

Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

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Architecture, urbanism and national heritage during German occupation in Belgium: The Modern Movement and the Commissariat-Général pour la Reconstruction du Pays

Founded in June 1940 under the Militärverwaltung, the German occupying forces, the Commissariat-Général pour la Reconstruction du Pays seems to be the continuation of pre-war structures. These had been set up in Belgium by modernist circles inside the Ministry of Public Works, involving for instance the Institut Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs of La Cambre in Brussels and the Office de Redressement Économique.

Inside the Commissariat-Général, the Office for Reconstruction was created next to the offices for Employment and for War Damage. Raphaël Verwilghen, who had also been the director of the Service des Régions Dévastées for the reconstruction after World War I, stood as one of Belgium's most prominent members of the Modern Movement, at the head of the Commissariat. In this administration for national reconstruction one finds many other of the leading modern architects and urbanists who—before the war and even during and after the First World War—belonged to the most progressive circles, among whom Stan Leurs, Max Winders, Joseph Viérin, Valentijn Vaerwijck, and also Henry Van de Velde.

Verwilghen's administration covered architecture, urbanism, regional planning and national heritage. The Commissariat's intention was to proceed to much more rigorous planning of infrastructures and urban development, and proposed in the main time a very rigid catalogue of new typologies for agricultural settlements and new villages. Planning for the metropolitan areas, started before the war, was continued and emphasized. Regional planning for dynamic new industrial areas like Limbourg and the new coal mining areas in the east of the country near Germany received special attention. Setting up a new urbanistic legislation, the Commissariat aimed to a total planning of the Belgian built environment within a clear and well-defined social vision. The strong voluntary opposition to the pre-war lack of economic and administrative policies could not avoid that the Commissariat's policy stood in an ambiguous relationship with the German military government. Secret German reports to Berlin mention the Militärverwaltung's high interest for the infrastructural development of rail- and highways in the Belgium region, and especially in Flanders, culturally spoken closer to Germany and considered as one of the regions to be 'annexed'.

In spite of the Commissariat's ambiguous concepts existing on the background of the war and the fact that many of its administrators were considered and treated as 'collaborators' after the war, during this period were laid the foundations for the spatial planning after the war in Belgium.

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