

Fig. 1. Stills from the televised live spectacle to commemorate the centenary of The Battle of Passchendaele, Ypres, 30 July 2017.

# “C’est la beauté de l’ensemble qu’il faut viser.”

## Notes on Changing Heritage Values of Belgian Post-World War I Reconstruction Townscapes

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### **Soldiers Projected on the Cloth Hall**

In the evening of 30 July 2017 the United Kingdom performed a large multimedia spectacle at the Grote Markt square in Ypres as part of its centennial commemoration of the Third Battle of Ypres.<sup>1</sup> The infamous 100-day British offensive, which is often referred to as the Battle of Passchendaele, cost the lives of nearly 500,000 soldiers, almost evenly distributed between the British and German sides, yet yielded negligible strategic gains.<sup>2</sup> The formless hell of mud to which eye witnesses had testified was now remembered with musical theatre with actors in crisp uniforms, live music and breath-taking image projections on the reconstructed thirteenth-century Cloth Hall with its Belfry tower that lines Ypres’s Market Square (Fig. 1). In addition to the thousands of spectators who attended the show in Ypres, many more followed the show at home via British and Belgian television. While more commemorative events were programmed in nearby Passchendaele itself – with notably distinct commemorations for the Canadian, Australian and New Zealand nations, but without major German involvement – the event in Ypres confirmed this West-Flemish reconstructed town as key *lieu de mémoire* for British Great War commemoration and war tourism. The commemoration also confirmed the reconstructed Cloth Hall in its status as a war memorial of sorts, but the projections on its façade perhaps also underlined the limited expressiveness, and the under-defined meaning of the building as a war memorial.<sup>3</sup>

For the reconstructed stone façade with its endless repetition of gothic bays bears none of the inscriptions that cover the Portland stone surfaces of the nearby Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, the city's second memorial epicentre which bears the names of 54,395 Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Ypres Salient but whose bodies were never found or identified. It is because of this, perhaps, that the Cloth Hall was deemed acceptable to serve as the backdrop for the theatrical narration and as a screen onto which word messages and static and moving images could be projected. The projections of fire, or of the silhouette of the Hall in ruins, onto the reconstructed building however also activated its memorial significance as a testimony of those suffering from war destruction and to the resilience of "Poor Little Belgium".

Ms. Karen Bradley, then the UK's Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, also hinted at this significance of the Cloth Hall as a marker of destruction and reconstruction in an online video announcing the commemoration spectacle:

The thing for me about being here today, in Ypres, a hundred years from the start of the Passchendaele offensive, is that you're standing in a town that was utterly destroyed. It is almost impossible to imagine just what happened in this town and how it's been completely reconstructed. And what we will see tonight is part of that reconstruction, and part of what it meant at the time.<sup>4</sup>

The near impossibility "[of] imagin[ing] just what happened in this town and how it's been completely reconstructed" is a characteristic yet most ambiguous quality, not just of contemporary Ypres, but of the townscapes and landscapes across the entire former Belgian war front zone, and of other repaired towns further inland, such as Louvain, Dinant and Visé. The opening words of the catalogue of the 1985 Resurgam exhibition about the post-1914 reconstruction in Belgium also raise the issue of forgetfulness of post-war generations:

Few people are aware of the enormous devastation caused in Belgium by the First World War. One remembers the Yser Front, the trenches and the many victims who have lost their lives in this unscrupulous battle. However, people rarely realize that, in the front region alone, the war has destroyed an area of approximately 60 kilometres long and 20 kilometres wide.<sup>5</sup>

That the front area has been reconstructed so as to form a somehow convincing image of its pre-destruction past, even if this proves to be a highly idealised historical image that masks various infrastructural modernisations, could be evaluated as a successful recovery from the destruction of war. What I want to evaluate here, though, is how

the reconstructed cityscapes perform as a memorial landscape or a “total monument” perhaps, commemorating the sufferings from the war and demonstrating the national resilience in recovering from it.<sup>6</sup> I want to argue that this double memorial programme in the historicist rebuilding of war damaged or devastated towns and villages turns out to have *rather failed* in the long run. Its readability as a resilient reconstruction was fragile from the start, and it has only diminished with each passing decade. Yet, acknowledging the ambiguous and diminishing significance of the reconstruction fabric as a commemorative monument should not keep us from acknowledging other heritage values that should equally inform our contemporary appreciation and critical appropriation of towns like Ypres or Diksmuide and villages like Slijpe or Westouter. Nor should we be ignorant or uncritical of the commemorative monument that slumbers under the surface of everyday built environments in the former war front area, and in rebuilt urban areas further inland, like Dinant, Louvain and Mechelen.

## Rebuilding Monumental Ensembles

Official initiatives to stimulate and coordinate repair started as soon as 1914, soon after the German invasion. A Service for Devastated Areas was established in 1919 to coordinate the rebuilding and existed until 1926. It would however take several more decades to finish the reconstruction of major historical monuments like the Cloth Hall, completed only in 1967. The institutional complexities and the ideological aspects of the Belgian reconstruction have been discussed amply in the existing literature.<sup>7</sup> Let me refer only, schematically, to the opposition between a traditionalist camp which advocated a historicist reconstruction of devastated towns and villages, based on their pre-war historically grown layout, and a more progressive camp which called for rebuilding the devastated regions according to the new town planning ideas. Two institutions confronting each other along these lines were the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites and the Union of Belgian Cities and Municipalities. In the main the same fault line also divided the visions of the desirability of reconstructing historical monuments or, alternatively, of preserving selected ruins of major monuments as commemorative relics of war events. The traditionalist views eventually determined the Belgian reconstruction approach, confining modern town planning in practice to a limited number of *cités-jardins* outside the reconstructed historical centres.

The rebuilding of the devastated towns and villages, each to a convincing image of its idealised pre-destruction past, was generally realised “in a two-tier pattern” which also marked the rebuilding of some of the historic towns in the French Front area, like Bailleul and Arras, while for other “martyr towns” like Rheims another ap-

proach was adopted.<sup>8</sup> Only a selection of key historical monuments like the cathedral in Ypres, the Cloth Hall and the Biebuyck House were reconstructed “à l’identique”, based on documentation from earlier restoration campaigns or from the wartime documentation campaigns like the one headed by architect Eugène Dhuicque.<sup>9</sup> “À l’identique” however rarely means an absolute correspondence to the pre-war state, as “corrections” would still often mark those reconstructions just as they marked contemporary restorations. These reconstructed monuments were set in an “ameliorated” local historical townscape that was not so much a receding background for these reconstructed historical monuments, as it produced an internally varied fabric and a historic image in itself into which the monuments would merge almost seamlessly. In this two-stage yet integrated approach, ultimately both major monuments and urban houses contribute to the desired effect of the whole: to upholding the image of a historical, region-specific town.

The pre-existing historical urban layouts and plot divisions were generally taken as the point of departure for rebuilding towns, save for local aesthetic optimisations and adjustments to the building lines in view of the modernisation of the road network. This approach matched with the organisation of war damage indemnification on the basis of individual ownership, but it also continued pre-war ideals and practices of urban beautification. In addition to an older practice of corrective historicist restorations of historic monuments, by the end of the nineteenth century also organically grown urban ensembles had become the object of conservation and corrective restoration. Inspired by the work of Camillo Sitte, mayor of Brussels Charles Buls expounded his influential vision of the *esthétique des villes* in an 1893 brochure.<sup>10</sup> This urban aesthetics approach was originally mobilised to counter the threats of a levelling urban modernisation. At the outbreak of the war the Royal Commission of Monuments recommended it to counter the levelling effects of modern warfare. Repairing damaged or completely demolished urban centres according to this same aestheticising historicist agenda now amounted to a programmatic gesture of cultural resilience, of imbuing the reconstructed fabric with the charge of a phoenix rising from the ashes. As early as in 1914 engineer Charles Lagasse de Locht and architect Paul Saintenoy, president and member of the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites respectively, had published an article sketching a programme of how the war-devastated towns and villages were to be reconstructed: “*Il convient que notre Patrie se relève, plus belle et plus magnifique, de ses ruines passagères!*”; “*nous appliquerons, dans des cas particuliers, les règles générales de l’esthétique des villes et villages*”; “*C’est la beauté de l’ensemble qu’il faut viser*”.<sup>11</sup> A 1910 lecture on the subject by Charles Buls was added as an annexe, to be studied by all parties called to the task.

The article by Lagasse de Locht and Saintenoy however also opened another line of thought that would be pursued in the following years: that of preserving and restoring a regionalist diversity to buildings and building patterns. The 1914

article might seem to limit this regionalist concern to rural architecture, as it calls for surveying "*les types caractéristiques des Campines anversoise et limbourgeoise, du Brabant, du Pays de Herve, de l'Ardenne, etc., etc., plutôt que d'innover, tout à fait, à la hâte et sans inspiration régionale*".<sup>12</sup> Yet, a few months later, Paul Saintenoy published a short follow-up article in the architecture magazine, *Le Home*, in which he further emphasised the regionalist concern and also applied it to the rebuilding of historic towns:

Rebuilding our fatherland in beauty! Resurrecting cities by drawing largely, as you say, on the deep resources of tradition and using as much as possible the materials offered by the area itself.

This is my dream that will be realized tomorrow.

I would like to see Dinant, Andenne, Louvain, Aarschot rebuilt as cities of Walloon and Flemish art. [...] cities that will remind us of our glorious past of freedom and independence and our old and dear cities of yesteryear, whose urban evocations at the exhibitions in Antwerp (1894) and Ghent (1913) gave the public imperishable images.<sup>13</sup>

Saintenoy is referring to the Oud-Antwerpen (Old Antwerp) and Oud Vlaendren (Old Flanders) precincts at the International Exhibitions in Antwerp and Ghent: collages of reconstructed façades and local, region-specific building types modelled on extant or lost historical buildings from Antwerp's Golden Century and from historic Flanders respectively.<sup>14</sup> Not only was the popular Oud-Vlaendren a highly significant feat that would influence the post-1914 reconstruction approach. Equally relevant was the redesign of Ghent's urban centre aimed at enhancing the picturesque appearance of its restored medieval monuments on the occasion of the international exhibition. This demonstrated how the *esthétique des villes* approach was already being put into practice to similar integrated effect to that obtained in the temporary Oud-Vlaendren décor.

Despite the daunting scale of the war-devastated areas to be rebuilt and the administrative and logistic challenges this involved, the rebuilding campaign did manage to achieve the "beauté de l'ensemble" aspired to in each of the rebuilt villages and towns. The campaign was centrally coordinated by the Service for Devastated Areas. High Royal Commissioners, associated with that Service, each supervised the rebuilding on the ground in a number of municipalities which had temporarily ceded many of their powers to the central body in return for financial and administrative support. Representatives of the Royal Monuments Commission not only supervised the reconstruction of lost major monuments, but also advised the High Royal

Commissioners on development plans – which were rarely more than building line plans. Temporarily appointed municipal architects often not only designed the main public buildings, but also supervised the façade designs of submissions for building permits. In the resulting reconstruction fabric, generic white neo-classical façades largely disappeared from the reconstructed townscapes of Ypres, Diksmuide and Nieuwpoort. Instead, a vague “Ypres style” or “Nieuwpoort style” came to dominate the streetscapes, with a proliferation of local variants of stepped gable silhouettes or motifs like the yellow-brick aedicular windows presumed to be typical of Veurne. This infill fabric set the stage for scientifically reconstructed monuments and for newly designed public buildings in prominent locations in the city whose structure they co-articulated.

The regionalist-historicist reconstruction of the territory, extending from farmsteads to entire historic towns, then added up to a comprehensive national memorial.<sup>15</sup> We could compare its modern, encyclopaedic yet fictitious assemblage of historical images with that achieved in the 1913 Oud-Vlaendren exhibition experiment or with an intriguing yet unexecuted project for a war monument in Liège, published in the architecture magazine, *L'Emulation* in 1921<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 2). It was designed by Liège architect Paul Jaspar together with the sculptor Georges Petit, developing an idea formulated by local senator Remouchamps. *La Grosse Tour*, the big tower, featured a complex sculptural programme of emblems and symbols that were to honour *la défense nationale*: the destroyed cities, the heroism of soldiers and civilians, the return of refugees, the acquired fame and the saved values of freedom, justice, law and, crowning the whole monument, democracy. Yet, the monument's architecture carrying all these sculptures was already most programmatic in itself, and it was so in a twofold way. First, because of the choice to adopt the belfry typology for this commemorative monument, because it was an architectural symbol of the freedoms that medieval cities enjoyed and cherished vis-à-vis feudal princes and celebrated in an established Belgian nation-building narrative as the precursor of a popular democracy. In his eulogistic review of the project, Eugène Dhuicque applauded the concise eloquence of Jaspar's belfry-like tower and its simple expression that was intelligible to the masses:

a big tower, a kind of monumental and definitive landmark of the invasion, a belfry proudly rising in the sky, symbol of an unbeaten pride, of a faith that does not let itself be defeated, emblem of freedom, dressed, in the popular feeling, in all the majesty of the centuries!<sup>17</sup>

The belfry motif can be found in many reconstruction projects too, for example it is integrated in the new City Hall (Joseph Viérin and Valentin Vaerwyck) in the rebuilt town of Diksmuide, and as one of the references echoed in the new university library

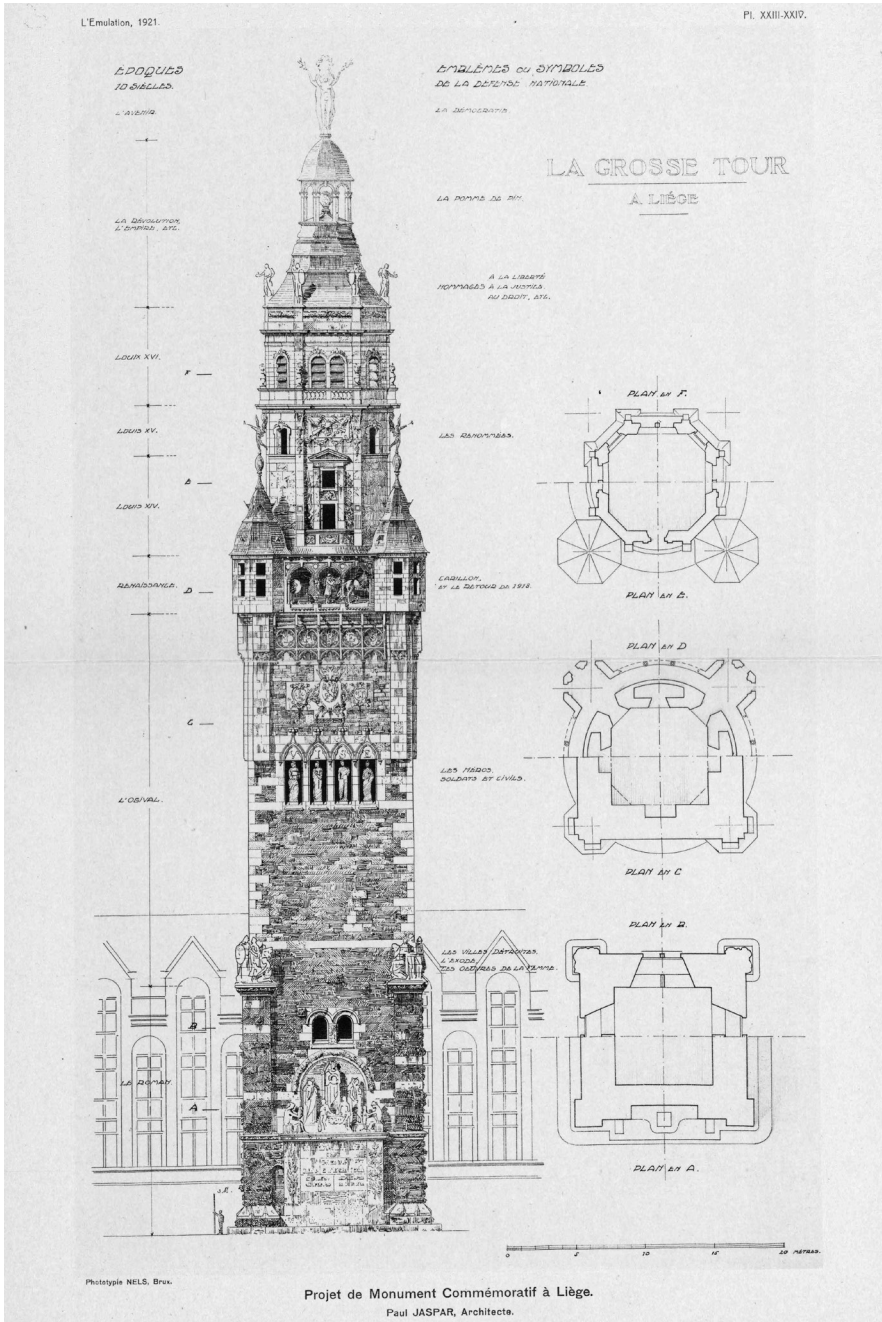


Fig. 2. Unexecuted project of Paul Jaspard for a monument commemorating Belgium's national defence, to be erected in Liège. Plate from *L'Emulation* 41, no. 12 (1921).



in Louvain (Withney Warren and Charles D. Witmore), replacing, if on another site, the burnt-down historic library.<sup>18</sup> The second programmatic architectural aspect of *La Grosse Tour* is the one that mirrors the assemblage quality of Belgian reconstruction. Jaspar projects onto the belfry silhouette – but independently of the historical phenomenon of belfry architecture itself – a historical sequence of architectural styles from Romanesque at the base and Gothic – *ogivale* – taking up most of the tower’s height, all through to the *Style Empire* at the top. Jaspar’s juxtaposition of styles thus exceeded the chronological limit – the middle of the eighteenth century – of the reference periods that marked the local stylistic bouquets of most reconstructed towns and quarters, but it manifests the same supple integration of (vaguely local) historical styles and typologies to craft a comprehensive monument. Reconstructed Nieuwpoort, Diksmuide, Lo, Ypres, Aarschot, Dinant, Visé, ...: we could compare each of them with Jaspar’s tower. Even if these towns largely lacked the tower’s sculptural allegories and programmatic inscriptions, their design too was informed by a commemorative ambition that chimes with but extends beyond the *esthétique des villes* approach.

## Reading the Reconstruction with Riegl: Intentional and Unintentional Heritage Values

The integration of selected facsimile reconstructions of key historic monuments into the towns and villages rebuilt with more liberty and historic idealisation entails a number of ambiguities that challenge the applicability of the categories of intentional monuments and of unintentional monuments as formulated by Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905). In his famous 1903 essay *Der moderne Denkmalkultus*, Riegl related both categories to a series of historically variable monument values.<sup>19</sup> The modern “cult of monuments” is informed by a set of present-day values (*Gegenwartswerte*), such as a use value or an art value, and a set of recollection values (*Erinnerungswerte*). The distinction between intentional and unintentional monuments results from a split between the three distinct recollection values that differentiate between ways in which a structure is valued for the way it allows a beholder to recollect (an aspect of) the past. The *intentional commemorative value* corresponds to what Riegl calls the intentional monument – any work of art erected with the purpose of commemoration. The other two commemorative values correspond to the modern phenomenon of the unintentional monument: a *historical value*, which lies in the way an artefact serves as an irreplaceable historical document attesting to, but also evoking, an episode in the history of some aspect of human culture; and an *age value*, which is essentially an aesthetic-existential appreciation of the way in which the traces of an artefact’s

ageing – patina, fading colours, crumbling walls, etc. – reminds us of time passing, and of the cycle of natural degeneration of human constructions. It is on the basis of one or both of the latter two values that modern societies, Riegl argues, denominate and try to preserve an artefact as a (historic) monument, even if it was never realised with the purpose of serving as a monument.

According to Riegl, *Alterswert* or age value was the most recent value being taken into consideration in the care and protection of monuments, and he felt its importance was still questionable. Riegl however predicted an important future for it, that would not only further expand the category of the unintentional monument, but also change its (ageing) face. The promise and societal importance of the age value lay for Riegl in the way it made a time-worn artefact speak directly, in a sensorial fashion, to a viewing subject, and could therefore also appeal to the “uneducated masses”. Riegl also predicted that the ascent of *Alterswert* would further diminish the importance of the commemorative monument. Yet, the post-1914 destructions and reconstructions of entire historic towns proved how soon the course of history contradicted Riegl’s speculations. Miles Glendinning has pointed out how “one immediate effect [of the war destruction] was to revitalise and radicalise the intentional-commemorative values that Riegl had pronounced obsolete”, since “an intensely politicised ‘memory landscape’ of mass conflict, focused on the Western Front” was now cultivated with conventional-style war memorials, but also with ruined and rebuilt monuments and towns.<sup>20</sup>

Riegl’s conceptualisation, however, remains a powerful lens through which to map and read the heritage values mobilised or sacrificed in the Belgian approach taken to the reconstruction and memorialisation of the Front area and of damaged monuments and towns further inland. Here it is important to point out that there are no indications that Riegl’s essay was familiar to Belgian architects and preservationists at the time of the war and the rebuilding debates. Distinguishing between heritage values was however a common practice in Belgian heritage discourse, also in the context of war devastations.<sup>21</sup> A first illustration is Henri Kervyn de Lettenhove’s wartime pamphlet, *La guerre et les oeuvre d’art en Belgique: 1914-1916* (1917), in which the German army is accused of the conscious destruction of important monuments and towns with particular heritage values – historical, archaeological and artistic values defined differently, however, from Riegl’s definitions.<sup>22</sup> Another illustration can be found in a 1918 letter inquiry that architect Huib Hoste, who spent the war in the Netherlands, organised into the opinion of 68 Dutch architects, artists, art historians and societies, asking: “Should the Ypres Cloth Hall be rebuilt or not after the war, if considered from an aesthetic, art historical, national and international perspective?”<sup>23</sup>

If we first assess the Rieglian present-day values, the *use-value* perspective highlights how functional modernisation measures were injected into the reconstruction endeavour, from adjusting street sections or crossings to facilitate modern traffic through the (reconstructed) historic centres to the introduction of modern building typologies in historicist dress. The *art value* is subdivided by Riegl into a *relative art value* which concerns the extent to which a monument meets a present-day *Kunstwollen* and a *newness value* which Riegl calls an “elementary art value” and which results from a work being intact. Newness value must have abounded in the freshly reconstructed monuments, towns and villages. Yet, as the *passe-partout* pejorative appellation of *vieux-neuf* for post-1914 reconstruction fabric suggests, this new, flawless execution of a historical-looking design was also exactly what made the reconstruction landscapes indigestibly inauthentic to some commentators. Turning to an assessment of the recollection values, we should first notice that Riegl’s cherished *age value* informed objections to reconstructing damaged or entirely lost historic monuments and towns, but was clearly not decisive.<sup>24</sup> Indeed in the reconstructions a *newness value* would become intimately interwoven with the *historical value* in much the same way as happened in nineteenth-century interventionist restorations epitomised by the projects of French restoration architect Viollet-le-Duc, aimed at completing a stylistically unified and idealised version of a monument, in a state that may have never existed before and at the expense of preserving a building’s authentic material substance.<sup>25</sup> Historical value, however, played out very differently in a range of preservation and rebuilding initiatives: its evidentiary dimension was respected in preserved war sites – like trenches, craters or shelters – and in the occasional preserved war-damaged monument, whereas this concern for preserving “material evidence” was readily passed over in the reconstruction of historic monuments or in rebuilding an entire historic town starting from a historical blueprint of its layout. Riegl’s relatively wide concept of historical value can, however, not be reduced to evidentiary values – and this width invites us to make a more benign evaluation of how historical value informed the reconstruction. For Riegl still accords documentary value to an “identical” copy of a monument, and even to historicist restorations and reconstructions to which he still ascribes the historic monument’s power to evoke particular historical episodes.<sup>26</sup>

Intentional commemorative values, of course, pertain to the numerous war cemeteries and war memorials within and beyond the Front region, but they also shimmer in general contours and specific details of the reconstructed cityscapes. Lagasse de Loch and Saintenoy had already suggested the possible application of a phoenix iconography with such commemorative intent in their 1914 programme: “*Que du sommet de ses pignons s’élançait l’oiseau renaissant de la cendre!*”<sup>27</sup> One rather rare example crowns the façade of *In het Woud* on the Grote Markt square in Louvain (Fig. 3). It echoes the Phoenix atop one of the ornate guild houses on the



Fig. 3. Louvain, Grote Markt. A phoenix on top of *In het Woud* (Léon Govaerts, design 1922) and date indications on the adjacent façade. (Photo: Author)

Brussels Grand Place, itself entirely reconstructed after the French bombing at the end of the seventeenth century. Another and much more frequently applied type of commemorative accent is building years inscribed in stone or in figure-shaped wall clamps. To limit the intentional commemorative aspirations to these explicit and small-scale elements, however, would be to fail to acknowledge various more extensive logics that infuse a programmatic commemorative ambition into entire buildings, villages, towns and landscapes: bringing back only a *selection* of historic monuments that are supposedly representative for the local architecture history; developing and applying to other buildings an eclectic “reconstruction style” loosely inspired by building materials, styles and motifs from regional architectural history, such as city architect Jules Coomans’ so-called “Ypres style”; and, finally the overall *curation of townscapes and streetscapes* in the organically grown image of the destroyed historical cities and in accordance with the already discussed *esthétique des villes* views. All of these dimensions cross each other and interact in an economy of recollection that turns entire towns into intentional monuments, “total” monuments in which the commemorative drive runs from some of the smallest ornaments to aspects of the entire urban structure. And these towns-as-total-monuments in turn

co-sustain, together with rebuilt farmsteads, the dispersed war cemeteries and war relics, the reproduction of the former Front area, if not the Belgian territory, into a diffuse memorial landscape.

## And Moving Beyond Riegl

This extensive logic of commemoration without clear focal points risks inflation. Yet, the instability of Diksmuide, Ypres, Nieuwpoort etc., as commemorative monument-towns is not only the result of this inflationary stretching. The very gesture of rebuilding an (idealised) pre-war state, of reconstructing “more beautiful than was before”, also contained a return to normality, to taking up daily life, and suppressing the traumatic memory of the historical events. The historicist-commemorative stage set would in time be able to recede into the background, to form a backdrop to the daily life that was to be continued once war refugees had returned and the rebuilding of the area was finished. In short, the adopted mode of reconstruction yielded a remarkable “total monument” that could, however, easily shift into an “absent monument”, which it did more and more over subsequent decades, as the emphatic newness of the historical simulation started fading. If it were not for narratives in other media – history books, documentaries, museums – that recall the destruction and subsequent reconstruction, today’s inhabitants and visitors of Nieuwpoort, Lo and other picturesque reconstructed towns and villages in rural West Flanders could easily *not* read the loss, the reconstruction and the intended commemoration in the built environment they are traversing.

Riegl’s relatively sophisticated monument conceptualisation clearly has its limits when it comes to charting this flickering of the reconstruction fabric as monument. It is a flickering between scales, between omnipresence and absence, but also between intentional and unintentional monuments. With regard to the latter, Riegl was obviously right that any intentional monument – each phoenix or soldier statue – is also an unintentional one – a document of historical interest. But more critical with regard to the historical reconstructions after the war is the way each unintentional monument (document) “hides” an intentional monument we might fail to notice, to paraphrase Jacques Le Goff’s argument about the *document-monument*.<sup>28</sup> This also forces us to acknowledge the nationalist (and regionalist) values and rationales that are conspicuously absent from Riegl’s cosmopolitan heritage framework, developed in the context of the pre-war multinational Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and to acknowledge the symbolic gestures of resilience performed in the rebuilding of entire historic towns (just like symbolic gestures were also at stake in the preservation of wartime ruins, an option which happened almost nowhere).<sup>29</sup>

## Epilogue: Valuing the Post-1914-18 Rebuilding Project as Twenty-first-Century Heritage

As the post-1914-18 construction fabric is now itself a century old, it is clear that its heritage values should also be reassessed from a contemporary vantage point. In 2007 I took part as a junior researcher in a consultancy procedure with Ghent University advising the Province of West Flanders and the municipalities of Ypres and Heuvelland on how to assess and valorise the various aspects of reconstruction heritage on their territories.<sup>30</sup> We were also asked to advise on how contemporary spatial developments could find a place in the still largely extant reconstruction landscape.

As is often the case with rediscoveries of heritage, a perception of threat catalysed the initiative. Local authorities were alarmed by the upscaling in agricultural industry that would overwrite a landscape dotted with sometimes historicising reconstruction farmsteads, or by a wave of renovations to improve comfort standards in housing. These and other spatial processes were increasingly putting pressure on what was vaguely understood as post-war reconstruction heritage by these authorities, but for which few comprehensive policies had ever been developed. The dynamics of change posing a threat all concerned a questioned *use value* of particular sections of the historical built environment – of farmsteads left without active farming or ill-suited to contemporary farming, of town halls of municipalities that had long been merged, of parsonages in villages left without parish priests, but also of plain working men’s houses facing major renovation.

Not formulated in our consultancy brief were considerations of the use value of the heritage of the reconstructed towns and buildings as economic resources for (war commemorative) tourism. In 2007, there was no anticipation of a valorisation of reconstruction heritage in view of the four-year-long war commemorations we have seen of late. Arguably, the use value of this heritage for war tourism is limited in comparison to that of war cemeteries or battle relics for instance, but this might also be a matter of heritage management. Now that we have also reached the centennial birthday of (physical) reconstruction activities, reconstruction architecture and urbanism have started being thematised in local commemorative events over the past few years, with exhibitions, catalogues and books about the rebuilding of Louvain, Nieuwpoort or the Ypres area among others.<sup>31</sup>

Recognition of the (*architecture*) *historical value*, including the architecture historical value, of the reconstruction building stock seems long to have been hindered by two reproaches. A first objection was that even the archaeologically reconstructed pre-war historical monuments were only reconstructions, lacking the original material substance that could authenticate them as historical document. Yet, a number of precisely such reconstructed major historic monuments constitute a group of buildings that were the first to be given legal protection. A second obstacle to recognition of

especially the architecture historical value was the rather negative appreciation of the rebuilding architecture as retrograde. Here preservation's predilection for what once was innovative and avant-gardist architecture – at least when it comes to more recent heritage – ran parallel to an architecture historiography with a modernist bias that used to stigmatise the rebuilding after the First World War as the Modern Movement's missed appointment with history.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the second group of listed buildings: a number of modernist exceptions to the overriding historicist and regionalist agenda. Luckily a more nuanced and inclusive point of view has been growing at least since 2007. Notable research and publication initiatives in West Flanders and other Belgian provinces have since followed, which helped the development of an appreciation of what was now increasingly called *wederopbouwarchitectuur* (reconstruction architecture).<sup>33</sup> This denominator transcends the progressive versus reactionary opposition, and brings the association with post-war repair more to the foreground. This hesitant thematic re-appreciation of *wederopbouwarchitectuur* is today largely associated with the local history this architecture issued from.<sup>34</sup> Yet, from a wider angle, this post-1914 rebuilding architecture could also be historicised within a wider history of heritage reconstructions after calamities and war. In the past two decades the subject has been given major attention in architecture and preservation circles in the German-speaking world, mainly due to contentious monument reconstructions in Berlin and other major cities since German reunification.<sup>35</sup>

Already in 1985 urban planning historian Marcel Smets stressed how the rebuilt urban fabric demonstrates exceptional care on the level of the urban design of public space: “[t]he whole of observations that the rebuilt urban areas release onto viewers, bespeaks an undeniable concern for coherence and décor. Every building is both a component and a building block of the total environment”.<sup>36</sup> This key quality of the reconstructed towns and villages as integrated cityscapes was a quality that we gave a central place to in our 2007 study. We believed that the close interaction between the positions and designs of public buildings, façades of private buildings, and the way they co-construct public space was not only critical to the value and meaning of individual buildings. We also argued that the carefully crafted cityscapes in themselves should be attributed heritage value, and that this was a valuable basis upon which future urban developments could be grafted. The study therefore presented maps that analysed the interaction of buildings and urban structures for Ypres and for selected villages in the area. We also proposed to add to the Rieglian heritage values a *locus value* which concerned the degree to which a construction contributes to the cityscape or is a decisive part in a larger urban whole. Constructions with high locus values should then be maintained in their configuration to preserve the larger cityscape coherence, but they could also be replaced by new structures that take up a similar role. And the larger urban structures can develop towards new qualitative cityscapes. Through this locus value we acknowledged the planned coherence of the

*wederopbouw* as total monument, while singling out the *esthétique des villes* level as a key to unlock this total landscape for future development.

Looking back, I feel our 2007 study did not sufficiently overthink the importance of the *intentional commemorative value* of the rebuilt towns, villages and buildings today. As argued above, the rebuilt War Front area is a total monument that is however only perceived as such when one realises the gesture of rebuilding entire towns, of reconstructing an entire cultural landscape. In the decades after the war, no one needed to be reminded of the size of the devastation and the scope of rebuilding efforts. For later generations however the *vieux-neuf* newness has started weathering while contrasting recent constructions bestow an aura of undefined pastness onto the reconstruction fabric. Date inscriptions and occasional phoenixes might not be enough to clarify the historical status of the rebuilt towns and the commemorative aspiration that infused it. This memorial dimension, and its ideological messages of a threatened but in the end reinforced local identity and of a victor's national resilience do not disappear for that matter. The total monument never completely shifts into an absent monument, but more into "a total monument in stand-by mode" with a rhetorical power only to be reactivated. The use of the Cloth Hall and the Grote Markt square for the Passchendaele commemorative spectacle illustrates this possibility.

Riegl was clear: while the logic of the historical value demands the unconditional conservation of the historical document, the logic of the intentional commemorative value demands only continuity on the condition that contemporary society still endorses the monument's message and cause. Yet, even if today we would probably no longer subscribe to the nationalist ethos of the reconstruction as intentional commemorative project, because so many other heritage values are also involved, we cannot simply give up the rebuilt towns and landscape as obsolete memorials. Rather, just as contemporary urban planning and architectural projects can further develop the cityscapes of Visé, Louvain, Diksmuide and Ypres, contemporary memorial practices could and should engage critically with this monument in stand-by mode. Site-specific artistic interventions and curatorial projects are a first option to do so. With more than a dozen exhibitions in Ypres and other towns in the Belgian Front area, with thematic routes, theatre projects and publications, the current project *Feniks2020. De groote wederopbouw van de Westhoek / Reconstruction of Flanders Fields* (March 2020 – October 2021) sets out to claim and to historicise the former Front area not just as a former war but also as a reconstruction landscape. It remains to be seen whether some of the artistic and curatorial projects within this large-scale cultural touristic programme will also question the reconstruction as lingering monument in the way Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Leninplatz-projection* (1990) did during the *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit* exhibition in Berlin. Like the 2017 British projections on the Cloth Hall in terms of media but critical instead of celebratory, Wodiczko's projection addressed the obsolescence of one of the many Lenin monuments in former East Berlin. It is but



one in a series of 1990s *Kontextkunst* projects that are currently revisited as projects of “experimental preservation”.<sup>37</sup>

Even architecture and urban planning, the very media used during the *wederopbouw*, could be a means to articulate a corrective or a questioning contemporary stance. The redesign of Skanderberg Square (completed in 2018) in Tirana by Brussels-based firm 51N4E shows how an urban ensemble of public space and communist representative architecture can be formally demonumentalised and at the same time infused with a new symbolism. In the Belgian former Front area, recent examples of a critical appropriation of the reconstruction fabric are much smaller and less outspoken. A first example can be found in the architectural design for the conversion of a wing of the Ypres Cloth Hall from municipal offices into a new city museum. This particular wing of the Cloth Hall complex was the last part of the monument to be reconstructed between 1957 and 1967. Architect Pierre Pauwels opted for a concealed reinforced concrete structure which FVWW and Callebaut Architecten chose to lay bare in their 2014 adaptive re-use project of this *vieux-neuf* monument. Exposing the ceiling’s grid of concrete beams in the spaces where visitors now marvel at the gigantic model of medieval Ypres was a way of highlighting the defiant historicity of the Cloth Hall complex, a quality that extends to the entire city. Yet, in the gloomily lit gallery spaces this exposed modern construction may remain hardly noticed. A different and more challenging response to the local reconstruction fabric can be found in the Schaerdeke social housing estate (2019), just outside the small historic town of Lo, 20 kilometres north of Ypres. There Architectenbureau Bart Dehaene addressed the West Flemish town’s invisible quality as (part) post-war reconstruction, as he adorned the eight new semi-detached yellow-brick houses with four entrance portals, each marked by round arches and a Brancusi-like concrete column, a combination of elements that refers to the portal of Lo’s reconstructed historical town hall. The Schaerdeke housing estate, however, also recalls the garden city ideal championed by the modernists in opposition to the *reconstruction à la identique*. In its combination of building typological and ornamental motifs, then, the Schaerdeke housing transcends the traditionalist-modernist division that marked the Belgian official rebuilding campaign, and becomes a modest, local, critical supplement to the reconstruction fabric of Lo and the many other reconstructed towns and villages, just as ambiguous as the reconstruction fabric itself.

## Notes

- 1 For Ypres (Ieper) and Louvain (Leuven), I will use the French toponyms despite their location in present-day Flanders, as these are most common in English usage. Other towns will be referred to by their Dutch or French names, respecting present-day official languages in Belgium.
- 2 The Battle of Passchendaele of 12 October 1917 is however only part of this larger offensive. See Spencer Jones, “Ypres, Battles of,” in *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, eds. Ute Daniel et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2015-02-13).
- 3 We can contrast this limited vocabulary with Baron Joseph Kervyn de Lettenhove’s appraisal of the (prewar) monument as symbol of the medieval communal guilds in his *Histoire de Flandre* (1847-1850): “Sur le Beffroi et les Halles d’Ypres [...] se trouvent écrites en caractères ineffaçables la grandeur et la puissance des corps de métiers de cette ville autrefois si florissante”, as quoted by his son: Henri Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre et les oeuvres d’art en Belgique: 1914-1916* (Paris & Brussels: Van Oest, 1917), 132. Some statues on the façade of the reconstructed monument make the monument speak of its dual historical identity as medieval and twentieth-century structure: a Lady Mary in a niche above the gate to the belfry, corresponding to the fourteenth-century original, and statues of Boudewijn IX and Margareta of Champagne under whose reign the Hall was build, are complemented by statues of the war royals King Albert and Queen Astrid. An unrealised war-time proposal by mayor Colaert was to mark the façade of the reconstructed Hall with shaming effigies of the leaders of the enemy responsible for the destructions, as had also been the case in the seventeenth century. Johan Meire, *De stilte van de Salient: de herinnering aan de Eerste Wereldoorlog rond Ieper* (Tiel: Lannoo, 2003), 116.
- 4 Quoted from the youtube video UK Culture Media and Sport Department for Digital, “Centenary of Passchendaele. Ypres Menin Gate and Market Square 30 July 2017” (28 March 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyoEutlmZ60>.
- 5 François Norman, “Woord Vooraf,” in *Resurgam: de Belgische wederopbouw na 1914*, ed. Marcel Smets (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet van België, 1985), 7.
- 6 Indeed, the reconstruction of devastated towns and villages shows a commemorative ambition and should therefore also be considered in the historiography of the post-war commemoration, next to the numerous monuments erected by municipalities to commemorate fallen soldiers as war heroes and civilians as martyrs, as discussed in Laurence Van Ypersele, “Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (Belgium),” in *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014-10-08).
- 7 For an overview, see: Herman Stynen, “De rol van de instellingen,” in *Resurgam: de Belgische wederopbouw na 1914*, ed. Marcel Smets (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet van België, 1985).
- 8 Miles Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation: Antiquity to Modernity* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2013), 194-198.
- 9 Herman Stynen, Georges Charlier, and An Beullens, *15-18, het verwoeste gewest: Mission Dhuicque, the devastated region* (Bruges: M. Van de Wiele, 1985).
- 10 Charles Buls, *Esthétique des villes* (Brussels: E. Bruylant, 1893).
- 11 Charles Lagasse de Loch and Paul Saintenoy, “La reconstruction des villes et villages détruits par la guerre de 1914. Rapport sur les devoirs administratifs incombant aux

- Pouvoirs publics,” *Bulletin des Commissions Royales d’Art et d’Archéologie* 54 (1914): 254, 259, 262.
- 12 Lagasse de Loch and Saintenoy, “La reconstruction des villes et villages détruits,” 254.
- 13 “Rebâtir notre patrie en beauté! Y ressusciter des villes en puisant largement, comme vous le dites, dans les profondes ressources de la tradition et en utilisant autant que possible les matériaux offerts par la contrée elle-même. C’est là mon rêve qui sera réalisé demain. Je voudrais voir rebâtir Dinant, Andenne, Louvain, Aerschot, comme des cités d’art wallon et flamand. [...] des cités qui rappelleront notre glorieux passé de liberté et d’indépendance et nos vieilles et chères villes d’antan dont les évocations citadines des expositions d’Anvers (1894) et de Gand (1913) ont donné au public d’impérissables images.” The article had an almost unworldly title: Paul Saintenoy, “Rebâtissons en Beauté!” *Le Home*, no. 1 (1915), 9.
- 14 We could also refer to Bruxelles-Kermesse (1897) and Vieux-Liège (1905). See Herman Stynen, *De onvoltooid verleden tijd: een geschiedenis van de monumenten- en landschapszorg in België 1835-1940* (Bruxelles: Stichting Vlaams erfgoed, 1998), 228-231.
- 15 “The entire rebuilt environment, and in any case the city or village centre as the most representative part, thus becomes one large memorial. Its architectural perfection symbolises the artistic and intellectual level of the nation.” Marcel Smets, “De Belgische wederopbouw op de overgang tussen stadsbouwkunst en stedebouw,” in *Resurgam: de Belgische wederopbouw na 1914*, ed. Marcel Smets (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet van België, 1985), 93.
- 16 Eugène Dhuicque, “Un monument commémoratif de la défense nationale à eriger à Liège,” *L’Émulation* 41, no. 12 (1921).
- 17 “une grosse tour, sorte de borne monumentale et définitive de l’invasion, d’un beffroi orgueilleusement dressé dans le ciel, symbole d’une fierté invaincue, d’une foi qui ne se laisse point abattre, emblème de liberté, revêtu, dans le sentiment populaire, de toute la majesté des siècles!” Dhuicque, “Un monument commémoratif de la défense nationale à eriger à Liège,” 178.
- 18 Jeroen Cornilly explains how the main building volume of the Diksmuide City Hall mirrors on each side of the entrance a stepped gable that was modelled on a lost sixteenth- or seventeenth-century house from Diksmuide; and how a tower evoking the belfry tradition was asymmetrically integrated into the building complex. Jeroen Cornilly, “Gevraagd: architecten. Kiezen tussen alternatieven,” in *Bouwen aan wederopbouw 1914/2050: architectuur in de Westhoek*, eds. Jeroen Cornilly et al. (Ypres: Erfgoedcel CO7, 2009), 137.
- 19 Alois Riegl, “Der moderne Denkmalkultus. Sein Wesen, seine Entstehung [1903],” in *Alois Riegl. Gesammelte Aufsätze* [re-edition of the 1929 edition of essays published with Filser Verlag] (Vienna: WUV-Universitätsverlag, 1996): 139-184.
- 20 Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement*, 191-192.
- 21 Stynen, *De onvoltooid verleden tijd*, 172-173.
- 22 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre et les oeuvres d’art en Belgique: 1914-1916*.
- 23 Huib Hoste cited in Herman Stynen, “Opvattingen over het herstel van de hal te Ieper,” *Wonen/TABK*, no. 4-5 (1983): 37.
- 24 When it comes to age-value, we should be careful, though, not to overlook the difference between a time-worn building or “natural” ruin on the one hand and a ruin resulting from man’s deliberate intervention, as with war-time deliberate destruction. Riegl suggests that in the latter case the cycle of becoming and perishing, in which man faces nature, is not evoked and *Alterswert* would not apply. Riegl, “Der moderne Denkmalkultus,” 156-157.

- 25 Note that Viollet's far-reaching idealist restorations can also be thought of as reconstructions, as in Alexander Stumm, *Architektonische Konzepte der Rekonstruktion*, Bauwelt Fundamente (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2017), 19-46.
- 26 Riegl, "Der moderne Denkmalkultus," 164-165.
- 27 Lagasse de Loch and Saintenoy, "La reconstruction des villes et villages détruits," 264.
- 28 Jacques Le Goff, "Documento/monumento," in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, eds. Ruggiero Romano and Alfredo Salsano (Torino: Einaudi, 1977).
- 29 Johan Meire structures the historical debate about the rebuilding of Ypres around the functional, the culture historical, and the symbolic values of Ypres. Johan Meire, *De stilte van de Salient*, 114-117.
- 30 David Schmitz et al., *Omgaan met wederopbouwarchitectuur in de Frontstreek van 1914-1918: Ieper en Heuvelland*, Labo S - Department of Architecture and Urban Planning (UGent) (Ghent, 2008).
- 31 Joke Buijs et al., *Herleven: Leuven Na 1918* (Louvain: Stad Leuven, 2018); Erwin Mahieu, *Een stad vol stellingen. De wederopbouw van Nieuwpoort-Stad na WOI* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2018); *herSTELLINGEN* (Ypres: Yper Museum), 2020 and Piet Chielens, Dominiek Dendooven, and Jan Dewilde, *Antony d'Ypres, fotografen van de wederopbouw* (Ghent: Tijdsbeeld, 2020).
- 32 This was the case at least until the early 1980s, when the Resurgam research and exhibition project directed by Marcel Smets signalled shifting views.
- 33 Jeroen Cornilly et al., eds., *Bouwen aan wederopbouw 1914/2050: architectuur in de Westhoek* (Ypres: Erfgoedcel CO7, 2009); Nicholas Bullock and Luc Verpoest, eds., *Living with history 1914-1964: Rebuilding Europe after the First and Second World War and the Role of Heritage Preservation* (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 2011).
- 34 For an overview of this gradual reappraisal in heritage management, see: Jo Braeken, "The Remains of War and the Heritage of Post-war Reconstruction in Flanders Today," in *Living with History 1914-1964: Rebuilding Europe after the First and Second World War and the Role of Heritage Preservation*, eds. Nicholas Bullock and Luc Verpoest (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 2011).
- 35 *Arch+ 204: Krise der Repräsentation* (Berlin, 2011); Adrian von Buttlar et al., eds., *Denkmalpflege statt Attrappenkult gegen die Rekonstruktion von Baudenkmalern - eine Anthologie* (Gütersloh: Bauverlag, 2013); Winfried Nerdinger, *Geschichte der Rekonstruktion - Konstruktion der Geschichte* (Munich: Prestel, 2010); Stumm, *Architektonische Konzepte der Rekonstruktion*.
- 36 Smets, *Resurgam: de Belgische wederopbouw na 1914*, 11.
- 37 Jorge Otero-Pailos, Erik Langdalen, and Thordis Arrhenius, eds., *Experimental Preservation* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).

# Revival after the Great War

Rebuild, Remember, Repair, Reform

Edited by

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