

Amsterdam University

Leergang 16

Planning Sustainable Mega-Cities: thinking beyond the urban centre

Opening Lecture

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**From Brussels, the Brabant Capital, to the
Cosmopolitan Central Belgian Metropolis
and the Low Carbon University Town
of Louvain-la-Neuve**

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ABSTRACT.

- A major feature of Brussels is its extreme receptiveness to external influences and its short-term opportunistic capacity to gain from them. The first example of Brussels as open Metropolis is perhaps the Wenceslaus of Luxemburg accession to the throne of Brabant in 1356. As foreign ruler he had to accept a charter limiting his power, called “De blijde inkomst” (happy entry). He settled his court on the Coudenberg Hill.
- One century later in 1440 Brabant became part of Burgundy. Philip the good moved his court from Dijon to Brussels. The AULA MAGNA, a 40 meter high Assembly hall symbolised his power and his capital city.
- Another century later the Habsburg Charles V, Emperor of the German Holy Roman Empire, chose Brussels as capital and installed his munificent imperial court on the same Coudenberg Hill. Among others he made Brussels the central hub of his celebrated postal network. His son Felipe II moved his court to Madrid.
- While the Court occupied the Hill, the low-lying land close to the river Senne was occupied by the merchants and common people. The town hall and its grand square symbolised the power of the merchants and their corporations.
The cathedral is located exactly in between the hill and the plain, the common people and the aristocracy, on the flank of the hill.
- Louis XIV’s attempt to conquer the Low Countries and to demolish the very symbolic Brussels town hall failed on both accounts. Another foreigner became the ruler of Brussels: Eugene Maximilian Duke of Bavaria, to whom the Belgians owe the reconstruction of the town square as it stands now (1696).
- Soon afterwards Brussels became a (remote) part of the Austrian Empire and the magnificent imperial court of Coudenberg, including the late gothic chapel of Charles V, had to give way to a more modest classic estate with a central square copied from of the Nancy grand Stanislas Square.
- The French Revolution entailed from 1793 a 20-year French occupation of the Low Countries. At the ensuing Vienna Conference (1814), the Southern provinces were not represented while the Netherlands were actively represented by their new German-born king Willem I. Brussels became part of the Netherlands and its alternate capital, on par with Amsterdam. Willem I proved a strong benefactor of the Southern Provinces economic development and Brussels as a metropolis, although his Protestantism and unilingual policy made him unpopular, what led to a revolution in Brussels (1830).

- The Brussels revolution brought to power another German Prince: Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, who became King Leopold I. He succeeded to keep the new country in existence and reaped the fruits of his predecessor's investments.
- He was followed by Leopold II, a ruler of imperial stature, who wanted Brussels to become again a cosmopolitan capital, both compact and green. He expanded Brussels outside its urban limits through a rail and tramway network extending over the whole country, allowing easy and subsidised commuting by workers to employment centres. In Brussels he triggered an overall master plan, which included numerous grand avenues and public parks, implemented through public private partnerships. He also set aside a huge amount of forest land as public open space, planning with the central Belgian metropolis in mind. His time could be called a golden age for urban living in Belgium, which lasted until after the Second World War.
- The 1952 Paris Coal and Steel Community Treaty was an opportunity for Brussels to become the first European Capital but this chance was thwarted by the national Government which refused Brussels as European Capital by pushing Liège that was not wanted by the others. Luxemburg became the first European capital.
- In 1957 by contrast each of the six countries wanted to host the new institutions generated by the Treaty of Rome. Brussels won the competition not through the national Government support but thanks to the alphabet, because it hosted the first Council of Ministers and thus the first administration. The 58 expo was another boost to its international character.
- Three Brussels municipalities took the initiative to build a 30 ha international office area - with a World Trade Centre - next to the North Station, with a direct 15' link to the airport, which could have hosted the three European institutions. But the main developers preferred to have the European offices in a residential area where they could buy individual homes at a lower price, replace them by high-rise offices and impose them to the Belgian Government, which was in charge of hosting Europe. --- This residential area evolved without master plan over some 50 years to become the present mono-functional European quarter, with scarce public space. It is to be noted that the three institutions, which have different planning policies, will soon benefit of a new rail transport infrastructure linking them directly to the airport.
- A huge urban sprawl took place, along the US model shaped by the automobile industry. It pushed some 200.000 inhabitants toward the periphery, mainly Flemish rural villages, in dispersed estates only accessible by automobile. This inflow generated tensions between the Flemish population and the new French-speaking settlers, creating an enduring conflict between territory-bound language rules and individual rights of the French-speaking settlers in Flemish territory.
- The generalised urbanisation of the central part of Belgium saw the emergence of growth poles around expanding small cities like Leuven, Mechelen, Aalst, Wavre or Vilvoorde, all at commuting distance from central Brussels but fiercely jealous of their identity. Their development plans had in common to ignore the others, and Brussels (devolution rules gave planning powers exclusively to the three regions – Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels), what led to redundant investment projects, the market being the arbitrator of the planning game.
- One new town was built within the Central Belgium metropolis, called Louvain-la-Neuve (new Louvain). It resulted from the expulsion of the French-speaking Louvain University from the city of Louvain and the need for it to find another location. The existing old Louvain became the intellectual model for the new Louvain, as the University did not want a French/UK type of isolated Campus.

The university was able to buy 1000 ha of farm land at low price in view of developing it, using the university building budgets as equity.

The government did not like this idea and had a law voted to make any sale of subsidised land impossible before 2020 (24 July 1969) but forgot the existing Dutch 1824 Erfpacht/Long-term leases law...The University thus became owner-developer of 1.000 ha through the sale of long-term leases.

- Its 1970 master plan by Lemaire, Blondel and Laconte imposed a high density low rise urban form and mixed use, modelled on Louvain/Leuven.

It was space-thrifty as only 350 ha were built up.

All its forest space was kept as a nature reserve.

It grew along an East-West spine, each phase being self contained, as the next step could not be ensured. Peripheral parking spaces were conceived as bird reserve with hays and a large diversity of trees (today fully grown).

Only one iconic “architectura major” building was built, surrounded by individual smaller buildings.

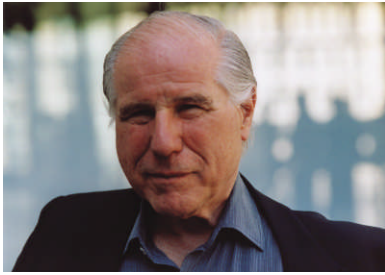
The new railway station (1976) became the central access infrastructure of the town.

All streets were reserved for pedestrians. Underground was reserved for automobile access, parking and deliveries.

Narrow streets and blocks with courtyards follow the traditional European urban pattern.

An urban shopping and services centre ‘L’Esplanade’ was opened in 2005 next to the station, together with a new shopping street and new housing. Both are presently being expanded, on university owned land (long-term lease/erfpacht).

- Separation of sewage water flows from storm water allowed minimizing the sewers width. An artificial lake is occupying the lowest part of the site, combining reservoir, flood control and amenity.
- Its environment attracted many science-related firms (science park developed in cooperation with a regional development agency), and cultural investments such as the private museum devoted to Tintin/Kuifje, in addition to private sponsoring of a new art museum project. The new town never became a new municipality but is part of the Ottignies municipality (now City of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve).
- New challenges/opportunities relate to the S Bahn plan of the central Belgian region, as LLN is the end station of one of its lines, and the extension of the shopping center. The LLN governance by the land-owner UCL will have to give way to public-public partnerships, generating a governance network.
- Coming back to the initial statement about Brussels, the central Belgium Metropolis’ governance is made of multiple public components (Brussels Agglomeration and municipalities, Flemish institutions and municipalities, French-speaking institutions and Walloon municipalities, etc.), in competition with each other but linked through cooperation when needed (“coopetition”).



Dr of Laws & Dr of Economics (Catholic U. of Louvain); Dr h.c. Edinburgh Napier Univ. President, Foundation for the Urban Environment, Brussels (see www.ffue.org). The Foundation has among others initiated five books between 2000 and 2009. Member (since 2004) and Vice-Chairman (since 2008), Scientific Committee of the European Environmental Agency (www.eea.europa.eu) for the urban and spatial matters of the Agency. These included the reports “Urban Sprawl in Europe” (2007) and “Quality of Life in Cities (2009).

- President, International Society of City and Regional Planners 2006-2009 (www.isocarp.org). Latest congress themes: “Urban Sprawl” (Dalian 2008); “Low Carbon Cities” (Porto 2009). Honorary Secretary General of the International Association of Public Transport – UITP (S.G. 1984-1999). It serves ca 3000 members, both public and private, and has a staff of ca 80 - www.uitp.org. Among its publications, the Millennium Database (2001/2006) compares 100 conurbations as to mobility, land-use and environment.
- Member of the Lee Kwan Yew World City Prize council for 2010 (won by Bilbao) and for 2012 - www.leekuananyewworldcityprize.com.sg. Member of the evaluation team for the European Green Capital Award 2012 and 2013 - www.
- Member, German Akademie der Künste, Berlin (Sektion Baukunst) and German Academy of Urban and Regional Planning - DASL. Council member, Europa Nostra, the Pan-European heritage federation; chair of its Industrial and Engineering Heritage Working Group. Expert member CIVVIH - International Committee on Historic Towns and Villages (ICOMOS). Board member, Club of Rome-EU Chapter. Member, Advisory Board, “Progress in Planning” (Elsevier). Member, Comité d’orientation of CERTU (National Research Centre on Transport & planning), Lyon and of “Revue Urbanisme” (Paris).
- Among his publications in English “Brussels: Perspectives on a European Capital”, co-edited with Carola Hein, shared the Society for Human Ecology 2008 Award for best publication of the year. Other publications in English include “Water Resources and Land-Use Planning; A Systems Approach” and “Human and Energy Factors in Urban Planning: A Systems Approach” (both in 1982). His publication in French “Mutations urbaines et marchés immobiliers: le développement des immeubles de bureaux à Bruxelles » received the Law-Economics Award 1974-1978 of the Belgian Crédit Communal and is presently being updated. This book was related to his experience as head of staff, Brabant Vice-Governor in charge for planning (1963-66).
- Was one of the three partners (with R. Lemaire, co-founder of ICOMOS, and J.P. Blondel) of Groupe Urbanisme-Architecture, created in 1968 by the Catholic U. of Louvain to produce the Master plan of a new private university town, near Brussels, and co-ordinate its implementation. Called Louvain-la-Neuve, it is now a regional service centre, built along the model of traditional European university towns. It has many energy and water-saving features and its centre is car-free. Abercrombie Award 1982 of the International Union of Architects. He edited “Recherche environnementale et urbaine: le cas de Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgique), Lyon : CERTU 2009.