Ferdinand De Ruddere
as Town Architect of Dendermonde
after the First World War

Stylistic Indifference or Balance?

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Because a lot of writing on architectural history has been limited to only a selection of exceptional buildings, architects are often still associated with one style or one logical stylistic evolution towards modernism. However, architecture between the two world wars is characterised by an enormous stylistic diversity, one which cannot be explained simply by referring to the different views or tastes of the architects involved. It seems that, for many of them, stylistic coherence or modernism was not such a principal concern. Some architects used a whole range of different styles even at one and the same time.

One of those architects was Ferdinand De Ruddere (1891-1960) who, as the town architect of Dendermonde (1922-1950), determined a great deal of the town’s reconstruction after the First World War. Although he himself clearly preferred the traditional neo-Brabant Baroque, he also designed buildings in Beaux-Arts, Art Deco, Expressionism and even Romantic Cubism. In this article I will briefly summarise his eclectic oeuvre and then discuss in more detail some factors that may provide an explanation for this stylistic diversity.1

Stylistic Chronology

A first explanation for this stylistic diversity already emerges when we look at De Ruddere’s realisations chronologically. Although there is no discernable linear evolution, there are some tendencies that can be linked to broader international architectural fashions. Above that, there seems to be an undeniable and recurring link between the choice of more traditional or modern styles on the one hand and the economic situation on the other hand.2

During the period of economic crisis in the aftermath of the First World War up to 1924, building styles were mainly traditional. This is also the case for Ferdinand De Ruddere, who built thirteen houses in those styles between 1920 and 1924. He used two kinds of traditional styles: the French Beaux-Arts and regionalism. In his use of Beaux-Arts we can distinguish between neo-Regency, neo-Rococo and neo-Classicism. However, the difference between these regionalist and Beaux-Arts buildings is not always that clear cut, since the latter often incorporate regionalist elements. They are for example not completely plastered but combine plastered surfaces with red bricks and balustrades.

This already indicates that regionalism is a characteristic that one can find in any given style in this period, even in the international style. The term regionalism can, however, also be used to group a number of specific styles. Literally, the term denotes styles that are thought to be typical for a certain region.

1 This text is a résumé of my dissertation at the University of Ghent in 2004. I wish to acknowledge Linda Van Santvoort and Leen Meganck.
2 Meganck, Het Miljoenenkwartier te Gent, 92; Idem, Bouwen te Gent in het interbellum, 188-191.
In reality, some kinds of regionalism such as the coastal cottage can be found in almost all of Western Europe. In Belgium there was in fact only one town, Dinant, which had a genuine regional style. In other towns the so-called regionalist architecture was in fact more general. The neo-Brabant Baroque (a variant of neo-Flemish Renaissance), for example, was used in geographically separated towns such as Dendermonde, Louvain and Antwerp.

De Ruddere’s regionalist buildings can be divided into two groups. In the early 1920s and the late 1930s, he sporadically used the international language of cottage architecture, typical of which is the variety of building materials, with visible use of stone below, plastering in the middle and timber framing at the top. Other characteristics of cottages are asymmetry, irregular placing of subdivided windows, varied annexes in different storeys and the combination of low roofs, chimneys, projecting windows and balconies.

However, the style De Ruddere used most was the neo-Brabant Baroque. Like most regionalist styles, it can be easily defined in contrast with nineteenth-century French architecture. For example, the combination of red brick and stone replaces the white coat of plastering and a gable is used instead of a cornice front. Yet the structure of these houses remained very nineteenth-century with the ridge parallel to the street hidden behind a fake gable. Other anachronisms that can be seen are the symmetry and regularity, the contrast between the upper and lower floor (usually a shop or garage) and the recessed balcony on the first floor.

De Ruddere’s first buildings in neo-Brabant Baroque were quite diverse. Some look like authentic reconstructions in Brabant Baroque, such as the house at Grote Markt no 27 (1921). This is clearly based on the nearby Baroque building at Grote Markt no 30 (1685) although the reconstruction is richer and bigger than

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3 Celis, “De wederopbouwarchitectuur”, 146.
5 Celis, “De wederopbouwarchitectuur”, 132-133.
the original. Other houses, like that at Grote Markt no 24 (1923) [16.1], are more fantastic. From the mid-1920s on, however, De Ruddere developed a standard neo-Brabant Baroque type consisting of a volute gable in red brick and white stone, decorated with balustrades and cartouches.

In 1924 the economic situation in Belgium improved, which translated into more modern Art Deco buildings. De Ruddere’s buildings sober up from 1922 onwards but his first real Art Deco design dates from 1923 and is located on E. Van Winckellaan no 37-41. [16.14] It is still quite moderate, with references to classical French architecture in the traditional dormers, triangular pediment and fruit motifs. Still, the geometrical treatment of fruit motifs, wrought iron and even doors and gable makes it an early example of Art Deco, considering that the real breakthrough in this style came only a couple of years later.

In the second half of the 1920s, De Ruddere’s Art Deco buildings became more elaborate, reflecting the economic wealth of this period. The Egypt mania that broke out in Europe after the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922 left its traces in his work quite early. Between 1922 and 1924 he used Egyptian Art Deco for the design of his Royal Academy of Fine Arts, while in general the influence of Egypt mania in architecture only became widespread after the second half of the 1920s.⁶ On top of that, he combined this style with a very modern and functionalist concept of a concrete structure.

In the beginning of the 1930s we can see some influences from Dutch Expressionism in the varied brick bonding, the white horizontal lines and pentice above the door, for example at Papiermolenstraat nos 17-18 (1932). The asymmetry and three-dimensional placing of the windows over the corner are also references to this style,  

although this is less pronounced in the actual building than in the original plans. De Ruddere’s gymnastics hall at Leopold II-laan no 17-17A (1932) is influenced by the Romantic Cubism of the Dutch architect Willem Dudok (1884-1974), and in particular by his municipal bath house in Hilversum (1920). Characteristics are the balanced asymmetry between horizontals and verticals (in the tower with oblique bricks), the use of yellow brick and black ceramic tiles.7

After 1931 the economic situation deteriorated rapidly in Belgium, first as a consequence of the international crash of the Stock Exchange, then because of an impending war. This had a double consequence for architecture. In general, it became more sober and modern but in the more wealthy segment - where the choice of style was not determined by economic considerations - there was an increase of traditionalism.8 Both evolutions can be discerned in De Ruddere’s work. His Art Deco designs sobered up and from 1935 onwards he reverted to neo-Brabant Baroque for his houses, although they are sometimes modern in their glazed windows, ironwork and even in the use of the typical Dudok brick bond and joints.

After the Second World War, his oeuvre was largely limited to a couple of large villas which fuse modern and traditional features, although some are rather traditional, referring to English cottages and Swiss chalets, while others have a distinct ‘modern’ touch, influenced by the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959). Throughout his career as town architect, De Ruddere also built many modest houses which do not belong to one certain style although the same general tendencies can be observed: Beaux-Arts elements in the early 1920s, Art Deco in the second half of the 1920s and the early 1930s and a return to more traditional features in the late 1930s.

8 Idem, Bouwen te Gent in het interbellum, 191.
Genius Loci

One of the greatest qualities of the reconstruction architecture after the First World War in Belgium - according to some the only quality - is the concern for the surroundings of a building. In trying to understand why De Ruddere used those different styles, it is therefore essential to look at the specific place, the *genius loci*. Literally this term denotes 'the spirit of a place' and dates from Roman times. In the second half of the twentieth century it recurred in writings on architecture. For Christian Norberg-Schulz, who wrote a book on this concept, it meant that living implicates identifying yourself with a certain place and therefore architecture has to articulate the characteristics of that place. But the idea that a building has to be adapted to its place is of course as old as architecture itself.

All the buildings of De Ruddere I investigated were located in Dendermonde, although he also built houses in Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Aalst and other places. In 1914 Dendermonde was a small provincial town on the frontier of Flanders and Brabant that had remained practically unaltered during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, because of its presumed military importance, the town was burnt to the ground during the First World War. On top of that its reconstruction afterwards was delayed, mainly because of a disagreement between the municipal and national governments concerning the river and the fortresses.

While the Belgian authorities wanted to divert the river round the town, the municipality insisted on the preservation, enlargement and straightening of the river within the town because of its economic importance. To make this enlargement possible the municipal government refused building licences near the river. This is the main reason why De Ruddere’s largest reconstruction project (the Koningin Astridlaan) was not initiated before 1935. [16.5]

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10 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci.
11 Verbruggen, De wederopbouw van Dendermonde, 93-142.
The fortresses were national military territory, but because they had already been decommissioned before the First World War the municipal government demanded the handing over of those grounds for labourers’ houses and factories. The municipality even refused to build homes for workers in the town to force the national government to give up those territories. However, this would not happen until 1936. As a result town architect De Ruddere designed only one small ‘garden city’ of 48 workers’ houses in 1929-1931, which was insignificant considering that 1600 people were still living in wooden barracks during those years.12

Instead of building large-scale housing, much effort was made to reconstruct a historical image of the town through prestigious projects and concepts like stylistic zoning. This meant that in important streets and places (in the proximity of monuments) more attention was paid to style, which was usually translated into traditionalism. This seems also true for De Ruddere. In secondary streets or outside the town centre, he built no traditional houses (with the exception of a few cottages), but used mainly Art Deco, for example in the Ridderstraat nos 40-42 (1932). His buildings on the thoroughfare were mainly in Beaux-Arts style and, on the outskirts, in traditional Art Deco, for example, the Sint-Blasius Hospital at Kerkstraat no 111 (1926). [16.13]

Only one of his buildings on the thoroughfare, the Belgica cinema at Kerkstraat nos 24-26 (1925) [16.7], was designed in neo-Brabant Baroque, probably because it closed off the opening from the market square (Grote Markt) to the Kerkstraat, next to the medieval meat hall. As such it was treated as an integrate part of the Grote Markt. Almost all his other neo-Brabant Baroque buildings were indeed located on the Grote Markt, the Koningin Astridlaan or the square in front of the railway station: important places, representative of the municipal image.

On the level of the individual building, the concept of genius loci can be translated into two more specific concerns: memory (referring to former buildings on a specific place) and harmony (adapting a building’s design to fit the buildings around it). At first sight it seems that memory played an enormous part in the reconstruction of Dendermonde after the First World War. However, when looking more closely at De Ruddere’s architecture, concrete evidence of that memory is scarce. Buildings with direct historical references are isolated cases that do not fit stylistically into the neo-Brabant Baroque townscape emerging after the First World War. Examples are the neo-Rococo house at Kerkstraat no 49 (1924) [16.12] and the neo-Classicist houses at Kerkstraat no 94-96 (1923). [16.6]

For the Belgica cinema, De Ruddere kept the structure of the nineteenth-century house, but added neo-Brabant Baroque decoration inspired by a neighbouring house. This seems typical for the reconstruction of Dendermonde after the First World War, as it is also seen on the south-west side of the Grote Markt (no 24-29). [16.1]

When rebuilding those houses, the architects (Paul Saintenoy (1862-1952), Maurice De Waepenaert, Alexis Sterck and Ferdinand De Ruddere) preserved the allotments, the bays and the relative heights of the houses, but replaced the plastered cornice fronts with volute gables in brick. Inspiration for the decoration was found in one or two remaining buildings but mostly in postcards, photographs and picturesque drawings in books such as P.G. De Maesschalck’s Oud Dendermonde. Termonde au temps jadis (1901).

Another house on the Grote Markt, at no 29, shows that reconstruction of the pre-war situation was not the main priority.12 However, when a socialist in the municipal council mentioned this, the magistrate responded that those 48 houses had been offered for rent to the people in the barracks, but that only seven of them had accepted this offer. Apparently the inhabitants had grown fond of their barracks. SA Dendermonde: Minutes of the municipal council, 25.04.1930, 25.
This plastered nineteenth-century corniced façade was miraculously unharmed during the First World War. Nevertheless, it was replaced by a neo-Brabant Baroque façade in 1936. The extensive use of the neo-Brabant Baroque on the Koningin Astridlaan and on the square facing the train station proves the same point but from a different angle. These two almost completely new streets were more traditionalist than any other street in Dendermonde, not because real historic buildings were referred to but precisely because there were no real historical (neo-classicist) remains to hinder things.

The town hall and meat hall on the Grote Markt can be seen as exceptions since they were indeed quite faithfully restored to their pre-war situation by De Ruddere. However, both buildings had already been severely altered in a medieval fashion before the war by Edouard Bouwens (1840-1897), a previous town architect who had added stepped gables and removed all Renaissance and Rococo elements. When enlarging the town hall in 1926, De Ruddere continued along those lines and instead of rebuilding the neo-Classicist rear part, used a neo-Gothic style that harmonised with the existing front part of the building. [16.8] For the meat hall he decided not to rebuild the Rococo stair hall that had been removed just before the First World War, although the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites insisted to do so.13

The proposal by a certain Alfons Pichat to preserve the destroyed town of Dendermonde and to rebuild a new one on piers seems a very unrealistic and utopian expression of the will to commemorate.14 Yet one has to wonder whether the actual reconstruction in Dendermonde was any less utopian. It seems that in Dendermonde people chose to select and rebuild certain memories while suppressing others. As such they projected longings and expectations into the past and created an inverse utopia.15

We can conclude that memory (the reference to a past) was vague and often faked, more rhetorical than real. The concern for harmony on the other hand took a very concrete form, for example on the Koningin

15 This description was used to describe the attitude towards the historical townscape in Bruges. De Kooning, Marc Dessauvage en bOb Van Reeth.
Astridlaan. The harmony created in this street, is not one of uniformity as it was in neo-Classicist streets. Although De Ruddere developed a standard type of neo-Brabant Baroque gable, there is still a lot of deliberate diversity on the Koningin Astridlaan. Neighbouring houses differ in height, type of gable and detailing, and as such they compose a unity in diversity rather than uniformity. However, looking at the first house (no 1), it is clear that De Ruddere tried to create a transition between the exuberant Art Deco bank (1926) by Jan-Albert De Bondt (1888-1969) and his own neo-Brabant Baroque houses on the street. He did this by combining modern features such as black tiles and decorative brickwork with traditional use of red brick and stone and little columns.

**Client and Programme**

Important factors in questions of style are of course a building’s specific programme and client. Although no form is completely determined by its function - as was the idea of some extreme functionalists - the link between style and function was an important issue in the interwar period and is also visible in De Ruddere’s work. His factories, shops and pubs, for example, were more sober and modern than his houses. The architectural style of his schools, on the other hand, varied according to their specific function. A school for technical education at Kerkstraat no 47 (1922) was given a severe neo-Classicist façade, whereas elementary schools on the Begijnhoflaan and Bogaerdstraat (1924) had a friendly, colourful appearance. The reference to Egypt in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts was no doubt associated with the idea of ancient classical beauty, and the Romantic Cubism of his gymnastics hall was as modern as its function, an example of the health mania in the early 1930s.

The specific role of the owner in matters of style is difficult to establish. Exceptionally De Ruddere explicitly stated on his plans that the design was not his own but that of the owners, as if to dissociate him. When looking at the people for whom De Ruddere designed more than one building, it is clear...
that some had a preference for one style. Yet others apparently tolerated different styles, like the architect himself. The sisters Maes for example, commissioned De Ruddere to build a house in neo-Brabant Baroque on the Koningin Astridlaan no 14 (1935) and one in sober Art Deco on the Gentsesteenweg no 10 (1939), each one perfectly integrated in its surroundings. This fact and the difference between the style used on the front façade and in the interior may be an indication that the owner was not always free to choose the style of the façade.

**Local Government Interference**

In comparison with towns in the front region, private building was very important in the reconstruction of Dendermonde, given the dramatic finances of the municipality. Of course the municipality tried to regulate this private initiative by issuing building regulations but in Dendermonde those did not contain any aesthetic or stylistic indications. The local government also had the authority to modify individual plans. Yet we found no modifications to De Ruddere’s plans, nor suggestions from local consultative commissions. The explanation for this is probably that those suggestions were his own authority as town architect. Nevertheless, the local authority had a clear view on how the town had to be reconstructed, as can be seen on some plans already made during the war, which show a very traditional, historic townscape.

According to some, the municipality of Dendermonde did not succeed in implementing -stylistic ideas, with the exception of large public buildings such as the Palace of Justice and the extension of the town hall.17 However, this seems to be not entirely true. First of all, the Palace of Justice was ordained by the provincial architect Valentin Vaerwyck. As such it was one of the few buildings in Dendermonde that was stylistically influenced by a higher level of government than the local authority. As the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites wrote: “There was only one instance when we could issue recommendations with regard to Dendermonde, and that was regarding the new Palace of Justice. And again, it is important to remark that this is a provincial expense, and that it was the previous governor […] who found it useful and necessary to hear our Commission’s opinion on the new construction.”18

On the other hand, it has become clear that the municipality influenced many other projects than the town hall. First of all, the local authorities tried to set an example by building some projects themselves. The houses on the Grote Markt next to the meat hall showed people how to build. The architect Alexis Sterck - De Ruddere’s predecessor as town architect of Dendermonde until his death in 1921 - said he had found inspiration in disappeared houses, in Dendermonde and elsewhere. He deliberately chose to give the houses different heights, widths, gables, etc, to obtain a view of an organic, slowly evolving townscape. It provoked different reactions. The Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites was very positive, while the modernist architect Huib Hoste condemned it as a falsification.19

Evidence of local government influence is also found in De Ruddere’s designs of the fish market (1929-1931). [16.9-16.10] These drawings show that De Ruddere was not always in line with his employer (the municipality and in particular the bench of aldermen). The first design he made for this project in Romantic Cubism was probably one of the most modern of his whole career. [16.9] However, on his fifth design (which was already much more moderate) he

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17 Verbruggen, *De wederopbouw van Dendermonde*, 146; Smets and Verbruggen, “De wederopbouw van Dendermonde”, 18.
18 For the original quote: *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d’Art et d’Archéologie*, (1921), 232.
wrote: “Observations by the aldermen: new façade plus decorative renaissance genre with several white stones, arches and sculptures.”20 And as such it would be built. [16.10]

The local government also interfered in other private projects. Before selling the building site on the Koningin Astridlaan, she stipulated that the front façades had to be executed in Flemish Gothic or Renaissance style and would be inspected and approved by the bench of aldermen.21 Although it is not clear whether or not the municipality exerted any influence by suggesting or even appointing certain architects, there are some indications in that direction. Town architect De Ruddere designed fifteen of the twenty-six houses on the Koningin Astridlaan. Together with his predecessor Sterck and the local traditionalist architect De Waepenaert, he designed almost all the houses on the Grote Markt, the Koningin Astridlaan and the Stationsplein in neo-Brabant Baroque.

National Government Interference

Because Dendermonde was so severely damaged during the First World War, the municipality decided to get ‘adopted’ by the national government. As such it received money for the rebuilding of monuments and parts of the old town in exchange for control by the Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten (Service of Devastated Regions). Projects by De Ruddere given support by this agency were the town hall, the meat hall, the houses next to the meat hall and the mayor’s house, all located on the Grote Markt, plus three schools and some minor works.

20 For the original quote: SA Dendermonde: Plans of public works, 1049.
21 Ibidem: Minutes of the municipal council, 04.05.1934.
Although a Royal High Commissioner functioned as a middleman between the national and local governments, several disagreements arose. The Royal High Commissioner Grenier complained to Mayor Alberic Van Stappen (1875-1934) about De Ruddere concerning the rebuilding of the town hall: “In this case, your architect is forgetting one thing: that he works for my office and thus has to follow directions and not substitute personal preferences.” The mayor, however, stood up for his architect. Another quarrel related to the neo-Egyptian Art Deco design of the academy, which was rejected by the national government, but approved by the municipal council and executed.

Remarks by the Service of Devastated Regions mostly concerned the quality of materials and cost-cutting factors but there were also more stylistic (if vague) recommendations. For a school on the Bogaerdstraat a modern façade was replaced by a more traditional one, for another school on the Begijnhoflaan [16.11] a less rigid, more aesthetic façade was demanded: “For such an important school, situated in a locality like Dendermonde, it would be desirable to present a less banal and monotonous aspect; it is perfectly possible, while striving for the strictest economy and without ever resorting to luxury materials, to give the building an aesthetic character; most notable shortcomings are the rigidity of the line of the terraces, the impoverished look of the entrance, the monotonous facades, etc.”

In general, their attention in Dendermonde was almost exclusively directed to formal issues and prestigious imagery instead of large-scale housing. This policy gave rise to some criticism. When the mayor received money to rebuild his second house on the Grote Markt (no 24) [16.1], this was heavily criticised in a local (liberal) newspaper. Yet both the local and the national authorities continued to focus on prestigious projects at the expense of housing. In 1924 the municipality even demanded the Royal High Commissioner’s permission to use money meant for the rebuilding of three working-class houses to reconstruct the town hall.

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22 For the original quote: ARA, Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten, 12013 (town hall): Letter, 14.03.1924.
23 De Bruyn and Stroobants, De Dendermondse school, 45.
24 For the original quote: ARA, Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten, 12058 (school Begijnhoflaan): Letter, 07.02.1922; 12028 (school Bogaerdstraat).
25 ’t Ros Bayuard, 19.01.1924.
26 ARA, Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten, 12013 (town hall): Letter, 26.03.1924.
Style was also the most important issue for the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites, which had an advisory role. Although they considered Dendermonde to be their most important case in Eastern Flanders, they often complained that they were never consulted by the local government. Hence the Commission rejected most of the reconstruction of Dendermonde, with the exception of the Grote Markt and the Palace of Justice: “[…] we deny all responsibility for the systematic mutilations to which the picturesque town of Dendermonde has been subjected since the war.”

Most criticism was aimed at the partial destruction of the old fortresses and the lack of a general architectural plan. Stylistically however, they were as conservative as the local government. In 1935 for example they still recommended a traditional or regional style for the Koningin Astridlaan.

Two members of this commission who had a special interest in Dendermonde were Paul Saintenoy and Oscar Schellekens. Saintenoy was a famous Belgian architect who influenced the reconstruction through his texts. As early as 1915 he had designed a house on the Grote Markt (no 25) in Dendermonde and as such he set an example for the reconstruction. Schellekens was a citizen of Dendermonde who wrote a book on the reconstruction of the town: L’Aménagement des Villes. Termonde renaissance (1919). Being part of the nobility and a correspondent member of the commission, he gained a great deal of influence. The local authorities and the town architect eagerly listened to his ideas on stylistic zoning, harmony, memory and even the rebuilding of certain destroyed houses such as that at Kerkstraat no 49 (1924).

I ideological Connotations: Nationalism and Social Segregation

Through its monumental impact on space, its visual presence in the environment and its symbolic and social functions, architecture can play an important role in shaping feelings of identity. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons for the government’s interest in the reconstruction of towns such as Dendermonde. However, the specific ideological connotations of an architectural style, are unstable and fluctuating. Above that, it is generally assumed that such connotations disappeared in the interwar period and that style was reduced to pure form. This seems especially true for Art Deco which - in spite of references to history and art - was associated with nothing except pleasure, beauty and geometrical elegance.

The traditional ideological rupture between Catholicism and liberalism that was so important in the late 19th century indeed no longer seemed to play a role in the interwar period. On the other hand, this period was characterised by an enormous uncertainty due to the war and the economic crisis. Urbanisation and industrialisation had rapidly changed the look of the land and
people were therefore searching for stability by looking at their own past and traditions (both invented and real). According to the influential traditionalist architect Louis Cloquet, architecture had always been governed by four traditions: religion, family, ethnicity, and politics. With the last of these, he meant the attachment to Belgium’s national independence as symbolised in its belfries and town halls.32

The issue of nationalism and its architectural elaboration was of course much older, at least as old as the nation itself with the establishment of the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites in 1835. Other architectural expressions of nationalism besides monument preservation were the erection of national monuments and statues, the beginning of a national architectural history and the search for a national style. In contrast to the Netherlands, where the Renaissance was adopted as the national style, there was no consensus in Belgium as to what style was to represent the nation, partly due to the ideological confrontation between Catholics and liberals. Eclecticism, neo-Gothic and neo-Flemish Renaissance all were claimed as the national style at some point during the nineteenth century.

The choice for regionalism as a national style came to the forefront at the end of the century, for example on the world’s fairs, which gave nations the opportunities to proclaim their identity. In the Paris exhibition of 1878, Belgium was still represented by a building that, although in neo-Flemish Renaissance style, was quite eclectic in that it incorporated several national materials and building types (including belfry, city gate and guildhall). For the exhibition of 1894 in Antwerp, a more authentic historical townscape (Oud Antwerpen) was reconstructed, a national representation that would last until 1958 in Brussels (Vrolijk België). Instead of representing the nation by combining several characteristics in one building, historical townsapes as a whole were used to symbolize the nation. This also affected real town planning. During the first international congress on town planning in Ghent (1913), the municipality was put forward as the autonomous unity that had to create a new collective life with architecture as a source of identity.33

The First World War only reinforced feelings of nationalism in Belgium. Some even say that it was during this war that a strong Belgian identity, characterised by neutrality and diversity, was created for the first time.34 Architectural regionalism was an ideal means by which to endorse such nationalism from the bottom up. In Flanders this regionalism focussed on urban instead of rural architecture because towns had played such an enormous role in the history of the region. Destroyed historical towns such as Dendermonde and in particular their town halls, belfries, etc, became symbols of Brave Little Belgium. Each town was reconstructed in the style which best represented the greatness of its past. In Dendermonde (as in Louvain) this was the neo-Brabant Baroque.35 Thus, even though many towns were reconstructed in a regional style, their architecture was strongly imbedded in a political nationalism.36 This is also reflected in the names of some of De Ruddere’s projects: the Belgica cinema, the Koningin Astridlaan and ’t Vaderland (‘the Fatherland’), a restaurant called Den Duitsch (‘The German’) before the war.

Some say that this nationalism was just a masquerade, uniting rich and poor in one townscape and hiding the real truth of those styles symbolising wealth, social segregation and class differences.37 Indeed, it is undeniable that the desire of the middle classes to display their wealth was generally translated into traditional styles. Louis Cloquet, for example, wrote that the stepped gable was

32 Cloquet, L’Architecture traditionnelle et les styles régionaux, 8-9.
33 Van Loo, “De architectuur in België van 1830 tot heden”, 47.
34 De Schaepdrijver, De Groote Oorlog, 37-38.
35 Celis, “De wederopbouwarchitectuur”, 141.
37 Willis, Flemish Renaissance Revival in Belgian Architecture, 375; Smets, De ontwikkeling van de tuinwijkgedachte in België, 100.
typical of middle-class houses.\textsuperscript{38} Traditional architectural elements such as loggias and balconies even constituted very concrete signs of wealth since the municipality imposed taxes on them.\textsuperscript{39}

Looking at De Ruddere’s output, we see that his middle-class houses were indeed mainly traditional while working-class houses were sober and more modern. His first Art Deco realisations were working-class houses; thus the claim that Art Deco was first associated with the rich and only afterwards with the masses does not seem to hold true here.\textsuperscript{40} To be sure, workers or socialists didn’t reject traditionalism. They probably welcomed the prestigious traditionalist imagery with a mixture of pride and jealousy, trying to imitate these higher classes and to take over those traditional styles. The fact that one of the most traditionalist buildings of De Ruddere on Brusselsestraat no 35 (1923) was used as a socialist public house is significant in this respect.

**The Architect**

What role was left for the architect in all of this? Jo Celis claims that despite building regulations, one person normally determined the appearance of individual elevations, and that in Dendermonde this was the town architect.\textsuperscript{41} As the case of the fish market shows, this is not the whole truth. It is clear that De Ruddere sometimes had a different view but was obliged to conform to the more conservative view of the municipal or higher government.

Above that De Ruddere also had to cooperate with other people. The specific role of architects and draughtsmen who worked in De Ruddere’s office cannot be reconstructed. Neither do we know much about building contractors or artisans, although they undoubtedly played an important part. This is proven by inscriptions on buildings which state not only De Ruddere but also the building contractor, for example on the Koningin Astridlaan no 12-13-13A (1936). A more explicit example is the reconstruction of the medieval meat hall. Here the municipal council decided not to publicly invite tenders

\textsuperscript{16.13} Sint-Blasius hospital, Kerkstraat 111. [Photograph by the author]
but to entrust this job to a specific building contractor who had shown great care and skill during the restoration of the town hall some years earlier.\footnote{SA Dendermonde: Minutes of the municipal council, 28.04.1927.}

For the Sint-Blasius hospital (1924-1926) De Ruddere worked with Jean-Norbert Cloquet (1885-1961), son of Louis Cloquet. Since he was specialised in hospitals, Cloquet was probably responsible for the more practical aspects and organisation of the building, whereas De Ruddere occupied himself with its style.\footnote{Bâtir, (1934), 696-698.} In 1920-1921 he also made a couple of designs with his predecessor (town architect Alexis Sterck) and even after Sterck’s death in 1921, De Ruddere recycled some of his plans. As such the influence of Sterck may account for the diversity of De Ruddere’s early neo-Brabant Baroque buildings. The archaeologically correct style of the Grote Markt no 27 (1920) can be traced to Sterck, whereas the more eclectic approach of the Grote Markt no 24 (1923) seems to be De Ruddere’s own.

De Ruddere’s own taste must have been quite eclectic. Though he pursued a modernist design for his fish market, he himself lived in one of his own neo-Brabant Baroque houses on the Koningin Astridlaan no 14. Born in 1891 as the son of a banker in the neighbouring town of Aalst, De Ruddere studied architecture at the St Luke’s schools in Ghent and Brussels just before the First World War. During that period, the St Luke doctrine evolved from neo-Gothic to regionalism, still strongly imbedded in a nationalist tradition.\footnote{Van de Perre, Op de grens van twee werelden, 36.} The rear of the town hall is a stereotypic design of that St Luke neo-Gothic. Other elements of this education visible in De Ruddere’s work are the care for surroundings and monuments and the artisanal, decorative finishing. However, the importance of education should not be overestimated. No schools in the 1910s were teaching styles like Art Deco, which would become so important after the war.\footnote{Meganck, Bouwen te Gent in het interbellum, 155.}

An important event for De Ruddere was of course the First World War itself, during which he spent two years in a prison camp in Germany and three in Switzerland.\footnote{Evere, Centrum voor Historische Documentatie van de Krijgsmacht: War dossier of Ferdinand De Ruddere.} His stay in Switzerland would have an especially deep impact on him for the rest of his life, also because he married a Swiss girl. On a professional level it is worth noting that the Swiss architect Polak was responsible for interned foreign soldiers in Switzerland and became acquainted with some Belgian soldier-architects.\footnote{Schoonbroodt, Michel Polak, 100.} It seems not unlikely that De Ruddere also was influenced by Polak’s architecture in that period which can be described as Secessionist. The stylised gables and fruit motifs characteristic of his style can be seen in De Ruddere’s Sint-Blasius hospital (1926). \cite{[16.13]}

A more profound and lasting architectural influence was Swiss regionalism, which was known all over Europe during the interwar period. Formally, it was characterised by a particular care for surrounding landscapes, and the typical Swiss chalet. Both elements can be found in De Ruddere’s work, for example on the Leopold II-laan no 16 (1951). Ideologically, regionalism in Switzerland supported federalism. As was said during an international congress on regionalism in Brussels in 1937: “The defence of regionalism is at the heart of Switzerland’s origins. Unity for Switzerland cannot be uniformity, centralisation, constraint; it implies diversity and complexity […] For Switzerland, regionalism is a raison d’être.”\footnote{For the original quote: Perrochon, “Le Régionalisme et la Suisse”, 31-32.} It seems that regionalism was a way of saving nationalism by admitting the diversity of the nation. While in Switzerland this diversity was the consequence of its diverse geography, it can be said that in Belgium it was due to the diverse history of the different regions.

In the years just before and after the war De Ruddere lived in Schaerbeek and we can only guess at the influence of that stay. Maybe De Ruddere got his inspiration for his
first Art Deco design, at E. Van Winckellaan no 37-41 (1923), from the architect Notéris, who also lived in Schaerbeek and had built a similar house a couple of months earlier in the centre of Dendermonde.\footnote{In Celis, “De wederopbouwarchitectuur”, 151 this house is erroneously referred to as a house on the Moenaertstraat in Dendermonde by architect R. Notens (under the letter b). Letter c for that matter is not a house by De Ruddere but letter d is, namely Sint-Jacobsstraat 43 (1925).}

In general the architecture of Brussels probably made him more receptive to modern influences. The Stoclet Palace, for example, may have prepared him for the influence of Dudok in his gymnastics hall. The Van Buren house in Ukkel may have opened his eyes to Dutch Expressionism, which he would later use in the Papiermolenstraat no 17-18 (1932).

In his traditional architecture as well, De Ruddere seems indebted to Brussels. The neo-Brabant Baroque of Dendermonde (and Louvain) is first of all reminiscent of the Baroque of the Grand Place in Brussels.\footnote{Basyn, “Diongre, Joseph”, 51} But De Ruddere’s architecture is also reminiscent of some nineteenth-century neo-Brabant Baroque houses in Brussels. \textit{Hier is’t in den Kater en de Kat} (‘Here it’s in the Tomcat and the Cat’) by Hendrik Beyaert (1874) on the Adolphe Maxlaan, for example, shows great similarities to De Ruddere’s house on the Grote Markt no 24 (1923). The influence of Brussels on this young architect therefore cannot be reduced to one style. It consists of the general eclectic attitude towards building styles as personified in architects like Joseph Diongre. Almost exclusively known for his modernist ‘White House’ (1926), he used a broad spectrum of (mainly traditional) styles for his houses in Schaerbeek.\footnote{Besluit van de Vlaamse regering houdende bescherming van monument, stads- en dorpsgezichten, 03.03.1994.}

\textbf{Conclusion}

After the Second World War, high-rise blocks found their way to Dendermonde. Yet historicism somehow survived. De Ruddere’s neo-Brabant Baroque buildings themselves became part of the \textit{genius loci} in Dendermonde, living models that have inspired other architects, such as the buildings on the Stationsstraat which were built in the 1950s. \footnote{Besluit van de Vlaamse regering houdende bescherming van monument, stads- en dorpsgezichten, 03.03.1994.} Official recognition of his oeuvre as heritage did not come until 1995 when the Royal Academy of Fine Arts was given protected monument status. Yet in the accompanying text, this protection was still motivated as follows: “because of its modern concrete structure and in spite of its traditional neo-Egyptian form.”\footnote{Besluit van de Vlaamse regering houdende bescherming van monument, stads- en dorpsgezichten, 03.03.1994.}
Ten years later, the attitude towards inter-war architecture has changed profoundly. In 2004, more than twenty of De Ruddere’s buildings were protected as part of a larger protection programme of reconstruction architecture in Dendermonde. All of these are in a traditional vernacular style and located in the centre of the town (mostly on the Grote Markt and Koningin Astridlaan) with the exception of his Romantic-Cubist gymnastics hall, which is located on the ring road.

However, most of his Art Deco, cottage, Expressionist and Beaux-Arts buildings are being rapidly demolished or altered. Although most of those buildings have no national significance, they have a local historical value and therefore it is desirable that some representative examples are protected. Doing so would acknowledge that the quality of an architect can be characterised by stylistic diversity rather than purity, originality or novelty. It would also confirm that the idea of an architect as an independent artist is an exception. On several levels, De Ruddere’s oeuvre seems to have been largely determined by the specific context in which it came about. Like most architects, De Ruddere was forced to compromise between his own taste and that of his clients, the historical context of a place, the building contractor, the programme of a building and the authorities. It is precisely this compromise that makes architecture so fascinating.
Entrée d'une maison familiale, à Malmedy (Chantier National)

Architecte : Albert Devillers.

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