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On the look-out for efficiency, monumentality, and grandeur. How the architecture of Dutch town halls stood model for the Belgian *réforme administrative* during the 1930s

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‘Ainsi la réforme administrative atteindra son véritable but: une amélioration de la qualité des services publics, une augmentation de son rendement, une amélioration des conditions du travail et de la situation matérielle des agents. [...] Est-elle réalisable? Oui. Je ne citerai à l’appui de ma catégorique affirmation que l’exemple de nos voisins du Nord. Si dans un pays de 8 millions d’habitants, d’excellents services publics peuvent être assurés par un effectif d’agents sensiblement inférieur au nôtre, mais aussi sensiblement mieux rémunéré, pourquoi ne pourrions-nous pas en faire autant?’¹

With these words, the high-ranked civil servant Louis Camu concluded his speech for a group of personalities in the *Palais des Académies*, located near the Royal Palace and the Houses of Parliament in Brussels. By the time his words were spoken – in the autumn of 1937 –, Camu was already a well-known name amongst Belgian intellectuals and officials. Exactly one year before, Camu had been appointed as *Commissaire Royal à la Réforme Administrative*, a newly-created function which remained in existence up until the beginning of the Second World War. With his broad cultural baggage and his clear-cut ideas on work ethics, administrative practices, and (as we would call it today) ‘good governance’, the relatively young and immensely ambitious Camu had quickly become one of the most important Belgian ‘technocrats’. For ministers and civil servants alike, he was someone to be reckoned with. At first, his task was rather limited in scope: Camu was charged with investigating the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of all official bodies (i.e. the ministerial offices and state companies, but also, for instance, the state-run educational system). Further, Camu was asked to propose measures for improvement. After two changes of government, his powers virtually surpassed those of a minister, as he became responsible for controlling (and even enforcing) the implementation of his reform proposals in the different ministerial administrations.²

Camu, who held degrees in Economy and Sociology, was originally appointed as *Commissaire Royal* by Prime Minister Paul van Zeeland in 1936. At that time, Van Zeeland led a

¹ L. Camu, ‘La Belgique de demain. La réforme administrative, un des grands problèmes du moment’. Published both in *L’Indépendance Belge* (December 4th, 1937) and the *Revue Internationale des Sciences Administratives*, 1938 (1), 5-30.

² For a short but excellent evaluation of Camu’s activity as *Commissaire Royal*, see: P.-O. de Broux, ‘De Camu à Copernic. L’évolution de la fonction publique en Belgique’, in *Administration Publique (Trimestriel)*, 2005 (3-4), 158-177. Many of my own observations on Camu are based on archival research in the State Archives (Brussels); particularly the records of the *Commissariat Royal à la Réforme Administrative* proved to be very valuable.

coalition government of so-called ‘national unity’, supported by catholics, liberals, and socialists. Van Zeeland, who was himself a centre-right catholic, was determined to strengthen state power by deploying technocratic strategies, in order to tackle the lingering economic crisis (which, as elsewhere in Europe, was contained without success during the first half of the 1930s).³ This way, he also wanted to push back the raging fascist tendencies in Belgian politics (embodied by the successful authoritarian parties Rex and VNV, which aimed to destruct the ‘rotten parliamentary democracy’).⁴ Paradoxically, strengthening state power was conceived by Van Zeeland as a solution for saving nothing less than democracy itself – although this democracy was to be less dependent of the legislative power. Moreover, it had to rely on a more ‘permanent’ and powerful executive. In this ideal political constellation, an important role was granted for the ministerial administrations, which were to conceive *and* implement long-term policies – largely independent of the disturbing ‘fluctuations’ caused by every new election. However, a strong and performant administration also needed competent, responsible, and decently-paid managers and executing personnel. It further needed logically conceived organisation charts, as well as modern office buildings and office equipment. And this was exactly where the shoe pinched. To put it simply: Van Zeeland and – in particular – Camu deemed the Belgian administration to be backward, and unworthy of a modern state.

In many ways, this ‘administrative backwardness’ is highly remarkable. After all, Belgian personalities had always played a prominent role in international organisations which were devoted to the study (and promotion) of public administration, such as the *Union Internationale des Villes* (UIV) and the *Institut Internationale des Sciences Administratives* (IISA), which both had their domicile in Brussels. Belgium has also been quoted as a country where the so-called ‘rational’ management principles of Henry Fayol – the French counterpart of F.W. Taylor – were quickly and successfully implemented in (parts of) the state administration, shortly after the First World War.⁵ Yet, these phenomena seem to have been unrepresentative for the Belgian state administration as a whole. Between 1918 and 1936, successive governments repeatedly found that the ministerial administrations functioned badly, while the number of civil servants rose continuously, in a rather uncoordinated manner. Multiple political commissions for ‘administrative reform’ were set up during the 20s and 30s, but their research methods were often flawed, while their proposals for improvement were almost never implemented. In this, Belgium was not unique. After all, the fact that private organisations and governments in many countries struggled with putting their administrative machinery on a par with a rapidly modernizing society, was precisely the *raison d’être* of international organisations like the IISA. However, Belgium was probably the country where these difficulties were the least to be expected, given the profile of the Belgians as dynamic contributors to international networks on administrative expertise.

³ On the popularity of technocracy during the interwar period, see: M. Kohlrausch, K. Steffen, and S. Wiederkehr, ‘Expert Cultures in Central Eastern Europe. The Internationalization of Knowledge and the Transformation of Nation States since World War I – Introduction’, in *Ibid.*, Osnabrück, Fibre, 2010, 9-30, there 15.

⁴ Quotation from: G. Vanthemsche, ‘De Franstalige extreemrechtse partijen’, in P. Van den Eeckhout and G. Vanthemsche eds., *Bronnen voor de geschiedenis van het hedendaagse België*, Brussels, Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis, 2009, 815-818, there 816.

⁵ J.C. Wood and M.C. Wood, ‘Introduction’, in *Henri Fayol: Critical Evaluations in Business and Management (Part One)*, London, Routledge, 2002, 1-10, there 5.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on one important aspect of Louis Camu's reform proposals: the ministerial office buildings in Brussels. Second, I will link Camu's proposals for the Belgian ministries with the way in which three Dutch towns – Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Hilversum – had modernised their offices during the 1920s and 1930s. After all, Camu considered the administrative architecture in these towns to be examples worthy of imitation in Belgium. To conclude, I will formulate some hypotheses on the transnational and interdisciplinary flow of expertise on office architecture during the interwar era.

During and after the First World War, state interventionism increased in many countries. As mentioned before, in Belgium (but also elsewhere), this led to the recruitment of a large number of new government officials. Logically, these civil servants had to be provided with adequate office spaces. As the old ministerial buildings were often overcrowded already, the Belgian government resorted to buying and renting dozens of maladjusted buildings – often small bourgeois mansions, just large enough for accommodating about twenty civil servants. In the short run, this was a cheap and uncomplicated solution. In the long run, however, it proved to be extremely costly, while the scattering of buildings hampered easy communication between services. It also brought about many inconveniences for the public: citizens sometimes had to visit different buildings – with mutually divergent opening hours – to obtain a piece of information from one single department. Hence, it is not surprising that Louis Camu considered a thorough modernisation of the ministerial office buildings *and* the state's general construction policy to be of supreme importance. In 1937, shortly after having released his first official report (on recruitment and assessment methods in civil service), Camu penned a second report, which dealt exclusively with the ministerial offices. In this *Rapport sur les bâtiments des administrations centrales de l'État*,⁶ Camu stated that virtually all offices which were in use by the Belgian ministries had to be abandoned. For reasons of historicity and representation, only a handful of 18th-century buildings in the Rue de la Loi – the Belgian equivalent of Downing Street in the UK – could be kept in use as official residences for the ministers, or as offices for the ministerial cabinets. Camu argued that the majority of the other office buildings – which numbered about 160 – suffered from numerous shortcomings: the corridors were '*obscurés et non aérés*', the courtyards were '*sombres*', the office windows were too small, the number of toilets was insufficient, and there were too many '*bureaux individuels*' (as opposed to large, collective workspaces). In brief, most office buildings were considered '*vétustes*' – dilapidated.

The report was larded with anecdotal depictions of these so-called '*taudis administratifs*'. Some offices of the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, were located in a former café, where the rinsing basin and the beer pump had not been removed. One of the most notorious situations could be encountered in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where more than hundred public servants had only one single toilet at their disposal. Embarrassingly, this particular toilet was also the only place foreign diplomats could use when they expressed the wish to have some privacy. Although these anecdotes clearly referred to singular excrescences, they were rhetorically important, since Camu

⁶ L. Camu, *Rapport sur les bâtiments des administrations centrales de l'État (Deuxième rapport sur la réforme administrative)*, Brussels, Imprimerie du 'Moniteur Belge', 1937. The report was also published in Dutch: *Verslag inzake de gebouwen voor de Rijkshoofdbesturen (Tweede verslag over de hervorming van het Bestuur)*.

placed them in sharp contrast to descriptions of a desired *modern* office architecture. In this respect, the report was heavily influenced by ideas propagated by administrative experts, among which Camu's fellow-countryman Louis Rigaux (to whom Camu rendered thanks in preface of the report). In 1936, Rigaux, a high-ranked civil servant at the postal administration, had shared his ideas on 'rational' office architecture at the sixth IISA conference in Warsaw. In a lengthy survey that was attached to the proceedings of the conference, Rigaux stated that the different components of large public administrations had to be concentrated as much as possible in one single building, with easily-retraceable entrances for visitors. In such a building, extensive use had to be made of '*locaux de travail en commun*' (i.e. large, communal office spaces), which were to be heated and ventilated mechanically, in order to improve working conditions and diminish maintenance costs. Further, Rigaux argued in favour of architectural 'flexibility': '*Les dimensions [of the building, jvdm] seront calculées en fonction du nombre des fonctionnaires [...]. L'armature général et la répartition des baies d'éclairages seront conçues de manière à faciliter la modification des cloisonnements de bureaux, suivant l'extension ou la réduction de leur personnel ou de leur matériel [...].*'⁷

In his 1937 report, Camu endorsed virtually all of the principles that were laid out by Rigaux in his survey for the Warsaw conference. While Rigaux did not give concrete arguments for the usage of open offices with flexible partitions (other than the overarching notion that such offices would be more 'rational' and 'efficient'), Camu did. For the Royal Commissioner, '*les grandes salles de travail collectives*' would enable '*l'augmentation du rendement des agents, par la présence et la surveillance directe du chef*'. Moreover, due to '*un stimulant collectif constitué par le travail en commun*' (i.e. peer pressure), work ethics would improve. Here too, Camu created a contrast effect with the current state of affairs: the absence of surveillance in many of the 160 government buildings, he believed, inevitably lead to '*négligence*', '*flânerie*', '*indiscipline*', '*désordre*', '*retards*', and – with a beautiful euphemism he had borrowed from the French administrative expert Paul Planus – '*des occupations extra-administratives*'.⁸ Interestingly, Camu believed that even the members of the higher management had to be subjected to the principles of surveillance and transparency. Although these top-ranked civil servants clearly needed personal office rooms, Camu asserted that their offices be fully glazed. This way, their (supposedly) immaculate behaviour would become a visible 'example' for the subaltern personnel. Here, Camu's personal views on occupational psychology become obvious; up until now, I have not found any source emanating from the international administrative sciences movement, in which the 'exemplary visibility' of the higher management was advocated.

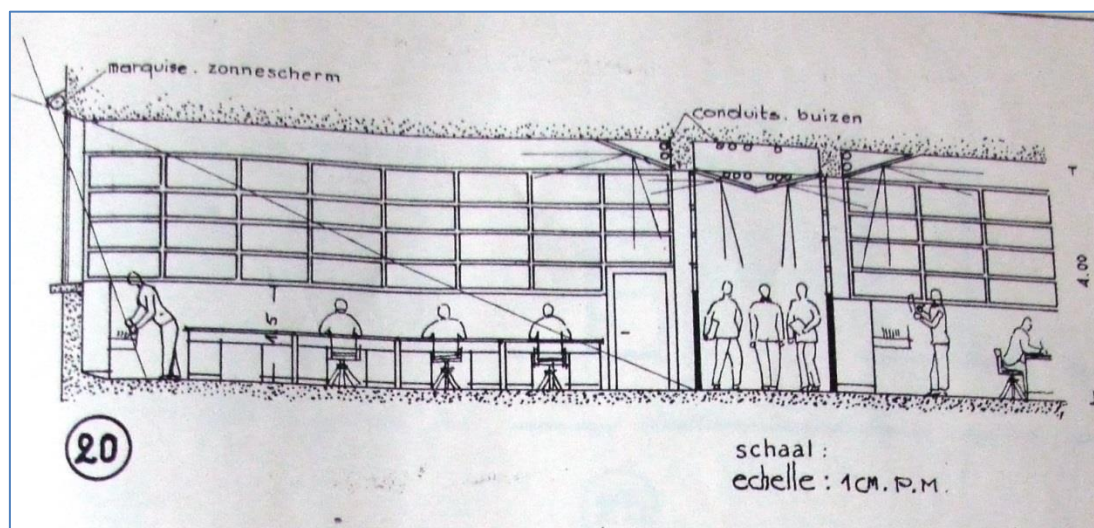
For the translation of his ideas on a 'rational' administration into an architectural programme, Camu was assisted by two architects: Raphaël Verwilghen and Jean-Jules Eggericx. Both were amongst the most convinced modernists in interwar Belgium: Verwilghen had gained himself a reputation as a staunch defender of urban planning policies, while Eggericx was an admirer of taylorist ideologies – he believed, for instance, that '*l'immeuble de bureau doit être aussi efficient qu'une Usine*'.⁹ Together, Eggericx and Verwilghen conceived a project for a so-called *cité*

⁷ *Compte rendu du VI-ième congrès international des sciences administratives*, Warsaw, Institut International des Sciences Administratives, 1936, 586-619.

⁸ Cfr. P. Planus, *L'organisation rationnelle d'un ministère*, Paris, Ducros & Colas, 1936, 30.

⁹ On Eggericx, see: G. Grulois and L. Tissot, 'La rationalité urbanistique', in M. Culot ed., *J.-J. Eggericx. Gentleman architecte, créateur de cités-jardins*, Brussels, AAM and CFC, 2012, 244-265. The quotation is taken from an internal report by Eggericx and

administrative: a complex of interconnected buildings, located close to the parliament, in which most of the Belgian ministries had to be centralized. The architectural language of this planned ‘administrative city’ was decisively functionalist: ornamentations were completely absent, while the façade was a direct rendering of the building’s internal structure.¹⁰ Despite this aesthetic of austerity, Eggericx and Verwilghen did argue that their *cit  administrative* would possess a certain degree of ‘*monumentalit *’ and ‘*grandeur*’. Moreover, they believed that the project would be a dignified, contemporary addition to the ‘representative’ ministerial buildings from the 18th and the 19th centuries. For their part, Eggericx and Verwilghen were heavily influenced by the work of their German colleague Ernst Neufert, who had recently published his design manual *Bauentwurfslehre* (which would later on become the best-selling architectural book of all times).¹¹ In Camu’s report, a series of images from Neufert’s book was integrally reprinted, among which a cross-section for an ‘ideal’ office layout (see image below). Not unsurprisingly, this diagram depicted a ‘collective’ office space, with flexible partitions, built-in closets, and highly-situated windows (which assured ample natural lighting, without – as one might suppose – the risk of the clerks getting distracted by looking outside).¹²



Upon publication, the report on the governmental offices sparked no political discussions. Yet, between 1937 and 1940, successive governments granted Camu’s *Commissariat Royal   la R forme Administrative* the necessary funds to pursue investigations on the subject. During those years, Eggericx and Verwilghen made a survey to determine how much office space would be needed in the future *cit  administrative*. They found that the building complex had to provide about 93.000 m² of office space, including space for anticipated growth and for centralized services, such as libraries, meeting rooms, cafeterias, and archives. In the complex, every employee would be granted ‘at least’ 4 m² of office space (with a ‘*cube d’espace r el*’ of at least 10 m³): numbers which were

Verwilghen (*Rapport sur la construction...*, d.d. April 12th 1937), kept in the *Archives d’Architecture Moderne* (Brussels), Records J.-J. Eggericx, File nr. 296.

¹⁰ During the interwar period, similar projects for a centralized ministerial complex were made in countries such as Spain (the so-called *Nuevos Ministerios* in Madrid) and Chile (the ‘Civic District’ in Santiago).

¹¹ On Neufert, see: W. Prigge ed., *Ernst Neufert. Normierte Baukultur im 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt/Main and New York, Campus and Edition Bauhaus, 1999.

¹² Cfr. I. Forino, ‘The Office as an Apparatus of Control: Interior Design and Furniture, 1880-1960’, Lecture at the conference *The Office as an Interior*, Bern, October 17-18, 2013.

clearly considered as a kind of *Existenzminimum*.¹³ Eggericx and Verwilghen also undertook study work on the ‘ideal’ temperature, atmospheric humidity, lighting and furniture equipment in the future offices.¹⁴ Because of the outbreak of the Second World War, however, the investigations for the project came to an abrupt halt. It would take another fifteen years – until 1955 – before the Belgian government would endorse the construction of a *cit  administrative*. By that time, however, the project had deviated strongly from the original proposition by Camu, Eggericx, and Verwilghen.

It is clear that the work of the German architect Neufert and administrative experts like Rigaux had an important influence on Camu’s 1937 report. As is exemplified by the quote at the beginning of my talk, however, Camu was also influenced by Dutch administrative practices. In 1936, shortly after his appointment as Royal Commissioner, he undertook a study trip to France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, to learn more about the ways in which these countries had laid down rules for the recruitment and promotion of civil servants.¹⁵ During this trip, Camu was undoubtedly confronted with state-sponsored administrative architecture. Yet, in his report, he seemingly considered the Dutch offices the only ones worth mentioning: more specifically, he praised the recently-built office building for the Ministry of Economic Affairs, as well as the new municipal offices in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Hilversum. Leaving aside the ministry building, I will now look more deeply into the town halls of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Hilversum, which were all rebuilt during the 1910s and 1920s.¹⁶ The central question in my analysis is: why could Camu have considered them to be commendable office architecture?

In **Rotterdam**, the construction of a new town hall was advocated from 1908 onwards, making it the first town (of the above-mentioned three) to do so. The project was originally conceived by Mayor Zimmerman, who considered the existing town hall to be insufficiently ‘representative’ for the second biggest city in the Netherlands.¹⁷ During a discussion at a council meeting, Zimmerman asserted that his quest for representativeness had nothing to do with a longing for ‘luxury’. Rather, he wanted a town hall in which all the demands for hygiene, light and air were met: ‘[...] *No single manager would accommodate his employees in such sombre offices, devoid of daylight, as can be found in the current town hall.*’ The mayor described the wedding room, for instance, as a ‘cave’, while he also criticised the fact that the building lacked antechambers: visitors simply had to wait on a ‘*garden bench in the corridor*’.¹⁸ Moreover, the scattering of municipal services over many different buildings was considered to be detrimental for their functioning.¹⁹ It is

¹³ A minimal surface of 4 m² was also advocated by Paul Planus (*L’organisation rationnelle*, 32.)

¹⁴ Brussels, *Archives d’Architecture Moderne*, Records J.-J. Eggericx, File nr. 296: L. Camu and M. Malderez, *M moire sur les b timents administratifs* (unpublished official report, January 1940).

¹⁵ A. Molitor, *Servir l’Etat: Trois exp riences*, Brussels and Louvain-la-Neuve, AURA and CRISP, s.d., 33. Unfortunately, I could not find a detailed itinerary of Camu’s trip.

¹⁶ On the Dutch ministerial office buildings, see: M. Kuipers, *Ministeries: Categorieel onderzoek wederopbouw 1940-1965*, Zeist, Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg, 2006. Kuipers’ study does not deal explicitly with the Ministry of Economic Affairs building.

¹⁷ A short history of the Rotterdam town hall project can be found in: M. Halbertsma, *En maar altoos duurt het vitten op het nieuwe raadhuis voort... Het Rotterdamse stadhuis als representatie van Rotterdam, 1912-1929*, Zwolle and Rotterdam, Waanders and Stichting Kunstpublicaties, 1998. Halbertsma does not analyse the interior of the offices in the new town hall.

¹⁸ Rotterdam, Municipal Archives, Records *Raadhuisbouw* (inv. nr. 408) [short reference hereafter: *Raadhuisbouw*]: File nr. 1, Extract from the Municipal Council, December 11th, 1908. Town councillor Kuijk, too, considered the existing offices to be ‘unhealthy’ for the personnel. (See: *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 5, Extract from the Municipal Council, October 5th, 1911.)

¹⁹ *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 1, Report by the Municipal Executive, September 1st, 1911.

obvious, however, that Zimmerman was not just looking for enhanced ‘rationality’ and ‘efficiency’: he also thought of the future town hall as a ‘monumental’ edifice, destined to ‘*last for centuries*’.²⁰ In 1911, a dedicated committee of inquiry – the so-called *Raadhuiscommissie* – was set up, and together with architecture professor Henri Evers, this commission determined the architectural programme for the new town hall. Evers suggested to construct a building with a ‘representative’, lavishly decorated *beaux arts* façade at the front, while the façades of the rear parts – destined for the offices of all municipal services – were to be kept ‘simple’ and ‘unpretentious’. Concerning the offices themselves, Evers asserted that ‘*these must be of large dimensions, so that the personnel can be placed together, under the surveillance of the chief clerk; if necessary, flexible partition walls will allow compartmentation*’.²¹

Because of his ‘large expertise’, Evers was asked by the *Raadhuiscommissie* to make a preliminary design for the new town hall. Over the course of 1909 and 1910, all chief clerks were asked to share their desiderata concerning office space with Evers and city manager Heynsius. Some of them explicitly shared Evers’ view on ‘open offices’: the manager of the taxation service, for example, believed that large rooms enabled ‘*control and surveillance*’,²² while the head of the Military Affairs department thought that ‘*one large room for the entire service is sufficient, while the department chief should be located in an adjacent office*’.²³ The director of the Education department favoured ‘*either one big office, or a series of interconnected offices*’, with the head manager located in ‘*a somewhat isolated part*’, from where he could have an ‘*overview on the office*’.²⁴ (Only one chief clerk – the head of the Finance department – showed some reticence towards the concept of the open office, as he considered them too noisy, especially when used for activities like typing and stamping.²⁵) In a final report on the questionnaire, city manager Heynsius endorsed the principle that the dimensions of the offices had to be standardised, while moveable partition walls – preferably glazed – would accommodate any reductions or enlargements of the desired office space.²⁶ Further, he requested the construction of a ‘*large canteen*’, so that the ‘*consumption of sandwiches and the preparation of coffee in the offices*’ could be prohibited, and the office rooms could be aired during the lunch break.²⁷ Although the plea for a canteen appeared reasonable, Heynsius quickly pointed out that such ‘rational’ innovations would not necessarily lead to rational *use*. He was convinced, for instance, that some employees would refuse to use a canteen where they could meet rivalling colleagues. Creating new spaces, therefore, was clearly just a first part of the solution: afterwards, a new corporate culture – with new worker’s routines – had to be established to make the architecture ‘work’.

After a somewhat dodgy decision process, the municipal council ruled in 1911 that the architect of the future town hall had to be appointed by competition. However, it was also decided that the competitors had to use Evers’ preliminary design as the point of departure for their own

²⁰ *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 1, Report by the Municipal Executive, April 15th-20th, 1909; *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 4, Meeting report of the commission *Raadhuisbouw*, May 8th, 1911.

²¹ *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 1, Report by the Municipal Executive, September 1st, 1911.

²² *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 17, Letter d.d. November 15th, 1909.

²³ *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 17, Letter d.d. November 13th, 1909.

²⁴ *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 17, Letter d.d. November 25th, 1909.

²⁵ *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 17, Letter d.d. November 25th, 1909.

²⁶ *Raadhuisbouw*: File nr. 17, Report by Heynsius, s.d.

²⁷ Creating a healthy atmosphere also implied that smoking in the offices had to be banned, Heynsius noted: ‘*A separate smoking room is necessary. Although I am a smoker myself, I have the conviction this is the path we should follow.*’

plans. Not unexpectedly, Evers came out as the winner of the contest in 1913, and until 1916, he worked on the final construction plans.²⁸ Upon completion of the new town hall in 1920, the building indeed featured large, ‘open’ office rooms for all administrative services, such as the departments of Finances, Education, Taxation, and Registration. For every clerk, about 6,5 m² of office space was provided, while the typists of the Central Secretary were all located in a centrally-located ‘typing pool’, thereby eliminating the presence of distracting noises in the offices. Although the final building plans did not feature moveable partition walls, it is highly likely that these were placed anyhow – probably with glazed cubicles for the chief clerks. Finally, the building was provided with three different refreshment rooms: a large one for the subaltern personnel, and two smaller ones for the aldermen and the chief clerks. This way, hierarchical differences – also central to the concept of glazed partition walls – were spatially re-affirmed during lunch breaks.

In the Dutch capital **Amsterdam**, the need for new municipal offices was felt strongly at the beginning of the 1920s. Over the course of the previous years, the responsibilities and powers of the municipality had risen considerably – as was true for many other city *and* state administrations in the Western world.²⁹ During this period, the attics of the Amsterdam town hall (the so-called *Prinsenhof*) had been transformed into offices, while adjacent houses – all with their individual entrances, courtyards, etc. – had been acquired and annexed to the complex. In 1920, the Municipal Executive found that this conglomerate of edifices resembled ‘*a maze with dark corridors, staircases, porches, and rooms, in which the public can barely find its way*’. As in Rotterdam, the lack of waiting and meeting rooms was criticised, while the office spaces were considered to be ‘*too small, badly illuminated, and sometimes overcrowded*’. Clerks who needed to get in contact with a service located in a different part of the building, often had to ‘*say goodbye to their roommates for a long time*’. In other words: the town hall complex was deemed ‘*unworthy for a state’s capital and its administration*’. In the newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, a part of the *Prinsenhof* was described in terms of a ‘*dark dungeon from the Ancien Régime*’, while the editor quoted a phrase from the 17th-century Dutch writer Vondel about the ‘*cramped air*’ in the (then) town hall. The *Handelsblad* even spoke of ‘*an atavistic situation*’.³⁰ To put it briefly, anecdotes and metaphors were used to underline the precariousness of the situation – as was the case in Rotterdam and Brussels.

A survey, undertaken in 1920, showed that the town hall complex had about 30 office rooms (1184 m²) short. If a partial centralization of all municipal services in one single building was considered, there was even need for somewhere between 110 and 424 office rooms (the equivalent of 4166 and 17.044 m², taking into account foreseeable extensions). In these calculations, a generic office room was considered to be about 40 m² large – which probably allowed for accommodating four clerks. In 1922, after lengthy discussions on a possible moving of the municipal services to the

²⁸ During this period, Evers undertook a study trip to Germany, where he visited the *Rathäuser* of Charlottenburg and Dresden, as well as the Berlin Reichstag. The Dutch architect was particularly interested in German technologies for heating and ventilation, but on a more general level, too, it is clear that Evers’ frame of reference was primarily German: he read magazines such as *Die Berliner Architekturwelt* and *Der Architekt*, while he also mentioned many German examples of architecture in his own articles. (*Raadhuisbouw*: Files nr. 29 and 34.)

²⁹ Cfr. literature on the transnational municipal movement, such as: P.-Y. Saunier and S. Ewen eds., *Another Global City. Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Movement, 1850-2000*, New York and Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; S. Couperus, *De machinerie van de stad. Stadsbestuur als idee en praktijk, Nederland en Amsterdam 1900-1940*, Amsterdam, Aksant, 2009.

³⁰ Quotations from: Amsterdam, City Archives, Newspaper cuttings on the topic of ‘Raadhuis’ (Inv. 30486, nr. 344).

virtually unoccupied 17th-century Royal Palace (which had been the town hall up until the beginning of the 19th century), it was decided that the *Prinsenhof* town hall complex would be drastically renovated: one building would be completely reconstructed internally, while a new wing would be added along the Oudezijds Voorburgwal street. Municipal architect Hulshoff was charged with the design of the new wing, and according to the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, Hulshoff favoured a ‘*modern building which harmonizes with the existing façades along the street*’. Tellingly, in its report on Hulshoff’s plans, the newspaper stated that ‘*there is, of course, little to be said about the interior of the future offices*’ – apart from the fact that the clerks would be housed more comfortably.³¹ This stance reflected the commonly held belief (even up until today) that office spaces are somehow neutral and ‘featureless’ – while, as historians like Delphine Gardey and Nikil Saval have demonstrated in the wake of Michel Foucault, office architecture is always permeated with ‘invisible’ *dispositifs* for the establishment of a certain work ethic.³²

Hulshoff’s new five-story wing, which was constructed between 1923 and 1926, could accommodate about 100 clerks, and accounted for 900 m² of new office space. The sober art-deco building contained a large canteen for 200 employees (literally called ‘*lunchroom*’ in some sources), as well as new offices for the mayor, elevators, and a central heating system (which serviced the whole complex, thereby eliminating the need for individual stoves in every office room). On average, every clerk was granted about 8 m² of work space, while the individual offices had a surface of 6 x 5,5 m. These rooms were certainly not the vast ‘open offices’ called for in Louis Camu’s 1937 report, and they were also smaller than the departmental offices in the Rotterdam town hall. However, Hulshoff’s building did feature a large typing pool, which implies that novel principles of administrative organisation were effectively implemented – albeit in a more reserved and fragmentary way than in Rotterdam. The clearly moderate ambitions of the Amsterdam Municipal Executive can be explained by the fact that the Hulshoff extension was considered to be just a temporary solution for the city’s office needs: after 30 to 40 years, it was decided, a brand new town hall – on a brand new location – was to be constructed anyway.

Throughout the 1920s, the city of Amsterdam commissioned new, modernist office buildings for some autonomous municipal services, such as the Tramway Office (*Bureau Gemeentetram*, 1923) and the Traffic Office (*Bureau Verkeerswezen*, 1924).³³ Yet, for the central municipal administration, many of the problems that were acute around 1920, reappeared during the 1930s. On its turn, the Hulshoff extension became too small for an ever-expanding public service; at the same time, some departments, such as the Public Works and Food Control administrations, had always remained in their own, pre-1920s buildings, where problems with hygiene and comfort were persistent. In 1939, the director of the Food Control department, for instance, complained to the Municipal Executive that his personnel suffered from severe humidity in the offices. The moist air affected even the Hollerith punched cards, which consequently became ‘*unreadable for the card readers*’.³⁴ This situation can be considered as a striking manifestation of the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’. While the Amsterdam municipal administration was clearly progressive in

³¹ Ibid.

³² D. Gardey, *Écrire, calculer, classer. Comment une révolution de papier a transformé les sociétés contemporaines (1800-1940)*. Paris, La Découverte, 2008; N. Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*, New York, Doubleday, 2014.

³³ Both buildings were listed in the following anthology: *Moderne Bouwkunst in Nederland (Nr. 10: Kantoren, banken, administratiegebouwen)*, Rotterdam, W.L. & J. Brusse, 1933.

³⁴ Amsterdam, City Archives, Records ‘Commissioners Town hall’ (inv. 490), nr. 63.

adopting new administrative techniques, by the mid-30s, its ensemble of office buildings could hardly be considered as exemplary.

One has to wonder then, which office buildings from Amsterdam Louis Camu was referring to in his 1937 report. Maybe the Belgian Royal Commissioner was still impressed by the 1926 Hulshoff extension, or maybe he alluded to the decision – taken in 1935 – to organize a design competition for a new, large town hall, in which the necessities of representativeness and functionality would both be fully met (as had previously been the case in Rotterdam). From 1935 to 1940, different functionaries and councillors were involved in the establishment of the architectural programme for the future building (which would not be built during the interwar period). In municipal reports from the late 1930s, it was claimed that a more profound mechanisation of the administration was necessary, since this could curb the incessant growth in the number of employees.³⁵ Moreover, these reports called for a town hall with ‘*a large amount of vast office rooms, partitioned by means of flexible dividers*’, which would be preferably made out of glass. It was asserted that the architectural plans should only provide generic, mutually interchangeable office spaces, which consequently – upon completion of the building – had to be assigned to the different departments by the city manager (and not by the architect). These offices had to be equipped with fixed closets – something which had not been the case in Hulshoff’s building, where (according to the Amsterdam reports) the furniture was constantly moved from one office room to another. Finally, the new town hall needed mechanical ventilation (‘*which will eliminate pressing discussions on the opening of the windows*’), as well as a separate room for the noisy punching machines.

The just-mentioned requirements for the future town hall were all aligned with the ‘rational’ concepts on office management that were promoted during the 1930s by organisations such as the IISA. A couple of questions, however, remained unresolved for the Amsterdam city managers. First, there was no consensus regarding the desired amount of office space for each employee: one report called for 10 m² per person, while another report pointed out that ‘*7 m² is sufficient, as long as modern furniture is used*’. This last remark clearly shows that administrative ‘rationalisation’ was not necessarily aimed at the creation of large *personal* office surfaces (although the numbers mentioned in the Amsterdam reports were still higher than those suggested at the same time in Belgium). Second, the Amsterdam town managers were uncertain if the centralization of all municipal services in one single building was recommendable. While the concept of centralization – so characteristic of the Belgian *cit  administrative* project, as well as of the newly built Rotterdam town hall – clearly had its advantages, it was also recognised in late 1930s Amsterdam that a large concentration of services in one building could lead to traffic congestion in the surroundings. Moreover, it would also make the building vulnerable to enemy attacks during wartime. Communication between services, it was asserted, could also be realized by means of telephone – thereby reducing the need for clustering every department at the same location.

The third and last Dutch town of which Louis Camu believed it had exemplary municipal offices, was **Hilversum**. With a population of ca. 30.000 inhabitants around 1910, it was considerably smaller than Rotterdam and Amsterdam – and up until today, Hilversum has no

³⁵ Amsterdam, City Archives, Records Public Works Department (inv. 5180), nr. 12089.

franchise of a city. Nonetheless, from the early twentieth century onwards, the town's Municipal Executive was confronted with problems that were very similar to those experienced in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and – in a different context – Brussels. While the population grew constantly (during the interwar era, 80.000 was considered as a target figure), the old town hall at the Kerkbrink square rapidly came apart at the seams. Already in 1906, the municipality addressed a questionnaire to a couple of other Dutch town clerks, asking '*if the town hall in Your municipality meets the demands of the services and the officials concerning internal layout, space, light and air*'. The results of this modest method for obtaining 'translocal' knowledge and expertise were quite predictable: while the officials from Arnhem declared that they were satisfied with their town hall, those from Dordrecht, Enschede, and Kampen thought that their premises were too small and badly equipped.³⁶ Convinced of the need for a new town hall, the town clerk of Hilversum penned a report in 1907, which – again – gave some anecdotic (or even laconic) evidence about the poor circumstances in the old municipal building: '*Since there are no waiting rooms, visitors often walk up and down the hallways, which can be detrimental for both their health and mood. Moreover, this situation is not always fully consonant with the dignity of the visitors.*'³⁷ The town clerk further believed that all municipal services had to be concentrated in one single complex: '*The administrative services of a municipality – as well as those of any other large organisation – are destined to form a unity. The different services should be in permanent contact with each other. However useful, telephonic communication is in itself insufficient to enable this contact. For the public, too, it will be convenient to find all services in one single building.*'

When the Municipal Executive appointed the architect Willem Martinus Dudok as managing director of the Public Works department in 1915, he was asked to draft a building plan for a new town hall. Because of the lingering economic crisis, Dudok's plans were quickly shelved – although the architect did receive numerous commissions for the design of development schemes, as well as for the construction of public service buildings, including municipal schools. In 1923, the town council decided to resume the town hall project, albeit on a new location, slightly outside of the town centre. This location – a large, unbuilt terrain surrounded by greenery – provided ample space for an ambitious architectural programme. Again, Dudok drew up a plan, this time in close collaboration with the new town clerk, Kardux.³⁸ Because of his creative exploration of modernist forms and concepts, Dudok was already a household name in Dutch artistic circles by the early 1920s. However, as one of his historiographers has pointed out, he was not a specialist of architectural typologies: '*Dudok was largely uninterested in typological issues; for instance, he barely undertook studies on floor plans. Rather, he developed a typical floor plan on the basis of the client's demands, and he modified this plan whenever it did not correspond to his ideas on the aesthetics of the building's exterior.*'³⁹ This is exactly why his collaboration with the town clerk was of supreme importance: most likely, Dudok had no *a priori* convictions on how a 'rational' office layout had to look like, and he was glad to follow Kardux' opinions on this matter.

³⁶ Hilversum, Municipal Archives, Records of the Municipal Secretary [short reference hereafter: Hilversum, *Municipal Secretary*], nr. 4528.

³⁷ Hilversum, *Municipal Secretary*, nr. 4528.

³⁸ Kardux was appointed in 1917.

³⁹ H. van Bergeijk, *Willem Martinus Dudok, architect-stedenbouwkundige 1884-1974*, Doetinchem, V+K, 1995, 45.

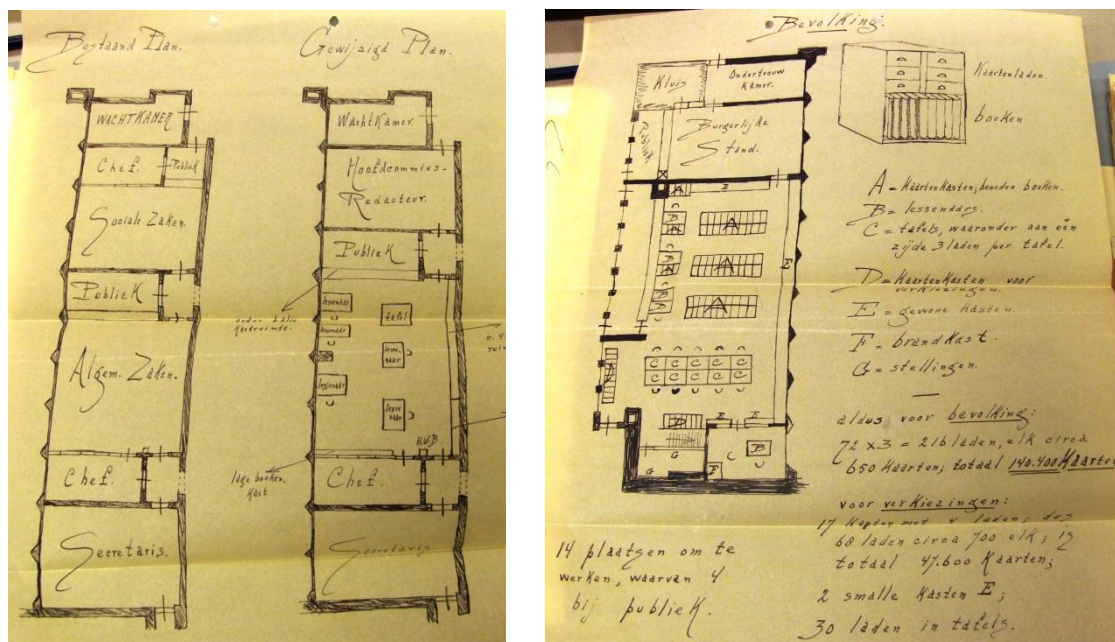
In 1924, Dudok presented his plans for the town council. In a report, the architect explained that his design gave expression to a certain duality, intrinsic to town halls: on the one hand, the building had to be '*strongly representative*', while on the other hand, it needed to have '*the qualities of an extremely practical and terse office building*'.⁴⁰ This duality – which was also a tension – was likewise prominent in the newly built Rotterdam town hall. In Dudok's project, however, the monumental 'representativeness' stemmed from restrained modernist forms and massive, carefully proportionated wall surfaces – rather than from a historicist style with ornamentations. While the most eminent spaces in the town hall (i.e. the offices for the mayor and aldermen, the wedding rooms, and the council room) were all located at the front of the building, the 'efficient' parts (i.e. the offices for the municipal services) were located in two rear wings. In his report, Dudok explained that '*all offices have dedicated rooms for the public, as well as for the department managers*'. The managers would be allocated separate rooms with glazed partitions, '*in order to provide them with a perfect overview on their department*'. This solution '*did not impair the feeling of unity in a department*', while it did provide space for the '*quiet, isolated work of the department managers*'. Further, Dudok (and Kardux) planned a separate room for the typists, as well as a central heating and ventilation system, a library, meeting rooms, a reading room, fireproof archive spaces in the basement, and spare offices for future extension. Most administrative departments would be located close to each other, although Dudok did believe that telephonic communication would simplify communication between the services to a large degree. Finally, the architect made a comparison with corporate offices, thereby stressing the need for one centralized complex: '*Any private company with an administration as large as the Hilversum municipal administration would not be satisfied with having its departments scattered around town, in different small buildings. No, this company would erect an office building. Probably a more luxurious one, by the way, than the one that I propose for Hilversum.*'

Although Dudok's plans were formally approved in 1924, new budgetary problems brought the project to a temporary standstill; the construction of the building finally took place between 1928 and 1931. During the building process, the internal layout of the office spaces was slightly modified on request of the inspector of the Finance department. A series of drawings from 1929, attached to a report written by this inspector (*see images below*), show how 'rational' administrative techniques and technologies had made their way into the Hilversum town hall. The head of the department of General Affairs, among others, was given a personal office, with a glazed wall from where he could have an overview on his subordinates, which were all grouped together in one large office.⁴¹ Below the window of this partition wall, a fixed closet was placed – and the archival records demonstrate that the choice for the type of closets was not taken overnight: different suppliers were contacted, while the dimensions and properties of the furniture were carefully examined. After its inauguration in 1931, Dudok's town hall quickly became an icon of modern Dutch architecture, both in the Netherlands and abroad: the Belgian architectural magazines *La Cité*, *Bâtir*, and *La Technique des Travaux*, for example, dedicated approving articles to the building. In Hilversum, however, Dudok's creation was not immediately greeted with anonymous approval. Town councillor Veth considered the town hall to be an '*ingenious complex with mysterious shapes, enigmatic little look-outs and hidden corridors*' – which he meant in a

⁴⁰ Hilversum, *Municipal Secretary*, nr. 1745 (Letter by Dudok d.d. June 4th, 1924).

⁴¹ Hilversum, *Municipal Secretary*, nr. 4525.

pejorative sense. Veth's colleague Merkelbach, on his turn, pointed out that citizens often '*felt themselves lost*' in the huge building.⁴² These comments suggested that the architect had submitted the demand for spatial clearness to aesthetic demands. Indeed, it is true that Dudok would never align himself with functionalist tendencies in modernist architecture (as would, for instance, Eggericx and Verwilghen in Belgium during the 1930s).⁴³ Yet, even Dudok himself was convinced that his town hall '*would not become popular overnight*'. He did believe that it would take some years before the Hilversum town hall would be rightfully judged as a dignified, characteristic creation, both modern and monumental. As it turned out, time would not prove him wrong.



To summarize this case study on administrative architecture, I would like reiterate that town and state administrations were confronted with very similar problems during the interwar era. Both local and national governments – undoubtedly in many different countries – were faced with a widening range of duties and a rising number of subjects, which led to serious shortages in office space. This *negative* situation – a patrimony of cramped and maladjusted offices – was often complemented with a *positive* aspiration: municipal executives and governments longed for modern, rational, and efficient administrative architecture, equipment, and working methods. In order to justify the enormous short-term investments of such an administrative modernisation, reform-minded officials described the existing office buildings by using *topoi*: the corridor as an antechamber, the gloomy and unhealthy offices, the labyrinthine ensemble of separate houses, the lack of ‘prestige’, the difficult communication between services, the inconveniences for the public. Modern (office) architecture was seen as the antidote for these problems. The need for of large, flexible ‘open’ office spaces for the subaltern personnel – which would be constantly supervised by the department

⁴² Van Bergeijk, *Willem Martinus Dudok*, 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 119.

managers – was clearly a *communis opinio* in the interwar era.⁴⁴ Although it was never made explicit, administrators in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Hilversum all seemed to believe that surveillance was crucial for the well-functioning of their departments. (In late-1930s Belgium, Louis Camu turned his distrust vis-à-vis the employees into a clear-cut doctrine: everyone was supposed to supervise everyone – no matter which rank one held in the administrative hierarchy.) Further, in the four researched cases, most administrators were convinced of the need for one central office complex (which could accommodate as much departments and services as possible), while they also used similar techniques for establishing the required amount of office space in the proposed new building (e.g. by addressing questionnaires to the department managers). In sum: not only the diagnosed problems, but also the proposed solutions were similar – although there were, of course, large differences in style and construction techniques between the different buildings.

Similarities as the ones mentioned above hint at the existence of transnational knowledge networks and flows of expertise. These networks and flows were necessarily plural: there was no single, decisive ‘influence’ which could have determined the design of the projects in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hilversum, and Brussels. It is possible, however, to point out a couple of important ‘channels’ through which knowledge on ‘rational’ office architecture was disseminated during the interwar era.⁴⁵ First, there were networks of administrative experts, which were active in organisations such as the UIV and the IISA. In the Netherlands (but not in Belgium), a strong influence was also exerted by the ‘efficiency movement’, which was devoted to lowering the costs and improving the production methods of the municipal departments.⁴⁶ There were many ways for administrative experts to get in touch with each other: via publications (e.g. the *Revue Internationale des Sciences Administratives*, in which, among others, Camu published), conferences (e.g. the second international conference of the UIV took place in 1924 in Amsterdam), or through direct personal contacts (e.g. Louis Camu corresponded with the Swiss politician and civil servant Oskar Leimgruber, who was one of the most prominent figures in the IISA). Moreover, both Brussels (in 1910) and Amsterdam (in 1911 and 1922) had been host cities for international exhibitions on ‘modern office equipment’, which could have influenced the local officials.

A second international knowledge network, which was independent from the previous one, was constituted by architects (and engineers). Although administrative experts and modernist architects shared important intellectual sources (in particular the ideology of scientific management),⁴⁷ they had their own conferences and magazines – during the interwar era, for instance, not a single architect would publish in the magazine of the IISA. Through architectural magazines, anthologies, and manuals, as well as through study trips, architects learned from domestic and foreign examples. Jean-Jules Eggericx and Raphaël Verwilghen, for instance, leaned heavily on the works of the German author Ernst Neufert, while Henri Evers looked up to late-19th

⁴⁴ One of the first examples of ‘open’ office architecture was Frank Lloyd Wright’s *Larkin Administration Building*, built in Buffalo (USA), 1906. (On the Larkin Building, see for example: Saval, *Cubed*, 64-71.) The usage of open offices was also strongly advocated by the French administrative expert Paul Planus, whose work was approved of by Camu. (Cfr. Planus, *L’organisation rationnelle*, 12-13 and 28-30.) In general, many modernist architects favoured internal layout dispositions which followed the concept of the ‘*plan libre*’ (as Le Corbusier would call it).

⁴⁵ Transnational communication between experts (in the fields of science and technology) intensified strongly during the interwar period. (See: Kohlrausch, Steffen, and Wiederkehr, ‘Expert Cultures’, 11.)

⁴⁶ Couperus, *De machinerie van de stad*.

⁴⁷ M. F. Guillén, *The Taylorized Beauty of the Mechanical. Scientific Management and the Rise of Modernist Architecture*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006.

century German *Rathaus* architecture. In a 1936 article on the proposed new Amsterdam town hall, the Dutch magazine *Architectura* spoke fondly of town hall architecture in Scandinavia and Germany, while the magazine also expressed approval of the recently-constructed building of the Belgian national broadcasting service (a building which, ironically, Camu did not consider exemplary because of the bad climatization system). As mentioned before, the work of W.M. Dudok was well-known internationally during the interwar era through numerous publications, while Dudok himself had given a lecture during the 1935 National Conference of Belgian architects in Brussels. Both the administrative experts' and the architects' *milieux* were, indeed, 'small worlds'.

What makes the 1937-1940 Belgian *cit  administrative* project so striking, is the fact that its main instigator – Louis Camu – had a profound interest in both administrative management and modern architecture. In his reports, which he wrote in collaboration with two of the most eminent modernist architects in Belgium, both spheres of influence came together in a remarkable synthesis. But remarkable as it was, the Belgian government was also quite late with proposing modernist construction projects as an all-encompassing solution for the ministerial office needs: in some Dutch towns, modernisation had been implemented already much earlier. Further research will be necessary, therefore, to provide an answer to Camu's lament, quoted at the beginning of this text: '*Pourquoi ne pourrions-nous pas en faire autant?*'.

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