From the historic city of Louvain/ Leuven to the development of the new Louvain University town: Memory and eco-innovation

Pierre LACONTE
President, Foundation for the Urban Environment (www.ffue.org)
Co-designer of Louvain-la-Neuve, new university town

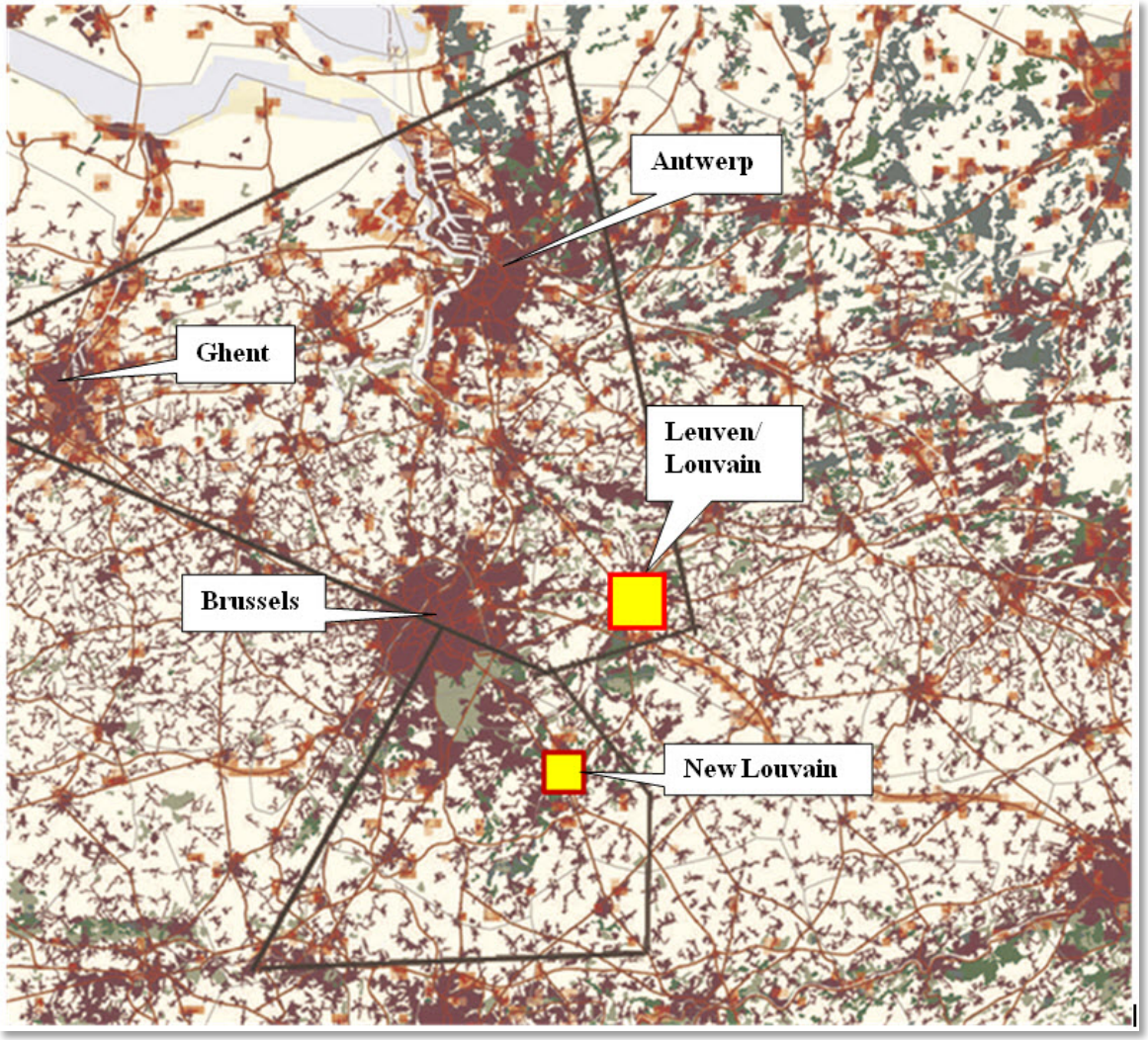

Fig. 1. Satellite map showing the urbanised area of central Belgium, around Brussels. In the Flemish region**,** Antwerp lies 50 km to the north, Ghent 60 km to the west and Louvain/Leuven 25 km to the east of central Brussels, in a diamond shape. The loose conurbation south of Brussels forms a kind of triangle. Louvain new town has been located in this part of the Walloon region, less than 30 km south of central Brussels. The university bought 920 ha farm land in order to build a complete town on it. Historic old Louvain/Leuven - east of Brussels - and the New Louvain university town (« Louvain-la-Neuve ») - south of Brussels - are shown on the map by yellow squares.

Fig. 2. Old Louvain's market place, location of the former cloth market that became the university's headquarters in 1425. It was largely destroyed during the first World War and reconstructed in the 1920s, preserving the old street pattern and cadastral plot divisions.

Fig. 3. The Groot Begijnhof/Grand Béguinage of Leuven. The Beguinage neighbourhood has the appearance of a small town in its own right, with houses planned along a network of narrow streets and small squares. This is in contrast to the beguinages of Bruges or Amsterdam, where all houses face a central courtyard. The only large open space, on the left bank of the river, resulted from the demolition of some houses in the 19th century (see photo). Photo RLICC 2016.

Fig. 4. Arenberg Castle. The historic Arenberg castle houses the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation, Leuven University (RLICC). This photo shows the 2016-2017 group of trainees. Its present President is Minja Yang (China), formerly Deputy Director of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre and Director of UNESCO's New Delhi office.

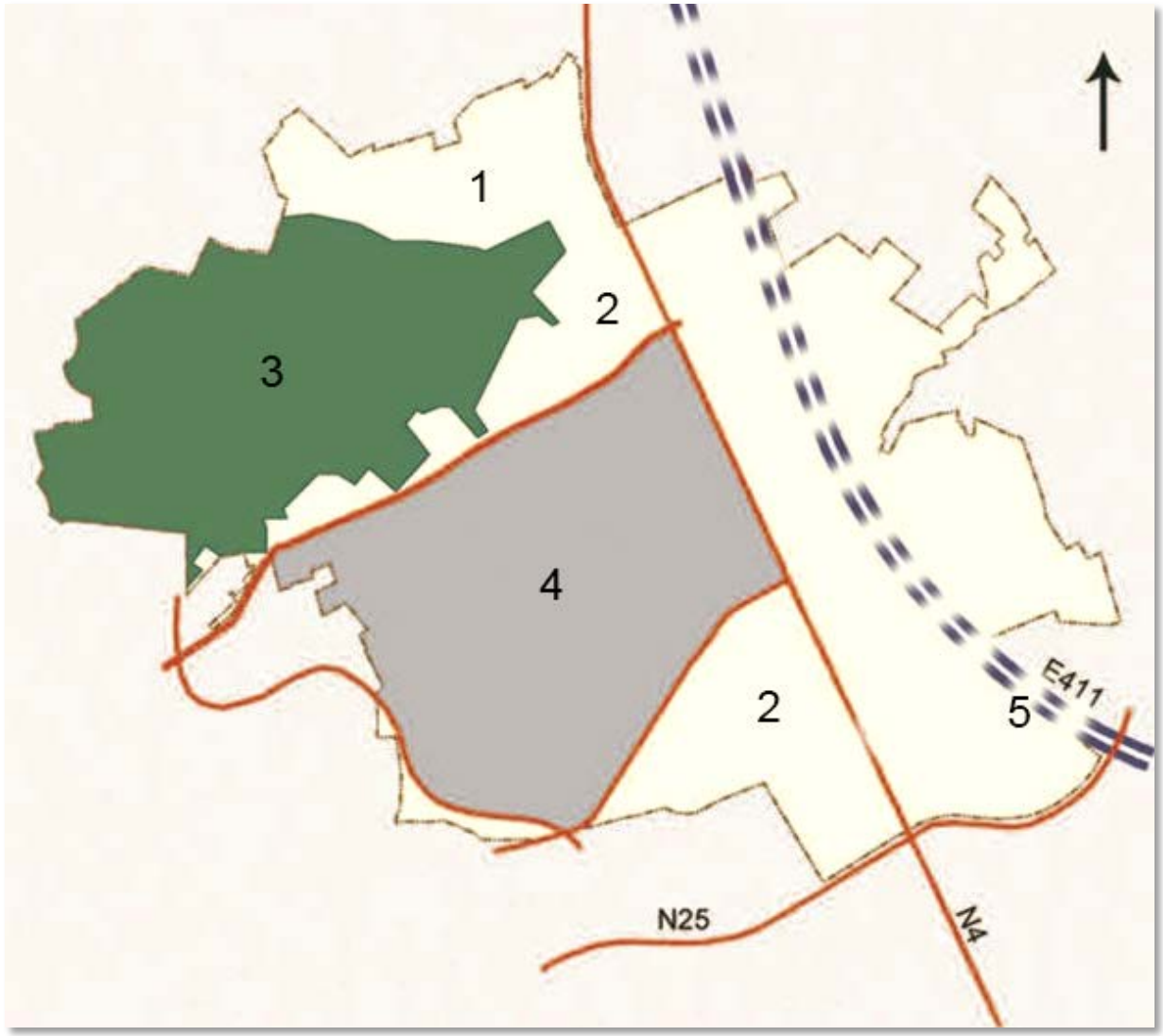

Fig. 5. The 920 ha of land acquired by the university in 1969 (“Domaine de l’université”). The arrow shows the anchoring of the new town on the only existing infrastructure, i.e. the N4 road linking Brussels to Namur and Luxemburg. The E411 motorway did not exist at that time and is shown by dotted lines. Dense mixed-use urban development (“Aire urbaine”) was restricted to the central part of the site (4). The northern area in green (“Bois de Lauzelle”) was reserved as forest (3). The area east of it and south of the dense urban development became a research and development park (2). The area north of the forest was developed as a golf course (1). The area east ot the N4 road became extensions of the research and development park. Drawing by the author, based on the local cadastral map.

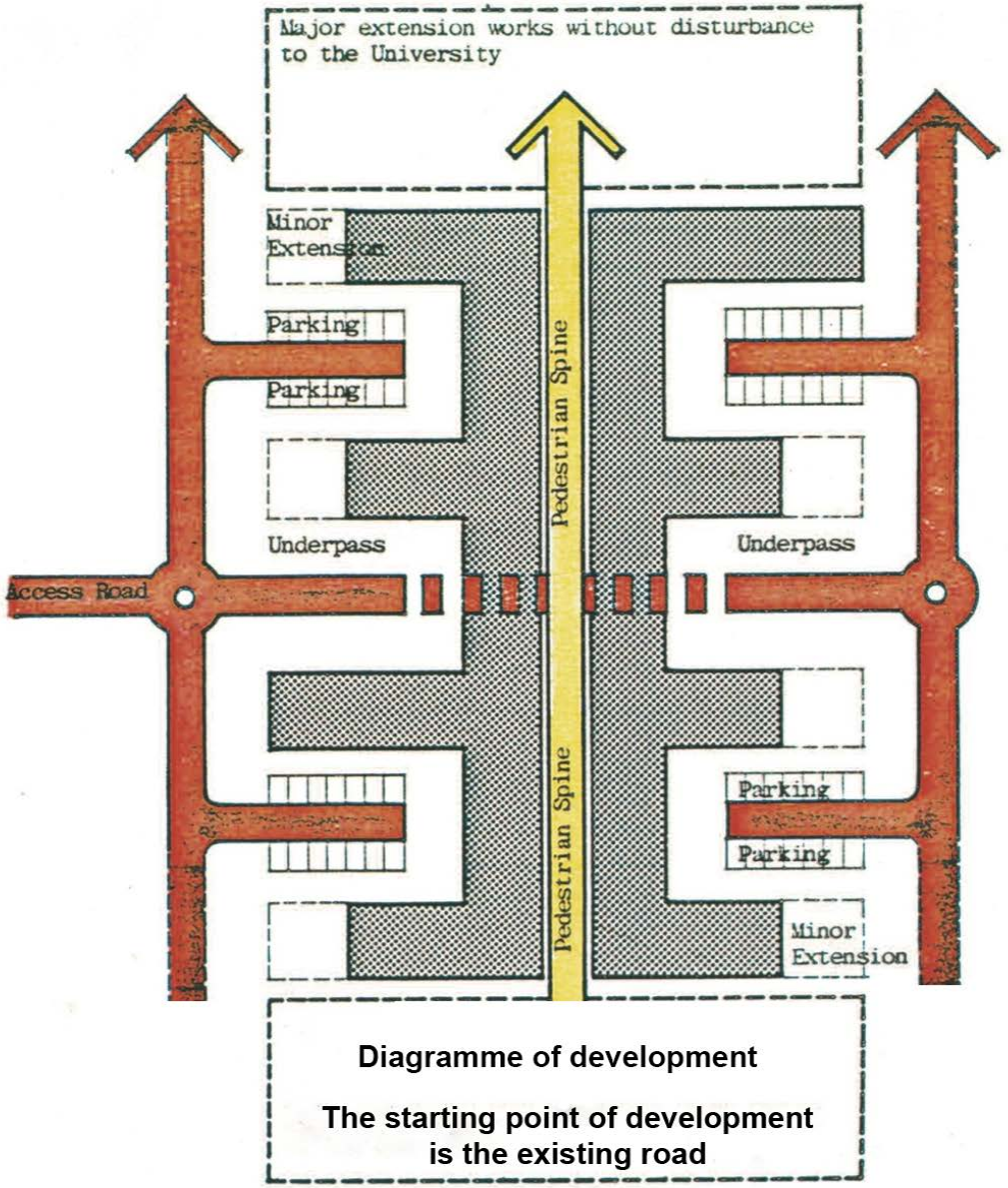

Fig. 6. Diagram of development. Linear development, along a pedestrian spine, allows the most flexible form of urban development ("stop and go"). In the case of Louvain the initial development started from the existing N4 road and extended along the spine from east to west, an adaptation of the linear development designed by G. Epstein in 1964 for the University of Lancaster (EPSTEIN 2009).

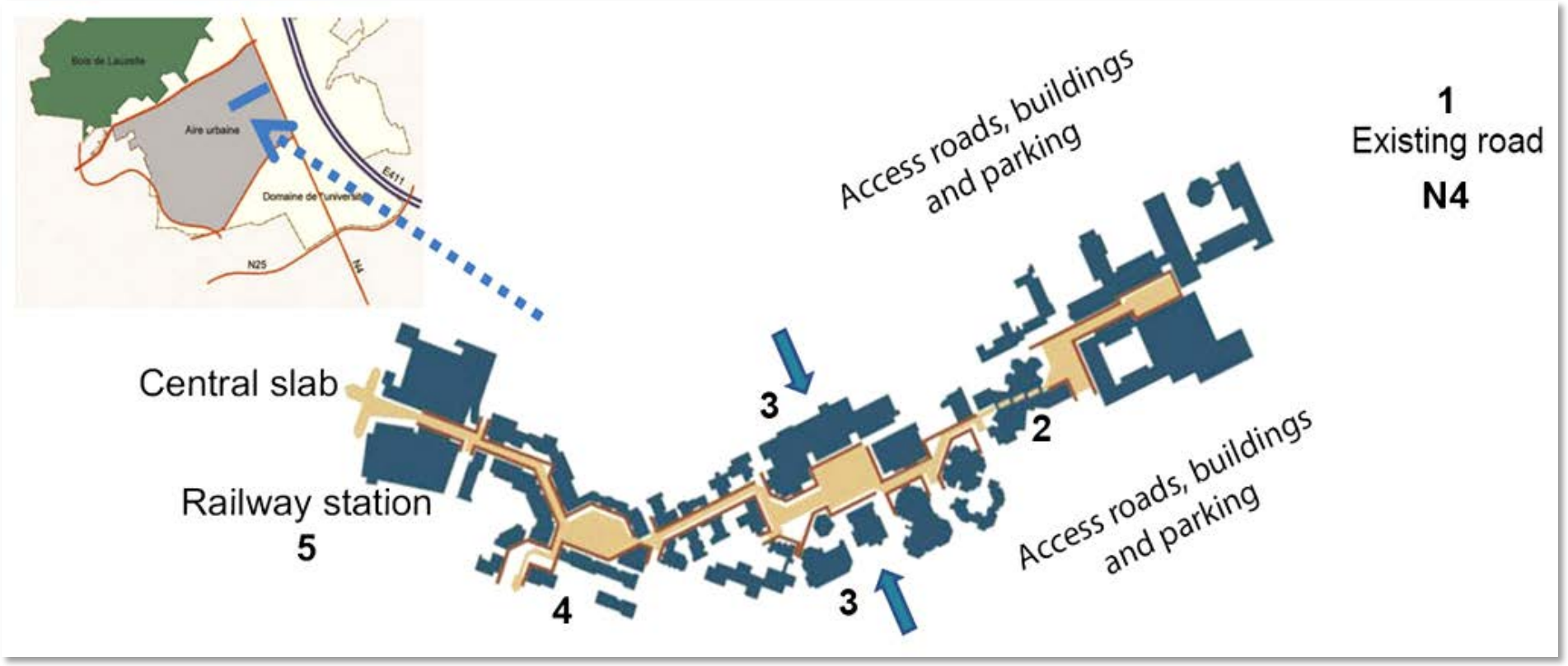

Fig. 7. The first phase pedestrian spine. The eastern starting point is the existing N4 road (1), followed by a string of public spaces and passages through buildings, indicated by dots (2). The diagram shows the location of access roads and parking lots. The arrows indicate the automobile underpass under the “Place des Sciences” (3). The piazzas have different shapes and their street access is either perpendicular or tangential (4). The sub-surface railway station (5) marks the beginning of the undergound slab (see fig. 5). Drawing by the author, based on the Groupe UA masterplan.

Fig. 8. The science library piazza (“Place des sciences”). This concrete and wood piazza is the main gathering place in the first phase. It includes access to an underpass and to underground parking. Photo by the author, taken in 2015.

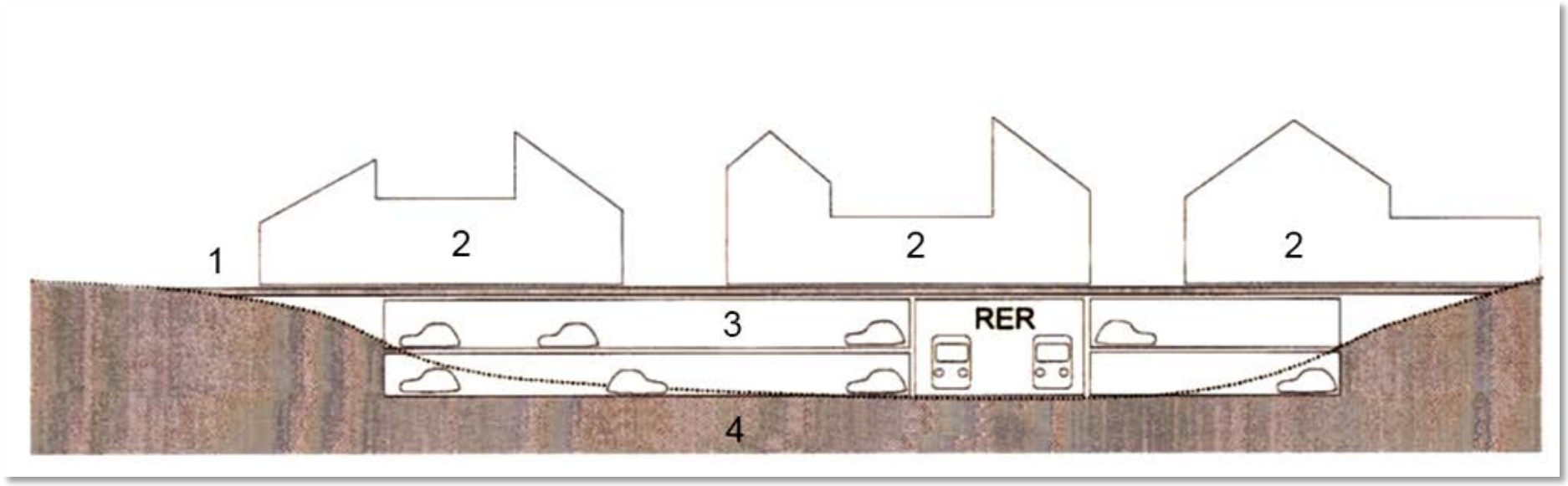

Fig. 9. Diagram of the platform. The platform/slab is covered by offices and apartments, with shops on the ground floor (1) and a high-density low-rise commercial street network that can be considered as “architectura minor” (standard architecture), in contrast to a few iconic buildings such as the S-bahn rail station (see fig. 7) which are considered as “architectura major”. The underground slab was financed by its infrastrucure users, i.e. the rail and parking operators (3), by renting it as storage space, and by leases on the commercial space above it (2). No speculative high rise development was included in the master plan. The ground below the slab remains the property of the university, just as the rest of the site (4). Drawing by the author, based on the Groupe UA masterplan.

Fig. 10. The arcaded entrance to the railway station (arch. Y. Lepere) seen from the street. The station is the point on the pedestrian spine where the natural ground meets the artificial ground (i.e. the slab), as schematically shown in fig. 5. Photo taken by the author, 2008. Archives P. Laconte. Used for the cover of his 2009 book (LACONTE 2009).

Fig. 11. Aerial view of the city taken in 2014. The view shows the high-density low-rise character of most of the development and the potential for further extensions close to the lake.