Revival After the Great War

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During the autumn of 1914, the annual congress of the National Commission for the Embellishment of Rural Life (NCERL) was to take place in Brussels. Architects and agricultural scientists were invited to present their answers on the issue of rural housing. Since the end of the nineteenth century the Belgian countryside had been perceived as a place in peril. Not only had agriculture – a typically rural professional activity – lost its position as the “primary sector” of the national economy. Processes of urbanisation, as well as the relatively poor access to public services and amenities in rural areas, undermined the vitality of the countryside.¹ From this perspective, the national congress was one of the many activities that were organised to revitalise rural life in Belgium. However, the start of the Great War in August 1914 forced the organising committee to postpone the congress until September 1919. Although the primary objectives remained, the context in which the congress took place had definitely changed. Four years of continuous warfare and occupation had devastating effects on the Belgian territory, but also on the national economy and society.² Nevertheless Firmin Graftiau, a state agronomist and vice-president of the NCERL, stated that the destruction provided a unique opportunity to regenerate the Belgian countryside. In his opening address he expressed the hope that “inspired by the presented studies and previous work, the authorities that are responsible for Belgium’s reconstruction will have the aim to increase the well-being of the rural population by improving their living conditions” (Fig. 1).³
According to Graftiau, the construction of good farms was indispensable for the creation of better farmers and, more generally, a better rural population. He believed, in other words, that it was possible to change people's beliefs and behaviour by changing their environment. This chapter explores the extent to which the reconstruction of the Belgian countryside can be considered an example of social engineering. According to the Dutch sociologists Jan Willem Duyvendak and Ido de Haan, social engineering was not so much a feature of the post-World War II welfare states but instead went hand in hand with the rise of nineteenth-century liberal societies. Starting from the hypothesis that this was indeed the case, we study the discourses that underscored the reconstruction of farmsteads – even before the end of the war – and how general ideas about farm building were put into practice after 1918.

Recent literature has shown that national governments across Europe started to govern rural communities from the nineteenth century onwards. The underlying rationale suggested that space is power-induced and could be used as a tool to control populations. In their edited volume *Governing the Rural in Interwar Europe* (2018), Liesbeth van de Grift and Amalia Ribi Forclaz showed that this idea formed the basis for practices of rural government in several European countries between the two world wars. The growing belief that spatial and social planning closely encouraged both democratic and authoritarian states to govern their countryside more actively.⁴

The tactics of governing people through space not only led to “high modernist” development plans and large-scale internal colonisation schemes, as was the case on the newly reclaimed lands of the Netherlands in the 1940s.⁵ Eugen Weber’s famous *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976) described how subtler forms of governing, for example road building, were aimed at affecting the identity of the rural population in modern France and integrating them into a nation of citoyens.⁶ In Britain, geographer David Matless revealed the role of landscape in the construction of an English national identity. Like in many other countries, the countryside and rural life were defined as the counterpart of urban, industrial society. While life in the countryside was idealised as “pure”, cities were often depicted as degenerative and their populations as immoral.⁷

The garden cities movement that originated in late nineteenth-century England also incorporated spatial and social planning schemes. The advocates of the garden city believed in the creation of a new type of city that would combine the benefits from the town (presence of public transport and amenities) and the village (healthy environment). Ebenezer Howard, for example, created a model of self-sufficient and cooperatively governed towns with radial spatial planning and surrounded by agricultural land and forests.⁸ During the First World War, the Belgian government remodelled the garden city idea to build the first garden suburbs shortly after 1918. Although post-war town planning in Belgium continued to be founded on private property instead of collective ownership, Louis Albrechts argued that the First World
War resulted in the application of new “philosophies of life and related reflections on the organization of space”.9

This socio-spatial entanglement also related to the level of individual (rural) building in interwar Belgium. Recent studies on architecture in the Belgian countryside, too, have perceived rural housing as a tool for governing farmers and their families. Sofie De Caigny and Wouter Vanderstede, for example, indicated how the Belgian Women Farmers’ Association explicitly related model plans of rural interiors to predefined role patterns for farmers’ women. Other studies as well linked discourses on the construction of “good” housing to processes of identity building. Models of rural architecture were designed to bridge the opposition between the identity of rural dwellers and the needs of modern citizens.10 In Regionalism and Modernity (2013), traditional building styles in the Belgian countryside were studied as disciplinary mechanisms as well as strategic elements that made modernity more acceptable for the rural population.11

Few publications have bridged the gap between theory and practice. While historians have uncovered the link between architectural guidelines and social engineering in early twentieth-century model books, little is known about the extent to which these guidelines were put into practice.12 This is surprising, because the devastations of the First World War resulted in perhaps the most intensive construction activity in Belgian history. Contemporary statistics estimated that more than 80,000 houses were completely destroyed and 200,000 houses were at least partially damaged. Approximately 30,000 of these houses were identified as farms.13 The geography of destruction reflected the chronology of war. While some towns in the east of the country were affected during the early months of war, the largest degree of devastation was situated in the so-called “devastated regions” in the westernmost part of the country.

By taking post-World War I farmstead architecture as an example, this article explores how the governing of society and space was entangled in architectural discourses during and after the First World War. It also studies how power-induced discourses on rural architecture found their way into practice. The reconstruction of farmsteads is an interesting case study for a couple of reasons. First, farmstead architecture played an important role in the rural idyll that conservative architects, civil society organizations and policy-makers propagated during and after the First World War. Second, there is an abundance of sources that allow us to investigate farm building in the context of post-World War I reconstruction.

Apart from the architectural model books that were mainly produced before the end of the war, the Belgian state archives have preserved a huge number of building plans and specifications from the Devastated Regions Office (DRO, 1919-1926). This was a special government institution that was established to recover the public domain – roads, communal buildings and other public property – after the First World War. Nevertheless, the government service soon became responsible for the
reconstruction of private housing as well. With the integration of a Building Service as a subsection of the DRO in 1919, a large-scale turnkey building project took off that would result in the state-led reconstruction of c. 10,000 private houses. This was the first time the Belgian government had directly intervened in the housing market by building private houses with public funds.

With the reconstruction by the state, the Belgian government and its minister of the Interior, Jules Renkin, aimed to tackle some of the problems that reconstruction was facing at the time. First of all, there was the problem of bureaucracy. Every owner that had suffered war damage had the right to full compensations. In order to be compensated, they had to file a request to specially constituted courts for war damage. This could lead to an administrative bottleneck and eventually the financial draining away of reconstruction activities. Since owners who agreed to let the state reconstruct their property automatically agreed not to claim their compensation, reconstruction by the state reduced pressure on the courts for war damage. A second element in favour of reconstruction by the state was a logistic one. Letting the state take over private building sites did in fact lead to advantages of scale. Thirdly, the government hoped to improve the housing quality by committing home owners to appoint an architect to draw up the building plans.\(^\text{14}\)
This article is based on the analysis of architectural guidebooks and 20 building documents from the archives of the DRO. The 20 documents were selected on geographical criteria. They represent the farms rebuilt by the state in a single village: Merkem. Merkem was – and still is – a rural village in West Flanders with a few thousand inhabitants. Located between Ypres and Diksmuide, the village became part of the front line in 1914 and remained under constant artillery fire for the next four years (see map). Consequently, Merkem was completely destroyed by November 1918. Since everything had to be rebuilt from scratch, Merkem is an interesting case study for investigating whether the tabula rasa of the First World War was effectively used to construct model farms and hence “increase the well-being of the rural population”.

After an introductory paragraph on regionalism as an architectural style and discourse, the next paragraphs highlight three different aspects of farmstead architecture: (i) the formal language of the farm, (ii) the agricultural enterprise and its buildings, and (iii) the farmer’s house. The building plans of 16 farms – four of the building documents had no plans or specifications – serve as a basis for this in-depth study, while taking into consideration that it is impossible to draw general conclusions from such a small number of cases. The fact that only state-reconstructed farms were taken into account further narrow the possibilities for extrapolating the conclusions to all farms rebuilt after the First World War. Nevertheless, the conclusions will give an indication of the rationales that underscored regionalist discourses during the early twentieth century and the ways in which new ideas about farmstead building were put into practice.

**Deconstructing the Regionalist Gaze**

Recent literature has generally acknowledged the dominance of regionalism as “reconstruction’s official ideology”. From the end of the nineteenth century, it was not so much regionalism as a well-defined architectural style that developed. It was part of a modernising movement, but with respect for traditional architecture and the regional environment. In Belgium, regionalist discourses perfectly fitted within conservative ideas about the countryside. They allowed the pursuit of a rural idyll with “picturesque” villages and landscapes that were at the same time adapted to modernity. This aligned with the efforts of the pre-war Catholic governments and organisations such as the NCERL to keep the rural population in the countryside and away from industrial cities. These culminated in the Modern Village that was presented at the 1913 World’s Fair in Ghent.
The Modern Village would later prove to inspire rural reconstruction in Belgium. From 1916 onwards, almost two years after the First World War had started, expositions on the reconstruction of rural buildings were held across occupied Belgium. The diffusion of (rural) architectural knowledge in the areas administered by the German General Government – the military government that controlled occupied Belgium and Northern France – happened via the channels of the National Relief and Food Committee (NRFC). The NRFC was established in 1914 to organise the distribution of foodstuffs and other necessities, but it also had an agricultural section aimed at the maximisation of food production in occupied Belgium. Within the agricultural section a special commission for rural reconstruction was established to investigate the issue of farmstead building. Furthermore, every provincial branch of the NRFC had its own technical bureau that was responsible for farmstead building on the local level.

At the exhibitions that took place in places like Brussels (Schaerbeek) and Antwerp, model plans of farms, as well as photographs of pre-war examples of “good” farmsteads, were shown to the audience. Lectures and architectural contests were also organised in the margin of these expos. Given the fact that communication was mostly in French, it can be presumed that the exhibitions in Antwerp and Brussels were aimed at both architects and civil servants. In order to connect to the farmers themselves, the technical bureau of Antwerp also organised an ambulant exposition in some ten smaller towns and villages. This time Dutch was the language of communication, which makes it even clearer that the audience to be reached was quite different. The exhibitions presented “good” examples of rural architecture next to “bad” examples, because it was “indispensable to affect the mentality of farmers by making comparisons and contrasts.”

Publications on rural and farmstead architecture could largely be divided into two categories. The first category contained the model books written from a merely architectural and artistic perspective. These publications were rather theoretical and first of all stressed the importance of the visual quality of the buildings in the surrounding landscape. A second type of publications was more practical in nature. Architects and agronomists developed model books and building plans that meticulously told farmers how to build their own modern farms. The Belgian Farmers’ League’s *Bouwen en heropbouwen van huis en stal* (Building and Rebuilding of House and Stable, 1915) is a schoolbook example of such a publication. Most of these booklets were published under the auspices of the National Relief and Food Committee. The committee had branches at local and regional levels, allowing the architectural guidelines to be diffused across the (occupied part of the) country.

Certainly in the more theoretical works authors were quite clear in stating their particular aims. Regionalist protagonists such as Edward Leonard believed that if farmers were to stay away from the “immoral” cities, improve their living conditions, and continue their professional activities, it was essential to construct
“good” farms. Vice-president of the NCERL Jacques Giele stressed that the emphasis on rural aesthetics went hand in hand with the improvement of rural life. The regionalist definition of an “embellished” farm could in broad terms be retraced to three elements: the aestheticisation of the buildings and their integration into the environment, the improvement of living conditions, and the modernisation of the farmer’s workplace. With regard to the exterior of the farm, regionalists agreed on the importance of a traditional formal language and the use of regional building materials and techniques. In the specific case of Flemish farmsteads, examples of brick architecture and red-tiled roofs were omnipresent.

Regionalists believed that a historicising reconstruction of the countryside would contribute to the mental wellbeing of farmers, day labourers and their families. In De kunst op het Platteland (Art in the Countryside, 1915), Albert Dutry – also vice-president of the NCERL – correlated the physical appearance of farms with mental virtues such as family commitment and intelligence. Furthermore, he claimed that “the physical well-being of the wage earner would encourage him to return back home after his day at work.” Helena Van Dorpe, one of the few female voices in the field, also linked rural aesthetics to the question of frugality. Even though the “embellishment” of rural architecture had no direct influence on the family budget, she thought that it might bring the rural population to more austerity.

Secondly, architects and engineers paid a great deal of attention to the living conditions on the farm. Dutry stated that the reconstruction of the countryside was obliged to meet not only the rules of the “science of aesthetic”, but those of the “science of health” as well. In order to familiarise the rural population with these rules, numerous publications contained practical tips for building in a way that reduced the risk of physical disease for both the farmers and their cattle. Guidebooks particularly focused on the provision of light and air on the farm. These two natural resources were believed to kill disease-spreading microbes and vermin. Architects also proposed the construction of better – more hygienic – wells, as well as “more healthy” separated bedrooms on the top floor of the farm. Furthermore, several publications defined minimal heights and surfaces for housing accommodation and integrated separate cellars for stocks and dairy products in their plans. Other modernisations, such as the provision of running water and electricity or the integration of bathrooms, were less frequently discussed.

The preoccupation with hygiene on the farm aligned regionalists with the nineteenth-century sanitary movement. Decades before 1914, hygiénistes had already devoted themselves to the health of the population. From the perspective of the nation as a social body, they perceived that the health of all societal groups was in the public interest. This certainly was true for farmers as “feeders of the nation”. In another vein, regionalists were of the opinion that the physical health of the farmer affected his mental health. Considering these underlying objectives, we agree with
Sofie De Caigny in recognising both the emancipatory and disciplining mechanisms that underscored regionalist building plans.32

In the third instance, some guidebooks – especially those written by agronomists – focused on the modernisation of the farm as a place for economic activity. One of the most eye-catching changes was the modernisation of the cattle sheds: classic manure stables were transformed into group stables with fodder and manure passages bordered by individual stands. Thus, the dairying and care of the cattle could be rationalised. The installation of drainage systems for manure had to improve hygiene standards in the cattle shed and thus promote healthy livestock. The use of bricks and concrete for the construction of cattle sheds had a similar objective, as well as the presence of door and window arches. The Belgian Farmers’ League explicitly condemned corners and nooks in the cattle shed as breeding grounds for pathogens.33

The breeding of healthy livestock was mainly inspired by economic reasoning. *Handboek van Landelijke Maatschappijleer* (Manual of Rural Sociology, 1931) argued that the productivity of the dairy farm depended upon the fitness of its animals. In the handbook practical cases provided evidence for the assumption that healthy cattle delivered better milk yields.34 Since stock farming had already become the largest branch of Belgian agriculture before 1914, this argument was not without significance.35 It meant that the implementation of sanitary measures contributed to the profitability of the farming enterprise and, in a broader perspective, to the resilience of the agricultural sector as a whole. The fact that the “official” model book on farmstead architecture published by the Belgian government, *Enkele practische gegevens nopens het bouwen van hoeven* (Some practical measures for the construction of farms, 1920), was solely devoted to the reconstruction of sheds demonstrates the (economic) importance of stockbreeding.36 The renowned Belgian zoologist Leopold Frateur rated hygiene as one of the three pillars for livestock improvement, next to the implementation of genetic theory and the prevention of diseases such as bovine tuberculosis.37

### The Formal Language of the Farm

The agricultural section of the NRFC made no secret of the fact that it aimed to inspire post-war reconstruction in Belgium. In its final activity report of 1919, the technical bureau of the province of Antwerp expressed its belief that “at the moment when our country […] is thinking about letting the devastated regions rise from its ashes, it is important to look back at the activities and realizations of our organization in times of hostile occupation”.38 The question remains, of course, whether architects involved in post-war farmstead rebuilding were informed about the newest developments
in their profession and, if they were effectively willing to implement the expertise that the NRFC had gathered during the war. This paragraph deals with the formal language of the farm.

Spokesmen for the regionalist movement regarded the urbanisation of Belgium as an imminent threat to the countryside. Regionalists regarded architecture as the culmination of three elements: work, family and the environment. The same perspective was used by the Belgian scholar – and later the first female professor in Leuven – Marguerite Lefèvre. She suggested in her thesis on rural houses in Belgium (1926) that rural architecture was the result of “actions and reactions, sometimes confusing, of physical, economic and social elements”. As a human geographer, Lefèvre thereby positioned herself in the school of the nineteenth-century French sociologist Frédéric Le Play. According to him there was triad between space (lieu), family (famille) and work (travail), which indicated that human action was always subject to environment and vice versa.

The idea that place and people eventually converged enabled regionalists to make a clear distinction between town and countryside, and thus between urban and rural life. While urban architecture was an expression of a specific culture and thus had to be limited to the city, the only logical place for rural architecture was in the countryside. In rural areas it was mainly the farm that served as a beacon of rural architecture.

Fig. 2. Lithograph of a model farm in *Fermes-types et constructions rurales en West-Flandre* (1918) by Alfred Ronse and Theo Raison.
Regionalism, in other words, gave great importance to “harmony”, a concept that stressed the connection between human culture and the natural environment. This respect for harmony and dependence on context was also clearly visible in the words of the Swiss regionalist Georges the Montenach, who was cited in 1919 by the Belgian architect Henri Vaes: “when thinking of a country […] is a farmer or his wife that will spring to mind. And when thinking of the housing of a people, it is the rural dwelling that will be imagined” (Fig. 2).

One of the main techniques for harmonising housing and architecture with their environment was the use of regional building materials. In the Flemish countryside, and in the devastated regions in particular, the use of brick was promoted by virtually every regionalist architect. Graph 1 gives an indication of the costs of building materials for a sample of five farms in Merkem. In this sample each farm represents a different price category. The graph shows that in the building specifications for small and large farms, bricks constituted more than half of total material costs. Brickwork was not only used as a construction material for walls and upright courses. Bricks were also employed as a flooring material in cattle sheds. The relative cost of roof tiles rose to 20%. Tiles generally covered all farm buildings; thatched roofs did not figure in the plans for farms in Merkem rebuilt by the DRO. The first reason brickwork and tiles were so prominent in the building plans can undoubtedly be traced back to the stylistic guidelines of regionalist architects. Furthermore, brickwork was cheaper than reinforced concrete and locally available, which made it a preferred building material in times when the national debt was increasing.

A detailed analysis of the model farms’ elevations reveals some recurring decorative elements. Half of the state-built farmsteads in Merkem had side walls with typical dovetail patterns. These patterns were frequently used to construct the gable ends of

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&lt; 10000 francs</th>
<th>10-15000 francs</th>
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<td>135,76</td>
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<tr>
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<td>44,34</td>
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<tr>
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<td>190,36</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1412,09</td>
<td>1601,17</td>
<td>2816,51</td>
<td>2563,15</td>
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<tr>
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<td>346,91</td>
<td>415,78</td>
<td>1181,5</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>8644,53</strong></td>
<td><strong>10639,36</strong></td>
<td><strong>13856</strong></td>
<td><strong>15685,07</strong></td>
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Table 1. Building materials used for the construction of walls, roofs and floors in five selected farms of different price categories.
the roofs, but they were also a way of adding to the appeal of the farmstead architecture. In more than half of all cases there were parapets, making the side walls slightly higher than the roof itself. According to the guidebooks, this prevented wind and rain from getting under the tiles, and in this way protected the farm buildings from draught and humidity and potential roof damage. Façade plinths were constructed in order to keep the outer walls moisture-free. Subtle stylistic elements, such as flared eaves, anchors and brick cornices, further contributed to the traditional image of rebuilt farms in Merkem. Another typical decoration was door and window arches. These elements were said to add to the picturesque of the countryside but were also technically useful as they increased the bearing capacity of the lintel.45

Regionalist architects had to find a balance between the harmony of the rural landscape and the originality of the individual plans. According to Edward Leonard, buildings had to correspond to a “dual characteristic: the beauty of the individual house and the beauty of the area in general”.46 This translated into designs that looked very similar but were at the same time composed of a variety of building components. While the DRO produced standardised doors and windows in order to reduce production costs as well as to rationalise the workflow, different types were produced to create variety.47 Doors were made of wood and usually had a fanlight to light the entrance. These fanlights systematically took the form of wooden cross-windows, consisting of six or eight squares. Another characteristic element of farmhouses was the presence of (painted) shutters. Shutters were not only functional but increased the esthetic qualities of rural buildings as well. The same holds true for dormers, which were integrated in almost half of the reconstructed farms. Dormers did in fact allow sunlight to warm and illuminate the top floors of the homestead, and simultaneously improved the image of the farm by breaking the monotony of the red-tiled roofs. The gable ends of the dormers were in many cases finished with spouts and shouldered gables, which were decorative elements in the first place.48

**Becoming Modern, Remaining Rural**

Rather than restoration of pre-war farmstead architecture, historians have revealed regionalism to be part of a modern movement that sought to go beyond nineteenth-century neo-styles.49 The proposed modernisations of regionalist architects first of all related to the sanitisation of the countryside. During the course of 1919, the Belgian government issued building regulations that included minimal hygiene standards for reconstructed houses. These included the obligation to have double outer walls (without a cavity) to protect against the cold and the rain. The government also regulated the height of ceilings, which had to measure 2 (top floor) or 2.8 (ground
The guidebooks directly correlated these compulsory measures with the improvement of in-house air quality and thus the health of the farmer’s family. For the same reason the total surface of openable windows per living room had to exceed 10% of that room’s area. In the same vein, bathrooms and cattle sheds were not allowed to have a direct connection with the homesteads. Neither was it permitted to construct cesspits near farmhouses.

A thorough analysis of the building plans under study shows us that in all the farmhouses but one the height of the ground floor was at least 2.8 metres, with those in almost half of the studied cases being over three metres. The average window surface largely exceeded 10% of the area of the living spaces in the farms under study. As far as the construction of walls and windows was concerned, the selected sample of farmsteads built by the DRO did (unsurprisingly) meet the standards set by the government. The building plans indicate that the façades of all farmhouses consisted of 1.5 brick-wide walls (or 33 cm). This was in accordance with the building regulations at that time.

Other measures to improve sanitary standards in the countryside were not taken into consideration. Since the integration of bathrooms was not mentioned in any of the model books, it comes as no surprise that not one farm in post-war Merkem was provided with a bathroom. In accordance with the building requirements issued by the government in 1919, the pit toilets installed on the farm had no direct connection to the homestead. They were usually part of the cattle sheds, which made it easier to collect the faeces in one central cesspit. Furthermore, wartime destruction was not seized upon as an opportunity to connect to public utilities such as running water and electricity. Rainwater drains and pumps were still omnipresent in the reconstructed farmsteads in Merkem.

The model books testified to the beginning of a rationalisation of housekeeping and thus of the reorganisation of living spaces. Indeed, during the first half of the twentieth century housekeeping became subject to a whole new branch of science that used chronometry and management techniques to make the housewife’s work more efficient. In the specific case of farm building, Ronse and Raison argued that “the farmhouse had to be designed in such way that it increased its functionality for the farmer’s family”. A general rule in this regard was that every room was to have a single function. A first indication that architects did indeed answer the call for rationalisation was the introduction of the entrance hall. While the hall was already commonplace in town houses of the nineteenth century, it was uncommon to find it in the countryside. The entrance hall not only symbolised the boundary between public and private space, but also functioned as a neutral room that gave access to the first floor and the living spaces on the ground floor.

In a number of farms bedrooms were installed on the first floor of the homesteads and in two cases even on a newly constructed second floor. Nevertheless, the majority
of building plans included an undefined *chambre* – presumably the parental bedroom – on the ground floor and conceived the top floor as one large dormitory. The example of the bedroom (*chambre*) suggests that the practice of linking one function to one room had not yet fully taken shape during the early 1920s. This is also clear when one looks at the “best room”. This room combined a pastiche of urban furniture that was widespread in the nineteenth-century Belgian countryside. During post-World War I reconstruction, however, most architects agreed that the “best room” represented everything that was wrong with pre-war rural housing. They regarded it not only as a bad imitation of urban interior design but also as a violation of the efficiency laws, since the “best room” was rarely used in daily life. Nevertheless, the “best room” did not completely disappear after the First World War.

Regionalist discourses presented the nuclear family as the keystone of modern society. On an architectural level this led to the introduction of the living room. The living room was the centrale place of the (farm)house where all members of the nuclear family spent time together. In most cases the room was centred around a stove, the main source of heat in the (farm)house. In most rebuilt farms, the stove retained its function as a cooking instrument (certainly in the cold winter months), which gave the living room a binary function. The bourgeois ideal of disconnecting living and working spaces thus occurred only partially during the reconstruction period. Virtually every farm had a laundry room that, unlike the kitchen, was equipped with a water pump – usually the only access point for water in the house. As a consequence, this was the place where the housewife did the laundry and the dishes. Since no bathrooms were integrated into interwar farms, it also served as a place to have a wash.56

### A Glimpse into the Farmer’s Workplace

Farms built during the reconstruction period had in common that the house and the working buildings were strictly separated. In no single farm under study was there a direct connection between the stable or barn and the farmhouse. It was believed that this would increase the hygiene on the farm. According to state agronomist Honoré Vandevelde, “a farm had to be built in a manner that the smell of the stable could not penetrate into the house”.57 The physical division between the farmhouse and the stable, however, transcended the question of hygiene as it represented the detachment of the farmer’s living space from the agricultural enterprise.58

Although dairy farming was never the sole form of agricultural activity on the farm, architects devoted far more care to the design of cattle sheds than to that of barns and other buildings. The disproportionate attention on the construction of
stables corresponded to the increasing weight of dairy farming in the economic structure of Belgian agriculture. It was also in tune with the attention for the quantitative and qualitative improvement of the national livestock during the aftermath of the Great War.\textsuperscript{59} In \textit{Enkele practische gegevens} (Some Practical Measures, 1920), an architectural guidebook published by the DRO, author Léon Gras explicitly stated that horses had to be accommodated in special horse stables. These buildings were divided into a number of stalls or remained as a single space, which in both cases had to give animals a minimum space of 1.3 metres each. An overview of the building plans shows that only one cattle shed (out of 12) did not comply with the suggestions made by the DRO. As far as pigpens were concerned, Gras recommended avoiding direct connections with cowsheds for sanitary reasons. The farmstead architects in Merkem seemed conscientiously to follow this advice.\textsuperscript{60}

Most attention in the DRO’s booklet was given to the construction of cowsheds. In order to “correspond to the modern scientific requirements”, cattle sheds had to consist of manure passages (1-1.5 metres wide) and drainage systems, individual stalls of 1-1.75 metres each, mangers, and a feed passage. This would facilitate not only feeding, but also caring for the stock and dairying.\textsuperscript{61} The (cattle) sheds did not fully comply with the modernisations suggested by Gras. While manure passages of a sufficient size existed in practically all cowsheds, feed passages did not (only one farm was equipped with such a corridor). This finding in fact tallies with Gras’ observations that feed passages were “indispensable, but rarely used in Flanders”. On the other hand, deep litter barns were systematically replaced by tie-stall barns with individual stalls. In the reconstructed stables the space per head of cattle fluctuated between 0.98 and 1.59 metres.\textsuperscript{62} These numbers demonstrate that almost every studied cowshed answered to the prescriptions of the DRO with regard to the positioning of cattle, and that the post-war reconstruction of farms at least partly complied with the modernisation of dairy farming.

After the First World War efforts were made to increase the productivity of the national livestock. This was done not only by implementing genetic theory, but also by improving the living conditions of farm animals. Léon Gras reminded his readers that the stalling of cattle involved a constant need for fresh air. Gras therefore advised the integration of air pipes in the outer walls of the cattle sheds. Another system consisted of a pipe that was placed vertically and ran through the outer wall. The latter system was implemented in at least one cowshed.\textsuperscript{63} However, it should be remarked that not all plans were detailed enough for one to decipher which air circulation system was used. Examination of the plans nevertheless revealed that every reconstructed cowshed was provided with one or more openable windows at the tops of the walls, as was recommended by Gras’ booklet. These windows would rationalise not only the ventilation inside the cattle sheds, but the distribution of natural light as well. To improve the sanitary conditions in the cattle sheds, Gras – just like other architects
cited in previous sections – advocated the use of bricks and cement mortar. These building materials indeed dominated the specifications for all cattle sheds.

Concluding Remarks

Those who witnessed the completely wild front zone shortly after the Armistice and now, in 1923, return are stunned as if confronted with a miracle. Towns and villages with churches and houses, arisen from their ashes like magic, rebuilt in stone, strong and solid. Architects have committed themselves, and have succeeded surprisingly well, to reconstructing whole villages with churches, dwellings and farms, in regional, rural style to give the region its old-Flemish character, but with respect for modern demands and techniques.64

In his Land en Leven in Vlaanderen (Land and Life in Flanders, 1923) the famous Flemish author Stijn Streuvels lyrically described the new land that had been rebuilt from the ruins of the First World War. Although Streuvels did not intend to give a scientific analysis of reconstruction, he pointed to one of the central features of regionalist architecture: the intertwining of a traditionalist formal language with modern comfort. More than any other building, the farmstead – the symbol of rural Flanders – incorporated these two characteristics (Fig. 3).
This article has explored the extent to which the reconstruction of farmsteads in the devastated regions after the First World War could be considered an example of social engineering. How did architectural guidelines and advice connect to ideas about governance over the rural population? This article has gone beyond discourse analysis to study if and to what degree new insights into “good” farmstead architecture were put into practice. Three elements were taken into consideration: the architecture of the farmsteads, the (re)organisation of the farmer’s home, and the rationalisation of the agricultural enterprise.

Regionalists generally considered farmsteads as uncompromising beacons of rurality. Although the countryside had changed rapidly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, farms – and farming – were often deemed to be the last elements that reconciled culture and nature. In architectural guidebooks the harmony of the farm with the environment was therefore stressed as a main feature of farmstead architecture. This could be achieved through the use of local building materials and techniques. Virtually every farm studied was indeed characterised by traditional Flemish brick architecture with few decorative elements. Modernisations were to be found in the details. In the farmhouse, the living room and the kitchen were sometimes disconnected, while the entrance hall was often introduced as a new space that separated private from public. The most eye-catching transformation on the farm itself occurred in the (cattle) sheds – because dairy farming became increasingly important during the twentieth century. Stables with manure passages and individual stalls had to rationalise the work of the farmer and his family – family farming was commonplace in Flanders.

The reconstruction by the state, a temporary mechanism to reconstruct private houses after the First World War, was the largest housing project managed by the Belgian government at the time. The government installed an administrative framework to manage the building programme in 1920, after it had established the DRO as an executive organisation to control the resources for the reconstruction of the devastated regions. The farms under study were all part of the reconstruction by the state and thus fitted within the framework by the state. According to Raphaël Verwilghen, the head of the Building Service of the DRO, state-led reconstruction had resulted in the reconstruction of hundreds of model farms. Although Verwilghen was not the most neutral source, the in-depth analysis of 16 building plans suggested that reconstruction by the state did indeed result in the implementation of model book advice.

Although regionalism was not an example of what James C. Scott labelled “high modernism”, this article showed how spatial and social engineering intertwined. A close reading of the model books and articles published by regionalist spokesmen during and shortly after the First World War taught that their final goal was the reorganisation not of rural landscapes as such, but of rural life as a whole. This
reorganisation of rural life had both disciplinary and emancipatory aspects. The preference for a traditional formal language could be traced back to the perceived need to keep the rural population in the countryside. Picturesque landscapes were believed to affect the mind of the rural dweller, thus preventing him from leaving the countryside for the city. Nevertheless, regionalist architects seemed to acknowledge that modern comfort – both at home and in the enterprise – was needed. Without denying the distinction between rural and urban housing, bourgeois elements were introduced in the farmhouse, while small adaptations (in the cattle shed) were to transform the farmer into an entrepreneur. Indeed, reconstruction in the countryside after the First World War aimed to make good farmers by giving them better farms.
Notes


2 For a broad overview, see: Pierre Lierneux and Natasja Peeters, eds., *Beyond the Great War: Belgium 1918-1928* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2018).


8 For his model, see: Ebenezer Howard, *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1898).


12 While Jean-Charles Cappronnier and Delorme argue that modernisations were rarely carried out in the French department of Aisne, Van Santvoort demonstrates that in Zemst, a municipality near Brussels (Belgium), attempts to build modern farms with a regionalist design were often blocked by local farmers. Jean-Charles Cappronnier and Franck Delorme, “La reconstruction des fermes dans le département de l’Aisne après 1918,” *In Situ*, no. 21 (2013): 2-32; Linda Van Santvoort, “Wederopbouwarchitectuur in de fusiegemeente Zemst,” *M&L. Monumenten, Landschappen en Archeologie* 33, no. 3 (2014): 20-28.


15 The database with specifications for every farm is presented in: Dries Claeys, “Land, staat en bevolking,” 470-490.


18 According to reports of the National Relief and Food Committee [Nationaal Hulp- en Voedingscomité] at least ten contributions on the reconstruction of the Belgian countryside were published in occupied Belgium between 1914 and 1918. These books were mainly aimed at an educated audience, although a few examples – such as The Construction and Reconstruction of House and Stable [Bouwen en heropbouwen van huis en stal] of the Belgian Farmers’ League – was explicitly written to be used by farmers themselves. See: Rapport spécial sur le fonctionnement et les opérations de la section agricole du Comité National du Secours et d’Alimentation. Section agricole 1914-1919 (Brussels: Vromant, 1920), 196.


20 Ibid., 301-302; as cited by Paul De Vuyst: Provincial Archives Antwerp, Collection First World War, no. 478, letter from Paul De Vuyst to Anatole de Cock de Rameyen, 17 July 1916.


22 Jacques Giele, Nationaal Komiteit voor de Verfraaiing van het Landleven: zijn doel en zijne werking (Leuven: Ceuterick, 1925), 4-5.


25 Albert Dutry, De kunst op het platteland (Ghent: De Scheemaecker, 1915), 9.

26 Helena Van Dorpe, “Landelijke esthetica: de woning”, in Handboek van landelijke maatschappijleer (Leuven: Belgische nationale commissie voor de verfraaiing van het landelijk leven, [1931]), vol. 1, 21.

27 Dutry, De Kunst, 5-7 and 42-45.

Although it has been argued that the introduction of bathrooms gained momentum in the interwar years, model books did not integrate these new rooms in their plans. Sofie De Caigny, Bouwen aan een nieuwe thuis: wooncultuur in Vlaanderen tijdens het interbellum (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), 45-46; Alfred Ronse and Theo Raison, Fermes-types et constructions rurales en West-Flandre (Bruges: Beyaert, 1918), vol. 1.


Leopold Frateur, De nieuwe methode tot verbetering van het vee (Leuven: Ceuterick, 1922).

Rapport spécial sur le fonctionnement et les operations, 201-202.

Marguerite Lefèvre, L’habitat rural en Belgique. Étude de géographie humaine (Liège: Vaillan-Carmanne, 1926).


Henri Vaes, “Le sens du regionalisme,” La Cité 1, no. 6 (1919), 103-105.


State Archives of Belgium, Archives of the Office des Régions Dévastées, nrs. 9968, 9974, 10292, 10296 and 10297.

State Archives of Belgium, Archives of the Office des Régions Dévastées, nrs. 9968, 9969, 9970, 9971, 9972, 9973, 9974, 10,290, 10,291, 10,292, 10,293, 10,294, 10,295, 10,296 and 10,297, building plans of 16 farms in Merkem.

Such warehouses were established by the Belgian government in Merkem and neighbouring towns such as Diksmuide and Langemark. “Bestuur van den Bouwdienst – Standaarddeuren en vensters”, *Beknopte bekendmaking nopens den Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten* 2, no. 3 (1920), 162-166; “Inlichtingen nopens de gemeentemagazijnen”, *Beknopte Bekendmaking* 2, no. 4 (1920), 271.


“Algemeene politie verordening op de bouwwerken ten behoeve der aangenomen gemeenten”, *Beknopte bekendmaking nopens den Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten* 1, no. 3 (1919), 159-171.

State Archives of Belgium, *Archives of the Office des Régions Dévastées*, building plans of 16 farms in Merkem. See footnote 34 for the specific archival records.


De Caigny, *Bouwen aan een nieuwe thuis*, 75-108.


De Caigny, *Bouwen aan een nieuwe thuis*, 132-133.

Ibid., 93-94.


Ibid., 2-8.

The size of the cowsheds under study varied wildly. The smallest cowshed had 3 stands, the largest had 20.

Gras, *Enkele practische gegevens*, 5; State Archives of Belgium, *Archives of the Office des Régions Dévastées*, nr. 9970, documents concerning the farm of Mr. Daniël de Haene.

Fig. 1. Stills from the televised live spectacle to commemorate the centenary of The Battle of Passchendaele, Ypres, 30 July 2017.