Revival After the Great War

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Reflections on Leuven as Martyred City and the Realignment of Propinquity

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I find it intriguing to return once again to Leuven and to the Katholieke Universiteit to reflect on the significance of the events here of a century ago that are still with us today in one form or another. We are meeting in the site of the former University Library, rebuilt after the war but no longer a library. I ask for your indulgence in reading the following account from 1914 of the fate of a professor at Leuven who would, on a regular basis, have passed through the Oude Markt and the University Library, before its destruction on 25 August 1914.

I am the son of a Louvain Professor. I met at Furnes [Veurne], whilst I was with the army, a man who was a refugee from Louvain. […]. He came to give me information as to the happenings at my father’s house, of which he had been left in charge. He told me that when the Germans arrived at Louvain they took possession of my father’s house and completely looted it, taking away all portable articles of value and destroying the furniture and other contents. That they stabled horses in the drawing room. That they destroyed, tore up, and threw into the street my father’s manuscripts and books (which were very numerous) and completely wrecked his library and its contents. That finally the Germans burnt the house together with all the others in the neighborhood. The Germans also destroyed the manuscript of an important work of my late father which was in the hands of a printer.¹

Apart from the above transgressions, the professor’s lifeworld in Leuven was definitively erased with the burning of the University Library and its 300,000 books and manuscripts dating back for centuries. Leuven was said to be “martyred”.² Although the sacking of Leuven remains unspeakable today, similar atrocities have since been
perpetuated elsewhere in the world. Let us reflect for a moment on our own academic worlds and imagine ourselves in the place of those Leuven faculty members in 1918 during their deliberations on rebuilding. I can imagine that we might be tempted to put everything back. There was the capacity to do so a century ago. Yet rebuilding went beyond “restoration” such that today Leuven remains an important precedent for understanding the options for urbanism that have been lost in the normative urban planning protocols of the rest of the twentieth century.

On the Western Front, the logistics of the destruction and reconstruction were immense, even by today’s norms. In Belgium and France, by one estimate, 3,430,000 hectares of land were destroyed, and in Belgium alone 242 municipalities had to undergo reconstruction.\(^3\) In Leuven, by various accounts 1,081 houses and some 2,000 buildings overall were completely destroyed, with extensive partial damage to others; 25% to 30% of the city terrain was “scorched earth”.\(^4\) In Belgium, by various estimates, up to two million people became refugees, one third of Belgium’s population at that time (Fig. 1). At least half a million refugees remained in France and the UK until well after the war, and of course many from Leuven would have remained displaced for some period, given the devastation.\(^5\) Surely the Belgian displacements of World War I were unprecedented in early twentieth-century Western Europe. Today, however, these numbers pale in comparison to the escalating wartime and climate migrations well underway.

In the Spring of 1979 Professor Marcel Smets and I were walking through the Oude Markt in Leuven. I knew almost nothing of the Belgian reconstruction, and I suggested that it should be properly studied as an important moment in the annals of twentieth-century urbanism. Our discussions continued with a “road trip” in which we visited the reconstructed World War I sites in West Flanders – including Ypres (Ieper), Diksmuide, and the Flanders Field American Cemetery at Waregem. Several years later, Marcel Smets published his pioneering study, *Resurgam*,\(^6\) as a companion to the 1985 exhibition in Brussels. *Resurgam* further piqued my interest. It seemed that the unprecedented scale of rebuilding could be understood as consciously “modernist urbanism”. On that day in 1979 I might have dismissed the Oude Markt as a picturesque but superficial scenography. Instead, I was tempted to understand the rebuilt Leuven as a unique modern urban artefact made in parallel to other, radically new urban strategies that were unfolding in the early twentieth century. I speculated that what I saw could be understood as an intentionally “modern” project, not just a historical reproduction and not just inherited nineteenth-century practice. I found it odd that the rebuilding did not occupy an important place in the context of the evolution of the cannons of modernism and regionalism. The scale of the operation alone would make it a “modern” initiative.
Marcel Smets’ contribution was precisely to raise questions related to our accepted cannons of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernist urbanism and to ask why this moment of learning and practice in Flanders and Leuven has been so ignored and, conversely, why the emerging and radically new “modernist” tendencies in urbanism were absent in the rebuilding. As a student I had studied the radical approaches to urbanism elsewhere, concurrent with the Belgian reconstruction. There were the villes-tours of Auguste Perret and the Radiant City of Le Corbusier. There was the immense Russian constructivist-era urbanization. There was the beginning of the American de-urbanist movement that transformed the United States over the next half century or more. And there was the American resistance to “de-urbanism”, the affirmation of nineteenth-century “urbanism as a way of life”, to use Louis Wirth’s phrase. But excluded was the largest single urban initiative in Europe in the 1920s.

One can suggest that the rebuilding of Leuven was a testament to complex motivations far beyond a simple reincarnation of the nineteenth-century ideals of Camillo Sitte, Joseph Stübben, Charles Buls, or the nationalistic tendencies of the German protagonists.7 The Belgian reconstruction did engage a certain realpolitik, including the German attempt at post-war occupation and interference with post-war planning.8 Yet, already in 1914 there were Belgian urban alternatives that anticipated the modernist German Zeilenbau planning that came into common practice only after the end of the 1920s. For example, in 1914 the completion of Émile Hellemans’ housing complex in the Marollen in Brussels considerably pre-dated the Zeilenbau formulas. It was Bruno De Meulder’s research as a graduate student at Leuven in 1983 that first made me aware of the precedent of Hellemans’ Cité in identifying alternative modernist cannons.9 Although such alternatives were surely well-known, Leuven represented a conscious resistance to this emerging “modernist” urbanism that has since exhibited so many signs of failure throughout the world. In some sense the rebuilding leap-frogged what was to evolve later on in the twentieth century. An important question is why this gap? And what can be some of the causes for eschewing the new modernist tendencies? One can understand that Hellemans’ Marollen would have been considered too radical for the reconstruction effort in Leuven and that the realization of the emerging orthodox ideals for a Modern Movement urbanism were not yet fully operable. Instead, for Leuven one can suggest that there was a desire for historical continuity in the aftermath of war with an unprecedented scale of destruction. And this continuity can be related to revaluing the propinquity of the medieval Leuven, in opposition to the potentially alienating effects of the new urban tendencies.

By 1924, concurrent with the ongoing Belgian reconstruction, Le Corbusier was railing against the Chemin des ânes – the donkey’s zig-zag,10 with the implication that those who persisted in such geometries were themselves donkeys, presumably including the Belgians as well as New Yorkers. In 1924, Le Corbusier did not hesitate
to rail against Lower Manhattan’s zig-zag as a *paradoxe pathétique*. I suppose, however, that it was not exactly politically correct to rail against the meticulous zig-zag rebuilding next door in Belgium, although he could not resist implying the inferiority of the “Flanders House” compared to his “machine for living”. In 1933 he published his Antwerp Plan for the West Bank as an affront to the Flanders reconstruction.\textsuperscript{11} At least he did not superimpose his colossal Parisian “Plan Voisin” on the Antwerp historic center although he did have ideas for Antwerp’s Cathedral Square. I am sure there can be more to say about a European *paradoxe pathétique*, and perhaps even why in the aftermath of the massive urban devastation from the war there could not yet be an operational method for implementing a “Plan Voisin” somewhere in Northern Europe. That would come to fruition after World War II. As for Le Corbusier, his “Cartesian geometry” of the “Radiant City” would supersede all other options until the 1960s, when he and even Mies van der Rohe retreated into “tradition” via their tactical advocacy of “truth” in design.\textsuperscript{12}

Given the immense devastation in Leuven, one can hardly conceive of a rebuilding strategy that would not reaffirm historic propinquity as an antidote. Leuven could be retrieved only by deploying a spatial fabric constrained by the demands of survival of social class and culture. Seen from today’s perspective, the rebuilt Leuven anticipated a new urbanism inclusive of a cohesive social vision that had its origins in its medieval core. The emerging new Modern Movement urbanism that was already obsolete by the time of its massive global implementation in the aftermath of World War II was rejected. Ironically, the urban scourges that had nurtured the “sun, space, and green” of Le Corbusier’s Radiant City were already being ameliorated as modern medicine superseded hygienic design arguments against the propinquity of the historic city.\textsuperscript{13} Given this consideration, one might postulate that the rebuilt Leuven was prescient of the next “modernist” city of the twenty-first century, rather than the other contemporary visions of the 1920s.

A legacy of the rebuilding in Flanders is the curious story of René (Renaat) Braem who prominently pioneered the new Modern Movement urbanism with a more measured variant for Antwerp in contrast to Le Corbusier’s West Bank plan.\textsuperscript{14} As a child he would have witnessed the destruction of Flanders first hand, and he would have witnessed the reconstruction of the Flemish towns first hand. Those citizens depicted in Braem’s “Linear City” proposal for Antwerp were denizens of an entirely new post-industrial world. They were the modern people of leisure in an environment devoid of the regimes of nineteenth-century labor, who would have the time to frolic in the “sun, space, and green”, and they rejected the propinquity of the historic Flemish towns (Fig. 2). In time this new urban world became more dystopian than the old in many cities around the world. Yet, in the post-World War I era it surely was an engaging vision and effective socio-economic instrument, as much for Flanders as for Manhattan by the 1930s. The Radiant City and the *Zeilenbau* would continue to
dominate much city design practice for the next half-century, including the massive public housing that has been among my long-term preoccupations in New York City. By the 1950s in New York, however, we had arrived at a definitive impasse resulting in the “dreary deadlock of public housing” that, perhaps more than any other urban design option, cast a pall over the city.\textsuperscript{15}

So, apart from all else, my reflections are related to my particular interests that engage the realignment ideals of propinquity, of community, of space, and of place. Such were at the origins of medieval Leuven, and they are the ideals that lay at its recreation in the aftermath of World War I. While for sure reconstruction changed the old social fabric, seemingly what was retained was the urban crucible – the container, put back as a celebration of Flemish urban culture and as defiance of the attempt at its annihilation (Fig. 3). As crucible, Leuven has been very important to my own formation, and I include the group of faculty colleagues with whom I have shared ideas over many years. We have all been subliminally connected to the ideal of propinquity, both spatial and intellectual. I believe that this condition continues to affect this place in ways large and small, mainly unspoken, in the ether as much as in the stones. Such is the strength of this place. Yet back in 1979 and in the following years I sensed a dark side. In the Oude Markt I remember well the demonstrations: anti-nuclear and anti-racism, but also the counter-demonstrations that were pro-Flemish Nationalist and separatist. In the bookstacks of the University Library I especially remember
witnessing the ongoing removal of the French language books to the new French-language Université Catholique de Louvain. For me it was a troubling encounter that still lingers in my mind today.

Fig. 3. J. Blaeu. Plan of Leuven from *Novum Ac Magnum Theatrum Urbium Belgicae* (Amsterdam 1649); reproduced from from *Atlas Van Loon* (1663-65). With the permission of Het Scheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam.

Within the expanded realm of urban “martyrdom” today, the phenomenon of the “Martyred Cities” of Flanders may seem distant. For myself, perhaps the recent images that come closest to 1914 in Leuven record the burning of the National Library in Sarajevo on 25 August 1992, the exact same day as in Leuven some 78 years earlier. In Sarajevo, one and a half million volumes were lost, of which 155,000 irreplaceable manuscripts and books including the National Archive. Today when I think of Leuven my thoughts also connect to Sarajevo and the meaning of that travesty and now, with even more immediacy, to the images from Mosul, from Aleppo, from Eastern Ghouta, or from Yemen. The Syrian refugee figures currently number more than 12 million, the entire present-day population of Belgium. Today for most of the world’s refugees there is little hope to achieve the extraordinary level of rebuilding that was managed in Flanders in the 1920s and 1930s. Still, one must hope that we
can learn lessons from those experiences of a century ago that can be relevant for today and tomorrow, especially now that we understand that the world has not yet moved beyond such depravities – far from it. I think of the recent ISIS desecrations in Palmyra. We must ask ourselves about the meaning of the past – of the historical events that we commemorate. We might well question whether now, after the passage of a century, the commemorations of the Flemish martyred cites move ever closer to Guy Debord’s *Société du Spectacle*, with the danger that the Belgian reconstruction becomes a matter of images.\(^{16}\) Perhaps the most profound remembrance is the acknowledgement that urbicide is alive and well.

I have found Paul Veyne’s writing on history, truth, and tribalism to be instructive in my understanding of the realignment of propinquity. Perhaps the rebuilt “new Leuven” was Veyne’s “palace of imagination” in the sense of his use of the term in the context of Greek mythology as a concept, “not built in space [but] the only space available […]”.\(^{17}\) One imagines that “truth” in the Leuven context was not the “truth” of Le Corbusier and Mies, but closer to the “truth” of Veyne, which is imbedded in diversity, such that “every patchwork culture, with its diversity opens the way to inventiveness”. For Veyne, in describing Greek Myth, truth is the “child of the imagination” which is the “child of the constitutive imagination of our tribe”, and without absolutes.\(^{18}\) Truth is tribal. The tribal engages propinquity. Perhaps it is Veyne’s “tribal” that best accounts for the realignment of Leuven propinquity, and from this we can gain understanding. I will take the liberty of ending with Veyne’s admonition with regard to Palmyra ancient and today: “Yes, without a doubt, knowing, wanting to know, only one culture – one’s own – is to be condemned to a life of suffocating sameness”.\(^{19}\) We can see the double edge, the dangers of the tribal then and now, but with diversity as a key to combating the dangers, and with propinquity as a key to encouraging diversity.
Notes

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2 There was considerable contemporary reportage related to the sack of Leuven including the work by the Committee on Alleged German Outrages. Also useful have been Richard Harding Davis, With the Allies (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1914) and Noël, Louvain, 891-1914, 203-241. The characterization of Leuven among "martyred" cities in Flanders appears early on in the account of Albert Fuglister, Louvain, Ville Martyre (Paris: Éditions Delandre, 1916).


Fig. 1. The completely devastated church and village center of Merkem at the end of the First World War.