

Summary of the book “La recherche de la qualité environnementale et urbaine: le cas de Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgique)”, Lyon: Editions du CERTU 2009 (P. Laconte Ed.)

A CITY SHAPED BY SCIENCE AND CULTURE: THE CASE OF THE NEW UNIVERSITY TOWN “LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE” (BELGIUM).

The Catholic University of Louvain was born in 1425 as a reconversion project from textile industry to science and culture. This reconversion was successful and the University hosted famous scholars such as Erasmus and Justus Lipsius. Its language was Latin and Greek, later French and Dutch.

The 1968 Belgian legislation imposing the exclusive use of the Dutch language to the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) forced the French speaking part of the University to leave the City of Louvain, where it had developed for 500 years, and to look for a new site. According to a proposal made by Professor Michel Woitrin, its General Administrator, the University decided to develop a new university town similar to the traditional university towns shaped by science and culture like the historic cities of the UK and Germany (see contribution by G. Epstein pp. 104 to 109) and Louvain/Leuven (see illustrations pp. 18 & 45). It opted against building a new campus, isolated from urban life (see Preface by UCL Rector Coulie).

After examining several potential locations, the UCL accepted the invitation by the small Municipality of Ottignies (4.000 inhabitants – 27 km from Central Brussels) 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. It bought some two-thousand acres (1.000 ha) of agricultural land there. The Belgian Government of the time would have preferred a French-style University Campus in the fields (see contribution by M. Wiel and D. Le Couedic). It disapproved the idea of a University developing a new town and passed a special law (26 July 1969) that forbade the university from selling any plots of land acquired with public help, before 2020. Far from abandoning the project, the University pressed ahead, but instead of selling land, it developed it by issuing long term leases (“emphytéoses”) to developers and individuals, in accordance with a Dutch Law of 1824, never abolished. Finance equity was provided by the state subsidies for university functions.

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 was strictly implemented, thanks to the single land ownership.

It imposed a high density-low rise urban form, plots of 100 to 400 m² and a design vocabulary. Illustrations of its implementation are shown in the book (see among others contribution by A. Masbouni pp. 59 to 66).

The development of the town happened in stages, according to a linear pattern extending from East to West on about 1.2 km (see contribution by J. Remy pp. 78 to 88). Each stage of development had to include science and culture, housing, shops, etc. All spaces that were not directly connected to the university were privately financed, within the low-rise bulk imposed by the master plan. The first stage of the new town (1972) grew around the Science Faculty, the “iconic” Science Library (see contribution by A. Jacquain pp. 110 to 116) and a first pedestrian street.

That pedestrian street was extended from 1972 towards the site of a new railway station, built in 1976 by the Belgian Railways and topped by offices and shops (see p. 30). The pedestrian urban spine further developed along the Grand Rue, towards the new Grand Place. 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 its working environment. The rail connection allowed easy cross-commuting and is to be part of the new Brussels S-Bahn system from 2014 (see contribution by C. van den Hove pp.90 to 101).

The densely built area covers only 1/3 of the 1.000 ha acquired by the University. The remaining area is not to be built. It includes a forest, managed as nature reserve and ecologic laboratory. The parking

spaces were treated as parks and have become bird reserves (see contribution by J.-N. Capart pp.117 to 124).The rain water is separately collected towards an artificial lake situated at the lowest point of the site (see contribution by L. de Backer pp. 148 to 157). 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. It enhances informal contacts and street life. Some 100 works of art are adorning the public spaces (see example on p. 20).

Louvain-la-Neuve, which started as a new university town, is now, due to its success, becoming a service and cultural centre at regional level, the host of numerous creative activities and a tourist location (see p. 38). The 2005 urban shopping and leisure centre L'Esplanade, just next to the railway Station, is one of the largest in the country, to be soon further expanded (see pp. 36 & 51). The faculty libraries, the numerous general and specialised bookshops, the Jean Vilar theatre complex, the cinemas and museums have become cultural focuses at regional level and contribute to the urban quality of life. Two private museums have chosen to locate in the new town: the Hergé Museum (Arch. de Portzamparc – see pp.91 & 93) and the Cultural Dialogue Museum (Arch. Perkins & Will – see p. 90). Some 130 science-related industries have developed at its periphery. The “new town” remains part of its initial host, the Ottignies Municipality, which has now a 30.000 day/night population, not counting the student population, and has been renamed City of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve.

Pierre Laconte, May 2011.