



Digital trading platforms for reclaimed construction materials

Short summary

The reclaim and reuse of building materials is a vital point of circular economy in the construction sector. To facilitate the circulation of these materials, several actors across the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France have developed digital platforms that aim at ensuring that reclaimed materials can be reused through online marketplaces.

To get a better view of this burgeoning market and see how it can help to improve the circulation of reclaimed materials, a study was pursued within the framework of Digital Deconstruction. Several interviews were conducted with a selection of the organizations running these platforms. They give a better understanding of these findings. A total of 41 platforms were analysed for this study.

This analysis enabled to show that there is a great diversity of marketplaces regarding reclaimed building materials, that vary in both content and form. From private companies to associations or public actors, from ergonomic online catalogues full of features to simple downloadable spreadsheets, the variety of these marketplaces does not enable to single out a trend among them at once.

Three main comparison criterions can however be highlighted:

- The possibility for third parties to publish their own ads.
Only 24% of surveyed platforms offer the possibility for any user to publish their own ads. Most platforms (59%) only publish ads themselves while the few last also let partners publish ads.
- The dematerialization of the marketplace.
About half of surveyed platforms offer the possibility to buy materials and products from their marketplace, without requiring to physically meet to make the transaction. A smaller 27% of surveyed platforms offer a fully dematerialized experience by including an option for having the material delivered.
- The association of the digital marketplace with a reuse expertise.
Whether it is in reclaim inventory, dismantling, quality control, material restoration or any other expertise related to materials reclamation and reuse, only 27% of surveyed platforms do not offer an additional expertise to their customers. While a marketplace hugely facilitates circulation of materials, this marketplace is generally not a unique service for the organization providing it, nor even their main service in most cases.

Indeed, several of the interviewed organisations reported that although these digital marketplaces are necessary to bring a better visibility to their materials, the consequent transactions generally do not represent a main source of income for them. As such, they tend to use the platform as a showcase for their other services, which is why so few platforms offer the possibility for a full dematerialized experience.

Interestingly, the interviewed organizations reported that the market for reclaimed materials, while currently boosted by both private and public circular economy policies, still has its limits. It stays a highly fluctuating market that does not offer the same guarantees as the market for new materials, be them technical or in availability. To compensate these shortcomings, the organizations behind these platforms choose to favour a direct and humane relationship with their customers and providers to maintain an image and a trust in their expertise that a fully dematerialized experience may not provide.

When asked if a meta-platform that would centralize catalogues from various existing platforms at a single location would be relevant, the interviewed organizations had a mitigated opinion. Even if it may simplify the user experience, it would further distance the organization from their customer and would represent a huge technical challenge that would be very and time-consuming for them.

