

The search for a suitable road. The history of the Belgian road network, 1900-1970

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Since the beginning of the twentieth century the Belgian landscape – like the landscapes in many other European countries – was subject to a series of transformations caused by industrialization and modernization of the state. Railroads, roads, highways, industrial areas appeared all over the territory and became inextricably bound up with the image and functioning of a modern nation.

In contradiction to what is written in most historical publications of the Belgian Ministry of Public Works, this development of a modern (road) infrastructure during the twentieth century can not be reduced to a technological history. Roads were a tool to explore the wonders and the beauty of the landscape and, at the same time, they were an instrument to organize the society on a political, economic and social level. The Belgian landscape of roads rather appears as the result of several ambitions and acts with varying backgrounds.

This research confronts the different visions of the parties involved in the construction of the Belgian roads between 1900 and 1970 – respectively the engineers of the Ministry of Public Works, urban planners and architects, politicians – and examines how these have defined the relation between the road network and its direct surroundings, being the city center, the urban sprawl or the rural landscape in order to develop a typology of a ‘suitable’ road.

From the moment the automobile has appeared in the streets on a large scale during the first half of the twentieth century, there have been several attempts to fit this new means of transport and its infrastructure in to

its immediate vicinity. The most remarkable way to achieve this can be found back in the ideas of modern planning and the construction of the modernistic city. Housing, working, roads and parks are arranged next to each other in a way as to avoid all nuisance as much as possible and, at the same time, to benefit from the advantages of a hygienic and compact city.¹ Though being a clearly distinguishable entity in the plan of this modernistic city, the road is inextricably bound up with the image of the modernistic city as we know it from, for example, the *Plan Voisin* of Le Corbusier and the *Hochhausstadt* of Ludwig Hilberseimer. But when it became clear that the modernistic ideas on how to organize a city were impossible to realize in most existing towns without the use of a ‘tabula rasa’, and so the road system also lost its frame of reference, the realization of road infrastructure became subject to a spectrum of studies on how to relate a road to the surrounding landscape, as was shown in the work of Pushkarev and Appleyard.²

Though stemming from different backgrounds, both approaches of, let’s say Le Corbusier on the one hand and Pushkarev on the other hand, share the idea that the road system is an exceptional construction which is

¹ Corboz, A. De stedenbouw van de 20ste eeuw: een profiel, *Archis*, 1992, nr.5, p49-52

² Appleyard, D., Lynch, K. and Myer, J.R. *The view from the road*. MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1966; Pushkarev & Tunnard. *Man-made America. Chaos or control?*, Yale University Press, 1966

in need of special measures in order to be part of its surrounding area. In the case of Le Corbusier and Hilberseimer these measures are translated as the model of the complete and rational modernistic city. Pushkarev and Appleyard describe a set of design-tools in order to transform the road and let it be part of its spacial context. In this way, both views express the necessity of a clearly defined and deliberate set of rules in order make the road infrastructure fit in to the landscape or cityscape. An approach which is still being used today.

Nevertheless, this act of transforming hasn't always been applied in order to give road infrastructure a meaningful place within the landscape. In 1887 at the occasion of the opening of the academic year, the rector of the Ghent University, professor Gustave Wolters, gave a lecture entitled *Les routes dans l'Antiquité*.³ In his lecture, Wolters situates the development of the road network of ancient cultures, such as the Persian, Greek and Roman at the origin of their wealth and power. He expresses his admiration for their economical and technical achievements in the construction of roads and the role these cultures assigned to the road system in the development of their country. Wolters concludes his exposé on the road infrastructure of ancient cultures, by positioning these works of art at the same level as the ancient architecture these cultures created. An architecture which is much admired at the end of the nineteenth century. He is convinced that the same value should be ascribed to the works of engineers as to the architecture of ancient cultures, because the engineers realized these magnificent works without preceding examples, scientific knowledge or the presence of experts in this matter. By putting the road construction and

architecture of ancient cultures on the same level, Wolters – as the head of one of the major engineering schools in Belgium at that time – installs a new frame of reference for the interpretation of these engineering works. The construction of roads becomes the continuation of a cultural tradition and an addition of works of art, as Wolters calls them, to the cultural landscape.

The lecture of Wolters in 1887 comes at a turning point in the history of the Belgian road development. In the following decades a number of movements towards modernisation of the roads will be set up. These will lead towards an extension and improvement of the road network through the twentieth century. This means that the analogy which Wolters discerns between road construction in ancient cultures and the engineering constructions in 1887 will totally fall apart and be replaced by other conceptions. Despite these changing conditions, the attempt to fit the oeuvre of the road-engineer into a broader culture, as Wolters did, seems to have survived the ravages of time and is still the subject of studies and debate. Contemporary projects for road development include at set of measures that affect and transform a whole area.

Following the vision of rector Wolters this research will focus on some other practices or acts which appeared through the Belgian history of road development. It puts some evolutions in the forefront that allow to make an alternative reading of the projects of road infrastructure. A reading that shows how roads, as the material realisation of a number of economic, sociological and technological evolutions reflect the conceptions, norms and conflicts which were at their origins.

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³ Wolters, *Les routes dans l'antiquité. Ouverture solennelle des cours. Remise des récompenses*, Annot-Braeckman & Imprimeur de l'Université de Gand, Gand, 1887