The battles of the First World War left the area of the front line a tabula rasa: the towns of Ypres, Diksmuide, Nieuwpoort and about 60 villages were simply erased. The centres of towns all over Flanders were pillaged, such as Louvain, Aarschot, Dendermonde, Malines and Lier, and smaller villages, such as Tremelo and Kapelle-op-den-Bos, were also looted. The hundreds of war relics that still scatter the front-line area are today the subject of renewed interest from the regional and provincial authorities. Not only is the listing and protection of this often fragile heritage at stake; of even greater importance is its proper management and its revaluation as a key element of the memory of the place. The policy towards the heritage of the reconstruction of the devastated areas is changing in the same way, as recent listing campaigns show. While in previous campaigns only the reconstructed ‘historic’ heritage was taken into account, more recently the focus has been broadened to include the contemporary ‘reconstruction heritage’. The story of listing campaigns in the front-line area before and after the Great War in itself constitutes a noteworthy page in Belgian conservation history.

The First World War: Relics

The surviving remains of war concentrated in the front-line area can be divided into two groups. The first group consists of the remains of military operations, such as trenches and dugouts, bunkers and case-mates, gun emplacements, observation posts and bomb craters. The *Michelin Guide* for Ypres and the 1919 front-line area gives evidence of the ‘disaster tourism’ which took off immediately after the Armistice. As early as 1922 the budget of the Minister for Arts and Sciences provided funds for the preservation of such ‘military monuments’. The *Dodengang* (literally ‘trench of death’) in Diksmuide, for example, is the remnant of a trench with sandbags that were later fixed in concrete. This *Dodengang* very soon became a symbol of patriotism and a compulsory destination for school trips. Moreover, this site was ‘classified’ as a ‘third grade landscape’ by the *Koninklijke Commissie voor Monumenten en Landschappen* (Royal Commission for Monuments and Sites) shortly after the war. It was designated as “the rests of the heroic defence of the city”.

The second group consists of the memorials to the human sacrifices of military operations. There are numerous memorials and many, mainly British, war cemeteries, which are scattered all over the landscape of the front-line area. To this very day, these places of quiet and contemplation have been cared for by the Imperial, later the Commonwealth, War Graves Commission, and this great care has been the best guarantee of
enduring preservation for more than three-quarters of a century.

Over the last ten years a renewed interest in the war relics heritage has become apparent, as the growing number of listed sites indicates. An early example of the listing of a monument for its historic significance during the First World War is the British soldiers’ club ‘Talbot House’ in Poperinge in 1973. Since the 1990s a number of remains of military operations have followed, eight in 1992 alone, among them the Dodengang in Diksmuide mentioned above, the ‘Pool of Peace’ in Wijschate, the casemates near Essex Farm Cemetery in Boezinge, where John McCrae (1872-1918) wrote his iconic poem In Flanders’ Fields on 3 May 1915, and a factory smokestack that was transformed into an observation post in Ramskapelle. Later followed, among others, the ‘Church Dugout’ in Zonnebeke, a German command bunker in Zandvoorde, the German complex of trenches ‘Bayernwald’ in Wijschate, a series of gun emplacements on the coastline of Ostend and the former Diksmuide-Nieuwpoort railway embankment, which served as a dike when the area was inundated in 1914 and subsequently marked the frontline.

As far as the war cemeteries are concerned, about 170 of very diverse sizes have been inventorized. Only four were listed in 2004: in 1997 the German military cemetery in Vladslo with the famous sculpture ‘Mourning Parents’ by Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) [21.2]; in 2002 the German military cemetery in Langemark; the biggest British war cemetery in Europe, the Tyne Cot New British Cemetery in Passendale, designed by the architect Sir Herbert Baker (1862-1946) [21.3]; and the Bedford House Cemetery in Zillebeke. Langemark is a special case as it was listed for the first time in 1943 by order of the German occupier. However, this decision was annulled immediately after the liberation in 1945.

The most impressive and famous war monuments of the front-line area were listed in 1986 and 1999 respectively: the Menenpoort (Menin Gate) in Ypres built by architect Sir Reginald Blomfield (1856-1942) and

---

1 J. Cornilly, Monumentaal West-Vlaanderen.
inaugurated in 1927 [21.1], and the King Albert Monument in Nieuwpoort built by architect Julien De Ridder (1891-1963) in 1938. The IJzertoren in Diksmuide was listed in 1992.

Preservation requires knowledge, effective management and a proper opening up of the site. As far as war remains are concerned this is less obvious than it seems. There are numerous such remains, scattered all over the front-line area. Survivals from military operations in particular may have a great historic, military, documentary and symbolic value, but their value as an experience is often small or difficult to ‘read’, their artistic value is non-existent, and their physical condition often fragile. Even if the will to preserve the site is there, the preservation may go wrong for various reasons. In Pollinkhove, for example, the listing of a field kitchen did not go through because of private interests. The ‘Bremen Redoubt’ dugout in Zonnebeke was listed in 1994. Because of its physical decay, this decision was reluctantly revoked in 2002 and after taking measurements it was freely reconstructed in a museum context.

War relics are by definition called ‘ZEN-monuments’ ('Zonder Economisch Nut', meaning 'Without Economic Value'). Moreover, they are often and unintentionally on private land, and are a financial burden for the owner, however small the owner’s financial contribution may be. Because of the limited lapse of time since the protection of what altogether is a small number of relics, major management problems have not occurred yet. However, the relics continue to deteriorate.

In November 2002, a research project was started by the Province of West Flanders and the Heritage Administration of the Flemish Community in order to realize a more global and integrated approach for the war relics in the Westhoek area. In this investigation all material remains of the First World War are systematically inventorized. To give an idea of the scope of the investigation, which is finalized in 2005: 1437 relics had been inventorized.² This inventory will serve as a policy instrument for a thoroughly based listing of


21.3 The Tyne Cot New British Cemetery in Passendale. [Louvain, KADOC]
the most important elements of this heritage. It has not been decided yet under what form and according to what criteria this will take place. There are two lines of thought: listing a select group of individual objects, or a protection as monument. An additional goal is to be included in the World Heritage Register of UNESCO, either as a whole or with specific elements. To this end, the 'War Heritage in the Westhoek' was registered on the Indicative List for Belgium in 2002. Further necessary steps in future management will be the integration of the war heritage in environmental planning and the writing of a manual on how to handle the relics. The value attached to the war heritage by cultural tourism is also very important for such an ambitious project. Educational and historical interpretation, accessibility and experience are essential in this. All existing initiatives in this matter are co-ordinated under the classification ‘War and Peace in the Westhoek’. The idea is to open up the front-line area as a whole, via a network of local anchorages.

Protection of war relics outside the Westhoek is scarce. One exception is the Necropolis of Grimde near Tirlemont, which was recently rediscovered, as it were, and listed in 2002. This is a deserted church that was used as a temporary burial place in 1914. In 1922 it was restored by architect Léon Govaerts (1891-1970) and transformed into a mausoleum with sculptures by Geo Verbanck (1881-1961) and stained-glass windows designed by Maurice Langaskens (1884-1946). Much research is needed to achieve an inventory in other regions.

The First World War: Reconstruction

Even before the end of the First World War, reconstruction was the subject of fierce debates that pitted traditionalists against modernists, in which retaining what could be remembered and reconstructing an image of the past drowned out the call for renovation. Very soon, however, the reconstruction was condemned as a missed opportunity, as fairground architecture, as the futile reconstruction of a setting that had had its day, and subsequently was forgotten for more than half a century.

An important trigger for the increased knowledge and revaluation of the reconstruction heritage was the 1985 exhibition ‘Resurgam. The Belgian Reconstruction after 1914’. It was the result of a scientific research project led by Marcel Smets of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. The catalogue contained the general framework, the debates, the various participants and the most important case studies, and remains to this day the point of reference for reconstruction in Belgium. The knowledge of particular architectural production was consequently further refined on site by the Inventory of the Architectural Heritage, as the reconstruction areas were dealt with in the ongoing investigation. The Inventory of the Architectural Heritage is the overall inventory initiative of the Heritage Administration of the Flemish Community, started in 1967. This inventory is also a major policy instrument, which determines the selection of buildings and sites for listing to a great extent. The consecutive inventory volumes dealing with the reconstruction areas show a gradual evolution towards re-evaluation, which remains in line with the investigation and the building up of knowledge of the reconstruction. The first inventory volume, published in 1971, which deals with the district of Louvain, completely

3 Vernimme, Omgaan met oorlogs- erfgoed.
5 Govaerts, La nécropole de Grimde.
6 Smets, Resurgam. De Belgische wederopbouw na 1914.
omits the reconstruction architecture of the towns of Aarschot and Louvain, due to time limitations. The inventory volume of the district of Veurne, published in 1982, already offers a detailed survey of reconstruction architecture in Nieuwpoort, with as much attention paid to the townscape as a whole as to the most eye-catching buildings. In the three inventory volumes of the district of Ypres, published between 1987 and 1991, this approach is rounded off by a thorough analysis and critical interpretation of the rich spectrum of building programmes, the architects involved, the ideas and the processes the reconstruction was based on (also on the basis of the results of the Resurgam investigation and detailed research in the archives of the Office des Régions Dévastées (Service of Devastated Regions)). The time was not yet ripe for a balanced listing policy covering all aspects of the reconstruction heritage. Only exceptional buildings were listed: a modest number of historically correct reconstructions and the modernistic ensemble of the Church of Our Lady and the presbytery in Zonnebeke by the architect Huib Hoste (1881-1957). Buildings that had been separately described and discussed in publications, however, were not considered, such as the marvellous castle of Elzenwalle in Voormezeele, the concrete ‘self-made’ dream of architect-inventor Ernest Blerot (1870-1957), which was started in 1921.

As far as the most recent inventories of the ‘devastated areas’ in the Westhoek or elsewhere in Flanders are concerned, such as Diksmuide, Lo-Reninge, Westende, Dendermonde or the centre of Louvain, the listing policy not only links up more closely with the results of the inventory, but accepts reconstruction architecture in all its aspects as a valuable part of the heritage. The selection process for listing no longer exclusively focuses on a loose collection of exceptional monuments, but rather looks for a limited number of representative ensembles that make up a coherent part of a townscape or a

---

7 Bouwen door de eeuwen heen in Vlaanderen, vol. 1.
8 Bouwen door de eeuwen heen in Vlaanderen, vol. 8n.
9 Bouwen door de eeuwen heen in Vlaanderen, vol. 11n.
10 Cf the contribution by Jaspers in this volume.
village. Two examples illustrate the history of the listing policy concerning our reconstruction heritage: Ypres, which has always played a more than symbolic role in the story of devastation and reconstruction, and Dendermonde.

Belgium was the first country in Europe with an official advisory body on the subject of conservation of monuments and historic buildings: the Commission Royale des Monuments (Royal Commission for Monuments), established in 1835.\(^{12}\) Still, the monument law giving the listed monuments a legal status only dates from 1931. Once established, the Commission gave recommendations on restorations of important historic buildings, which for that purpose were classified into three ‘grades’. Soon after the outbreak of the First World War it became clear that the military operations would cause major devastation. In August 1914, the then chairman of the Commission, Charles Lagasse de Locht (1845-1936), took the initiative and in great haste drew up a list of as many valuable buildings as possible needing protection, as an extension of the existing list of ‘classified’ buildings. This new list with 1771 objects was published in September 1914, when the frontline had stabilised and an occupied Belgium could only assess the damage.\(^ {13}\)

In 1915, the Minister for Arts and Sciences assigned architect Eugène Dhuicque (1877-1955), a member of the Commission, the task of safeguarding the works of art in the battle zone in the front-line area, where the devastations were continuing unabated. The ‘Mission Dhuicque’ very soon extended its task to the measuring of valuable buildings or architectural details, the photographing of the war damage and the consolidation of ruins, sources that would later be of major importance in the reconstruction.\(^ {14}\)

As a result of the monument law of 1931, a total of seven monuments were listed in 1939 and 1940, all without exception reconstructed religious or civil public monuments: the Hall and its belfry [21.5], the Vleeshuis (Meat Hall), the churches of St James (Sint-Jacobs), St Martin (Sint-Maartens) and St Peter (Sint-Pieters), and the hospices of Sint-Jan and Belle. A limitation of the monument law was that it excluded private properties from protection, so that the reconstructed civil private buildings of the 1914 list no longer qualified. It is remarkable that in its listing policy the Royal Commission for Monuments and Sites made no distinction between restoration and reconstruction, and followed its own logic with the 1914 list as a guideline, as if the war and its devastation had never taken place. A few of the village churches in the frontline area are good illustrations of this. The church of St Vedast in Vlamertinge, originally a late-Gothic church, was rebuilt after a fire in the beginning of the nineteenth century, conserving the west tower. This tower was largely saved during the war and was consequently restored by the architects Richir and Veraert and integrated in the

\(^{12}\) Cf Stynen, De onvoltooid verleden tijd.

\(^{13}\) "Édifices religieux, édifices civils publics, édifices civils privés classés par la Commission royale des Monuments et de Sites”.

\(^{14}\) Cf. Stynen et al., 15/18 Het verwoeste gewest. The devastated region. Mission Dhuicque.
reconstruction of the pre-war church. In 1938 the late-Gothic tower was the only part of the church listed, but only to the precise height of the parapet and without the slate spire, a common option in that period. On the other hand, St Peter’s church in Loker, a building with the same history, was totally devastated and reconstructed by the architect Albert Dumont (1853-1920) true to its pre-war state. Still, in 1939 only the west tower was listed here as well. Finally, St Michael’s church in Boezinge, another late Gothic building, which had remained intact since the seventeenth century and had been rebuilt by Jules Coomans (1871-1937) after its total destruction, was listed as a whole in 1939.

A second important listing campaign had to wait until 1983, when a group of 16 monuments was listed after the inventory of the district of Ypres. They were mainly drastically restored or archaeologically reconstructed private houses from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, such as the Post Office, the Genthof, the guildhalls of the Cattle Market and the Merghelynck Museum. About half of them were already on the 1914 list and thus formed a logical addition to the buildings listed in 1939 and 1940. Still, this selection also contained two examples of contemporary reconstruction architecture, each representative of its kind: one building in the ‘Beaux-Arts’ style, the National Bank by architect Albert Roosenboom (1871-1943) built in 1922, and one modernistic building, the house of architect Pierre Verbruggen (1860-1940) with sculptures by Dolf Ledel (1893-1976) from 1923. In 1994, another two realisations by Coomans followed, the Kasselrij and a row of houses near the station, and finally in 2003, the Saint
George’s Memorial Church [21.6] and the Eton Memorial School, a complex by Sir Reginald Blomfield of 1927-1928. As the handful of archaeological reconstructions only make up the idealised fraction of the devastated historic heritage of the town, this is also true for the thirty or so buildings listed today, however much these historic landmarks may determine the town’s image. They represent neither the total image, nor the different typological and stylistic patterns of the reconstructed town, the value of which is chiefly based on the homogeneity of the whole.

In 1914 Dendermonde was burnt down and almost completely devastated by the advancing German army. The reconstruction was difficult and not well structured. It was characterized by the complex combination of a largely preserved medieval street pattern and a historicising and regionalist architecture. The most important and drastically restored monuments in the heart of the reconstructed town, the Church of Our Lady, the town hall with the belfry and the Meat Hall, were listed in 1943. In 1996 the marketplace (Grote Markt) was listed as a townscape, and the reconstructed Palace of Justice by architect Valentin Vaerwijck (1882-1959) as a monument. The inventory of Dendermonde and the listings which followed were finished in 2003-2004, twenty years after Ypres. Four ensembles of reconstruction architecture deemed vital to the town’s image were selected. They are not only representative of the diverse initiatives that determined the reconstruction of the city, but they also mark the extended heritage zone within the town centre:

1. the Kerkstraat, historically the main axis of the town with an architecture of high quality, which was completely protected as a townscape, with four of the most important houses listed as monuments;
2. Koningin Astridlaan, a row of mainly neo-traditional house fronts by the canalised Dender, of which all 25 houses including the street and row of trees and three more contemporary houses in the vicinity were listed as a monument;
3. the adjacent building complexes of the

15 Smets en Verbruggen, “De wederopbouw van Dendermonde”; see also the contribution by E. Vandeweghe in this volume.
abbey of Sts Peter and Paul and the cloister of the *Zwarte Zusters*, which were listed as monuments;
4. the marketplace (Grote Markt), where the townscape listed in 1996 was extended with the listing of 18 houses as monuments, among them the only block of houses in Dendermonde that was completely designed by town architect Alexis Sterck using a prescribed typology for the frontage as a model for the reconstruction.

A garden estate on the edge of town with 22 houses for the gendarmerie, dating from 1936-1937, was also listed as a monument in the same campaign.

Listing is of course only one instrument in heritage preservation, reserved for the most valuable and exceptional parts of it. There is a lot of reconstruction architecture; the differences in quality are relative, and the selection criteria are difficult to determine. The requests for protection are increasing, e.g. for the reconstructed churches in the frontline area, about 100 in number. There are 15 such churches in the municipalities of a small town such as Diksmuide alone, most of the time the only monumental landmark in the village centre. Are they all potential monuments? Is listing always the most appropriate method of preservation? Are all monuments of equal value? These are questions that heritage policy will have to answer in the near future. If the homogeneity and the quality of the surroundings of the reconstruction areas need to be preserved as a whole, other management instruments will have to be used on the local level. Larger heritage zones could be included in the municipal environmental structure plans, with specific guidelines concerning volume, details, materials and colours.

Appreciation of the reconstruction heritage and regionalism as a whole is growing. A few reconstructed monuments labelled as ‘vieux-neuf’ some time ago have now achieved the status of World Heritage, such as the beguinage in Diksmuide [21.7] and the belfries of Ypres, Diksmuide, Nieuwpoort and Lo.
The Second World War:
Relics and Reconstruction

Because the military operations during the Second World War lasted only for a short time, with Belgium capitulating after ten days, the devastations were never as great as during the First World War. Although no Flemish town was intensively bombed or devastated, major damage was caused in 1944 by both the Allied bombardments and the Germans’ ‘flying bombs’, the V1s and V2s, of which 3699 fell on Antwerp alone. Both operations primarily targeted traffic infrastructure and the war industry, but frequently hit residential areas, causing thousands of civilian casualties.

This time, the post-war reconstruction debate was not based on aesthetics but on economic reasons, with the housing shortage as the major problem. On average, 7.6% of real estate in Belgium was damaged, rising to 21% in the most heavily bombed district of Antwerp. About 50,000 houses were completely destroyed, twice as many were heavily damaged, and there was a deficit of property because the construction industry did not work for six years. All this added up to a shortage of 300,000 houses. To speed up reconstruction the policies of the consecutive so-called ‘leftist’ governments concentrated first of all on financial support for the sinistrés (homeless), the owners of destroyed or damaged buildings, and on an effective use of the scarce building materials. The models promoted were the single-family dwelling and the garden estate, traditional architecture, limited standardisation and a regionalist idiom.

An example of more direct government intervention in reconstruction was the so-called Nationale Werven (National Building Sites) system established by the communist Minister for Reconstruction Jean Terfve in 1946. They consisted of new housing estates of between 20 and 60 single-family dwellings built on community land and intended as private property for the ‘homeless’ in anticipation of their war damage payments. Although some 25 architects were selected in a competition, the results were on the whole below par, with as the rare exception the Nationale Werven of Borgerhout and Deurne by Renaat Braem (1910-2001), Geo Brosens (1891-1967) and Flor Laforce (1902-1973).

In 1948 the De Taeye Law provided for premiums to increase construction activity for the lower income groups. The result was an endless repetition of plots with a mediocre and repetitive architecture. The 100,000th premium was allotted in 1954. Collective housing projects on a larger scale were provided for by the Law Brunfaut in 1949 but remained rare. They would, however, become a major factor in urban policy in the sixties, which focused on slum clearance. In any case, social housing projects never accounted for much more than 5% of the housing market.

Cases in which the reconstruction debate also referred to the symbolism of the frontline area were rare. The retreating German army blew up or set fire to quite a number of targets that were considered to be strategic, such as the listed St Catharine’s church in Hoogstraten, the pinnacle of the brick-Gothic style in the Kempen region. As with the Hall in Ypres, here as well the option to preserve the remnants as a ‘national ruin’ was considered. But a reconstruction came-era, dove-era was finally decided upon, executed by the architects Louis Stijnen (1907-1991) and Pol Berger (1884-1954) in 1950-1958.

In the reconstruction of relatively heavily devastated town centres, the debate between tradition and renewal hardly surfaced. A conservative, regionalist tendency was given preference in towns such as Courtrai and Tielt. This was also true for the recon-

16 Cf. Stevigny, “Les chantiers nationaux dans le cadre des activités du ministère de la Reconstruction”; see also the contribution by Floré in this volume.
struction of the many destroyed railway stations, where modernism only began to manifest itself in the sixties. Ostend took the opportunity to drastically renovate devastated public infrastructure with an unambiguously contemporary architecture: the Post Office by architect Gaston Eysselinck (1907-1953) from 1946-1953, the Casino by architect Léon Stynen (1899-1990) from 1950-1953, the Wellington hippodrome by architects Boutelier and Van Beginne from 1947-1955 and the town hall by Victor Bourgeois (1897-1962) from 1954-1961. It is therefore no coincidence that the first three of these buildings have meanwhile been listed, the Post Office (as the first post-war monument) in 1981, the other two in 1998.

Antwerp participated fully in the quick economic recovery of the first post-war years thanks to its port activities and, apart from the war damage, planned a similar operation, which was only partially executed. Still, the Administrative Centre, again designed by Renaat Braem in 1950 and built between 1957 and 1967, has been part of the listed heritage since 2002. As far as social housing was concerned, Antwerp resolutely opted for collective high-rise construction, spread over three large-scale new housing estates on the edge of town. Renaat Braem also set the tone here, with the 'Kiel' estate from 1950-1957, his own interpretation of 'La Ville Radieuse', which in recent years has been renovated drastically, but still quite respectfully.

Although this complex is among the best of its kind in Europe, to this day it is not protected, mainly for financial and technical reasons. In anticipation of that, everything possible is being done to demonstrate the value of this important work; the reconstruction of the original, abstract colouring on the ceiling of the main entrance hall and the realization of a museum apartment.

In recent years the listing of war relics from the Second World War has focused on the remnants of the Atlantic Wall, with, among others, field artillery and bunkers in De Panne, Middelkerke and Ostend. Today, listing policy concerning the architecture of the period 1945-1970 is aimed primarily at the preservation of architectural highlights, the most important structures of leading architects. As shown above, some of these monuments can be situated more or less in the context of post-war reconstruction. Most of them, however, are exponents of a new era, which peaked with Expo '58, the 1958 World Fair in Brussels.