

## THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL CORES IN BELGIAN CITIES AFTER THEIR DESTRUCTION IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR.

by Marcel SMETS

Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Leuven (Belgium)  
Chairman of the Center for Urban History.

### An emblematic resurrection.

In general, one may state that unforeseen destruction, caused by war or other catastrophic events, fundamentally disrupts the customary pattern of day-to-day activities. Along with the shock of insecurity, the loss of daily ritual, engenders a new appraisal for what has disappeared. The sense of belonging by which inhabitants were linked to a place, has suddenly been broken, and its destitution stirs up the awareness of the value they attributed to their home and their city.

In the case of the reconstruction following the first world war in Belgium, like in most recoveries from a calamity, this sense of deprivation led to a need of recovering the past. No official policy of overall adaptation was envisaged, and existing ownership gradually reappropriated the former division of streets and parcels. The reconstruction of the old tissue did not imply however that original sites were identically reproduced. Transformations that had been formerly operated, were dismissed as esthetical errors. They were 'corrected' with the aim of restoring the city to its ancient beauty. This retrieval to the highlight of medieval urban culture, clearly marked a symbolic gesture. It indicated how much the local elite wanted to rebuild the city, more beautiful than before. The return to a glorified past stood for an emblematic resurrection.

### An archetypical vision of the medieval town.

Such an effort of restituting ancient values was reminiscent of the pseudo-historical villages, set up during the world exhibitions that preceded the war. In these models of medieval townscape, settings were largely made up of stereotypes. They were not meant to reproduce existing sites, but intended to create new compositions by a rearrangement of randomly chosen historical buildings of prototypical nature. In 'Old Flanders' e.g. the idealized concept of a traditional Flemish city designed by architect Vaerwyck for the Ghent exhibition of 1913, the recurrent spatial groupings common to most Flemish cities were being used as vocabulary for the new design.



*'Old Flanders' at the World Exhibition in Ghent (1913), by arch. V. Vaerwyck.*

Existing historical constructions, selected from a great many locations in the same region, were identically rebuilt in wood, plaster and tiles. These full scale models however, were placed in a new spatial relationship to the urban fabric. They were used like building stones for a stage set. If authentic buildings were being copied, it was not so much for their intrinsic value, but for the associations they evoked. They were symbolizing the beffry, the guild-house, the town-hall, the entrance-gate, the canal-row, the beguine-enclosure, etc.

The urban environment of 'Old Flanders' thus represented the idealized vision of the archetypical medieval town. It incarnated the Grand Place, the radial street

leading to it from the city gate, the canals, the beguinage, and all the other stereotypical settings, which visitors could easily recognize by their analogy with images found in their own neighbourhood. Far better than any example in reality would, these emblematic sceneries embodied the idea of the town, rather than the town itself. In their artificial nature, they could do away with the processes of historical change, and return to a mythical representation of the glorified heritage. In this sense, they sketched out how one imagined the restoration of the ancient townscape afterwards : not by reproducing the exact historical truth, but by working in analogy with similar settings found in the vicinity.

#### The preponderant role of central monuments.

With the restrictions imposed by a nationwide reconstruction, this return to pseudo-historical stereotypes was mostly used for the rebuilding of the city centre. The planning instruments at the time, nor the financial possibilities permitted to pursue the same objectives in other quarters, at least not with a similar obstinacy. In comparison to other parts of town, the historical core also accommodated many public buildings of monumental nature, which were particularly indispensable to set the example for private initiative and accomplish a scenery of some character. For that reason, most of the comprehensive schemes projected for the rebuilding of Belgian cities, usually limit themselves to considering the representative area around the Grand Place, even when destructions took hold of a much larger site.

This self-imposed delimitation constitutes the first step of an intervention policy in which the restoration of major landmarks in the historical townscape played a considerable role. The vast program of restitution and conservation that resulted from this direct action, led to three types of approaches :

- 1° Some buildings were integrally reconstructed in their pre-war condition. Such attitude mostly prevailed for monuments which were considered of national importance, or for buildings which had been recently restored. In both cases, the exact measurements and detailed drawings, necessary for such an intervention were available. Reconstruction however, did not always imply historical restitution, because many of these monuments had already been transfigured by earlier restauration.
- 2° In most cases, the urge towards stylistic improvement that had characterized the

conservation movement in the years preceding the war, continued to be used as major recipe. Damaged buildings of very different nature, were heavily or partly reconverted, following the prescriptions of stylistic classification, which 19th century architectural theory had put forward to describe the perfect form of the historical building types it had considered. Restoration in this case, largely amounted to transforming the original building into a pseudo-historical model, which tried to look more authentic than what had existed before.

- 3° Sometimes, this tendency towards historicism led to a complete abandonment of prewar architecture and to its replacement by a new historical reference. Classical or neo-classical constructions that had formerly been erected to insert major public functions in the historical core, were particularly despised. Their location was claimed for a new eclectic solution in harmony with the prevailing styles of the surrounding. In some cases, these new constructions even drew upon old engravings, and reinstored the medieval building types, that had cleared the way for the 18th or 19th century renovation.

#### The subsidiary role of individual facades.

Attuning private properties to the example of these public buildings required specific measures. Planning control at the time, relied on the enactment of alignment plans and building regulations. The latter however, applied to the whole communal territory, and could not impose particular conditions for central locations. Stylistic treatment and outlook of facades kept on depending on the initiative and the goodwill of individual owners. A steady campaign of public incentive was therefore necessary to coordinate their actions and to persuade them that investing into the beauty of the city centre would eventually benefit all of them.

Local authorities proved very inventive on this subject. While they usually hesitated to promulgate changes in the building line, they never delayed to take initiatives in relation to the quality of the building front. Their careful study of building permits and their concern for a rightly adjusted architecture, as well as their subscription to different kinds of subsidies, clearly evidenced the importance they attributed to the completion of a homogeneous setting.

In most cities this exhortation to a scenery which reflected the cultural ambitions of the local elite, gave rise to practical in-

tentives. Individual proprietors were stimulated by esthetical committees to follow the objectives laid down in the monumental foci. Urban design competitions for the central area, along with projects of a more informal nature, suggested how this adjustment should be made. Building applications were heavily discussed and returned to their authors when judged unsatisfactory. Sometimes, amendments were suggested and interesting details of neighbouring constructions proposed to remodel the outlook of hastily drawn facades.

In the proximity of classified monuments, advisory committees were set up by the law of 1912, which had granted the Royal Commission of Monuments with the authority of evaluating the surrounding site. If this was not the case, a delegation of local architects and leading citizens usually performed a similar duty. The most consistent solutions came about when the role of the advisory committee was taken up by a single architect, and/or when the city council decided to provide for funds, e.g. by creating a 'prize for the prettiest housing front'.

In the cases where the influences of the city-architect prevailed, his amount of control depended upon the procedure which the political mandatories chose to follow. Usually, he could do no more than formulate implicit guide-lines, while trying to improve building applications. Sometimes however, this course of action was reversed, like in the case of Dinant, where Paul Jaspar set out explicit regulations for the reconstruction of the Meuse Quay. In other instances, the lack of legal possibilities for enforcing formal decisions upon private initiative, was shortcut by informal agreements. In this way, it sometimes happened that the city architect was commissioned to design the most eye-catching buildings or the entire housing row in places of particular interest.

*Plan de Dinant. L'ensemble des constructions des maisons en bois de la ville. D'après le plan de Paul Jaspar, 1919.*



*Architect Jaspar's building prescription of the Meuse Quay at Dinant (1919).*



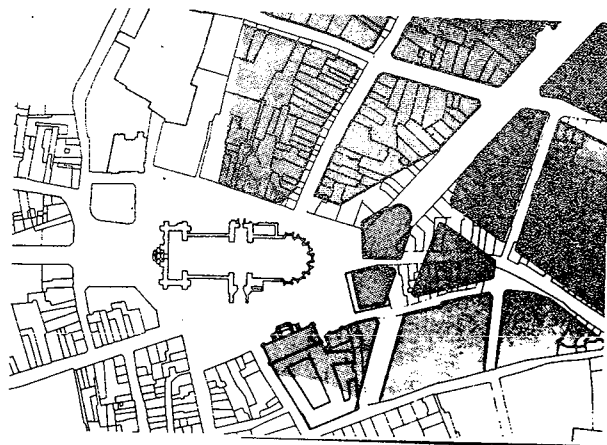
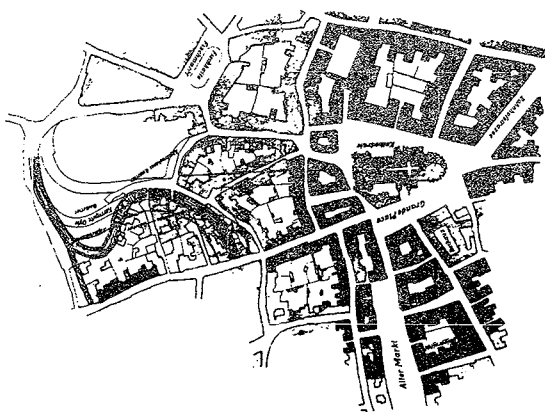
*Architect Jaspar's sketch of the former Meuse Quay at Dinant.*

All of these comprehensive projects clearly illustrate the urge to differentiate every individual facade. As a reference to the historical development of the city, street fronts are composed by juxtaposing elements, even when they are conceived and realized as a singular initiative. The inspiration of 'Old Flanders' is evident: historical reality is not recovered, but transformed into a scenery. The ideal urban form is drawn up as a compilation of fragments, whereby prototypical models are being re-appropriated into a new context.

In architect Sterck's proposal for a new enclosure of the Termonde Grand-Place, the original differences in parcel width and in stylistic treatment are smoothened away. Cornices and saddle-roofs parallel to the street are straightened out and exchanged for medieval looking gables. The housing row is turned into a stage-set. Back and front become mutually independent, and are merely designed in relation to picturesque quality. Considerations of functional or historical nature are abrogated for the prestigious representation of an outdoor setting.

The lavishing example of Louvain's Grand Place.

To clarify how the conjunction of the above interventions initiated a coherent spatial



*The central area of Louvain, with indication of destructions in black (left) compared with a project for a screen-block at the end of the railway station avenue (right).*

design, it might be helpful to give a more extensive description of their practical implications in the formation of a specific site. The reconstruction of the Grand Place at Louvain is quite significant in this respect, because it illustrates the prestigious result obtained by a concerted action, in the absence of effective planning instruments.

In Louvain, the area around the cathedral was completely destroyed by arson, except for the city hall which had been saved, and the cathedral whose structure was heavily damaged, but not ruined. Planning for the reconstruction of this central location took place all along the war, and finally led to the following decisions :

1° As can be clearly observed from the 1914 situation, this medieval rectangular space at the south side of the cathedral had been opened up at its north-east entry by a breakthrough realized in the late 19th century, which linked the city centre with the railway station. The extremely elaborated gothic city hall had thus been uncovered from its necessary surroundings, and could be observed all along the rectilinear avenue traced from the railway station. By the time one approached it closely enough to appreciate the detailed stone-work, all real interest in a close investigation of the building had gone.

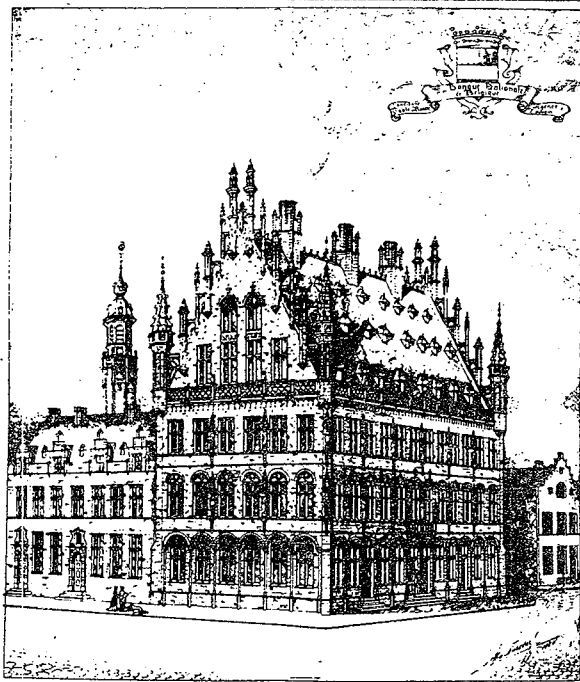
To restore the original effect of enclosure and surprise, a local committee for civic art had organized in 1915 an informal competition for the rebuilding of this particular site. Numerous entries had suggested to create a new block at the north side of the choir, to screen the view towards city hall when approaching from the railway station. Such proposal had been retained, and expropriations

were carried out. Its final implementation only stranded on the bankruptcy of the contracted investor.

2° The Grand Place itself was dominated by two major monuments : the cathedral and the city hall. The latter had been left intact by the fire, the former had to be restored. With this purpose in mind, one set out to rebuild the prewar situation, which in itself had resulted from a rather drastic reconversion operated in the years before. The decorative elements that had previously been added to create more stylistic homogeneity were preserved, while the annexes that had been formerly demolished, were never rebuilt.

3° Due to the war damage however, a chance was being offered to complete these two monuments by a third, and thus revive the image of Louvain's city centre at the height of its urban culture. At the east side of the Grand Place, a former 15th century construction by Mathieu de Layens, the architect of the city hall, had been replaced around the middle of the 19th century by a neo-classical substitute. Because the arson had destroyed the latter, a return to the original could now be envisaged. Based on old engravings, architect Winders worked out a carefully elaborated fac-simile, which completed the high side of the rectangular square in stylistic accordance with both other landmarks of the medieval outlay. In such way, the initiative, paid for by the Belgian national bank, set the example for an analogous adaptation of the private premisses in the other parts of the Grand Place.

4° For the reconstruction of the housing block



*The new agency for the national bank in Louvain : a historical fac-simile (arch. Winders).*

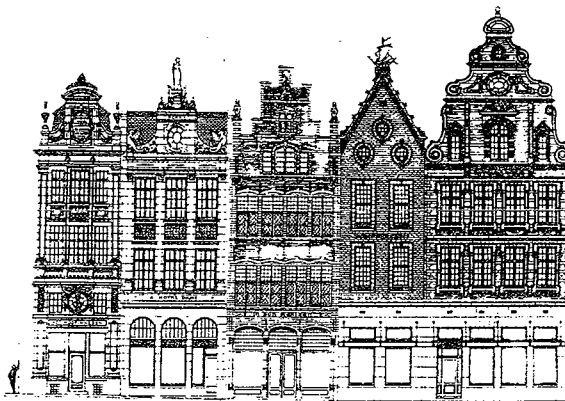
adjoining city hall, a quite unique procedure came about. Through an enlargement of both roads on either side of this block, the original allotment had somewhat changed. The new proprietors had already contacted their own architects, when the municipal authorities decided to commission the Brussels architect Govaerts with the plan of the different individual facades. Govaerts thus corrected and redrew some of the projects initiated by his colleagues, without changing the inner distribution. In such way, he clearly marked the distinction between the facade, as a projection of exterior urban space; and the plan conception, as a reflection of interior functional requirements. His prime concern went to a programmatic architecture, linked with the classical tradition of creating a homogeneous townscape. Instead of using this comprehensive design opportunity to unify the housing block into a modulated facade conception, he chose however to accentuate diversity. Inspired by the guild-houses that occupied the location in medieval times, he retrieved to an exuberant new interpretation of this ancient typology. Without aiming at a specific historical concordance, the symbolism inserted in his project became obvious : Louvain would be reinstored into its ancient vigour.

5° The lower side of the Market Place finally, was modelled on similar lines. After

many unsuccessful attempts by architect Bonduelle to create a grand commemorative entry by forming a continuous housing front which bridged the visual gap of the Brussels street by extending above its outset; Govaerts was asked to complete the kind of work he already initiated on one side of the Grand Place. He maintained Bonduelle's idea of an arcade by conceiving symmetrical buildings on either side of the Brussels street, but he coupled this effect of enclosure, to the realization of highly individualized facades for each plot. In its lavishing and luxurious differentiation, the whole site thus commemorated the idea of civil resurrection, much like the 19th century restoration of the Brussels Grand Place had tried to revive the image of its reconstruction after the fire of 1695.

The presence of an all too evident past.

The consistent reconstruction of Louvain's historical core shows how coherent city planning could be achieved in the absence of adequate planning instruments. The outcome of course, drew heavily on the practical means



*The facade row on the south side of Louvain's Grand Place : reconstruction (down) compared with original (top).*

which public authorities had at their disposal. Alignment and building regulations however were imaginatively surpassed to comply with the essence of the operation : the restoration of a recognizable urban public space.

After annihilation of the preexisting structure, the reestablishment of tangible reality, embodied in the visual appearance and associations connected with the places of public life, seemed to be what mattered most. Town planning, conservation and architecture necessarily went together to achieve this goal. The collective memory of city form did not rely on the separate existence of streets and squares, monumental landmarks or specific architectural features. It related to the consistent formation of concrete locations, in which all of these elements joined together.

Such interlinkage of all spatial constituents has become rare in today's split-up organization of public policy in specialized agencies. From this point, we could certainly learn from the reconstruction experience. The full extent of its achievement was indeed a social one, in the sense that it brought about an environment where all layers of society could identify with. The subdivision into definite categories of specialized activity (traffic, hygiene, housing, etc...) which modernism had suggested, was willingly disregarded and exchanged for a synthetic view of communal space allocation. The elitist stereotypes that were suggested rested on fixation of social positions, but they also permitted everyone to join in the collective wealth and beauty of the city. Such a natural consideration of urban morphology, typology, historical continuity and of the associations they create, keeps

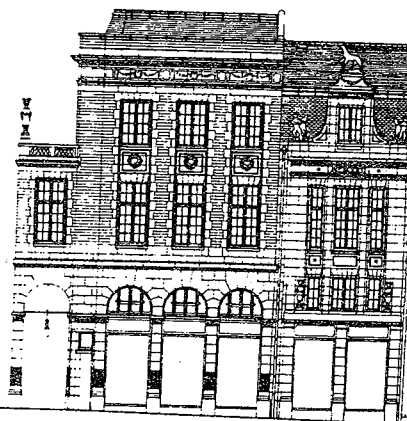
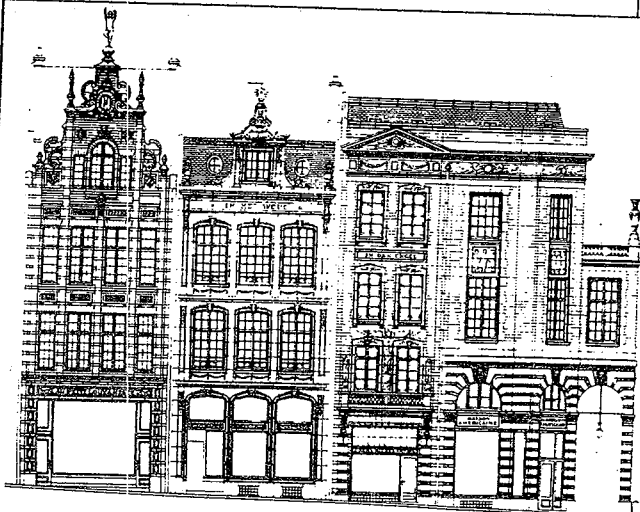
on being an essential attribute of any intervention in the city, even if we seem to have lost its evident character in the course of a systematic problem-solving attitude introduced by modernism.

The constant presence of the past is striking in the whole reconstruction endeavour. History seems to be taken up as an irrefutable feature which determines daily action. It doesn't prevent to be in line with the essence of one's time and produce authentic work. Architects proudly date their work by inserting the year of realization into their facade projects. They don't copy, but interpret previous achievements. They consider their cultural heritage as evident source of inspiration against which it would be foolish to rebel.

In this Belgian reconstruction, history however, is also a place of shelter. It is a lucky dip where architects can search for preconceived solutions. Instead of accepting history in its real development, they model it into a preset conception. They reduce the past to a recurrent number of systematic precepts, with no relation to their initial origin. If modernism needed to dispose of history to create a rationality of its own, the reconstruction architects acted similarly, by freezing history down to a few schematic archetypes. In both cases, solutions stick to their own limited scope of certainties, and miss the glow of unforeseen discovery.

#### Bibliography

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*The facade row at the west side of Louvain's Grand Place designed by arch. L. Govaerts (1921).*



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by Marcel SMETS,  
Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Leuven (Belgium)  
Chairman of the Center for Urban History.

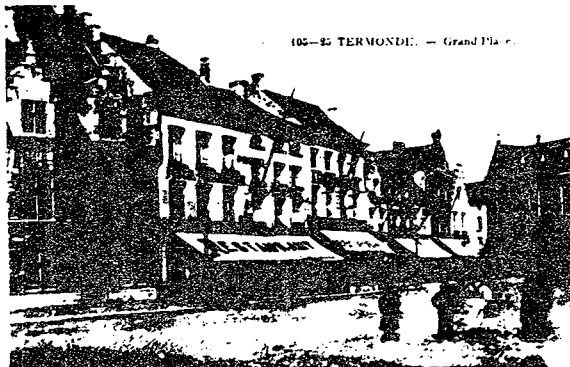
### Abstract

This paper is intended to give an insight in the principal results of a five year research project on the Belgian reconstruction after the first world war. This collective work which amounted into a large exhibition, a book and a film for television, has indeed brought some clarification as to the role of monuments and the significance of style in this reconstruction of completely devastated sites.

Like in most resurrections from the sudden destruction of a familiar environment, Belgian reconstruction was very emblematic. With the loss of a customary ritual of day-to-day activities, the return to an urban structure which allowed the whole community to identify with it, had a major significance. In the case of the historical centre, such a structure was made up from a conjunction of streets and squares, monumental landmarks and general architectural features. To restore this urban space that lingered on to collective memory more than any other, the main protagonists purposely forgot about the definite categories of specialized action which modernism suggested. Instead, they sought for inspiration in synthetical approaches, where conservation, urban planning and architecture mutually collaborated in a vision of the whole.

To attain this goal, they continued on the principles of the different historical quarters realized during the world exhibitions before the war. They set out artificial urban settings with historical elements from the local cultural heritage. In such a way, they arrived at improved stereotypes, which allowed them to correct the 'mistakes' which the historical core had suffered during its development in time. On the other hand, the method guaranteed the easy understanding of the newly created environment by appealing on its analogy with existing townscapes in the vicinity.

For the implementation of this concept, historical monuments played a preponderant role. They acted as landmarks, and served to convince private property holders in the surrounding area of the rightness of the envisaged policy. The restoration of public buildings



*The building front at Termonde's Grand Place in its original state (see p. 3 in text).*

therefore aimed at an idealized historical form, which had usually never existed in that manner before. This example was largely followed by private reconstruction, which completed the scenery by modelling its facades unto the archetype of the former guild-houses.

By explaining the revealing case of Louvain's Grand Place in more detail, we get to understand how the different components of this exemplary reconstruction mutually interfered with one another. This fruitful endeavour illustrates the evidence with which historical continuity, local morphology and existing typology were brought into consideration.

Such natural assimilation of history in the town planning achievement as well as the ambition to project a collectively shared image of the place in the spatial organization it proposes, remain valid objectives for today's practice. They may not however, as was the case during Belgian reconstruction, be restricted to the mere conception of an idealized stage-set. When history gets to be frozen down into pre-established schemes, it is indeed deprived of its fundamental essence. To engage in a continuous dialogue with day-to-day reality, one should learn to absorb contingencies while fighting to extend their limitations. One must accept history the way it is, and keep the strenght to be wondered.

# LA RECONSTRUCTION DES CENTRES HISTORIQUES EN BELGIQUE APRES LEUR DESTRUCTION PENDANT LA PREMIERE GUERRE MONDIALE.

par Marcel SMETS

Professeur d'Urbanisme à l'Université de Leuven (Belgique)

Président du Centre d'Histoire Urbaine.

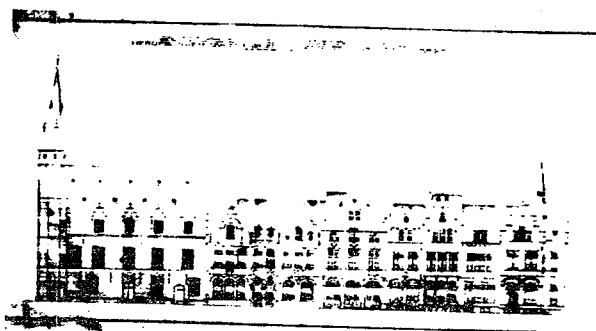
## Résumé

Cette communication a pour but de rapporter les principaux résultats d'une recherche collective de cinq ans au sujet de la reconstruction en Belgique après la première guerre mondiale. Cette recherche qui a donné lieu à une exposition, un livre et un film de télévision, a en effet éclairci le rôle des monuments et la signification du style dans la reconstruction des sites sacrés.

Comme dans la plupart des résurrections qui suivirent une destruction soudaine de l'environnement familial, la reconstruction en Belgique prit un caractère fortement emblématique. Le rite des habitudes journalières étant rompu, le retour à une structure urbaine à laquelle la population locale pouvait de nouveau s'assimiler, exerça une signification profonde. Dans le cas des centres historiques, celle-ci se constitua d'une conjonction de rues et de places, de monuments notoires et d'une architecture d'ensemble. Pour restituer cet espace urbain qui marqua plus que tout autre la mémoire collective, on se résolut à se désister des catégories d'action spécialisée que le modernisme suggérait, pour recourir à des options synthétiques où la conservation, l'urbanisme et l'architecture se complétaient dans la vision d'ensemble.

Pour y accéder, on s'inspira des principes inaugurés lors des différents quartiers historiques érigés pendant les expositions universelles d'avant-guerre. On composa des décors urbains artificiels, à l'aide d'éléments historisants empruntés au patrimoine local. On aboutit ainsi à des stéréotypes améliorés, qui permirent d'effacer les 'fautes' commises au cours du développement des centres-villes dans le temps. Cette méthode garantissait la lecture facile du cadre urbain à cause de son analogie avec les sites connus des alentours.

Dans la réalisation de ces ensembles les monuments prirent un rôle prépondérant. Ils devinrent les pivots du site, par lesquels on tenta de persuader les propriétaires des constructions privées à leurs abords du bien-fondé de l'approche proposée. La restauration des bâtiments publics s'appliqua



*La proposition de l'architecte Sterck pour la reconstruction de la rangée de maisons à la Grand Place de Termonde (voir p. 3 du texte).*

donc à restituer une forme historique idéalisée, qui pour la plupart du temps n'avait jamais existée auparavant. L'exemple fut largement suivi pour la reconstruction du domaine privé, qui veilla à compléter la mise-en-scène en assimilant ses façades au modèle des anciennes maisons de corporations.

En nous servant de l'explication détaillée du cas révélateur de la Grand-Place de Louvain, on saisit l'influence réciproque exercée par les différentes constituantes de cette reconstruction exemplaire. Elle nous renseigne aussi sur l'évidente prise-en-considération de la continuité historique, de la morphologie locale et de typologie existante, qui domina cette approche féconde.

L'assimilation naturelle de l'histoire à l'action urbanistique, ainsi que l'insertion de celle-ci dans la représentation collective du lieu, sont certes encore d'actualité. Elle ne pourront pourtant se limiter, comme ce fut le cas pour la reconstruction en Belgique, à la fixation d'un décor idéalisé. Si on réduit l'histoire à des schémas préconçus, on la soustrait en effet de son fondement essentiel. Pour engager un dialogue permanent avec la réalité du vécu, il faudra s'appliquer à absorber les contingences urbaines et apprendre à accepter l'histoire telle qu'elle est.