



WE CAN CHANGE THE WEATHER

100 cases of changeability

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The 1968 Belgian legislation imposing the exclusive use of the Dutch language at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) forced the French speaking part of the University to leave Louvain, where it had prospered for 500 years, and to look for a new site. Following a proposal made by Professor Michel Woitrin, its General Administrator, the University decided to develop a new university town similar to that of traditional university towns like the mediaeval city of Louvain/Leuven, instead of building a new campus.



Louvain-la-Neuve

From a new university town to a regional center

After examining several potential locations, UCL accepted the invitation proffered by the small municipality of Ottignies (4,000 inhabitants) and its mayor, Count Yves du Monceau de Bergendal, to settle at the edge of its territory, on a gently undulating plateau along the main Brussels-Namur road, and to buy some two-thousand acres of agricultural land there. The Belgian Government of the time would have preferred a French-style university campus in the fields. It rejected the idea of a university developing a new town and passed a special law that forbade the university from selling any plots of land acquired with public help before 2020. Far from abandoning the project, the UCL pressed ahead, but instead of selling land, it developed it by issuing long-term leases (*emphytéoses*) to developers and individuals.

To work out the overall master plan and undertake the architectural coordination of the new town, the UCL appointed the 'Groupe Urbanisme Architecture' (Urban Planning and Architecture Office), headed by R. Lemaire, J.P. Blondel and P. Laconte. This master plan was adopted in 1970 and actually implemented. An update by Jean Remy took place in 1993.

The development of the town was to happen in stages, according to a linear pattern. Each stage of development had to include townhouses, blocks of flats, shops, etc., in addition to the university buildings. All spaces that were not directly connected to the university needed to be privately financed, within the low-rise bulk imposed by the master plan. The first stage of the new town grew around the Science Faculty, the Science Library and a first pedestrian street (1972).

That first pedestrian street (rue des Wallons) was extended from 1972 towards the site of a new railway station and the pedestrian urban spine further developed along the Grand rue, towards the Grand Place. The railway station became a focal point of the new town's urban development. From 2001, the urban population, unrelated to the university, has exceeded the population employed by the university. The main reason for the non-university population to settle there is the availability of numerous cultural activities generated by the university. Conversely, the university population often prefers to live outside.

The densely built-up area covers only 1/3 of the site acquired by the university. The remaining area is to stay clear off buildings and includes a forest, managed as nature reserve. The rainwater is separately collected in an artificial lake situated at the lowest point of the site. This urban concept – both compact and green – is by far the thriftiest in energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, since cars are not needed within the town.

Yet, the challenge of becoming a regional service center, asked for an underground location for the railway line and access road, and in order to provide sufficient parking places, it was decided to build a slab of roughly 3 ha, including two underground levels. These accommodate, besides the station and the access roads, the car parks and support services. The slab was easily integrated into the site topography – a dry valley – and helped to provide a smooth connection between the rue des Wallons, built in 1972, and the artificial ground of the Grand rue.

The Louvain-la-Neuve project started as a new university town and is now, due to its success, indeed becoming a service centre at regional level. This presents a new planning challenge. The entrance plaza of the shopping and leisure centre L'Esplanade, next to the railway station, has become the third large pedestrian gathering space of the new town, an integral part of the Ottignies municipality, which now has a 30,000 day/night population, not counting the student population, and has been renamed the city of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve.

Pierre Laconte is a Belgian urbanist, born in Brussels, Belgium. He specializes in city and regional planning, urban transport and environmental issues. He has a Doctorate in Law and a Doctorate in Economics from the Catholic University of Louvain and is Dr honoris causa, Edinburgh Napier University. Laconte was one of the three planners in charge of the *Groupe Urbanisme Architecture*, which was entrusted with the planning and architectural coordination of the new university town. He received the UN Habitat Scroll of Honour Award in 1999 and was the Belgian Government Representative at UN Habitat I in 1976, at Habitat II in 1996, and at the UN Kyoto Conference of Parties on Climate (1997). Laconte is the president of ISOCARP – International Society of City and Regional Planners (2006–2009) and the Foundation for the Urban Environment (from 1999).

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