

The new university town of Louvain-la-Neuve at 50 – What next?

Account of the colloquium on 11 february 2020 at the LOCI Faculty of the Louvain University
By Hugo Demets, author of the book *De mens maakt de stad (citizens make the city)*, Halewijn 2018.

Introduction

The masterplan of the new university town of Louvain-la-Neuve was adopted in 1970 and was to be the guideline for its development ever since.

The book "Louvain-la-Neuve à la croisée des chemins" (Louvain-la-Neuve on the crossroads), by Pierre Laconte and Jean Remy, two of its initiators, was published on its 50 years.

An international colloquium was held at the university on this occasion about the origin and the growth of the town, which is today recognized as the most dynamic growth pole south of Brussels.

After fifty years of successfully planned development, initiated and framed by the master plan of UCL's "Groupe Urbanisme Architecture", what is the urban development model for further growth?

The colloquium was organized by the LOCI Faculty, represented by Vice Dean David Vanderburgh and chaired by Pierre Laconte, with Raymond Lemaire and Jean-Pierre Blondel the co-designer of the 1970 Groupe UA master plan.

Summary of the speaker presentations and participants interventions

The event started with a tribute from Pierre Laconte to Jean Remy, co-author of the book, professor and urban sociologist who unfortunately deceased during the run-up to the publication of this book.

At the colloquium eight speakers were invited and they got introduced by **Marthe Nyssens**, professor of social economics and pro rector for transition and society, who talked about how the Louvain university approaches the challenges of the energy transition.

The colloquium was kicked off by **Julie Chantry**, since 2018 the first female mayor of Ottignies - Louvain-la-Neuve, the city of which a fourth is occupied by the university city area (**her ppt appendix 1**). In total, its town has a little more than 31,000 inhabitants, one third in historic Ottignies, one third in Louvain-la-Neuve and the rest in the two former communes of Limelette and Céroux.

In addition to the 10,600 domiciled residents, Louvain-la-Neuve also has about 10,000 students residing during the week within its borders. In the university town, a total of 25,500 students attend higher education: 22,000 at UCLouvain (the new UCL short name since 2018) and 3,500 at the other higher education colleges located there. In Ottignies - Louvain-la-Neuve, a total of about 140 nationalities are represented.

Louvain-la-Neuve was built and further developed according to a number of clear principles envisioned by the masterplan:

- a pedestrian city, with streets and piazzas that promote encounters,
- a recognizable city with a mixture of functions, as opposed to the out-of-town monofunctional

university campus, as it was developed for example in Liège (Sart Tilman)
- an energy-efficient and environmentally friendly city.

The mayor points out that these principles are under pressure from the real estate boom in Louvain-la-Neuve, the development of the science park periphery, the expansion plans of the Esplanade shopping center, but also from the demand of ageing population.

In this way, urban policymakers should keep an eye on three points in particular:

- preserving the principles with which Louvain-la-Neuve was developed,
- finding a healthy urban balance between center and periphery and
- demographic balance between groups of inhabitants.

The mayor also mentioned that the university city has become a growing part of Ottignies - Louvain-la-Neuve as a whole and will therefore also have to present some of the solutions.

Pierre Laconte then talked about the unique history of LLN and its perspectives, (see **Appendix 2**).

After the decision to split the University of Leuven, there were two main contenders to host the French-speaking university:

- the large municipality of Woluwe-Saint-Lambert in Brussels, which could offer 38 hectares of urban building land, more than three times the ULB's Solbosch Campus, and finally only hosted the medical faculty and the university hospital and
- the railway municipality of Ottignies (3,800 inhabitants), where the young count and mayor du Monceau could offer agricultural land owned by a few large landowners.

Most of the university board of directors was in favor of settling in a purely French speaking area and not in the bilingual area of Brussels. So, the university refused the offer to settle in Brussels and chose the site proposed by the municipality at 5 km northeast of the Ottignies train station.

Once the location was chosen, its development had to be decided. Michel Woitrin, UCL general manager, had the vision of a *city with a university, not a university campus separated from a city*.

The site that the university was able to purchase was 920 hectares, including 200 ha forest, and it was decided to keep this forest intact as a green lung.

The Groupe UA decided to build a city of maximum 400 ha, and to provide a central development axis from the east to the west, more than a kilometer long, starting from the existing national trunk road N4. This structuring axis was to be pedestrian, not only to maximize the number of meeting opportunities between users, but also to save space and energy.

The government's agreement to build an underground train station was a turning point for the site. The cars, as well as supplies to the buildings and shops, could also be located underground. A concrete slab was built on top of the station and on part of the valley ("la dalle"). The construction of a railway in the center of the university area was a godsend for the university, because it so became well served by public transport to and from Brussels.

A unique feature of Louvain-la-Neuve is that the university, relied very much on the in-house expertise present in the faculties, leading to several building principles that were ahead of their time. For example the rainwater that falls on the roofs is not drained to the regional sewer system but to

an artificial lake. Not only did LLN get a pleasant residential environment but the university was able to drastically limit the cost of the traditional sewerage system by using smaller pipes.

Urban functions were mixed and integrated as much as possible. The speaker gave the example of the Halles Universitaires (university headquarters): the railway station, a commercial gallery and the university administrative functions are interwoven in one building.

Pierre Laconte also outlined some major urban development challenges for the future, the developments east of the station, where there will be a huge P&R car park, with apartments above it. This project, together with the existing Esplanade shopping center, is on a very different scale than the integrated and rather small-scale urban planning from the early years of LLN.

Claudine Houbart, from Uliège, presented her doctorate on Raymond Lemaire (1921-1997), professor of art history, architecture and monument conservation and spoke about his most important achievements (**appendix 3**).

From 1953, Lemaire became full professor at the Catholic University in Leuven. He taught art history and history of architecture in French and Flemish. After the university split, he continued to teach at both universities until his retirement in 1986. Raymond Lemaire was neither an architect nor an engineer, but nevertheless devoted many of his activities to architecture and urban planning.

After his doctorate, he was involved in the restoration of a number of castles, old houses, and some thirty churches and chapels, but he was best known for the successful restoration of the Great Beguinage of Leuven, now part of the Unesco World Heritage Site, and obviously because of the construction of Louvain-la-Neuve. He argued for a “culturalist approach”, which drew inspiration for urban development from the diversity of history and was therefore against the then popular “functional zoning”.

Piet Lombaerde, professor of urban and spatial planning at the University of Antwerp, made a comparison between the construction of Louvain-la-Neuve and the traditional Italian city, as we find it in Firenze or, say, Pienza (**appendix 4**), and in the standard work of Camillo Sitte. Just like in the Italian cities, the streets of LLN have all kinds of axis shifts and kinks. LLN is a very original development for a 20th century town, faithful to the values of the ancient cities, particularly in the field of human scale and the soft mobility. No matter how Louvain-la-Neuve continues to develop in the twenty first century, it will always remain a realised utopia.

Nicolas Bernard, professor at the Université Saint-Louis in Brussels, outlined the long-term lease as the original form of development of the new university town (**appendix 5**). When the university received funding from the government to purchase the 920 ha of land, the government wanted to prevent the university from building a city and eventually sell the plots of land for a profit. Moreover, the government at the time did not like the idea of a new city that may bring a new population and change the balance between political parties. It initiated in 1969 a law prohibiting the resale of the land. This was thought to make the development of a city impossible. The university reacted by using a law from 1824 about the long-term lease. The university thus keeps the land ownership, and it leases the land to users, who can build on it. The lease could have a duration of maximum 99 years, after which the buildings become the full property of the landowner. This was not very attractive to

buyers. A way was found to turn around this limitation. Every time the building lease, for example a single-family house, is sold, the university renews the leasehold for a period of 99 years - so that the owners of the houses are offered perpetual legal security. But thanks to the leasehold, the university remains involved in the destination of the land and can thus prevent unwanted use and is able to maintain a social mix. The leaseholder pays a land rent to the university, and an infrastructure fee, to finance the infrastructure (roads and utilities). Specific to LLN is that the construction must start within 18 months, that the building may not be sold for the first five years and that the maintenance obligation of the building is included in the lease contract, all this to prevent excessive speculation. All in all, these measures had only a limited effect. Because of the attractiveness of Louvain-la-Neuve few people sold their lease and because of the high demand from prospective residents' house prices rose more quickly than expected. The university is not entitled to a part of the profit made on the sale of the building, but this may be considered in the future

The speaker also explained the 2020 evolution of the land leasehold legislation, in favour of an increased flexibility, and about a new development vehicle: The Community Land Trust (CLT), which separates ownership of land and ownership of buildings. This allows to achieve more affordable housing. This is because the price of land is not included in the sale price of the dwellings. In case of sale three quarters of the value increase of the land goes to the CLT, giving the CLT the opportunity to buy new land for affordable housing.

Nicolas Cordier, of INESU-Immo (Institut pour l'embellissement, l'Aménagement, l'équipement et la gestion des sites universitaires), which manages the university domain, described the current development project of the 30 ha new Athena-Lauzelle neighborhood (**appendix 6**). The university wants to develop an exemplary neighborhood there, at a price level accessible to new residents of moderate income.

Athena-Lauzelle is a neighborhood on a human scale, in line with the 1970 master plan, to be well integrated into its surroundings and near the Bois de Lauzelle. The plans for the district include 3 ha for scientific research, 1 ha for a primary school, 10% for social housing, 10% for a Community Land Trust, in partnership with the City of Ottignies - Louvain-la-Neuve, and new faculty buildings and housing in accordance to the needs of the university. Great attention is given to soft mobility, to car-free sub-neighborhoods, public services for all ages and incomes, energy efficiency and the further expansion of the separate rainwater / wastewater drainage system.

After the first six speakers, there was a **debate, moderated by Yves Hanin**, director of the CREAT Territorial Development Research Center responsible for urban planning specialization at UCLouvain.

Professor Hanin raised several pertinent questions:

- Is the original spirit of Louvain-la-Neuve still present? And if so, how can one maintain that spirit for the next 50 years?
- How can one keep the knowhow about the development process? Is there a need for a new "Groupe UA"?
- Who will carry the project in the coming decades: the university, the municipality or the Walloon region?
- How can LLN attract young families?
- How does mobility consider the new possibilities offered by e-scooters and electric bicycles?

Quite a few questions that could only be answered partially within the given time; they call for further discussion.

The mayor stated in the debate that the present building permit model of LLN, in which a candidate builder must first pass through the urban planning committee of the university and then through the urban planning department of the municipality, has resulted in the unique current result, and that the cooperation between the university commission and the municipal service are now going well. But one should dare asking whether this dual model is to stay forever: For the political authorities, elected democratically, it is somewhat uncomfortable.

After the break, **Philippe Van Parijs** sketched everyday life in Louvain-la-Neuve. The well-known professor of philosophy left Louvain-la-Neuve for Brussels but LLN was an ideal city in which to grow up his four children. His utopian vision for Brussels is to export LLN's model to the capital.

Yves Leroy, the new alderman for urban planning of Ottignies - Louvain-la-Neuve, was the last speaker to talk about the relationship between the university and the city, and, based on personal anecdotes, how he arrived in LLN in 1976, after graduating at the then bilingual Sportcenter in Leuven. He also talked about the current challenges for Louvain-la-Neuve: retirees come to live in the university districts without considering the fact that there are students, Sometimes the new residents regard the university social life as troublesome, while it is part of the city's success.

The current rapid development of apartment buildings poses challenges in terms of mobility and of speculation, that need to be addressed.

The colloquium ended with a second, debate moderated by **Alain Bourdin**, professor at the Paris Ecole d'Urbanisme, about how people experience Louvain-La-Neuve.

A resident opened the debate with thoughts about the difficult legibility of Louvain-la-Neuve. Even though he has lived there for years, in neighborhoods where he does not come often, he loses his way, both as pedestrian and as motorist. The absolute separation of pedestrians and car traffic, on different levels, and the lack of pedestrian paths along thoroughfares are to accept some flexibility.

In any case, Louvain-la-Neuve has been a laboratory, in which the expertise of the university itself played an important role. The themes around which people worked in LLN in the 1970s are now discussed and researched all over the world.

In his closing comments, **Marcel Crochet**, honorary rector of the university, talks about the book, in which he relived the development of the city with amazement and astonishment and thanked the more than fifty participants, some of whom came from abroad.

More information about the book is available at: <https://www.ffue.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/livre-croisee-des-chemins-prospectus-26012020.pdf> .

The six speakers PPT attachments (in French) are available on request.