Living with History, 1914-1964

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Domi or Dom-Ino?

The Role of the Genius Loci in Post-war Reconstruction and Interwar Urbanism*

Leen Meganck

The First World War undeniably functioned as a catalyst through which visions of the past, present and future came into conflict with each other. In the field of architecture, too, the issue of the war's devastation acutely posed the question of what role the past would play in the future. In the following essay I wish to compare and contrast two diametrically opposed visions of reconstruction - in the wider sense of ‘Living with History’. Yet the reconstruction after 1914 was not an autonomous phenomenon, but rather a clear crystallisation of the tendencies of that time concerning the architectural past. Was it necessary for this past to step aside for a new, optimised dwelling form that could offer the best opportunities for a healthy and happy life (Dom-Ino)? Or did this past have to be restored as much as possible so as to meet the need for recognition, of ‘feeling at home’ (domi)? Could an architectural form be universally applied (Dom-Ino)? Or would it have to take into account the local circumstances, the genius loci (domi)?

In 1914-1915, the architect Le Corbusier (1887-1965) designed his Maison Dom-Ino, a freely adaptable architectural skeleton intended as the basic blueprint for the reconstruction of the devastated areas (published in his Vers une architecture, in 1923).

The Dom-Ino house consisted of a skeleton, which had to be mass produced, with the details filled in by the individual owner according to his or her own tastes and means. Like dominos, they were intended to be assembled in numerous combinations. Commissioners and owners with more money could expand their houses by adding more Dom-Ino modules. The common origin of modest housing for workers and villas for the wealthy would ensure that social differentiation through architecture was possible, but that it would not lead to striking visual differences. The settlements sprang from a tabula rasa: the houses were linked one after the other into new neighbourhoods, without any connection to existing urban or village structures.

Although originally intended for the devastated areas, the Dom-Ino skeleton provided a basic architectural grid that could be set up anywhere in the world - preferably in an untouched or completely annihilated environment. It was universal and completely negated existing structures and local customs, especially in the fields of aesthetics and technology. Indeed, Le Corbusier built for the new man, who would soon wear the same clothing and speak the same language the whole world over, and who would approach life from the mind and not from the heart. 3 “The house will no longer be an archaic entity, heavily rooted in the soil by deep foundations, built ‘firm and strong,’ the object of the devotion on which the cult of the family and the race has so long been concentrated. Eradicate from your mind any hard and fast conceptions in regard to the dwelling-house and look at the question from an objective and critical angle, and you will inevitably arrive at the ‘House-Tool’, the mass-production house, available for everyone, incomparably healthier than the Dom-Ino?

* This text is based on the chapter “City Planning” from my PhD dissertation Bouwen te Gent in het interbellum (1919-1939).

I wish to acknowledge my late mentor Herman Stynen, who inspired me to look more closely at the aspect of monument conservation.

1 Genius loci: literally, the local genius, the divinity to which a certain place is consecrated.

The concept of genius loci was introduced to architecture in 1966 by Aldo Rossi in his book Architettura della Citta (see Rossi, The Architecture of the City) and was further elaborated by Christian Norberg-Schulz in Genius Loci. Paesaggio, ambiente, architettura (see Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci. Towards a phenomenology of architecture).

2 The Dom-Ino system was first published in 1923 (Le Corbusier, Vers une architecture, 189-197). For “les maisons Dom-Ino” see, among others, Boesinger et al, ed, Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, 23-26; Brooks, Le Corbusier’s formative years, 384-391; Jencks, Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution in Architecture, 94-95.

old kind (and morally so too) and beautiful in the same sense that the working tools, familiar for us in our present existence, are beautiful”.

However, it is precisely these instinctive arguments (the heart, the race, 'rootedness') that played a crucial role in the reconstruction. Architecture is certainly not a casual artistic design statement: it intervenes in the built environment, which is appropriated by several interests. It comprises a part of our memories, of our daily life, of our experience of beauty and familiarity in our living environment. In a world that had been shaken to its foundations, in a world whose city centres, villages and even entire regions were reduced to unrecognisable fields of rubble, the recovery of things that offered comforting memories was evoked as a form of ritual against chaos. If it was impossible to get back the many who had been killed in action, then at the very least that for which they fought, the patrimony of their fatherland, could be rebuilt in their honour. Respect for 'the spirit of the place', the genius loci (although the term was never used), was pressed to the fore as one of the most important principles. The fulfilment of this principle through the implantation of a local architectural language and maximum conservation of the existing urban fabric led not only to regionalism's great success - as a trend, it was clearly revealing itself before the war - but, simultaneously, to its being discredited in progressive circles. Around the turn of the century regionalism and modern architecture encountered each other in the rejection of the 'empty formulae' of the revivalist styles, and in the search for sober and rational renovation. Progressives experienced the

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5 Besides patriotic and sentimental convictions, economic factors also played a role: there was a fear that a modern reconstruction would damage tourism. See Celis, “De Wederopbouwarchitectuur tussen inhoud en vorm”, 141.

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success of regionalism in reconstruction as a massive and suffocating historicisation of the urban habitat, as a ‘giant leap backward’. Nevertheless, arguments supporting regionalist architecture’s right to exist were based on rational principles: easy access to local construction materials, and adaptability to the climate and circumstances specific to a certain place, worked out through years of experience. ‘They are the result of discoveries slowly acquired through various generations. We cannot disown good traditions with impunity. How many old methods in the course of the last century were rejected in the name of modern art without serious enquiry, yet now are recognised as highly rational?’

Domi or Dom-Ino? Should architecture provide a feeling of ‘home’, of recognition and familiarity, or choose a new habitat for the new man? This dilemma not only emerged in reconstruction, but we also find it in connection with the urban fabric and historic patrimony beyond the devastated areas. After all, existing cities had also to adapt themselves to modern society.

The problems of rapid urbanisation, city formation, slum housing and increasing traffic were weighing heavily on historic city centres.

Many modernist architects saw the answer to ‘the problem of the city’ in the ab nihilo construction of new cities that would be adapted to the demands of modern life. The historical testimony of existing cities was completely denied as a result, or was clear-cut in large city neighbourhoods so as to make place for renovation, such as in Corbusier’s Plan Voisin for Paris (1925). These projects, however, never got past the design stage. The best-known examples by architects and urban planners in Belgium are Julien Schillemans (1906-1943) with his “utopian project for a communist World-City” (1928-1931), Renaat Braem (1910-2001) with his “design for a line-city between Antwerp and Liege” (1931) [15.2], Sta Jasinski (1901-1979) with his “project for the revaluation of Brussels’ inner-city” (1932) and Gustave Herbosch (1908-1976) with his “line-city along the southwestern industrial axis of Brussels” (1933).

Victor Bourgeois

Still, not all Belgian modernists were so radically anti-urban as their Franco-Swiss model. One very interesting figure in this regard is the architect Victor Bourgeois (1897-1962). As a modernist architect and the vice-chair of the CIAM congresses, he was one of the pioneers of the Modern Movement in Belgium. In his “plan for greater Brussels” of 1929, he took into consideration the inner city and did not plan for any increase of scale. He situated the new alignments and settlements chiefly beyond the ‘Brussels pentagon’ (thus outside the old city). Besides this, he paid extensive attention to urban problems and their interaction with historic patrimony. In a series of articles for the avant-garde weekly Sept Arts in 1927, he developed his vision of what he called “l’urbanisme vivant”. He censured, among other things, the reconstruction of the Groot Vleeshuis on Brussels’ Grasmarkt as proposed by the Comité du Vieux Bruxelles. The Committee pushed forward a reconstruction with - in their own words - “une exactitude historique et archéologique parfaite” (a perfect historic and architectural exactitude) and, at the same time, with adjustments to improve the flow of traffic, and with functionally inspired changes in the division of the plan. Bourgeois pointed out this internal contradiction and debunked the myth of ‘faithful’ reconstruction. The new building would not possess the materials, the shape, and the patina of the past, nor would

6 For the original quote: Viérin, Over de landelijke woning aan de Vlaamsche Kust, 69. The manuscript is signed: Oxford, October 1918.
7 See also Meurs, De moderne historische stad.
8 See Strauven, “Victor Bourgeois”.
Between 1928 en 1932 the building was effectively replaced by a new building by architect Michel Polak, however, in a neobaroque style. See Le patrimoine monumental de la Belgique, 418.


Bourgeois, “L’Urbanisme vivant. Pour le Grand Bruxelles. Quelques propositions pour conserver ou mettre un peu d’ordre dans les quartiers existants”.


The rail link connecting north and south Brussels and its attendant clear-cutting provide a striking exception to this. However, it must be said that the concept of this underground train link, diagonally through the city, dates back as far as 1890, and was taken up as far back as 1910. Work was resumed after the First World War only with difficulty. From 1920 to 1934 the technical and financial feasibility of the connection was debated. Not until 1935 was the work resumed. Van Meerten, “De Brusselse Jonction”.

Buls, L’Esthétique des villes.

Sitte was especially known in Belgium through Camille Martin’s French, slightly changed translation: Sitte, L’art de bâtir les Villes (citation: Ibidem, 3).

it belong to the present. Only a modern building that responded to “la mobilité plastique de la ville avec une unité de proportions de couleurs et de l’esprit” (the flexible plasticity of the city with a unity of proportions through colour and character) could for him adequately complete the Grasmarkt site.\(^\text{10}\)

Bourgeois pleaded for the conservation of the existing heritage. But once this was lost through circumstances, reconstruction was out of the question. “After all, there exists only one rational attitude toward historical monuments: that of the doctor who lengthens the lives of his patients in a dignified manner, and not that of clumsy surgical intervention with an eye for artificial restorations ... . When these testaments to the past, these venerable monuments, are lost (and don’t we cause this through a lack of maintenance?), let us replace them with modern buildings whose three-dimensional value completes the urban site without offence, but also without scruple.”\(^\text{11}\)

Bourgeois also deplored the thoughtless sacrifice of historical street patterns to the demands of ever worsening traffic. He proposed furnishing the historic inner-city with a network of “artères de repos” (peaceful arteries) from which all vehicular traffic would be banned.\(^\text{12}\) These streets could show historic buildings and shops to their best advantage. These “espaces restraints à l’échelle humaine” (subdued spaces on a human scale) would have to meet the physical needs of the city dweller.

In his article “Quelques propositions pour conserver ou mettre un peu d’ordre dans les quartiers existants” (A few proposals to preserve or create some order in existing neighbourhoods), Bourgeois expressed his regret as he saw how the character of certain streets and neighbourhoods was violated by new buildings.\(^\text{13}\) For this reason, he pleaded that regulations be imposed by the city services as to colours and materials, and for limitations on height and the projections of façades (such as balconies and loggias). He saw these control measures as the only manner through which to guarantee the urban aesthetic and the unity of the existing architectural ensembles. Tall buildings were necessary in the city, but only in a coordinated manner and in certain neighbourhoods, in which sufficient greenery and open space would be provided for hygienic reasons.

For Victor Bourgeois, the old and new went together harmoniously in the city, and on the basis of a respect for the location and the environment in which a building came to be. The concept of genius loci - which he formulated as the “intuition de l’ambiance” (intuition of ambience) - was for him a means with which to reconcile the past and the present.\(^\text{14}\)

In the practice of urban architecture in the interwar period we generally find a search for reconciliation between modern demands and the existing urban morphology. The nineteenth-century policy of city planning through disruption was sharply reduced between the wars.\(^\text{15}\) Besides the economic background, aesthetic convictions also played a role. Camillo Sitte’s vision of urban design, which was strongly propagated by Brussels’ Mayor Charles Buls (1837-1914), was an important guideline during the interbellum.\(^\text{16}\) On the basis of the study of successful examples from the past, the Austrian architect and city planning theoretician Sitte (1843-1903) wanted to rediscover “l’art de bâtir des villes” (the art of building cities), so as to give back to cities their “aspect caractéristique et pittoresque d’autrefois” (characteristic and picturesque aspect of the olden times).\(^\text{17}\) Typical elements from Sitte’s grammar of city planning are enclosed squares, the avoidance of long, straight street plans, and ensuring that
monuments are framed by development. Both Sitte and Buls pleaded that the individual character of locations be respected, as opposed to the drawing-table city planning of the nineteenth century that spared nothing.

Ghent: Korenlei and Jan Breydelstraat

Analysis of several cases of new interwar buildings and interventions in Ghent’s city centre beautifully illustrates the search for local characteristics and the drive toward respect for the existing ensemble. This respect does not always proceed from the architect and the commissioners themselves, but rather was often the consequence of the intervention of the Stedelijke Commissie voor Monumenten en Stadsgezichten (City Commission for Monuments and City Sights). This commission, set up in 1823, was the first monument commission in Belgium.18 Notably, it was one of the only urban commissions in the interwar period, although there were pressure groups such as the Comité du Vieux Bruxelles, mentioned above. Its advice was not legally binding, but it certainly possessed a large moral authority. The City Commission set as its task “to preserve the paternal heritage and to listen to the demands of the present”19.

To this end, it strove against the pollution of the townscape through the use of signage, illuminated advertisements and loud colours, against the thoughtless setting up of store display windows in historic districts (above all, they hated the disruption of architectural rhythm), against the destruction of interesting buildings or complexes, and against new buildings of ‘a glaringly modern style’ within an historic context. Its meetings and lines of reasoning provide a good picture of the balancing act that increasingly was being made between tradition and modernity, between honour for the past and the recognition of the rights of the present, in the form of technical arguments concerning economics, hygiene and traffic.

The first example is an owner’s unexpected demolition of a house in the city’s historic harbour the Korenlei. [15.3] In 1914, though the war was raging, plans nevertheless were made for the restoration of this city sight, which was widely known (and greatly loved by tourists). The building, demolished in 1934, was not protected because the

18 Founded on 27 December 1823 as the Commissie tot bewaring der Kunst- en Historiestukken te Gent (Commission for the Preservation of Ghent’s Artistic and Historical Artifacts). See SAG, SCMS: Commissie der Monumenten en Stadsgezichten der Stad Gent, Verslag der zitting op het Stadhuis van Gent onder voorzitterschap van den heer Burgemeester, den 29 december 1923, gehouden ter gelegenheid van het honderdjarig bestaan der Commissie 1823-1923, 3.

19 For the original quote: SAG, SCMS, Annual Report, 1937, 1.
façade had until then been covered over with plaster and thus was not immediately recognisable as pre-eighteenth century.20 The owner and his architect submitted a project for a house in traditional style, an eclectic constellation of German and Moorish influences. [15.4] Thus, the project had no real affinity with Ghent’s historical residential typology, nor its surroundings.

The City Commission responded that the design “is a composite of various disproportionate and exotic building styles that do not in the least take account of the extremely special environment wherein it must be built”, and proposed two alternatives.21 Frans Van Hove, the architect of the City Commission, drew up two counter-plans in styles that reflected the surrounding buildings. Plan A was a variant on the traditional Flemish Gothic [15.5]; plan B harked back to a Louis XV or Rococo style [15.6], like the adjacent building. Both projects, however, featured a garage door and a bay window, urgently demanded by the building’s commissioner. The design adapted by the owner’s architect freely follows plan A. [15.7] The building is certainly recognisable as twentieth century - aside from the fact that it proudly bears ‘anno 1934’ in cartouches on the façade - but it blends in with the historic row of façades. Whether or not this is valuable architecture is certainly open to debate, but in any case the atmosphere of the quay was protected by the intervention of the Commission.

The Jan Breydelstraat, one of the typically narrow, meandering streets in the historical city centre is certainly a much more complex case, and one that dragged on for ever. It involved two problems: straightening, and the repair of damaged urban fabric.

In the nineteenth century a canal that had cut the street in half since the Middle Ages was filled up. This greatly altered the appear-
ance of the street. The destruction of three properties in this same period caused a true ‘breach’ in the face of the street.

In 1887, the street was ordered widened by Royal Decree. This meant that, after demolition of the buildings, the street would have to be rebuilt on a building line that was pushed further back. This is typical for nineteenth-century urban architecture strongly resting upon technical considerations of traffic. From 1910, voices rose against carrying out this comprehensive widening. The inevitable demolition of the Hôtel Vander Meersch, which dated back to the sixteenth century, was the principal cause for concern. This caused the City Commission for Monuments and Urban Sites to come into conflict with the city urbanisation service, which “saw the streets as pipes through which the stream of traffic must be canalised. Watch out, any building or complex that dares to cross its path!” In the end, the city chose to maintain the street’s appearance to the greatest extent possible, and the straightening was revoked in 1931. The typical and picturesque look of the street won the day.

However, there was still the problem of how to fill up the gap. Shortly after the First World War the city council entered into an agreement with the City Commission in which building applications for the Jan Breydelstraat were subject to the recommendations of the Commission. Moreover, in 1927 a city building ordinance was enacted specifically for the Jan Breydelstraat - a unique occurrence. The ordinance determined that the plans of the new buildings on this street had to be in the same style as the surrounding fabric, “that is to say, in the Flemish style”. New buildings had to be a maximum of three storeys tall, and crowned with gables and dormers. The commission’s architect, Frans Van Hove, drew up three design types so as to inspire future commis-

15.6 Counter-plan by Frans Van Hove, 11 June 1934. [Ghent, Stadsarchief, SCMS, Plannen-Korenlei]

15.7 Final plan by Theofiel De Smet, 15 June 1934. [Ghent, Stadsarchief, SCMS, Plannen-Korenlei]

22 Royal Decree, 27.09.1887.
23 See, for instance the discussion in Bulletijn der Maatschappij van Geschied- en Oudheidkunde te Gent, 20 (1912), 449-456 and 21 (1913), 143-146.
24 For the original quote: Casier, Les travaux de la Commission des monuments et des sites de Gand de 1919 à 1923, 11.
25 Royal Decree, 07.08.1931.
26 This breach in the street and its possible filling was also extensively discussed by the Maatschappij van Geschied- en Oudheidkunde te Gent (The Society of Historians and Antiquarians of Ghent); witness the reports in the Bulletijn der Maatschappij van Geschied- en Oudheidkunde te Gent, 33 (1925), 70-78: “Est-il désirable, ou non, de conserver l’échappée sur l’Hôtel de Coninck, aujourd’hui Musée des Arts décoratifs?”.
27 Casier, Les travaux de la Commission des monuments de Gand en 1917 et 1918, 15.
28 “Bijzonder policiereglement op het bouwen en ombouwen in de Jan Breydelstraat.”
not insist too much on the construction of façades in the old style (vieux-neuf); this is a case of new work, and I think that it would be good to permit a certain artistic freedom, so long as it is insisted that they respect the site ...” 29

The stakes were raised in 1932 by the demolition of the neighbouring Hôtel Vander Meersch. In the 1910s the City Commissioners and owners: design A, with seventeenth-century scrolled gables [15.8]; design B, an early eighteenth-century (Louis XIV) gable inspired by a building on the corner of the Jan Breydelstraat and the Burgstraat [15.9]; and design C, a gable in Rococo style. [15.10] The letter that conveyed his proposal, however, expressed his doubt concerning the approach: “I suggest that the Commission do not insist too much on the construction of façades in the old style (vieux-neuf); this is a case of new work, and I think that it would be good to permit a certain artistic freedom, so long as it is insisted that they respect the site ...” 29

29 For the original quote: SAG, SCMS, Dossier Jan Breydelstraat: Letter from Frans Van Hove to the chair of the City Commission, 17.05.1927.
Commission had fought another grim battle with the city administration concerning the preservation of the building. Meanwhile, the complex was becoming severely dilapidated, and the City Commission actually now delivered, through a study of the archives, arguments in favour of its demolition (!): the building had, according to them, already undergone too many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century renovations. The architectural value of the building thus no longer weighed against the technological improvement to the street traffic that would be achieved by its demolition.

The design for the new building was not positively evaluated: it was too monolithic in relation to the street, and the finishing of the shop fronts disturbed the harmony of the façade. The building was restyled by the commission’s architect so as to make it more harmonious with its environment. The retro-façade on the water, visible from the many bridges in the neighbourhood, was also redrawn in a local style.

The demolition of the Hôtel Vander Meersch illustrates well how attitudes towards the historic heritage were dominated by visual considerations. It is remarkable that first an authentic old building was demolished, after which the city conscientiously made sure that any new building would look old! Urban architectural and aesthetic limitations evidently determined the value of the heritage more than historical-documentary considerations.

At that time, Ghent had not yet been badly afflicted by the disruption in scale caused by the insertion of apartment buildings - this would only have disastrous consequences for the urban fabric after the Second World War. Still, apartment buildings occasionally arose in the historic urban fabric. Thus in 1938 the Brussels-based architect Geo De Backere designed an elegant six-storey modern apartment building, the ‘Center Residence’. The implantation was to be in the Kouter, a square surrounded by eighteenth-century mansions and nineteenth-century neo-Classical façades. The City Commission for Monuments and Urban Sites had no objections to the concept of tall buildings per se, but did object to the way that the style was handled here: “Just like other large cities, we will be required to
15.11 Jules Van Driessche, Plan for a new building in the Jan Breydelstraat in Ghent, 2 November 1931. [Ghent, Stadsarchief, SCMS, Plannen-Jan Breydelstraat]

15.12 Counter-plan by Frans Van Hove, 20 January 1932. [Ghent, Stadsarchief, SCMS, Plannen-Jan Breydelstraat]
permit tall buildings; but, in that case, they must above all fit within the framework for which they are designed".  

The contrast with the neighbouring Hôtel Falligan, one of the highlights of Ghent's eighteenth-century architecture, gave rise to particular discussion. As a result, the modern apartment building was wrapped up in a dress that went better with the surrounding framework of the square's enclosure in terms of both the use of materials (stone for the surface and slate for the roof) and of style (a combination of neo-Classicism and Art Deco). A closer analysis of the façade's scheme shows that the proportions of the neighbouring Hôtel Falligan, such as the size of the columns and the height of certain mouldings and cornices, were also taken over.

The cases discussed above illustrate well the search for compromise between renewing the urban fabric and safeguarding the urban aesthetic. In engaging with heritage, the value of the site and the typical, local architectural characteristics play an important role. The concern for the *genius loci*, the individual character of a place, is primarily fleshed out on a formal-aesthetic basis. The goal is either applying the 'proper' architectural language (Korenlei and Jan Breydelstraat), or the preservation of picturesque street plans (Jan Breydelstraat), or surrounding monuments with 'subordinate' architecture (Center Residence). Visual continuity and harmony are important, and weigh more heavily than do arguments of historical authenticity. We can thus conclude that in the interaction with the historical urban fabric - just as much as in reconstruction - it is often more the continuity of a place's 'spirit' that is sought, rather than its actual material reality.

The expression of such notions can be found in theories concerning both reconstruction and monument conservation. Thus in 1916 the urban planner Louis van der Swaelmen's (1883-1929) famous *Préliminaires d'Art Civique* gave three basic principles that applied both to rebuilding where exact reconstruction was not possible (or not wanted), and to new construction in the vicinity of monuments: "(a) The unity of the "genius loci"..."
or the harmony of the colours between the building and its surroundings ... which is mostly obtained through the exclusive use of local materials in the visible parts of the building; (b) the harmony of the relative proportions between the volumes is to be sensitively restored in the same relation as earlier, between the general silhouettes, the heights, the rhythmical main lines, and the open and closed parts; (c) a rigorous respect ... for the alignment of the building itself in terms of city planning, and for the surrounding urban fabric.32 And in 1938 Canon Raymond Lemaire (1878-1954), in his La Restauration des monuments anciens - long the basic text on monument conservation among Belgian architects - proposed that “with respect to new construction in historical zones, this must be designed in aesthetic harmony with its environment, especially concerning dimensions and rhythms.”33

Theoretical statements often maintain that this search for harmony with the historic surroundings does not mean that the vieux-neuf style must be used. However, in practice, the façades often come across as very ‘historic’. It thus seems that in the interwar years a large discrepancy exists between discourse and its results.

Only a few talented architects succeeded in rendering the genius loci in a contemporary manner, such as Huib Hoste (1881-1957) famously achieved in his reconstruction of Zonnebeke.34 Others fell into a formalism that contained a certain attenuation of architectural values. For example, Dendermonde, burned to the ground by the Germans in the first days of the war, was rebuilt in neo-Brabant Baroque, in which use was made not so much of literal copies of historic buildings from the city, but a new kind of gable type was created, based on gables and decorative elements from the rich past of the Brabant Baroque.35 The houses hardly refer to the particular buildings in place before the war. Alexis Sterck, the architect of the row of houses on the market square (Grote Markt), next to the Vleeshuis, said that he had chosen the gables “from examples in the town that have disappeared or from successful examples elsewhere”.36

At the same time, the houses are children of their time, with a ridge parallel to the street, a plan going back to the nineteenth-century en-suite structure and often a loggia or balcony as well. Placing cartouches with dates of reconstruction also showed that this was not an attempt to create a completely falsified stage set. The architect Huib Hoste pointed out in 1922 that the rebuilt buildings could not disguise their youth: “Every house is in a different style, has its own width, and height. This in the name of so-called historic growth! But they have all been made with the same brick, and will always reveal that they are only twentieth-century imitations.”37 Whether they are considered imitations or historically inspired reconstruction, it must be admitted that even this décor created by lesser gods - either through reconstruction or through interventions in historic city cores - offers a living environment which has certain qualities of its own.

The question of interaction with the stock of historic buildings continues to be pertinent today.38 In the reconstruction following 1918 this question was generally answered with an architecture that strongly mirrored the past. We see a similar approach in the modernisation of the existing urban fabric. Also in the reconstruction following the Second World War, the answer was still overwhelmingly sought in the re-creation of the historically accretive configuration of the city. As Paul Rolland (1896-1949) expressed it in 1940 in connection with the reconstruction of Tournai, which had been flattened by bombing, “there is no question that we
must preserve the specific characteristics of Tournai, the elements which make this city what it is and which ensure that it does not look like any other city (...). If we want the inhabitants of Tournai to feel 'at home', if we wish them always to enjoy a positive outlook, something which no doubt comes down mainly to imagination but nonetheless involves a psychological reality in which the physical aspect of things must be a component – they have to be able to find their 'milieu' once again, or at the very least their new 'milieu' must be grafted as tightly as possible on to their memories and their past, which have formed their being.”

In the standard history of architecture, which up until the 1980s was strongly coloured by the presupposition of the modernists, this recall of the past was dismissed as a 'step back' that might be looked at with some compassion. But perhaps we may dare to admit that the search for the restoration of the *genius loci* - both in reconstruction and in the modernisation of the urban fabric - often helps to make places more liveable. It successfully preserves the proper character and the identity of the living environment, so that one can continue feeling at home oneself.
