‘The German way of Making Better Cities’

German Reconstruction Plans for Belgium during the First World War

Wolfgang Cortjaens

“The new society has to erect new housing. By building - spiritually as well as materially - we will (much more certainly than by tearing down) become aware of everything that has been locked away during those years of pain within our soul that yearns for expression, that fulfils what lies within the freed soul of the German people.”

Although French and English interest in the reconstruction of Belgium during the First World War has been the topic of international research, the architectural debate in Germany during the occupation is a largely unexplored chapter of Belgo-German history.

Before the war, the ‘German Way of Making Better Cities’ had become a synonym for architectural quality throughout the world. When war broke out, German interest in the reconstruction of the devastated areas and cities on the front line concentrated not only on their own territories in East Prussia or Alsace, but also focused their interest on Northern France and Belgium. German architects and guilds soon realised that the tabula rasa in West Flanders offered new opportunities for urban planning. This essay briefly sketches the development of the official German reconstruction campaigns in Belgium between 1914 and 1918. The fact that these projects are relatively unknown is due to the fact that they were in the first instance a means of propaganda, and thus widely ignored, in Belgium as well as in Germany. This ignorance derives from ideological reasons that have to do with the idea of reconstruction itself. Before the First World War, an ideologically and emotionally charged struggle had begun between traditionalist and modern wings. Rooted deeply in the transformation of the industrialised Western European societies that had taken place in both countries long before the war, this struggle was to become crucial for the future understanding of housing problems and urban planning, as well as for the perception of urban qualities in general.

Das Land der Kathedralen.
War of the Worlds - War of Culture

At the end of 1914, the view of Northern France and Belgium as ‘the land of the cathedrals’ (das Land der Kathedralen), as evoked in a notoriously anti-French article written by the German art historian Richard Hamann (1879-1961), had ceased to exist. The monuments of the past could no longer be claimed to be “witnesses of a peaceful annexation of France by German science”. The territorial annexation went along with the usurpation of the history of art and architecture as well, declaring the major icons of Roman culture now to be part of Germany’s cultural heritage, and to always have been. [2.1] The initial turning point in this debate, which had occupied archaeologists, art historians and architects since the beginning of the debate around the origins of Gothic architecture, was triggered in August

1 Für the original quote: Grautoff, Formzertrümmerung und Formaufbau in der bildenden Kunst, 86.
3 Cf Hamann, “Das Land der Kathedralen”.
4 Cf Frankl, The Gothic.

6 Vachon, *Les villes martyres de France et de Belgique*, 14. The discursive concepts dealing with the terms ‘barbarie’ and ‘humanité’ have recently been explored in Horne, *German Atrocities*.

7 Dilly, “Internationale und nationale kunstgeschichtliche Praxis”, 95 ff.

8 The towers of Rheims Cathedral were said to have been used by the French army as a platform for military observations and had therefore been taken under fire by the German troops. Recently, the well-documented case of Rheims has been the topic of semiotic studies concentrating on the meaning of destruction and the power of images. The role of the French army also has to be reviewed. Cf Kiefer, “Die Beschreibung der Kathedrale von Reims”; Carqué, “Epistemische Dinge”, 65-112.

9 Cf Anderson, Peter Behrens; Posener, *Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der neuen Architektur*, III, 47-59.

10 Cf Von Ungern-Sternberg, Der Auftruf An die Kulturwerlt!; Rother, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, cat No II/14.

11 Cf Die völkerrechtswidrige Führung des belgischen Volkskrieges. In 1917, the Belgian government responded with its *Réponse au Livre blanc Allemand du 10 mai 1915*, which contained no less than 535 pages.

12 Cf Goege, “Kunstschutz und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg”. See also the contribution by Beyen in this volume.

1914. Soon after the German occupation of neutral Belgium, in violation of international law and the Hague Convention, the German army deliberately set fire to the historic centre of Louvain, the ancient Brabant university town, and then gruesomely massacred its residents. Although other reports on acts of terror committed against Belgian civilians occurred - for example in Andenne, Aarschot, Namur and Dinant - the international protest focused on the destruction of Louvain, a city famous not so much for its architectural qualities but for its symbolic value as a cradle of science, theology and humanism. When the University Library and its unique collection of rare books and manuscripts were completely destroyed by the fire, this *barbarie savante* meant an almost irreparable loss of face for Germany. Retrospectively, ‘civilisation’ and ‘culture’ were - to quote Schievelbusch - “the parties into which the spirit of Europe had split, estranged and antagonised itself during the years before 1914”. Now civilisation and culture became ‘super-weapons’ within a war that the European intelligentsia fought against each other, becoming mere supporting troops of the real military. From now on, the enemy could state that it was not only the German army that had destroyed Louvain. “Culture has destroyed the treasures of Louvain”? Only a few weeks later in September, Rheims Cathedral, seriously damaged by German and French troops, became a similar debacle for the Reich. 8 [4.4]

Shortly after the sack of Louvain, with the battle of Rheims still raging, the Germans started several campaigns to ban the worldwide protests. On 11 October 1914, a pamphlet signed by 93 representatives of the German intelligentsia was published. Among the undersigned were celebrities such as the painter Max Liebermann (1847-1935), the architect and designer Peter Behrens (1868-1940)9, the art historian Wilhelm von Bode (1872-1929), then General Director of the Royal Museums at Berlin, and the physicists Max Planck (1858-1947) and Wilhelm Röntgen (1845-1923). The pamphlet denied the guilt of Germany and, even worse, the destruction that had taken place in Belgium. Known as *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt* (aka *Manifesto of the 93*), the document was widely distributed and translated into many languages.10 The white book published by the German government only a few months later in early 1915 even tried to put the moral blame on the Belgian government for not having allowed the German troops to cross their border on their way to France.11 With the manifesto and the subsequent polemics (especially among art historians), the war of culture entered a new phase.

The worldwide anti-German demonstrations called for an institution responsible for the protection of the cultural heritage. In 1915, the German Emperor William II (1859-1941) established the Kunstschatz, an institution that was supposed to protect the most important monuments in Belgium and in Northern France. The Rhenish art historian Paul Clemen (1866-1947) was appointed its leader. [2.2] Having done efficient work as the first Chief Conservator of the (then Prussian) Rhine Province since 1893, he was perfectly equipped for this task.12 The organisation of the Kunstschatz was officially based on articles 23 and 27 of the Hague Convention which had come into force on 18 October 1907. To control the execution of the official instructions, in January 1915 Clemen was authorised by William II (who was also Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces) to travel the whole Western front including the communications zone and the theatres of war. Under his leadership, face to face with the mechanisms of destruction, hasty inventories were made, many of them in the very last minutes before precious historic monuments were irretrievably lost.
Paul Clemen posing in an unidentified ruined church at the Western front (around 1915/16). [Cologne, Rheinisches Amt für Denkmalpflege]
In reality, however, the concrete measures taken in order to protect historical buildings were quite modest. The executives of the Kunstschatz had no power of command in the communications zone or in the field of direct military operation. Additionally, material and means of transport were rare, as were human resources since neither the Belgian authorities nor the civilians were willing to co-operate with the members of the occupying troops. Due to the lack of means of transportation, material and human resources, the preventive measures taken by the German authorities were simply ineffectual, sometimes even primitive. Only a small percentage of the movable heritage could be rescued by improvised transports. In retrospect, the Kunstschatz, far from being a properly organised protection movement, has to be evaluated as a failure. Its responsibilities lay mainly “in clearing up and looking after the military authorities and in co-ordinating the inventories”.

At the end of the First World War, when the total extent of the destruction became evident, Clemen was accused of having been misled by his own lofty ambitions. In fact, preventive measures had been neglected in favour of mere art-historical interests such as documentation, illustration and inventorization.

During the first year of the war, the degree of devastation caused on the Western front remained invisible for most of the German civilians. All pictures taken by the official war photographers were carefully censored by the proper authorities, headed by the press bureau of the Foreign Office. The material had to follow the official instructions for war photographers (Anweisungen für Kriegs-Photographen) that were published on 8 October 1914 by the German Bureau for Film and Photography; patriotic behaviour of the German troops was to be emphasised while the depiction of destroyed places and the atrocities of war was strictly forbidden. In 1916, the Swiss architect Eugen Probst (1873-1970) reported in a series of articles published in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung about the damages that war had caused in Belgium. ‘Objective and dispassionate’ as it was, the text was cheerfully greeted by the German censors, because it acquitted the occupation forces from having acted as ‘barbarians’, praising their efforts to protect the historic monuments.

After Probst had visited large parts of the front, he came to the somewhat astonish-
ing conclusion that "of the great, beautiful buildings of Flemish and Brabant art ... not a single one has been destroyed". Other recent publications on Belgian art history contributed to the impression that the threatened historical sites on what was now the Western front had remained intact; only reading between the lines do we find phrases that allude to the actual warfare: "Even if bitter duty calls once more today for destruction, the image of this country and its art still remains unaffected." Using photographs mostly taken before the war, the German publications tended to create an almost idyllic image of 'Old Flanders' consisting of a conglomerate of historical patterns. In a certain sense, it corresponded with the anachronistic manner in which Belgium had presented itself at the Ghent World Exhibition of 1913. Before the war, Belgium also had strong support from traditionalist wings that later would, ironically, play a prominent part in the post-war reconstruction of the Belgian cities.

**From Kunstschutz to Heimatschutz**

On 28 August 1915, Paul Clemen held a lecture in Brussels where a symposium concerned with the protection of historical monuments (Kriegstagung für Denkmalpflege) had been organised. His statements would dominate the content and the tenor of all the official statements and publications in Germany. Like the majority of his German colleagues, Clemen regarded Germany as the "classical country of the protection of historic monuments". At the same time, he pointed out the strong connection between the protection of monuments and the then-current Heimatschutz movement. This organisation had emerged from various German associations which, during the nineteenth century, had been busy on a regional level, conserving local traditions by collecting historical relics and protecting historic sites and landscapes. In 1904, those numerous historical societies or Heimatvereine merged to become the Deutscher Bund Heimatschutz, which soon became their leading logistical instrument. Its main thesis was to confront a collective cultural crisis which was regarded as a symbol of an age dominated by the struggle between modernism and anti-modernism. Powered by bourgeois elites composed of...
of scholars, writers and local politicians, the Heimatschutz in Germany became a most influential sociological and political factor, because it propagated the same fears that would lead to the extreme nationalism of the 1920s, fed by excluding and defaming political enemies and minorities. The ideology and the politics of the movement perfectly fit the conservative and equally plebeian conviction of the mission that later would dominate the discussion of cultural, social and political renewal deriving from an educational approach. Its influence on the Prussian zoning law (Wohnungsgesetz) cannot be underestimated.29

During the First World War some of the major principles of the Heimatschutz were applied to the occupied territory and were propagated as the basis for all future reconstruction plans, especially on the Western front. They were spread by its major organ Der Städtebau as well as by the organs of the various local associations.30 For the German architects, reconstruction offered the opportunity to apply their progressive knowledge to a country that, in their opinion, had shown “only very little understanding for the demands of the Heimatschutz and modern town planning”.31 A permanent point of criticism was the lack of official regulations by which offences against good taste (i.e. the appropriate style) and the prevailing conditions of the urban surrounding could be avoided. Even in cases where its name was not mentioned, the Heimatschutz provided the ideological framework for the Germans’ reconstruction plans in Belgium. Among the recurrent requirements was adherence to building lines, as well as the strict application of the regulations of the building control department, which were to avoid new constructions that did not fulfil the general demands of the site.

In fact, these concepts were not totally new. In many points they were even identical to those that had been worked out and published by the Belgian Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites.32 Indeed, the authors of the architectonic periodicals in Germany were very well informed about the situation in Belgium.33 The pre-war activities of the Royal Commission were attacked equally by progressive and less progressive circles. Its ideas were considered out of date. Its first programmatic statements on reconstruction published in 1914 (“La reconstruction des villes et villages détruits par la guerre”) were regarded as only a weak paraphrase of the Esthétique des villes (1893) of Charles Buls (1837-1914)34, who himself had been strongly influenced by the writings of the Austrian urban planner Camillo Sitte (1843-1903) who, in his influential book Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen (1889), had recommended studying the patterns of ancient cities in order to gain a better understanding of urban structures.35 Like Sitte, Buls heavily criticised the current emphasis on broad, straight boulevards, and public squares arranged primarily for the convenience of...
traffic. In order to avoid monotony, all forms of regularity or symmetry were banned. Historic buildings were to be spared and be integrated carefully into the modern town in order to accentuate its structure. As Mayor of Brussels, Buls played a leading role in the rehabilitation of old city structures. The theories of Sitte and Buls thus provided the ideological background for the German reconstruction plans in Belgium. But this was all theory. In reality, the occupation forces were confronted with two main tasks: the large-scale creation of new housing and the Gesamtkomposition of the devastated towns and villages.\textsuperscript{37}

In Germany, as in Belgium, the new ideas about urban planning were based on systematic studies of old city structures. One of the most prominent representatives of this method was the German architect Hermann Josef Stübben (1845-1936). A close acquaintance of Charles Buls and in favour of the theories of Camillo Sitte, Stübben was also a leading figure of the German Garden City movement.\textsuperscript{39} Before the war, he had regularly worked in Belgium, too. Besides many smaller pre-war projects such as the recreation zones he planned in Knokke-Het Zoute (the Prins-Karelwijk, which loosely combined detached villas in a park-like environment), Knokke-Duinbergen and Ostend, he was also involved in bigger city extension projects in Antwerp, Bruges and Brussels.\textsuperscript{40} Stübben carefully examined the patterns of Flemish cities.\textsuperscript{41} In 1909, when the city of Louvain planned to isolate the Gothic St Peter’s Church and to create a new urban environment for the neglected slaughterhouse quarter in the very heart of the old city centre, the German architect worked out a plan which he later used to illustrate his articles on the Wiederaufbau of destroyed Louvain. [2.4] The plan spared most of the historic buildings alongside the church. The district in the south was transformed

\textsuperscript{2.4} Hermann Josef Stübben, Plan for the new surrounding of the St Peters’ Church at Louvain, 1909. [Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung, 1915, 266-267]
into a park-like area using the river Dijle as a natural barrier. The picturesque concept was clearly influenced by the German Garden City Movement.\textsuperscript{42} The plan was not carried out. During wartime, Stübben suspiciously observed activities abroad, especially in Great Britain. In 1914 he wrote: “It almost seems as if the English Garden City Movement is planning to take the architectural future of Belgium into its own hands, regarding the country as a welcome area for colonisation, for English magazines and garden cities are enthusiastically giving advice about reconstruction. Therefore German circles should also follow this course of events carefully and take preventive measures in order to avoid a most interesting field of work falling into the hands of the enemies.”\textsuperscript{43}

The reconstruction of Belgium by that time had become an affair of international concern in Germany. But what were the Belgians themselves saying?

\begin{center}
\textbf{A Foreign Affair: the Role of the Belgian Administration}
\end{center}

The reconstruction of the devastated country was organised from Le Havre, where the Belgian government was in exile. The ministers were headed by the famous neo-Gothicist Joris Helleputte (1852-1925), then Minister of Public Works\textsuperscript{44}, and his pupil Raphaël Verwilghen (1885-1963)\textsuperscript{45} whom Helleputte entrusted with the preparation of the Belgian reconstruction campaign. The other European nations suspiciously followed the activities: As early as November 1914, the English Garden Cities and Town Planning Association had signalled particular interest in supervising the reconstruction of Belgium, in line, of course, with their own ideals. A few months later, the Town Planning Conference held in February 1915 in the historic Guildhall in London would form the basis for a new law concerning the reconstruction. Its significance lies in the fact that it was mainly a work of experts and not politicians. It reinforced the power of a centralised authority. In the future the reconstruction, enlargement and improvement of the Belgian cities would be preceded by a carefully developed scheme.\textsuperscript{46} The London conference was followed by similar undertakings in France (Commission exécutive d’Organisation de la Participation belge à l’Exposition de la Cité reconstituée, Paris, 1915) and the Netherlands (Comité Néerlando-Belge d’Art Civique, The Hague, 1915). However, all these efforts failed to unleash practical activities during wartime. It seems as if the planning processes of the reconstruction in Le Havre and in occupied Belgium went on almost unaffected by each other. This was due to two factors: 1. the question of responsibilities, which led to quarrels, especially among the members of the Belgische Vereniging van Steden en Gemeenten (Belgian Association of Cities and Municipalities) and 2. the aforementioned Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites and the principles adopted in the reconstruction.\textsuperscript{47}

Some of the most capable architects and urban planners, such as the garden designer Louis-Martin van der Swaelmen (1883-1929), who, along with Huib Hoste (1881-1957)\textsuperscript{48} and several other Belgians joined the Comité Néerlando-Belge, had left the occupied country in order to find work elsewhere. By contrast, the traditionalists could rely on the Royal Commission for Monuments and Sites which, in its official report in 1914, by Charles Lagasse de Locht (1845-1937) and Paul Saintenoy (1862-1952), had recommended sticking to regional architecture.\textsuperscript{49} The ideas of de Locht and Saintenoy were highly acclaimed in Germany: “If you succeed in establishing your views in states and cities, the war of 1914 will not only have damaged art, but been useful to it as well.”\textsuperscript{50}
The German Werkbund

In the summer of 1914, shortly before war broke out, the German Werkbund opened a big exhibition in Cologne which had to close once the war had begun. In spite of its short run, the exhibition was highly acclaimed internationally because it had bundled all of the progressive tendencies within German architecture and the decorative arts.51

The aim of the Werkbund was to enforce the social component of architecture and design. Historicising models and sentimental formulas were to be replaced by modern designs, but without abandoning principles of the past.52 War was to make way for these new principles. In 1915, several Werkbund members addressed the ministries in East Prussia and Alsace, offering their support in the reconstruction of destroyed housing areas.53 Their intent was to give organisational advice, in collaboration with the Museum für Kunst in Handel und Gewerbe (Museum for Art in Trade and Design) in Hagen (Westphalia), a touring exhibition dedicated to the different artistic media related to war. Another underlying task was to create housing areas for workers employed in the enterprises essential for war needs (kriegswichtige Betriebe). Besides architectural and urban planning, the programme included many facets of arts and crafts such as furniture, war monuments, graphic arts and photography.54

Some of the architectural ensembles of the Werkbund exhibition, especially those which used more traditional forms and materials, showed strong affinities to the Heimatschutz (which was also among the exhibitors) and Garden City movements.55 They all had discovered urban planning as an important space-creating factor. With regard to this aspect, their advocates avidly supported the study of old city structures and historical sites such as the beguinages.56 [2.5]

A good example is the 'Lower Rhenish Village' which, by taking into consideration typical local building traditions, was erected

2.5 A workers’ house, designed by Camillo Friedrich for the "Lower-Rhenish Village" presented at the Werkbund-exhibition in Cologne in 1914. In the background the church designed by Heinrich Renard. The unifying brick architecture combined traditionalist and modern elements.

[Frühe Kölner Kunstaustellungen, Cologne, 1984, 86.]
as a conglomerate of several types of sober brick architecture including a church, a market square, recreation areas, light industries, small-scale agricultural production and farms. Among the protagonists of this pseudo-medieval townscape, which at the same time was claimed to be ‘modern,’ were Georg Metzendorf (1874-1934)\(^{57}\), architect of the famous workers’ garden city of ‘Margarethenhöhe’ in Essen, and Heinrich Renard (1868-1928) from Cologne.\(^{58}\) Special attention was paid to space-creating factors. About the same time, architects like Paul Mebes (1872-1938)\(^{59}\), Alfred Gessner (1868-1953)\(^{60}\), Hermann Jansen (1869-1945)\(^{61}\) and Richard Riemerschmid (1868-1957)\(^{62}\) who were all influenced more or less by Sitte’s theories, designed small cities that were meant to serve as recreational areas and as reference points of cultural identity within a larger entity. However, those ensembles meant to evoke the illusion of a small-town environment within a big city were highly artificial constructs. Before the war, of course, a small country like Belgium had not had the housing problems of Germany, where industrialisation had created an enormous demand for housing in the major cities. After the war, the housing situation in Belgium had dramatically changed.\(^{63}\)

Confronted not only with the task of reconstruction, but with the need to create new housing for the homeless civilians as quickly as possible, several aspects of the ‘German way of making better cities’ were adopted by progressive architects like Raphaël Verwilghen.\(^{[2.6]}\)

In spite of their ideological diversity, the connections between the different German groups were very strong. Hence, it seems only logical that the government in Berlin recruited the protagonists responsible for the supervision of the reconstruction in Belgium from within the progressive circles of the Werkbund and the Heimatschutz. Early 1915 saw the establishment of the Cologne-based Verein zum Wiederaufbau der zerstörten Gebiete (Guild for the Reconstruction of the Devastated Areas). The guild appointed as its chairman the Cologne architect Carl Rehorst (1866-1919) who between 1915 and 1917 was active as a ground engineering consultant and who recently had joined the German Territorial Army where he became Captain.\(^{64}\) As not only an active member of the Deutscher Bund Heimatschutz but equally responsible for the exhibition of the German Werkbund in 1914, Rehorst and some of his assistants and collaborators - among them the Munich-based economist Günther

---

\(^{2.6}\) Raphael Verwilghen, Plan for the garden city Batavia in Roeselare, 1921. In 1919, Raphael Verwilghen was named director of the Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten. A pupil of the famous neo-Gothicist Joris Helleputte, he was also active as editor of the modernistic magazine La Cité and founder of the Société des Urbanistes belges. In post-war Belgium Verwilghen was not able to realise many projects because of his progressive ideas. Only a few designs were carried out, most notably the Batavia Garden City in his hometown Roeselare which echoes not only his acquaintance with the English International Garden Cities and Town Planning Association but also with the Werkbund-designs of the pre-war period. [Louvain, KADOC: KYC 40, Ons Volk Ontwaakt, 17 November 1921]
Freiherr von Pechmann (1882-1968), a specialist of arts and crafts - formed an important link between the two institutions. Another former Werkbund architect and participant in the exhibition of 1914 who was involved in the reconstruction plans was the Cologne-based Ludwig Paffendorf (1872-1949). During the First World War, he became a member of the German construction department in Wallonia where he was mainly entrusted with making floor plans of historic buildings. At Namur, he installed a permanent exhibition consisting of numerous blue-prints and technical drawings of ‘typical’ regional building types and façades that were claimed to be suitable models for reconstruction. The exhibition was intended to foster a better understanding of archaeological problems, regional types of construction and local techniques. The project clearly harks back to the principles of the Heimat-schutz. Another publication showing a similar interest in ancient construction types was published in 1916, at the peak of the positional warfare: Flandrische Wohnhaus-Architektur, a collection of samples compiled by Erdmann Hartig (+1925), then Director of the Königliche Baugewerkschule (Royal School for Architecture and Civil Engineering) in Aachen. Instead of dealing with the major monuments such as churches, abbey, town halls and other representative types of buildings, Hartig concentrated on civilian architecture, rural buildings and farms. Paul Clemen provided the foreword which once again contrasted an ancient ideal with the sins of modernity: War was regarded as an elementary force imposed upon an almost unstoppable boom of ground speculation and corruption that, in his opinion, had dominated Belgian building regulations before the war. This verdict would become an important factor in the current debates in Germany as well as in Belgium. In both countries, the anti-modernist movements were fed by the scientific disciplines of art history and archaeology, which emerged as the main support on which all discussions about reconstruction were grounded.

Beyond Realisation: the Failure of German Reconstruction Projects in Belgium

In contrast to the debates and articles that aired the problem of reconstruction, the projects that can be associated with German occupation authorities are rather limited. Apart from the fact that the ever-changing positions during the war in Flanders and Northern France did not allow for carrying out extensive building activities, there are several other reasons that contributed to this failure. The restrictions the Belgian civilians had to cope with, did not explicitly affect the building trade. Important institutions such as mail, telegraph and railways - i.e. all means of transport and communication, which were needed for warfare - were put under German control. In spite of these restrictions, the administration of the Belgian civilians remained almost intact during the years of occupation. Most of the local authorities could continue their work. Only the political leaders of the provinces, the governors and the district commissioners, had to give up their posts according to the Belgian law promulgated before the war. Between 1914 and 1918, the cities and communities strove to re-establish a working infrastructure conforming to the pre-war situation. Under these circumstances it comes as no surprise that the German civil government did not gain much influence on the reconstruction of Belgium. Their policy was a policy of prevention, being well aware that any interference in internal affairs of the local institutions would cause even greater damage. The idea...
that they should work together with the Belgian civil government was soon abandoned. Indeed, most of the German writings of that time stress the responsibility and independence of the Belgian civil government. However, it has to be presumed that in reality, the functional scope of the Belgian administration was slightly reduced, whether by restrictive orders, rejection of material or by bureaucracy.

In contrast to the activities of the Kunstschutz, the section responsible for reconstruction developed concepts not for the restoration of solitary buildings but for the creation of entirely new urban spaces. The task of the Germans was to advice, not to construct.69 On the other hand, the local building control departments, who largely acted independently of the state building law, differed greatly from the German model. The main problem was the statutes governing the legal protection of private property. In the cities, available building space was quite rare, which hindered urban planning on a larger scale.70 The rapid growth of important trading cities such as Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Liège at the end of the nineteenth century had led to an exponential growth of suburbs. Planning and expansion of the cities was becoming more and more of a problem.

As a result of the restrictions mentioned above, the German authorities failed to put through their ideas in most cases. In Tournai, for example, where a competition was held in 1915 among Belgian architects in order to reshape the Grande Place, the jury voted for a neo-medieval plan that was meant to unify the picturesque essence of the historic centre.71 From the German point of view, this was an anachronistic undertaking. A similar response was provoked by the reconstruction of the late-Gothic Table Ronde in Louvain, a masterpiece erected in 1482 by the late-medieval architect Mathieu de Layens and torn down because of its ruined state in 1817, to make way for a neoclassicist building. After this building was destroyed in August 1914, the city of Louvain and the proprietor of the building, the National Bank, opted to rebuild the Table Ronde based on the original plans preserved in the city archives. Progressive German organs like Der Städtdebaule rejected this approach as ‘unfruitful romanticism,’ condemning it as the final decline of Belgian town planning, as “städtbaulicher Tiefstand”72.

The complete rejection of historicising reconstructions of urban spaces seems to have had an almost symbolic meaning in the same way that in Germany, the First World War definitely marked the end of the architectural historicism that had dominated the entire nineteenth century. Paradoxically, authorities like Paul Clemen picked up the same historicising argumentation when they claimed that appropriate models for town planning were to be found in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, i.e. the era of early classicism.73 Whereas in Germany an architectonic period that had been neglected for almost a century was now being rediscovered as a model for an ‘indigenous’ architecture deeply rooted in local traditions, in Belgium the same period was wiped out. For example, in Diksmuide, the plastered classicist buildings that previously had bordered the market place were not rebuilt but replaced by neo-Gothic gabled houses.74

The German authorities tried to influence the reconstruction of the in 1915 devastated city of Dinant as well. The efforts resulted in a carefully edited publication that was compiled under the auspices of the second governor-general in Belgium, Freiherr von Bissing (1844–1917), who had previously edited Paul Clemen’s œuvre on the Cisterian abbeys.75 Completed in 1916, the book was not published until 1918, only a few

69 Clemen and Bersu, “Kunstdenkmäler und Kunstpflege”, 31: “Sie konnten vor allem verhindern, daß nicht durch unbedacht getroffene Entscheidungen die Festlegung auf ungeschickte Baupläne gegeben werde und daß durch voreilig ausgeführte Bauten ein gesunder und wohlbedachter Bebauungsplan unmöglich gemacht werde.”
70 Uyttenhove, “Internationale inspanningen voor een modern België”, 42.
71 Clemen and Bersu, “Kunstdenkmäler und Kunstpflege”, 33.
72 “Städtebauliches aus Löwen”; “Belgisches Bauwesen”.
73 Clemen and Bersu, “Kunstdenkmäler und Kunstpflege”, 33.
74 Cf Stynen, “De rol van de instellingen”, 126 (fig).
75 Clemen and Gürlitt, Die Klosterbauten der Cistercienser. See the contribution of Beyen in this volume.
months before the armistice. Besides summarising the architectural history of Dinant, it also contained detailed proposals for rebuilding the city.\textsuperscript{76} [2.7] All previous efforts to build in a modern way were rejected as “uneven, diffuse, international”.\textsuperscript{77} The destruction of the “architectonic monstrosities”\textsuperscript{78} of the pre-war era was even welcomed to improve the general appearance of the city. The main task was to create a harmonious townscape (including, of course, the reconstruction of the pear-shaped church tower which was rejected as inappropriate) that corresponded to the particular geological situation and topography of the city: “Modification of the buildings to fit the character of the ground and their adaptation into the landscape, pushing forward of the upper and lower natural limits of the houses in certain streets in order to avoid an unhandsome, all too great inequality […], last not least by applying indigenous methods of building and of style. Special attention is to be paid to attractive built-up areas in the layout of streets and squares.”\textsuperscript{79} Brick buildings or specially accentuated façades were to be avoided. The advice given by the author tends to unify the features of the city. The influence of the \textit{Heimatschutz} and the German Garden City Movement is evident.

The situation in Namur was somewhat different. The fortified city situated on the banks of the rivers Sambre and Meuse was less affected by war actions than other Belgian cities. Its historic centre had only been hit sporadically. Out of approximately 4,800 houses, only 134 had been destroyed. Unfortunately, one of the districts most affected was the Grand Place (Place d’Armes) which was almost completely destroyed. The Town Hall, a classicist building erected in 1828-1830 by the previous (Dutch) government, was also burned to the ground. The German architect Wilhelm Kreis (1873-1955)\textsuperscript{80} developed a reconstruction plan for the Grand Place that can be regarded as typical of the German viewpoint. [2.8] It created views and spatial relationships that had not existed previously. New alignments gave a wide view of the Belfry, the tower of St John’s Church and the impressive Citadel on the opposite bank of the river. To achieve open spaces, Kreis planned not to rebuild the houses that had stood between the Grand

\textsuperscript{76} Cf Dinant. Eine Denkschrift.
\textsuperscript{77} Cf Heinrich, “Gedanken über den Wiederaufbau der Stadt Dinant”, 208.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibidem, 196.
\textsuperscript{79} For the original quote: Ibidem, 202.
\textsuperscript{80} Cf Schneider, Nerdinger and Wang, Deutschland, passim.
Place and the Rue de Brasseur, in order to gain more space for the new Town Hall, which would now be totally detached. Urban space was primarily being evaluated in relation to its picturesque qualities. The style of the new buildings was supposed to be oriented to their surroundings: “The character of this city district, in spite of its simple, appealing, although somewhat narrow-minded manner, is quite remarkable and demands an adoption of this type of construction.” Some characteristics of the destroyed houses were to be copied, such as the varying alignment of the horizontal mouldings, whereas all forms of gables, oriel and towers were to be avoided. The height of the new buildings, which could not protrude above those of the few houses that had been spared by the fire, was especially important in Kreis’ reconstruction plan. For the new Town Hall and the Stock Exchange, the architect suggested adopting the style of the old Meat Hall which was erected at the end of the sixteenth century in a late-Renaissance style, typical for the Meuse region. Although this quite conventional plan was not executed, the solution applied after the war bore some similarity to Kreis’ vision.

One of the few German designs that was, at least partly, carried out during the occupation was for the construction of 247 housing units in the heavily destroyed village Kapelle-op-den-Bos (Province of Flemish Brabant). The style of the houses referred vaguely to regionalist patterns. The dwelling units followed a total concept which did not allow much variety. The most prominent means to visually subdivide and accentuate the homogenised facades were corbie-step gables, the form of which ranged from neo-Gothic to neo-Baroque variations. The reduced scale - the houses had no entrance hall and the width of the fronts was only 4 to 8 meters - and the use of cheap building materials such as cement and local bricks guaranteed relatively cheap prices meant to attract a clientele of workers, artisans, shipbuilders and dockers. The combination of various functions - living, working and self-suppliance by domestic animals and small gardens - under one roof recalled recent projects of the German Gartenstadt or Garden City Movement, especially the small allotments. However, the regularity of the row houses and the somewhat monotonous recurrence of the same building type followed conventional patterns that had already dominated paternalism half a century earlier, when a feudal elite of British industrialists was the first to promote the erection of large dwelling units for their workers within a ‘green’ environment. The experiment in Kapelle-op-den-Bos was called off after the armistice in 1918; due to legal quarrels caused by the fact that the Germans had ignored the private-property law in favour of new allotments, the completion of the houses already begun took several years.

---

81 For the original quote: Kreis, “Vorschlag zum Wiederaufbau des Rathausplatzes”, 87.
82 See, for example, the workers’ houses in Copley (Halifax), built between 1849 and 1853 by the textile manufacturer Colonel Ayckrodt.
83 Maes, "De tuinwijkexperiments", 192-193.
Aftermath

After having lost the war, a politically isolated and partially occupied Germany was traumatised by the fear of political, social, economic and cultural annexation. For a short period, a radical modernism seemed to offer a way out of this dilemma. In 1919, the German art historian Otto Grautoff (1876-1937) applied the principles of modern architecture to the idea of a new society. Grautoff had published several anti-French compilations during the war which quoted French colleagues out of context in order to minimise the German role in the destruction of cultural heritage during the war actions. Originally a specialist in French baroque art, his writing *Formzertrümmerung und Formaufbau in der bildenden Kunst* conveyed the image of a nation that could regain its integrity and dignity only by rejecting any foreign influence in its building trade. Drawing a chronological line from antiquity to German Expressionism, the book concludes: “It is to be feared that the victory of the Western nations over a confused and self-destructive Germany will impose, to an even greater extent than before the war, the Greek-Roman-French ideal of the beautiful form, of measure and balance upon the German people and that the menacing stream coming in from the West will sweep away the remains of German personality.”

The narrow focus of this position characterises almost perfectly the contradictory distinction that history of art and architecture had established between German ‘high culture’ and its Roman neighbours - an antagonism that was rooted deeply in the chauvinist attitude the European nation-states had cultivated throughout the nineteenth century. The tragic circumstances in which Belgium had been dragged into the war were only the logical consequence of this development. While the Belgian authorities sought to re-create the lost cityscapes in a ‘look-alike’ historicising manner, Germany, almost unaffected by war actions, regarded the devastation caused by modern warfare as a necessary means to overcome traditionalism and to regain cultural superiority by the blessings of modernism. This point of view again reduced the problem to one of mere aesthetics. Although protofascism in Germany politically and aesthetically adopted some aspects of the avant-garde, this modernist tendency was only short-lived as the right-wing ‘Expressionism of the Bomb’ (Hannah Arendt) propagated by minister Goebbels was soon abandoned once the totalitarian Nazi regime was in power. Instead, it was replaced by aesthetic strategies that were modelled on exactly the same traditionalist concepts that had marked the beginnings of modern architecture in Germany before the First World War.

2.9 A rather paradoxical last effort to point out the supremacy of the German occupation was made when in late 1918 the Cologne-based architect Johannes Schüller (*1884), who since 1916 had worked on various projects in Flanders, published his book *Neue Kleinhäuser in Belgien erstanden während des Krieges*. In this book, which subsumed the German efforts from a rather euphemistic point of view, Schüller pointed out Kapelle-op-den-Bos as a model project for the Belgian ‘Wiederaufbau’.

[84 Grautoff, Kunstverwaltung in Frankreich und Deutschland; Mâle, Studien über die deutsche Kunst. For biographical notes on Grautoff’s up-and-down career see Wendland, Biographisches Handbuch deutschsprachiger Kunsthistoriker im Exil.
85 For the original quote: Grautoff, *Formzertrümmerung und Formaufbau in der bildenden Kunst*, 86.
86 Arendt, Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft, 528.]