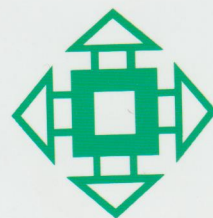


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A Review on *Louvain-la-Neuve, University Town at the Crossroad*

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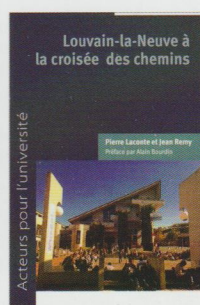
Louvain-la-Neuve, University Town at the Crossroad

Authors: Pierre Laconte and Jean Remy

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In the 1960s, with the demand of creating a French-speaking university (Université Catholique de Louvain, UCL) out of Louvain (due to the Belgian institutional evolution), a new university town, Louvain-la-Neuve, was established. Louvain-la-Neuve is a successful exploration of the compact town model in Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century. It is a multi-functional regional center rather than just a campus and can be seen as a representative example of “Town and Gown” university. Moreover, the exploration model – that the university itself acts “as the planning establishment, which creates, builds and promotes the city” is also unique in the planning history of university towns (Laconte and Remy, 2020; Dang Vu, 2014). In terms of the general concept of planning, instead of adopting the functionalist approach under the influence of modernism, Louvain-la-Neuve started from a culturalist perspective inspired by the old Louvain city. Based on the idea of regional overall planning and its social development issues, Louvain-la-Neuve developed a human-oriented planning strategy taking into account both the cultural traditions of European towns and the needs of modern life. In addition, the success of Louvain-la-Neuve is also due to the integration of sustainable development theory in specific planning concepts, such as city scale, population density, transportation methods, and cultural and social life issues. Today, half a century after the creation of Louvain-la-Neuve, the significant change of its socio-economic situation poses new challenges for future urban renewal and urban development.

Louvain-la-Neuve à la Croisée des Chemins was published in 2020. It is a joint work by Pierre Laconte and Jean Remy, both experts of Louvain-la-Neuve. Pierre Laconte was the member and co-founder of the project management Group – Groupe Urbanisme Architecture (UA Group) of Louvain-la-Neuve and he is also President of the Foundation for the Urban Environment. Jean Remy was a consultant of UA Group, head of the Urban Planning service, and responsible for updating the Louvain-la-Neuve master plan in 1992. In early February 2020, on the occasion of the 50 years of town creation, I had the honor to participate in the symposium in which the main authors of the book were invited to present and discuss the relevant subjects. Compared with many previous books concerning Louvain-la-Neuve, the significance of this book lies in the fact that, above all, it sets up a brand-new perspective that is a set of testimonies on the production of the town from its foundation till today by 7 experts in different fields. Therefore, it not only puts forward directions for city planning and urban renewal for planners, but also sheds light on the directions for the government and urban managers on how to manage urban construction with multidisciplinary actors and how to maintain consistent continuity in urban construction. Secondly, this book goes beyond an interpretation of the planning concepts and looks towards the future in addressing directly the problems and new challenges in the “cross of development roads” that marks its half-century history. In addition, it also puts forward thoughts and develops experiences on the model of “Town and Gown” universities, which is especially useful in enlightening us on the construction of university towns that have emerged in China only in recent years.

This work is divided into 10 chapters. Chapters 1 to 5 introduce the planning concepts and management model of Louvain-la-Neuve in a chronological order. In Chapter 1, Pierre Laconte mainly reviews the basic information and legal background of the project, and especially introduces the importance of the project leadership – UA Group and its three members in different fields (Raymond Lemaire

in art history and architectural restoration, Jean-Pierre Blondel in architectural design and Pierre Laconte in law and economy). UA Group, until its dissolution in 1982, was in charge of the overall concepts in the master plan, mainly in fixing the urban framework for a “city on a human scale” and a design vocabulary intended for architects that assured the architectural coordination of the town (p. 34). The intervention and control of UA Group, in my opinion, is the key to the early success of the project.

In Chapter 2, Pierre Laconte gives a comprehensive analysis of concepts of the Louvain-la-Neuve plan from 1968 to 1970 mainly in 9 aspects: university domain general plan concepts, water management, landscape policy, general built space design, linear development concept, urban center design, public transport plan, district plan, and industrial park for research and design. The most impressive ones are its environmental protection concept, regional planning concept, and human-oriented urban design. Environmental protection concepts and ecological innovations always run through the entire project. For instance, the conservation of the whole 200 ha of Lauzelle Forest land, the design of new water system for the Lauzelle highlands, and the design of the used water treatment system for industrial parks were all advanced at that time. As for the regional planning concept, the transport system (newly built railway lines) has extended in all directions (connecting Brussels, Ottignies center, airport, etc.), making the multi-functional and multi-scaled development model of Louvain-la-Neuve integrated into the regional development blueprint.

Following the planning concepts, Pierre Laconte then focuses on clarifying the management model of Louvain-la-Neuve among multi-actors in Chapter 3, especially on analyzing the synergies between the landowner – New UCL University (owner of 900 ha), the UA Group, and the public authorities. These synergies, according to the author, assure the planning goals of UCL (p. 98).

Chapter 4 highlights the origin and details of plan concepts. In Jean Remy’s view, compared with much modernist planning of new towns created in the second half of the twentieth century, the planning of Louvain-la-Neuve has a cultural utopian character, “which is taken in an anthropological sense: to encourage a way of living in the city ...(and) to promote an open sociability” (p. 102). Certainly, the planning also drew on modernist theories, such as the pedestrian and vehicles separation system, in order to optimize the space design in a more human-oriented way. According to Jean Remy, two dimensions should be distinguished: city planning and town design. In general, at the city planning level, the master plan

controls the program of Louvain-la-Neuve through four dimensions: balancing the volume and composition of the population (especially the composition ratio of students and other residents), creating job opportunities, considering the cultural and commercial needs of different populations, and ensuring direct contact of the town with outer cities. While at the town design level, the design implements guidelines of the master plan and creates in-depth public spaces and architectures adapted to its environment (p. 103). This chapter is extremely rich for planners and designers to better understand the planning concepts.

Chapter 5 sheds light on the actualization of the master plan (1992) in the second development phase and puts forward the outlook for the future. In general, the new master plan has continued and ensured the planning direction of the former one and proposed several planning adjustments to the problems that emerged recently. The most exciting part is Jean Remy’s outlook for the future development of the town at the end of this chapter. He believes that there is a kind of “relative unpredictability” in the development (p. 144), but this “relative unpredictability” is oriented and will not be out of control, since from the beginning, all the planning ideas are strictly aligned to the guideline of the master plan. He suggests always thinking about the overall situation and puts forward three ideas for future development: firstly, positioning from a diverse campus to a diverse town; secondly, developing urban vitality and insisting on technological innovation; thirdly, integrating further town development into a larger regional scale.

From Chapter 6 to Chapter 10, authors of diverse fields discuss different topics of Louvain-la-Neuve. In Chapters 6 and 7, historians Claudine Houbart and Piet Lombaerde retrace the design concepts of the town from a historical perspective. Claudine Houbart deeply analyzes the ideas of Raymond Lemaire – the soul figure of UA Group in Chapter 6. Raymond Lemaire shares Henri Lefebvre’s thinking (in his book *Le Droit à la Ville*) that urban space should have use value rather than just exchange value. He criticizes functional modernism and tends to explore a culturalist development model of the modern new towns in drawing from historic cities.

In Chapter 7, Piet Lombaerde interprets the significant inspiration from medieval town planning and city square design into the design of the main town axis in Louvain-la-Neuve which remains unique in the new town design.

In Chapter 8, legal expert Nicolas Bernard focuses on the land system of Louvain-la-Neuve, which was completely original in

Belgium and the European continent at the time, by introducing the origin of long-term lease law (Droit d' emphyteose) – its timeliness, rights during and after the end of the contract and application in the town. Nicolas Bernard also points out that under the framework of lease law, land speculation cannot be completely avoided for diverse reasons. He considers that the implementation of the new land system – Community Land Trust (CLT) in the neighborhood since 2018 may have advantages in controlling speculative sub-lease of houses due to its multi-party participation management mechanism and rent control measures.


Chapters 9 and 10 focus on the current practices in town, especially a newly developed neighborhood named Athena-Lauzelle.

Overall, *Louvain-la-Neuve à la Croisée des Chemins* is a well-organized and abundant collection of city witness. It is not only a rich interpretation of the planning concepts, but also a sharing of close observation of experiences in multi-actors interventions and conflicts resolution, which makes the book very readable and enlightening. Besides, I also would like to see more inputs, especially the witness and analysis of more recently emerged issues, which have been partially discussed in the symposium in February 2020, such as population aging problem, gentrification trends, resident participation, urban agglomeration development, etc. For me, the discussion of these issues, which are inevitable in today's urban renewal process, has an important practical relevance.

Finally, I want to discuss how the experience of Louvain-la-Neuve sheds light upon Chinese university town planning. The practice of new university towns has been introduced to China since the end of the 20th century. With the rapid development of urbanization and the flourishing of the higher education industry in China, the construction of university towns is being explored in full swing. Nevertheless, the university towns practices in China are still lacking theoretical support and long-term development planning. Most university towns are operated in a unitary mode, mainly relying on government investment, while universities themselves have very limited income sources. Their functions remain single and the campus lacks diversity in activities. The management mode of university towns is usually relatively closed, without overall integration into the regional development.

The research of this book, on the one hand, provides us with another exploration orientation, differing from modern functionalism, of a sustainable, human-scaled, multi-functional, and human-oriented town planning model, which tries to meet the needs of residents of

all ages and incomes. On the other hand, it also provides us a significant reference in new towns management in terms of land-use model, fund raising method, and in particular the planning management mode, which emphasized on the multi-dimensional synergies, such as the synergies between the multidisciplinary research team of UCL, the UA Group, and the urban management departments, and which finally realized the technological innovation and the culturalist planning goals.

In addition, the creation and development of Louvain-la-Neuve also reflect the university town planning and renewal theory and practice changes in half a century. Today, the problems encountered by Louvain-la-Neuve pointed out in this book, such as the difficulties in achieving the social mixing goal as rental price of housing increase progressively, the emergence of conflicts between students and non-students residents living in a close area, can also occur in other new towns. These issues have brought us new thinking and are worthy of further study. It is believed that this book can trigger more effective discussions in better building university towns, therefore contribute to establish a theoretical system for university town planning in China in the future. 

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Reviewer

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