

A DIFFERENT KIND OF NEW UNIVERSITY TOWN: LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE (Belgium)

The decision to build a new university town instead of a mono functional campus for the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) was taken in 1968, as new laws on the use of languages compelled the French-speaking University to move from the city of Louvain, where it had thrived for 500 years.

The aim was to recreate an urban and university environment similar to that of classic university towns like Louvain. After examining several options, the UCL accepted the invitation proffered by the small town of Ottignies, 25 km from Brussels, to settle at the periphery of the town on a gently undulating plateau along the Brussels-Luxemburg Highway, and was able to buy two thousand acres of agricultural land there. The then Government only agreed to finance university facilities. As it disliked the idea of a multi functional university environment, it passed a law that forbade the university from selling any of its land until 2020. However, far from abandoning the project, the University pressed ahead, issuing long term leases for the development of the university town, and still owns the land, as does Columbia University in New York for example.

The UCL set up an Urban Planning and Architecture Office (R. Lemaire, J.P. Blondel and P. Laconte) to work out the Master Plan and undertake the architectural coordination of the new university town.

The actual development of the town had to be done in stages, with self-contained units, because all facilities that were not directly connected to the university needed to be privately financed. Each stage of development had to include housing, shops and university buildings. The first stage grew around the Science Faculty and the Science Library (1972). The second phase was the development of a pedestrian spine (rue des Wallons) towards a new railway station. The Belgian National Railway Company agreed to build a 4 km long junction to the Brussels-Luxemburg railway line. The University, owner of the air rights, financed the building of the railway station and the connected residential and commercial buildings, which opened in 1976.

The urban pedestrian spine developed further as the Main Street (Grand Rue), towards the Main Square (Grand Place). This square includes the main university hall, cinemas, a museum, apartment blocks and shops. The pedestrian spine was extended towards the Church and the Sports Centre.

The railway station is therefore a key point of the urban development. Since 2001, the non-university related population has exceeded the population connected to university jobs. This indicates the successful town and gown mix. The non-university population has been attracted by the numerous cultural activities generated by the university. Conversely, the university population often lives outside and can easily commute from Brussels.

Thanks to the central location of the station, it became possible for the real estate market to plan adequate high density housing, without having to resort to tower blocks (concept of "high-density - low rise"). The daytime and night time population (2006) is above 40,000, which translates to roughly 100 jobs/inhabitants per ha in the central part of the town. Because of its high density, traffic in the city centre is mainly pedestrian, often via passages through the courtyards of buildings. Access to the city from the outside is either by car or via

public transportation (direct train or bus connections to Brussels, and direct automobile access via the Brussels-Namur highway). This urban concept - both compact and green - is by far the best in terms of savings in energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, since cars are not needed inside the town.

In order to relocate the railway line and access road underground, and in order to provide sufficient parking spots, a decision was made to build an overpass of roughly 3 ha, as well as two underground levels for the station, parking lots and the various support services. The overpass was easily integrated into the site topography - actually a dry valley - and helped to provide a smooth connection between the rue des Wallons and the artificial ground of the Grand Rue. It was, however, necessary to call upon private investments to finance the high costs of the overpass. The University therefore negotiated with the developer Wilhelm & Co, who was initially intending to build a shopping centre just outside the new town, to rather develop a mixed use project of more than 100,000 m² within the overpass (shops, housing, offices, leisure and parking lots). The project was called Esplanade and now belongs to the French Group Klépierre (Paris). The opening took place in 2005. It adds the range of shopping choice for both the residents of the new university town and to visitors.

See views and plans on www.ffue.org

Pierre Laconte
Partner of Groupe Urbanisme Architecture