In order to explore the merits of this relational approach of the political difference, we mobilize it to assess the political dynamics in the struggle for ‘t Landhuis in Ghent, a mid-sized city in Belgium. ‘t Landhuis, literally translated as ‘The Manor’, is a former organic farm located at the outskirts of the city. This domain – housing a central building, a herring smokehouse, adhering shacks and some organic farmland – was abandoned in 2009 and squatted in the Spring of 2010. The initiating group of squatters consisted of youngsters who were searching for a place to start their own open urban farming initiative. For about one year and a half, the youngsters lived and worked there with the consent of the private owner.¹ During that time, they held sessions on urban gardening, organized vegan people’s kitchens, and opened up the organic garden for neighbors to have their own allotments (vzw De Warmoezeniers, 2011). By 2015, about 40 gardeners and a dozen squatters were involved in ‘t Landhuis. However, in the purchase of the plot of land by the City of Ghent in the Winter of 2011, the continuation of this ‘autonomous ecological centre’ has been threatened by expulsion and demolition, as the City of Ghent intended to erect a training complex for the city’s first division soccer team (Van Pee, 2012).

In what follows, we examine how this conflict has unfolded since 2011 and what the effects have been on the city as a space that may nurture ecological commons. To reconstruct the conflict, we collected data from newspapers and magazine articles reporting on ‘t Landhuis, relevant policy documents, reports of meetings and the e-mail correspondence between the youngsters and city functionaries. Furthermore, we interviewed several

¹ After squatting the building, they contacted the private owner. According to the squatters, this person did not mind because he was already planning to sell the land to the City of Ghent and had no further intentions to do anything with the land itself.
actors involved in the conflicts. On the basis of an analysis of this empirical material, we identified three phases in the conflict: (i.) a first phase in which a non-negotiation policy was applied towards squatters; (ii.) in the second phase the city council started negotiating with the youngsters and reached an agreement on the maintenance of the allotments; and finally (iii.) the revival of the conflict due to the squatters affirming to the right to housing.

Squatting ‘t Landhuis: no voice in ‘property holding democracy’

In the first phase of the conflict, the city council refused to negotiate with the squatters. Even though they used the land and invested their time and other resources in it, thus developing a close relationship with it, the squatters’ voice were not heard by the city council since they had no legal ownership. The dominance of property rights in the existing order thus reduced the squatters’ voices to noise. When in December 2011 the parcel at the ‘warmoezeniersweg’ was purchased by the City of Ghent, it soon enough became clear that for the then Alderman of Finance, Facility Management and Sports, there could be no toleration of squatters. This approach towards squatting stemmed from a long-lasting anti-squatting stance within the Flemish liberal party, of which this Alderman is a member, because, according to them, it is unacceptable that ownership is not universally accepted.

Furthermore, this Alderman already had other plans with the terrains of ‘t Landhuis. He promised the city’s first division soccer team that they could use the site to erect an extra training complex (Van Pee, 2012). The Alderman’s vision on ownership in general and his particular intentions with ‘t Landhuis terrains specifically, explain why the Alderman did not perceive the squatters as negotiating partners (let alone on equal terms). Lacking an ownership claim or official political responsibilities, they were seen as having

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2 In total, 9 actors were interviewed, including activists, gardeners, functionaries and advisors of Aldermen.
3 We deliberately use the term ‘squatter’ here because the occupants of ‘t Landhuis employ the term ‘political squatting’ themselves, both in communication on their online blog and when communicating with the media. Furthermore, they insist on using the term squatting in the Articles of Incorporation of their organization ‘VZW De Warmoezeniers’. According to the occupants of the house and initiators of the project, occupying the terrain was an essential beginning of their socio-ecological initiative. If the terrain was not occupied, there would be no allotments today, there would be no cultural activities as well. (Interview gardener, 27-03-2015)
4 Between 2007 and 2012, the city council of Ghent consisted of members of the socialist party (SP.a Spirit) and the liberal (VLD) party. Since 2013, the green party (Groen) joined this coalition.
no right to co-determine the future of this plot of land. In this context, it was no big surprise when the Alderman ordered the youngsters to harvest their crops and leave the terrain.

In February 2012, the squatters reacted to this threat of expulsion with a twofold strategy. First, they started a petition, titled “wasteland and anti-squat for the socio-ecological project ‘t Landhuis?! (vzv de Warmoezeniers, 2012) In this petition, they accused the city council of undermining its own sustainable image by closing its eyes to a valuable social ecological project. Secondly, the squatters laid down a complaint with the city’s ombudsperson, appealing to the value of their project for the city and defending that “more than ever, it is crucial to handle our planet in a sustainable way. [...] It would be a shame to put a socio-ecological project in full development on hold, and make the residents/concierges homeless, while there is no worthy alternative scenario laying on the table.” (dienst Ombudsvrouw Stad Gent, 2012)\(^5\)

In both actions, universalizing framing can be recognized. Although there is no doubt that particular interests were playing as well when occupying the site, the squatters framed their claims in terms of an equal right to co-determine its (and by extension the city’s) socio-ecological future. By doing so, they disrupted the police order, which requires you to identify as owner of this particular property in order to be recognized and heard as a negotiation partner. The squatters contested this ‘distribution of names, places and functions’ along the lines of property owners and non-property owners as they felt it institutionalizes inequalities in discussing the city’s socio-ecological future. Although the official plans were still to evict the squatters, the expulsion date was delayed until August 2012 due to a personal intervention of the mayor.

*From noise to voice*

The personal intervention should be seen in the light of the contentious context in which this struggle was going on: not everyone working in and for the municipality shared the opinion of the Alderman. The ombudsperson, for example, who is employed by the city council to mediate in such conflicts, believed that it should be sufficient to be a tenant to be heard in the discussion on the future use of the land. This ombudsperson suggested to

\(^5\) The expropriation of the adjacent plots were pretty rough and it would take time before the training complexes could ever be erected. (Interviewee 05 & 06, April 15, 2015)
the occupiers to present themselves as the ‘caretakers’ rather squatters of the building and urged the Alderman to let them stay in the building under the custody of an anti-squat firm and provided they were willing to pay rent (Interviewee 01, March 23, 2015). The ombudsperson thus intervened to open up more space for negotiation, but on the condition that the squatters would take the more ‘acceptable’ position of tenants and caretakers of the building, a position that could be easier accommodated for in the existing order of property-holding democracy. Thus, they can only be ‘heard’ and ‘seen’ by the police, if they speak from a particular position that is already established in the currently existing order.

Tensions between ‘t Landhuis adherents and opponents aggravated, when in January 2013 the Green party joined the socialists and liberals in the city council. The occupiers of ‘t Landhuis emphasized that their project is in line with the official governing program of both the Greens and the Socialists and spoke to the ambition of the new responsible (socialist) Alderman for Urban Development, Housing, and Public Green to expand garden allotments in the city. (Balthazar, 2014) As a result of the much bigger sensitivity for ecological concerns of the newly established city council and favorable publicity of ‘t Landhuis in a local newspaper, by May 2013 the city council officially changed its approach towards the conflict and announced that it wanted to maintain a share of the allotments at ‘t Landhuis (vzw de Warmoezeniers, 2013). The action was a first rapprochement towards the squatters, acknowledging their voice as legitimate stakeholders in the discussion. While previously there could be no conversation with the squatters, they now were invited to share their vision on the situation. By speaking as equal human beings and demanding the right to have a say on the socio-ecological future of the city (or at least part of it), the squatters managed to open up the police order, obtaining a right to speak on certain topics on which they previously were not heard and making the preservation of the allotments negotiable.

However, the negotiation on the allotments came with the condition that the squatters would formally organize themselves in an official association, unifying squatters and gardeners. This effectively framed their position in a more particularized fashion as they would now speak as a legally sanctioned official association. Though not everyone involved at ‘t Landhuis completely

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6 A Flemish newspaper posted on 23/04/2013 an article titled “I’m willing to fight for my home” (see Vergauwen, 2013). In this article, the users of ‘t Landhuis are being given a platform to address the high housing prices and vacancy rates in the city. According to the squatters, this article was the direct reason for the change of direction by the City of Ghent.
agreed with this move, in February 2014 the squatters created the association ‘VZW de Warmoezeniers’, referring to the street which the allotments are located. After a few months of negotiation, the city council and the association came close to reaching a conclusive solution. In March 2014, it was agreed that the residential building in which the squatters lived, could be demolished. The allotments, on the other hand, could partially stay and be organized by the association. This time, the city council even explicitly asked the squatters to draw a plan of their propositions for the allotments. In this way, the squatters could safeguard the land for cultivation by neighbors and govern it as an ecological commons through the association. At the same time, their involvement in negotiations and subsequently in the management of the common land pushed them to see their position and activities in more particularized terms.

The conflict re-politicized: The right to housing as new universalizing strategy

However, when in August 2014 a recent founded neighborhood committee in cultural heritage stepped into the breach for the maintenance of the central building, arguing that the site is quite remarkable and should be preserved as cultural heritage, the squatters in the association changed their mind in support of this claim to preserve the building as well (vzw de Warmoezeniers, 2015). This change of mind should be seen in the light of another discussion on the statutes of ‘de Warmoezeniers’ that was going on between the squatters and the gardeners in the association. In the goals written down in the Articles of Incorporation, it is stated that:

“The association aims at [p]romoting sustainable agriculture and nutrition, sustainable organic lifestyles, animal welfare, short-chain initiatives and food sovereignty”; “showing solidarity without borders, and resisting oppression and social or environmental abuse, while focusing on communities and farmers in the South”; and “contributing to a positive role for squatting in society.” (vzw de Warmoezeniers, 2014b)

The reference to the positive role of squatting remained a voice the city council was unwilling to accommodate, as it shied away from confronting the potential contradictions between its promise to

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7 This committee was founded in March 2014 and aimed at collecting and preserving (information on) cultural heritage in the district of ‘de Ottergemse Dries’, the district in which ‘t Landhuis is located.
mobilize citizen’s bottom-up for an alternative socio-ecological future and the unequal speaking rights in property-holding democracies. While for most gardeners, the particular interest in maintaining the allotments was their main concern, others mostly youngsters living in the building - kept framing their interest in ‘t Landhuis in more overarching universal concerns. In the Summer of 2014, this dispute was won by the squatters, thus resisting to reduce their contestation to the particular struggle for ‘t Landhuis. On the general assembly of the association in August 2014, members who did not agree with this more principled approach decided to leave the association (vzw de Warmoezeniers, 2014a). Since then, the official point of view of ‘de Warmoezeniers’ towards the City can be described as follows: no demolition of the building, no eviction of the residents, more space for grassroots initiatives and the recognition of squatting as a valuable answer to the high vacancy rate (Interviewee 03, April 08, 2015).

In January 2015 the City eventually withdrew its earlier demolition permit. While this shift can be partly explained by the fact that the city council encountered strong opposition against the expropriation of the adjacent plots, the permanent opposition of ‘de Warmoezeniers’ and their adherents, framing their claims on universalizing socio-political and ecological grounds (which resonated with the stated ambitions of the new city council), as well contributed to the shift. In January 2015, the association ‘de Warmoezeniers’ started a second petition, denouncing the intentions of the city to tear down the building. In this petition they refer to both the socio-ecological value of the initiative and the current housing shortage and the right to housing (vzw De Warmoezeniers, 2015).

Regarding the socio-ecological value of the project, ‘de Warmoezeniers’ got support from the ‘municipal advisory committee for spatial planning’ of Ghent (GECORO). “Where does the city want to go? Does she not see the potentials of this growing social and societal relevant initiative, which perfectly complements various thrusts of this year’s policy agreement? Given the city’s choice for climate neutrality, a green and social policy, co-creation and co-production, it is the GECORO’s belief that this should also be reflected in her vision on the future and the choice made by the City for this site.” (De Kezel, 2015)

Because of this support, the difficulties with the expropriation procedure for adjacent grounds, and because of the objection made by
‘de Warmoezeniers’ against the demolition of the residential building, by the end of January 2015 the City of Ghent decided to cancel the demolition of the residential building (Dienst Coordinatie, 2015). In the new spatial implementation plan for the area the building is included, but located in a recreation zone and therefore should not be permanently inhabited (Stad Gent, 2016). At the time of finishing this article, the occupants are still living in ‘t Landhuis, organizing activities on a regular basis.

What is clear in this case, is how the transformative dynamics of the conflict are driven by attempts of the squatters to position themselves and their demands around ‘t Landhuis as stand-ins for a universalizing message on each and everyone’s right to decide on the socio-ecological future of the city. In a context in which the city council had explicitly committed itself to the co-production of a ‘socio ecological city’, they were able to resist attempts at policing their ‘place, name, and function’ and continue to disrupt the existing order of things, which increased the collective capacity of citizens to co-determine the city’s socio-ecological future. This acting as a stand in for a universalizing message is, however, always a precarious exercise, as the group of members who preferred to focus on gardening alone left the association, thus potentially undermining its capacity to mobilize.