *The Snorks*. Tooter cannot speak and thus cannot be heard; he can only communicate by tooting (loudly). Activist group *De Toeterterroristen*, Geert Vervinck (creator), 2024, STAM, A2023.046.002

housing, large-scale infrastructure projects, high-rise construction, and environmental and climate concerns. Other themes also inspire civic action, including racism and decolonisation, LGBTI-related issues, sexual harassment, wind turbine construction, and the preservation of neighbourhood facilities such as local libraries or community centres. These initiatives are generally smaller in scale or less sustained over time. Debates surrounding the renovation or repurposing of monuments and heritage sites often provoke strong emotions and attract significant media attention. Whether these

<sup>6</sup> *Disobedient Objects*. Eds. Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon. London 2014, p. 9. Additional interesting observations, with a focus on protest art, in: Wong Sampson: “Crowd creations: Interpreting occupy art in Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement.” In: *Art and the City: Worlding the Discussion through a Critical Artscape*. Eds. Jason Luger and Julie Ren. London 2017, pp. 199–204; Ho Selina and Ting Vivian: “Museological Activism and Cultural Citizenship: Collecting the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement.” In: *Museum Activism*. Eds. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell. London–New York 2019, pp. 201–203.

<sup>7</sup> Oosterlynck Stijn, De Rynck Filip, De Waele Els, Lamberts Miet, and Vermeersch Lode: *Het Gentse sociale middenveld en middenveldbeleid: een ecosysteem in beweging* [online]. 2021, p. 34 [accessed on 28 January 2025]. Available online: <https://hiva.kuleuven.be/nl/nieuws/nieuwsitems/het-gentse-sociale-middenveld-en-middenveldbeleid-een-ecosysteemin-beweging>.

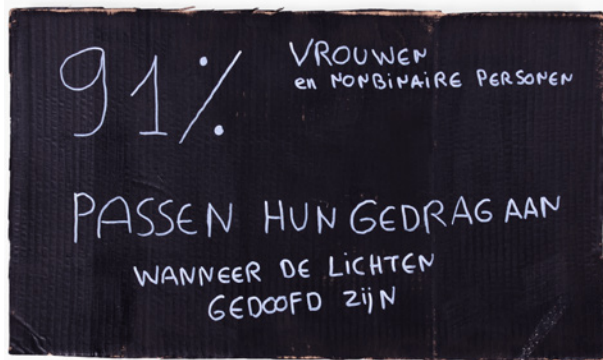


Fig. 2. “91% of women and non-binary people adjust their behaviour when the lights are off.” Protest sign from the campaign *Leave the lights on!*. Activist group *Collecti.e.f 8 maars Gent*, Matilde De Cooman (creator), 2023, STAM, A2023.075.005

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emotions translate into effective mobilisation or sustained physical action varies from case to case.

Participation in these discussions is not limited to local residents alone. Other city users are also drawn into them. In 2023, for example, truck drivers organised protests in response to a speed limit reduction on the Ghentbrugge viaduct. Calling themselves the *Toeterterroristen*, or “Tooter Terrorists”, they expressed their grievances by honking their horns day and night, deliberately disturbing nearby residents whom they held responsible for the policy change (Fig. 1). Students form another distinct group of participants. Many students, whether originally from the city or temporarily residing there, engage in actions related to racism, decolonisation, LGBTI-related issues, sexual harassment, and environmental and climate concerns. A clear example is the 2023 campaign *Leave the lights on!*, which opposed the decision to switch off street lighting after midnight as a cost-saving measure, since it increased feelings of insecurity (Fig. 2). Female students were strongly represented among both organisers and participants of the campaign. They are often among the first to encounter unsafe situations in nightlife contexts, making this issue particularly immediate and tangible for them.

The focus remained on urban themes rather than broader socio-economic issues such as wage disputes, education, or healthcare reforms, which are typically addressed at the regional or federal level. For the same reason, protests related to international issues were excluded. Actions such as the 2022 Woman Life Freedom Gent demonstration against the Iranian regime, or the 2024 occupation of the university rectorate by Ghent Students for Palestine, are in

themselves highly interesting cases and illustrate the city’s international connections. However, in terms of their thematic focus, they fell outside the scope of this project. Finally, the project deliberately avoided protests orchestrated by political parties. Instead, it concentrated on grassroots initiatives organised by citizens themselves and embedded in the urban fabric of the city.

Given Ghent’s perception as a progressive city, extremist or far-right activism is relatively rare. This does not mean that extremist opinions are absent, but they tend to remain confined to online spaces and rarely translate into street protests. When such actions do occur, they are usually initiated by the nationalist right-wing party *Vlaams Belang*. A case in point is November 2017, when protests against the renovation and expansion of the Fatih Camii mosque in the Rabot neighbourhood were initiated and organised by *Vlaams Belang*. The party framed the issue within its broader opposition to what it describes as the “Islamisation of Flanders”. No other spontaneous protest actions, for instance by local residents, were observed.

## STAM’s dual-track collecting strategy: an example

Housing is currently one of the most pressing challenges facing Ghent. Rising property and rental prices, combined with steady population growth, have created a structural housing crisis. By 2022, nearly 12,000 people were registered on the waiting list for social housing. Single residents and even middle-income households increasingly struggle to find affordable and adequate living arrangements within the city.<sup>8</sup>

In response, the city has adopted a range of policy measures. On the one hand, the supply of social housing is being expanded. This occurs through new construction by the urban development agency *Sogent*, as well as through the renovation or replacement of ageing housing stock, much of which dates from the 1950s to the 1970s. On the other hand, the private housing market is being encouraged to explore alternative models of living, ownership, and management, such as collective and cooperative housing. Ghent is widely regarded as a pioneer in Belgium in experimenting with innovative forms of contemporary housing. At the same time, policy attention increasingly focuses on densification within existing residential areas and on building higher. These strategies are presented as key instruments for expanding housing capacity.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Vervloesem Els, Coenegrachts Karl-Filip, Ballon Pieter, Boudry Linda, Dehaene Michiel, De Boeck Sarah, De Rynck Filip, Mabilde Julie, Oosterlynck Stijn, and Vanautgaerden Liesl: *Stedelijkheid is een collectieve uitdaging* [online]. 2022 [accessed on 28 January 2025]. Available online: [https://hannah-arendt.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/VSS\\_Manifest\\_Stedelijkheid\\_is\\_een\\_collectieve\\_uitdaging-1.pdf](https://hannah-arendt.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/VSS_Manifest_Stedelijkheid_is_een_collectieve_uitdaging-1.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Stad Gent: *Beleidsnota Wonen 2020–2025* [online]. 2 March 2021 [accessed on 29 January 2025]. Available online: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/stadsbestuur/wat-doet-het-bestuur/beleidsnotas-2020-2025>; Stad Gent: *Beleidsnota Ruimtelijke Planning, Stadsontwikkeling en Stedelijke Vernieuwing* [online]. 26 April 2021 [accessed on 29 January 2025]. Available online: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/stadsbestuur/wat-doet-het-bestuur/beleidsnotas-2020-2025>.



Fig. 3. “Stop, we don’t want this”. Poster protesting housing densification in the Poolse-Winglaan neighbourhood. Neighbourhood committee Poolse-Winglaan, Tim Tronckoe (designer), 2022, STAM, A2023.072.001

Together, these policy choices are already shaping, and will continue to shape, the organisation of urban space and the concept of living in the city. Ghent is entering a new phase in its historical development, marked by significant changes to both the cityscape and skyline. To document this transformation, STAM has developed a collection strategy based on three main approaches. First, a photographic survey of Ghent’s current social housing stock was commissioned. This report captures a moment in time, just before large-scale renovation and redevelopment projects begin. Second, processes of demolition and renewal are closely monitored. Physical elements from demolished buildings are salvaged, particularly those of architectural significance or representative of specific social housing models. Third, scale models of new social housing projects and experimental collective housing concepts are proactively acquired.<sup>10</sup> These models enable future researchers to study not only what was built, but also which visions of urban living were proposed at specific moments in time.

Alongside these policy-driven developments, STAM collects materials from protests against housing policies. Some of these actions target specific projects, while others challenge broader strategies. Resistance to densification in the Poolse-Winglaan area provides a clear example of the former (Fig. 3). In this typical suburban neighbourhood from the 1960s, permission was granted to replace detached houses with apartment blocks. This intervention will drastically



Fig. 4. Box of petitions to enforce a public referendum on affordable housing. Activist group *Te Duur*, 2023, STAM, A2023.037.002

alter both the character of the neighbourhood and its social fabric. An example of a movement that challenges Ghent’s housing policy more broadly is *Te Duur* (“Too Expensive”). This group emerged in response to rising housing costs and the shortage of social housing. In October 2023, they succeeded in forcing a public referendum after gathering signatures from more than ten per cent of Ghent’s residents (Fig. 4). A large majority voted in favour of a moratorium on the privatisation of public buildings and for the creation of a public land bank to realise social housing.

From the Poolse-Winglaan protest group, a poster was collected. From *Te Duur*, the collection includes posters, flyers, banners, props used in demonstrations and performances, and the box used to deliver 35,620 petition signatures to the city authorities. At first glance, this cardboard box may seem mundane, yet its symbolic value is considerable. It represents months of mobilisation and demonstrates how organised civic action can directly influence political decision-making. It also captures the scale of public support, expressed through thousands of handwritten signatures.

By juxtaposing materials linked to official policy with those produced by activist groups, STAM presents urban change as a dynamic and contested process. Activist groups articulate concerns and propose alternatives. Their actions make conflict visible in public space. Collecting their materials reveals how urban transformation emerges through friction and negotiation, as the result of the interaction between diverging interests and competing visions.

### (Dis)obedient objects

Ghent action groups draw on a wide repertoire of techniques and methods to communicate their message. At the most basic level, this includes handing out leaflets and displaying window posters and banners in the streetscape. Demonstrations are also very common, either as simple gatherings of people carrying protest signs

<sup>10</sup> STAM Gent: *Collectieplan 2024–2028*. Ghent 2022, pp. 66–76.



Fig. 5. Guerrilla film screening at the Luminus power plant in an original protest against a new gas power plant. STAM also collected the digital projection file. Activist group *Gents Tegengas*, Pieter Geens (photographer), 2022, STAM, A2023.045.019

or as more elaborate processions with flags, costumes and other props. Meetings in front of the city hall, usually timed to coincide with the start of the municipal council meeting, are likewise frequent. Some groups stage musical or theatrical performances or organise events such as nature walks, cycling tours, car parades, neighbourhood parties, festivals, film screenings, award ceremonies or art exhibitions. Others intervene in public space, using the city as a canvas, for instance through spray tags or guerrilla actions (Fig. 5). A smaller number of groups adopt more direct forms of action, including squatting, blockades, occupations or sabotage.

While most of these actions generate visual records, others do not. These include publishing opinion pieces in the media, giving presentations, producing reports and other publications, launching petitions, intervening during municipal council meetings or pursuing legal procedures. Some groups operate exclusively through legal channels and do not engage in public manifestations at all. From a museum perspective, forms of action that do not produce objects or other visual materials are less suitable for this collecting project.



Fig. 6. Sticker “Traffic circulation plan, no thank you!”. *Actiegroep tegen LEZ en het circulatieplan*, 2017, STAM, A2023.052.001

Two-and-a-half-year working with activists has resulted in a diverse collection of disobedient or “rebellious” objects.<sup>11</sup> Most items relate to protests against existing policies, but the collection also includes pieces from campaigns created to support proposed or already implemented measures. These pro-policy groups emerged particularly in the context of Ghent’s mobility plan. Introduced in 2017, the plan involved significant adjustments to car traffic, parking

<sup>11</sup> My alternative term, “rebellious objects” connects with Ghent’s longstanding image as a “rebellious city”: unconventional, defiant, and anti-authoritarian. For a deconstruction of this urban self-image, see: *Rebelsheid in de Gentse letteren: literaire stroppendragers van de middeleeuwen tot nu*. Eds. Lars Bernaerts and Lieselot De Taeye. Tiel 2023.



Fig. 7. Children's car costumes from a campaign for increased safety and quality of life in the Wolterslaan neighbourhood. Neighbourhood committee Wolterslaan, 2021, STAM, A2025.11.03-05



Fig. 8. "Sint-Kruis-Winkel is not a cash cow." Banner from an action advocating the preservation of the village community centre and opposing a reduction of the speed limit in the village core. A second banner from this action was reused to cover straw bales and was subsequently lost. Neighbourhood committee Sint-Kruis-Winkel, Jens Bauwens (designer), 2022, STAM, A2023.065.003

regulations, and the introduction of a low-emission zone. From the outset, it triggered intense debate, both online and offline (Fig. 6). In response to the wave of criticism, several activist groups and neighbourhood committees were formed specifically to defend the plan and to promote measures aimed at improving neighbourhood safety and quality of life (Fig. 7).

The items we collected cover a wide range of materials, including banners, flags, protest signs, posters, flyers, stickers, T-shirts, costumes, badges, graffiti stencils, artworks and props. The selection was not guided by aesthetic criteria or traditional notions of museum value. Instead, the aim was to represent the full spectrum of activist repertoires. As a result, the collection includes expressive and explicit materials,

numerous DIY objects and items made by children. Some protest objects consist of nothing more than a handwritten slogan on an A4 sheet or a banner created using WordArt or other basic design tools (Fig. 8). This handmade quality, occasional "clumsiness", and raw artistic expression emphasise authenticity, convey emotion and actively shape the meaning and message of the objects (Fig. 9). As Michael Taussig observes, 'it seems as if this graven quality comes from the sign saying exactly what the sign bearer wants to say.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Taussig Michael: "I'm so Angry I Made a Sign." In: Mitchell W.J.T., Harcourt Bernard E., and Taussig Michael: *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience*. Chicago 2013, pp. 27–28.



Fig. 9. The Promisebot, with a (Pinocchio) nose to unmask false promises by politicians, from Save Assels Wood campaign. Activist group *RED Assels BOS*, Koen Vromman (creator), 2019, STAM, A2023.080.002

Our search also focused on documentary materials. These include slogan sheets, song lyrics, scripts for sketches, even a curated Spotify playlist played during the satirical event *Fuck the Future Awards*, organised by the climate activist group *Move Your Money* in April 2023. These materials highlight the performative dimension of protest and show how actions are often carefully staged and communicated. Photographs and videos created by activists themselves form another essential component of the collection. These visual records not only complement the objects and situate them within specific moments of action and mobilisation, but also function as objects in their own right. They emphasise the message and convey it in ways that align with the values and objectives of the activists, allowing to retain control over their own communication and public representation. At the same time, these materials help the protest live on beyond the moment of demonstration, circulating online and sustaining networks of mobilisation.

## Trust through participation

Working with activist groups required sincerity and transparency. Trust could not be taken for granted, but had to be built over time through repeated meetings and open

dialogue. Clear communication about expectations proved essential. From the outset, we stressed that the project was not geared towards a specific exhibition. Its aim was to build a long-term collection that could support future research and other projects. In practice, however, this distinction was not always easy to convey. For some participants, museum work is almost synonymous with exhibition-making. Questions therefore arose about when objects would be displayed or whether they were already visible in the museum. Disappointment sometimes followed when it became clear that the materials would not be exhibited immediately.

Despite this occasional misunderstanding, feedback from participants was generally positive. There was a strong willingness to collaborate. Many groups viewed the project as an opportunity to preserve the memory of their actions and to contribute to a multi-perspective history of the city. One activist from Parkstad III, a group working on urban densification in the Wondelgem district, articulated this sentiment clearly in December 2025: 'Activist groups that can entrust their materials to museums are fortunate. Whether something happens with them immediately or much later is secondary. What matters is that these collection projects ensure that the heritage value of ideas and materials from the past continues to live on somewhere. Otherwise, these things risk being lost forever.'<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, this accumulated trust could not be assumed or generalised. Building trust was not equally straightforward in all cases and depended on the partners involved. One's own positionality also proved to be an important factor. In my case, it was relatively easy to connect with activists engaged in concrete urban issues such as the preservation of neighbourhood parks, libraries, high-rise developments, or local traffic circulation. By contrast, gaining the trust of activists working on decolonisation, sexual harassment, or those pursuing more confrontational forms of direct action proved more challenging. Additionally, trust in institutions is often limited within these groups. Thus, as a city museum, STAM was frequently associated with the city administration and urban policy against which many activists position themselves. Although STAM operates autonomously in terms of programming and exhibitions, and is funded not only by the city but also by the Flemish government, it was nonetheless difficult to counter the perception that the museum functioned as a vehicle for government communication (Fig. 10).

For these reasons, a participatory approach was essential. Collecting was done through activist groups, with their approval and in dialogue with them, rather than bypassing them. This applied not only to material objects, but equally to photographs and videos. Only images produced by activists themselves were included (Fig. 11). Journalistic images or material created by external parties were avoided, as these may foreground spectacle rather than substance.<sup>14</sup> By prioritising participation and original materials, the risk of bias is reduced and contextual information comes directly from those involved. Adopting a participatory approach, however, does not mean taking on activist language or positions. It means accurately representing their viewpoints while avoiding exaggeration, glamourisation, or, conversely, minimisation.

<sup>13</sup> Cecile De Bruycker to Brecht Dewilde [email]. 17 December 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Press photographs are not included as collection items, but may be retained as documentation in the collection archive to provide additional context.

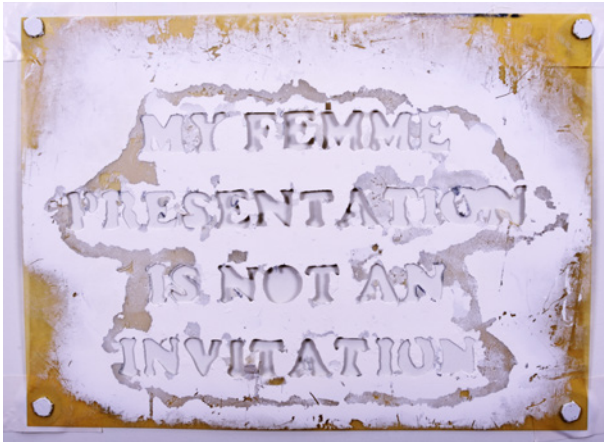


Fig. 10. Graffiti stencil “My femme presentation is not an invitation,” from an action against street harassment. This is an example of an object (from a series) that could only be acquired after several discussions and months of negotiations regarding its use and online accessibility. The hesitation was due to disappointment and broken trust, as the activists felt that the City of Ghent responded without understanding to their guerrilla action. Tine Van de Looverbosch and Patrycja Olszówka (creators), 2020, STAM, A2023.082.004



Fig. 11. Extinction Rebellion blocking the coal terminal at the Port of Ghent. The action was documented by a photographer from the group and shared on their social media. *Extinction Rebellion Gent*, Pieter Geens (photographer), 2022, STAM, A2023.044.021

## The materiality of activism

Rebellious objects do not always survive the rebellion: they are inherently functional and often have a short life cycle. Banners, signs, costumes, flags, and props are designed for use during protests and demonstrations. They

are exposed to outdoor conditions, transport, and physical interaction. Wear, damage, and change are therefore inseparable from their meaning. Additionally, many of these items are made from non-durable materials and are not intended for long-term preservation. Some groups, such as the squatters’ collective *De Pandemisten* and the Ghent branch of Extinction Rebellion, even deliberately reuse materials until they are completely worn out.

The condition of the collected materials, therefore, sometimes posed challenges. Objects could be dirty, weathered, or damaged. Rather than being seen as problematic, these traces of use are essential to understanding the objects themselves, as they form an integral part of their cultural biography. As Blanco Esmoris and Ohanian argue, such use marks testify to the intensity of use, the specific social situations in which protests unfold, and the conditions under which they take place. Wear, damage, and alteration reveal the role and function of objects within protest performances and document the transformation of ordinary objects into objects of protest.<sup>15</sup> The functional and performative character of activist material thus requires a different approach to assessing significance, in which context, use history, and social meaning take precedence over material perfection.

Nevertheless, in practice some degree of selection was unavoidable. This was the case when an object was in too poor a condition, when further physical degradation was inevitable, or when items posed contamination risks in storage. Physical constraints, such as size and limited depot space, also played a role. Certain items were simply too large to store, including a boat used by Extinction Rebellion and several parade vehicles built by *DakDak* (“RoofRoof”).

## Digital activism and hybrid practices

Alongside street protests, activism increasingly unfolds online. Social media, in particular, play a crucial role in mobilising supporters and disseminating messages. These platforms also create additional spaces for protest and, through practices such as livestreaming, enable new forms of participation.<sup>16</sup>

Most activist groups in Ghent blend physical actions with digital communication, while some rely entirely on online platforms. At times, it is difficult to distinguish between activist movements and online discussion forums. This distinction becomes even more complex when participants in online forums also initiate physical actions. In the

<sup>15</sup> Blanco Esmoris María Florencia and Ohanian María Jazmín: *Material Protests: A Contribution From the Cultural Biography of Things.* *Ethnologia Polona* 2022, No. 43, pp. 179–194.

<sup>16</sup> McGarry Aidan, Erhart Itir, Eslen-Ziya Hande, Jenzen Olu, and Korkut Umut: “Introduction: The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication.” In: *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*. Eds. Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, and Umut Korkut. Amsterdam 2020, pp. 20–26.

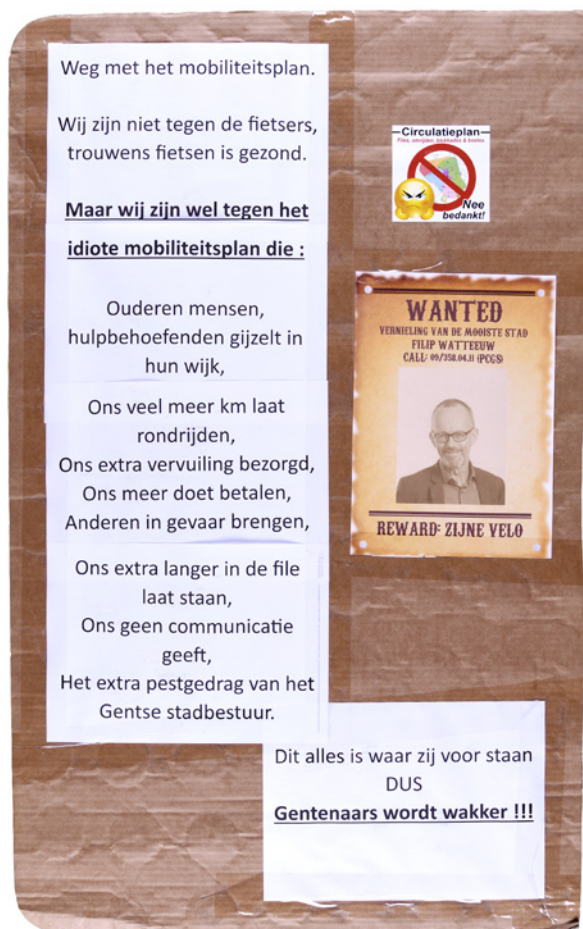


Fig. 12. Protest sign from an action against the ban on through traffic on Gentbrugge bridge. The “wanted” meme declared Deputy Mobility Mayor, ecologist Filip Watteeuw, as “fair game”; reward: his bike. *Actiegroep tegen mobiliteitsplan Gentbrugge*, Didier Kaes (creator), 2024, STAM, A2025.08.06

case of the *Actiegroep tegen mobiliteitsplan Gentbrugge* (“Action Group Against the Gentbrugge Mobility Plan”), this resulted in uncoordinated and hybrid forms of activism. Slogans and memes circulating in the group’s Facebook forum were printed by individual participants and displayed as posters in their windows, in various formats and layouts. These images were also used as protest signs on bicycles, cars, or cardboard placards during a demonstration on the Gentbrugge bridge on 9 May 2024 (Fig. 12). The action involved around 200 participants, was not centrally organised, and had no designated spokesperson. It emerged organically from online exchanges.

<sup>17</sup> Fernandez-Alonso Jeroen: *Deelname van Amsab-ISG aan het participatief verzamelproject van het STAM rond activisme en burgerparticipatie in Gent* [Presentation at the Workshop *Digitale cultuur verzamelen*]. Ghent, 20 February 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Message Kylie: *Collecting Activism, Archiving Occupy Wall Street*. London–New York 2020, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Compare with: Message Kylie: *Museums and Social Activism: Engaged Protest*. London–New York 2014, p. 74.

To document digital forms of activism, STAM collaborated with Amsab-ISG, the Ghent-based archive and research centre for civic engagement and social resistance in Flanders from the 19th century to the present. Since 2020, Amsab has developed a digital strategy to archive websites and social media channels of contemporary social movements. In collaboration with STAM, Amsab also focused on digital activism of local groups in Ghent. Through web scraping and self-archiving, Amsab preserved the online presence of activist groups with whom STAM was in dialogue. This process raises complex questions regarding technical implementation, selection, data reuse, and public access, which fall beyond the scope of this article.<sup>17</sup> In the near future, the collections of Amsab and STAM will be digitally linked. This will ensure that material and digital sources can be searched and consulted together.

## Documenting history now

This project focused primarily on contemporary debates about urban change. Where possible, it also looked further back in time, exploring past campaigns and activist groups. Doing so, however, was far from straightforward. Activist groups are typically informal and short-lived organisations. Managing archives or collections is rarely their priority, which means that materials from protests (if they survive at all) quickly disappear. In our experience, it is already difficult to recover objects from actions that took place more than five years ago. Fortunately, exceptions exist. We have even managed to locate and preserve items from campaigns dating back to the 1990s. In these cases, the objects were typically kept at home by former activists as personal souvenirs. Unfortunately, this means we rarely recover full repertoires of materials from that time.

This ephemerality highlights the urgency of collecting activist materials in the present, while history is still unfolding. As Kylie Message cautions: ‘Collect first, determine relevance second.’<sup>18</sup> The priority must be to rescue materials from loss or destruction; their potential significance can be assessed later. This approach presents a challenge because the heritage value of these materials is not always immediately evident. Collecting in real time requires a shift in museum practice. Traditional methods often rely on judging an object’s significance before acquisition. In contrast, this project anticipates which contemporary materials may acquire historical meaning in the future. The value of rebellious objects emerges over time: items that seem trivial today may become crucial records of urban transformation tomorrow.<sup>19</sup> Not every object will gain such significance, but even rare successes justify the approach.

Two recovered items from the 1990s illustrate this point. The first is a T-shirt from a 1997 protest against plans to build an underground car park at the foot of the Belfry in Ghent’s historic city centre (Fig. 13). Sustained protest ultimately halted the project. On 14 December 1997, Ghent held Belgium’s first successful referendum, in which the Belfry car park was rejected. This moment marked a turning point in the redesign of the inner city and paved



Fig. 13. T-shirt “Belfry car park no! Referendum yes!”. The Belfry turns its spire into a middle finger pointing at the planned underground parking. Activist group *Belfortparking nee, volksraadpleging ja*, Rufijn De Decker (designer), 1997, STAM, A2025.07

## GROENE VALLEI GROEN



Fig. 14. Poster “Green Valley Green”. Activist group *Groene Vallei Groen*, 1999–2000, STAM, A2023.107.001

the way for the eventual exclusion of cars from the historic core. The second object is a simple handmade A4 poster from a 1999 or 2000 protest against plans to develop land

released after the demolition of the La Lys flax factory (Fig. 14). The activist group *Groene Vallei Groen* (“Green Valley Green”) opposed the construction of apartment blocks on the site. As a result, only two of the five planned towers were built. Further protest eventually led to the transformation of the remaining land into the public Green Valley Park. Today, it is the largest green area within the R40 inner ring road and provides a vital green space for the densely populated Brugse Poort neighbourhood. Both protests represent key episodes in recent urban development, in which grassroots action ultimately proved decisive. The recovered objects make it possible to tell these stories through the authentic materials with which policy changes were enforced.

## Results and future prospects

To date, STAM has engaged with 62 activist groups and neighbourhood organisations. This has resulted in a collection of 649 items. Most of these have now been catalogued, with approximately 514 objects currently accessible online via the STAM website and Erfgoedinzicht. Future work will focus on completing the registration process and on further contextualisation of the material.

In addition, the museum seeks to collaborate with academic partners in fields such as political science, performance studies, and communication studies. These collaborations will support further research based on the collection, as well as on the knowledge and networks developed throughout the project. Such research may address interactions between public authorities and activist groups around local issues, assess the actual impact of protest on urban policy, or analyse the visual culture and performative dimension of protest, including the interplay between online and offline practices in contemporary activism. To date, much academic research on activism has tended to focus on influential, large-scale social protests, such as Occupy Wall Street or Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement. The added value of the STAM project lies in its city-wide mapping of activism that centres on concrete and often tangible local issues. This approach offers promising perspectives for developing new analytical frameworks. In the meantime, several rebellious objects have already been incorporated into STAM exhibitions, where they add nuance, introduce multiple perspectives, and stimulate discussion.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth reiterating that the project does not aim to collect activism for its own sake. Its primary objective is to explore debates on urban change in Ghent through the lens of activist practice. The project arose from a perceived need to follow processes of urban transformation in all their complexity. A focus solely on objects that illustrate the outcomes of policy decisions proved too limited, as it excluded the lived story of the city and the debates and ideas circulating within civil society. The decision to make these debates visible by focusing on activist groups reflects the fact that such groups actively

produce visual culture to communicate their claims and positions. This visual dimension makes their practices particularly legible within a museum context. The ultimate goal remains to present a layered account of contemporary urban development and changing city life that accommodates multiple perspectives.

The project does not seek to adopt a position in each of these debates. Rather, its purpose is to document complexity and opposing voices. Where we do consciously take a position is in recognising citizen participation as an integral component of urban change. Grassroots involvement is acknowledged as meaningful and worthy of documentation. In this sense, the project introduces a new, “rebellious” approach to the museum’s engagement with the city’s history. By focusing on concrete local issues and a diversity of viewpoints, the project redefines how contemporary citizenship in Ghent is represented, while framing urban decision-making as a participatory process. In doing so, the city museum positions itself as a space for exploration, research, and dialogue on contemporary urbanism.

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