

The Future of the Past: Architectural Heritage Guides as Handbooks for City Decoding and as Blueprints for Urban Design.

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ABSTRACT

What is the relevance of architectural and urban heritage to present-day design education, theory and practice? Beyond the specific field of heritage preservation, can the built heritage's urban and environmental history represent more than a mere catalogue of formal solutions or source of inspiration?

An opportunity to explore this question came along with the authors' recent involvement in the Belgian French-speaking Community's plan for a series of «Modern and Contemporary Architecture Travel Guides».

The recent *UNESCO Recommendations on the historic urban landscape* insist on the opportunity to “shift from an emphasis on architectural monuments primarily” towards “a landscape approach” including “the broader urban context and its geographical setting”, to understand historic urban landscape “as the result of a historic layering”, and to “create new tools to address this vision”. Along this line of thought, the proposed approach expands the traditional contents of architectural guides, providing keys to reconsider and evaluate the listed works' contribution to the evolution of their immediate surrounding, to the urban structure as a whole, up to the territorial scale.

Moving from a design-oriented perspective and using the methods of urban morphology, the work consists mainly of a set of original schemes, maps and drawings of Liège and its neighborhoods, as means to reveal the urban structure, its layering over time, and the role of architectural heritage in clarifying, enhancing, or even degrading the coherence of the urban artifact.

Halfway between popular and scholarly literature, the forthcoming guides aim to become at both times “handbooks for city decoding” and blueprints for urban design.

Providing tools to read, comprehend, and appreciate the part played by built heritage in a city's evolution and in the shaping of our daily environment helps to understand urban environments as a process bearing the overlapping influences of many experiments, partially implemented plans, competing visions and contradictory ideas. As a result, both the ordinary and the specialized audience can possibly raise their awareness and perception of modernist architecture's legacy, but also learn how certain urban qualities were achieved and how certain local issues came about, acquiring relevant critical keys to take part as stakeholders or designers in the debate over the future city.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present subject relates to the highlighting of possibilities offered by detailed studies of geomorphology. The Research Unit « *Ville, Territoire, Paysage* » of *Liège University's Faculty of Architecture* adopts this approach to refine readings and interpretations of *Wallonia's* multifaceted landscape and built environment.

A better understanding of this landscape's complexity, is to be obtained through approaches finely grasping the constitutive materials of territories. The urgent need of comprehension at different levels is the starting point for a decoding-method, aware of geomorphology's role as the merit of each project.

Today's *Walloon* landscape is convulsed by ignorance about the components that organize the different layers underlying diffusion of the territory's built matter. This might be a severe statement, however, all issues concerning modification of our living environments ascribe to a major lack of global approaches. Failing comprehensive procedures, capable to rely on documents describing the fragmented framework and condition of uncontrolled mutations, the *Walloon* territorial culture is hardly receptive to design-orientated research.

In fact, a return to reasoned morphological readings reveals a prevalent deficiency of approaches traducing analytical aspects into methods understanding previous and ongoing dynamics. Accordingly there is an increasing gap between the means of *reading* and those of *writing*. The omission to refer to laws conditioning a balance between urban artifacts and contemporary landscape interposes a distance between man and the site. Today this distance emerges as a lose retard hardly manageable within a short time.

Emerging phenomena of imbalance between landscape and the built environment have never been assigned to any responsibility of professionals, acting in the field of construction, although these could be incriminated of only paying little attention to the interaction of artificial and vegetable materials nor to intelligent exploiting of natural resources (water, air, soil, etc.). Architects for instance are perpetually losing ground in the field of foreshadowing states of natural and artificial materials' interaction. Furthermore there seems to be a real denial of more holistic and complex approaches, rehashing consolidated procedures. Previously mentioned discrepancy between *Walloon* inhabitants and their living environments is reinforced by the fact that the territory in question is inherited by 20th century; marked by unbridled segmentation as well as blind trust in methods of mechanical and legislative intervention, sparing elaborated project management and comprehensive readings.

At large, these listed breaches, all intensifying over time, are actually clues crying for adapted methods in order to *decode different states of the earth*.

Rediscover new « *Tableaux de la Nature* » leads us to A. von Humboldt and his complex readings. Accompanied by an interpretive look revaluing narration and the creation of imagination, they appear today as a way to experiment the recovery of lost links with the soil.

Various personalities, as diverse as A. Berque, V. Gregotti and B. Secchi appealed repeatedly to the need of returning to the « *landscape's reasons* » and the re-assessment of the « *soil's condition* ». Finally, the *European Landscape Convention's* (Florence 2000) as well as the *UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* advocate the need to emphasize other positions than the only technocratic look, to face multitude of questions we have to reinvest when considering the balance of our living environment, which we are responsible of in maintenance as well as foreshadowing.

Amidst this methodological and disciplinary questioning arrives the *Belgian French-speaking Community's* request to collaborate in the elaboration of *Liège's* (BE) «*Modern and Contemporary Architecture Travel Guide*». This demand abetted the *Faculty of Architecture*, more precisely its research unit dealing with territorial and landscape issues, to reconsider its mission. Indeed, fundamental research needing to renew and consolidate its skills within *Belgium's French-speaking Community*, the announced project seemed an opportunity to

divert a propagation of the architectural culture's ultimate object into a subject matter of landscape and territorial considerations.

Halfway between popular and scholarly literature, the forthcoming guide allows to sensitize a broader audience, from the connoisseur to the less informed user. Accordingly the project features an interesting niche to translate a geomorphological approach into both a tool of knowledge and communication. Readers of this guide could benefit from a decoder to understand the visited sites. Beyond strolling between the city's emerging buildings, this would provide them means to understand how human communities have, at any time in history, maintained a more or less constructive dialogue with settlement places. Despite continuous action of physical modification through built artifacts, interpretation of the changes affecting the relation to the ground, reveals itself as detector of approaches and thoughts bearing within them a world-view or mindset differentiating each period of development.

These traces, evocative of dreams, tendencies, potentials, hopes and confusions or discrepancies, are precisely what geomorphology states us today. Its suggestive potential of raising moments of regression and permanence, up to times of relaunch and projection, shaped the different technical, philosophical and stylistic approaches of architecture. This main interest as starting point for a methodological experimentation, extended the initial proposal of the architecture travel guide towards the proposition of a new writing method. The interpretation of signs and motions, observed in situ, can happen to take the reader to a journey, as much real and linked to construction as imaginary and suggestive of natural and contextual constraints. The experiment thus converts an approach, often used in a fixity, denuded of any potential for research, into a reading opening to landscape suggestion and the discovery of places whose traces reveal the dynamics of their own.

In this way geomorphology transforms into a medium that could serve as a kind of seismograph, able to follow the stirrings of a territory that moves by virtue of the rhythm of seasonal and climatic changes, despite the process of extreme deterritorialization supported by a reductive vision of modernity.

Hence, geomorphology could return to modernity the same subversive load, coevally constructive and de-constructive, immanent to Derrida's thinking applied to territory.

2. OBJECTIVES

The request aiming for an expertise in modern and contemporary architecture refers to putting the latter in perspective. The architecture guide could have been limited to a statement of innovations and formal or technical aspects of the "*art de bâtir*", expressed as a collection of models and ideals offering visitors the most splendid display that suits a city, frequently conducting its own promotion. In this case the guide, despite its cultural content, could only turn into an exclusively commercial good. In contrast, the demand directed towards the faculty, to act as guarantor for the tool, should lead to its critical review by adapting it to the current historical context of architecture.

This issue was pursued through a reflective process, whose main objective was to present architecture as a fully interdisciplinary field, capable to manage syndetic interaction of diverse knowledge and practices. Moreover, if landscape is the venue for any synthesis between human and natural actions (*European Landscape Convention*), the architectural production, as result of this dialectic, needs to be related to environmental balances, temporalities and dynamics crossing this early twenty-first century.

Liege is subjected to an awareness of oblivion, as for the city's relationship to its geomorphological site and the characteristics of its valley. This forgotten landscape originally owned the qualities of an archipelago formed by a maze of islands and waterways. Today, still kept muted, this absence is the motivation for a re-reading explaining the city and its architecture throughout the history of landscape transformations.

The study thus aims at highlighting the alternating moments of tight governance and slackening. For a long while these fluctuations commanded an urbanity taking possession of

the land, firstly with extreme precaution, to subsequently dominate it through exceeding the rules of proper use of natural forces. The actions conducted on the *Meuse* and its landscape of islands are not really erased. Traces as well as imperatives associated with this particular setting are still present and, once brought to light, their existence allows for a novel look at the artifact represented by the city as a whole.

Based on this observation, all stages of major transformation of the city's territorial countenance grant to "*locate*" the architectural actions in a context meaningful of progress inherent to all fields that contribute to the shaping of the city.

The objective is thus to situate the architecture in order to overcome the expression of its advances interpreted as the only result of a generic modernity.

Moreover, the availability of resources such as subsoil combined with that of water, turn the city of *Liege* into an artifact, hardly readable without relating it to the territory's shape and the way it was gradually built and domesticated.

The morphological approach is a way to understand the present throughout the landscape and its forces. These elements, often disowned and repressed, are however considered simple economic and touristic resources, hollowed of any potential balance and sustainability.

This research case inverts hierarchies to show the inventive, combinatorial possibilities and continuities still inherent to this approach.

3. HYPOTHESES and METHODOLOGY

The starting hypothesis focuses on the possibility to explain the city and its architectural artifacts through highlighting the natural sites that accommodated and supported the establishment and its urban growth over time. The observation of this steady transformation is adopted as a practice heading for a dual purpose: Firstly it frames the scientific founding to recognize the setting's capacities to adapt itself to actions of "*artificialization*". Secondly it constitutes an experiential base, accessible to all, to provide a so far forgotten "*reading grid*" revealing how the soil has been and is being modified.

The main challenge of the architecture travel guide - consisting in its double audience of informed and the non-specialist visitors - is tackled by proposing the soil and its transformations as the medium or common denominator, readable by everyone. The underlying idea assumes that the soil, in association with water, is the basic resource to attract and guide all phases of urbanization. The given soil is the primer element to re-question, while reflecting on the current state of our living environments, their balance and their inherent sustainability perspectives. This produced argument usually leads to formal and quantitative, non-dynamic classifications. In contrast the present research focusses on the potential capacities defined by combinations of soil, water and time. Past combined effects explain therefore, how urban thoughts and philosophical attitudes relating to nature and city produced artifacts evoking "imaginaries, intentions, politics, negotiations and conflicts", rather than "exclusively formal architecture".

The research hypothesis starts from the recognition of signs, that evoke all past events in considered places. M. Corajoud refers to the quest for the experience of sites: to be aware of what happened, what was hatched there. The observation and affirmation by comparative reading of different maps discloses facts, contrasts, and upheavals of an history, whose open book - allegorization to its present-day soil - illustrates barely disjointed and confused traces. The approach can be compared to the one's of archaeologists or detectives, who want to go beyond visible signs. The reading-method is thus used to collect clues that reconstruct a picture of the different phases of life, through which these places went, remaining unknown to most inhabitants of these sites. This careful research, confronting natural and human actions in order to explain the past, bears multiple truncated facts, of which today's residents have no longer any knowledge. Originating the writings, that incised the soil, offers to anyone the opportunity to be confronted with dense *palimpsests* that tell forgotten stories. Reproducing parts of a continuous narration, dissected by wills and phenomena, often contrasting in

intention and temporality, allows to rebuild a connective tissue that turns any agglomerate into an authentic body.

Thus, geomorphology is not used to analyze and classify, but to turn up lost relationships between an urban body and its landscape, which inhabitants visualize to a lesser extent.

Deterritorialization is often presented as an unavoidable phenomena to be accepted and eventually opposed by analytical regards. These do dissect the territories, searching to define materials and quantities, without providing other means than technical ones, which operate in quantitative ways. The study of different morphological outlines, composing the landscape, offers clues and trails concerning the dynamics and qualities of places. These could be appropriated by projects of urban development and landscape, to restore balances that have been dissected and interrupted. Thus, the process could be completed by participation of residents. New combinations of nature and culture, obtained by territorial composition, could initiate a slow restoration of relations between natural areas and human intentions.

In the case of *Liège*, the transcript of the morphological outline, drawn up by the water and its numerous runoff patterns, carving the wetlands, constitutes a fundamental step in the understanding of the landscape's initial condition. The state of this landscape immediately reveals the richness of the site, but also its constraints, limitations and the diversity of nature in motion.

3.1. Geomorphologic setting

The middle course of the river *Meuse* is characterized by curving meanders, generating an alluvial plain that is confined between accentuated hillsides. Two affluents, the *Ourthe* and *Vesdre*, originating from the massif of the *Ardennes*, join this system on its right bank.

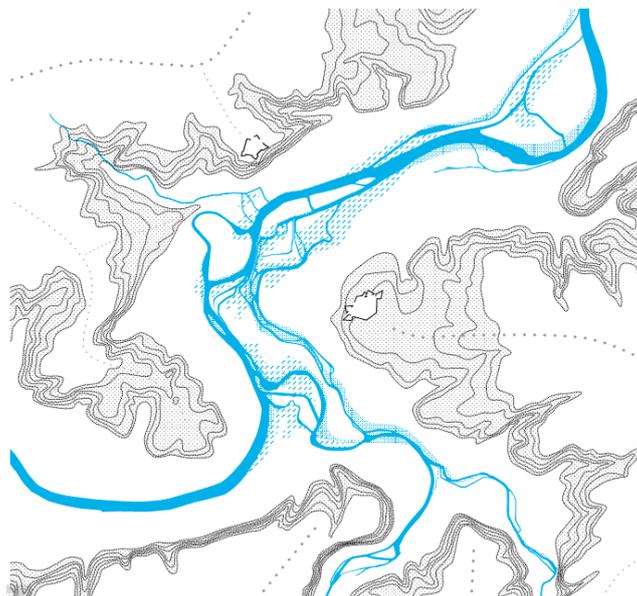
The confluence of these tributaries used to disperse the *Meuse's* main riverbed into a multiplicity of smaller channels isolating a variety of sedimental islands. Throughout the seasons, the torrential river created and erased many islands and creeks. This dynamic alluvial system used to occupy the concave riverside of the valley's main right-turning bend.

The opposite bank has been shaped by the eroding outer channel of the *Meuse's* meander interacting with the outcome of a smaller torrent, the so called *Legia*.

Antagonistic forces of erosion and soil deposit established the principle features for *Liège's* initial settlement on this left bank. While the main river's meander eroded the hillside into a steeper river cliff, the tributary, carving the latter, generated a delta shaped alluvial plain at its confluence.

The consequent geomorphologic setting presented an accentuated promontory overlooking a plain of slightly higher lying fertile banks.

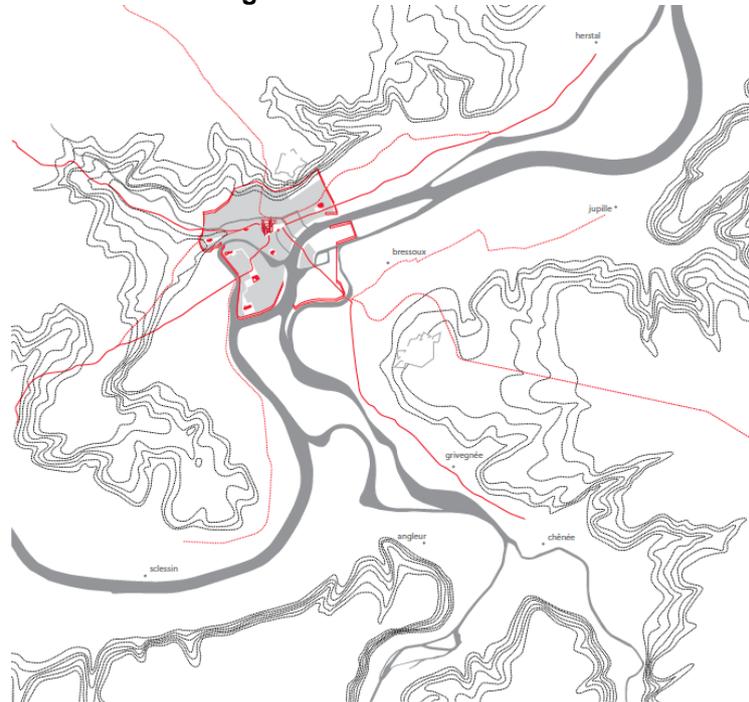
Figure 1.
Geomorphologic
setting



3.2. Basic settlement

The city did not establish directly on the river. It firstly took advantage of the higher lying so called "*Publémont*" and the confluence of the *Legia* and *Meuse*, to settle its first nuclei. Thus, the 11th century fortification wall encloses these two strategical components of the valley landscape into a curiously shaped city plan, wherein the riparian settlement depends on its castle, enthroned on the river cliff.

Figure 2. Basic settlement



The winding lines of former water channels reveal to this day a picture of a tortured valley landscape. In theory, we are able to seize its existence. However, the terms "*insular city*" or "*archipelago*", designating such places, did never imply to our imagination any interrelating conditions as strong and tough as those existing between the city and the site of its original settlement. The drawing, depicting the multiple water movements, has the potential to make the landscape condition reappear. This former instability is no longer imaginable today, due to river embankments, bridled by dykes.

Describing the specific geographic features of the first settlement's site seems a fundamental step to understand: first, the ideas of "*ville-paysage*", that endure over time, and secondly, the sensitive system defining the functioning of the valley.

Many paintings and drawings, exceeding the simple representation of factual situations, manifest a city in symbiosis with water and its surrounding territory, which has gradually been tamed. Details and framings showing topographical amplifications, reflect perceptions that apprehended the urban site with care, especially on those territorial portions, where the *Meuse* could easily reclaim its land. The clear interposed distance between city and water – or the presence of a polycentric city, formed by islands of which each is marked by its own church – suggests the simultaneous need for control and caution, while cohabiting with the river and its rhythms. The schematic drawing of the first settlement shows the existing intense dialectic: fears and challenges are mingled to finally build an artifact composed of a city, largely controlling the left bank of the river and waiting to easily exceed the *Meuse* and extend beyond. Crossed by the river, *Liège* takes full advantage of its waterway. The former arable left levees are subjected to harbor development and accordingly transformed into a production line, where raw materials are converted into tradable goods, to be merchandised on the central market place. This is the beginning of a tight dialogue between city and water.

3.3. Shaping of a 19th century urban policy

Representations of the territory's transformation under the blows of modernization projects are little known and remain technical documents. However, used as basis for land registry, they present precious graphics, finely describing the unstable natural character of the settings willing to be changed. The former winding flows of the *Meuse*, are drastically overwritten by well defined rigid lines marking the new boundaries between land and water. These plots and intentions initiate the continuation of a dialogue that gradually hardens with the increasing desire to carry the equation between exploitation of natural resources (landscape) and city development to extremes.

Anticipating industrial profit, by virtue of important deposits of stone coal in combination to reclaimable waterways, the hitherto organic riverine landscape is drastically rationalized. A sophisticated hydrologic plan concentrates numerous winding waterbeds in one main channel, keeping water outside the city center. The previously capricious right bank is dried up by discharging the main affluents into an artificial by-pass, the so-called "*Derivation*". The thus substantially reduced surface water allows former undeveloped areas to accommodate the city's main industrial extensions. Additional railway infrastructure, encourages the development of *Liège's* productive suburbs.

On the verge of these major landscape transformations, proto-industrial experimentation had already taken place on the northern fringe of the medieval city, where sedimentary rocks of coal were found on the high plateau. The extracted coal was descended in the plain, where artisanal armories and other small scale metalworking factories settled along the river. This logistic organization, counteracting the valleys main longitudinal direction, consolidated a former linear rural tissue. Its small plot grain however contravened local industrial growth, which incited factories to relocate in the newly reclaimed *Ourthe* confluence.

The right banks modern configuration is based on the on-site arrival of *Liège's* first train connection. Its terminal station is linked the historical center by a new set of bridges crossing the *Derivation* and the *Meuse* on the point where they are nearest one to another. The thus generated new city entrance arrives straight to the former "*island*", relocating the city's center and enhancing its extension southwards. The consequent urban district is stretched between a navigable commercial basin on the riverbank and the foot of the valley's hillside, where the main railway station provides fast access to circumjacent cities (*Brussels* and *Aachen*).

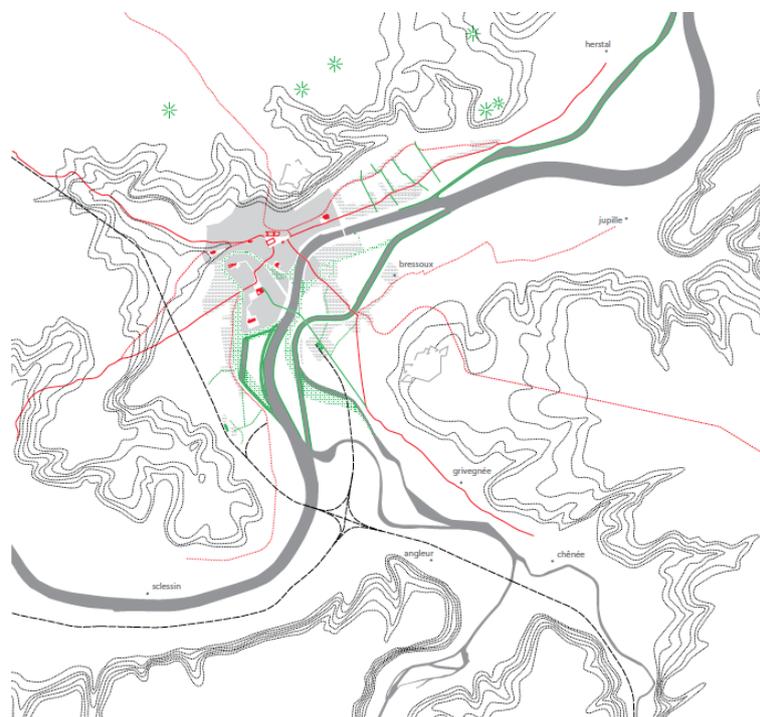


Figure 3. Water- and railway as initiator of urban and landscape transformation

The main project of this 19th century policy is

the ambitious reshaping of the *Meuse* river. Its new configuration serves several purposes at once:

- Adapt the stream to the needs of intensive navigation, turning it into one of the most important infrastructures for industrial development.
- Dewater the channels running through the city centre to cleanse the inhabited urban fabric while conferring it a new urban scenery.
- Amplify the network of boulevards and quays as support for new housing development.
- Develop a new system of public spaces, urban parks and gardens supporting urban development.
- Build new residential areas enforcing the image of a new dominating class, the bourgeoisie.

The new shape of the territory is thus the "composition of an artificial landscape" representing the wishes of a society administrating the city and its qualitative places, both natural and mineral, as signals of a collective project. Engraved in situ, on the city's ground, this enterprise presents a state of balance between political, economic and cultural willpower. Green spaces, as well as the architecture and infrastructure, have formed a network in the city becoming a carrier of thought and approach of an integrated project, which allowed *Liège* for a limited time to appear almost like an "*oeuvre totale*".

3.4. Urban structure defining the 19th century city project

The early 19th century infrastructural works define the constructional framework to absorb an important upcoming economic and demographic growth in the *Meuse* valley. As part of the broader prosper development defining *Belgium's* industrial backbone, the so-called "*sillon industriel*" of *Sambre* and *Meuse*, *Liège* transmutes into one of continental Europe's first large-scale steel making centers.

Construction of the previously implied city districts follows the logics of 19th century urbanization. Public spaces are arranged in sequences on main bisector lines, adjusted according to the valley's predominant directions. Public buildings acquire strategic embedding in these geometrical compositions. The purest of these plans defines a residential district in the center of the valley, where an artificial island is confined by the *Meuse* and its *Derivation* (Figure 4.). This artificial landscape hosting the zoological garden and the "*parc de la Boverie*" might be understood as the beginning of a voluntarist policy that combines the art of gardens, landscape, technology, philosophy and economics. The public park accommodates part of 1905's *Universal Exposition*, which is only one of the three world fairs taking place in *Liège* at the beginning of the century.

3.5. Event sites

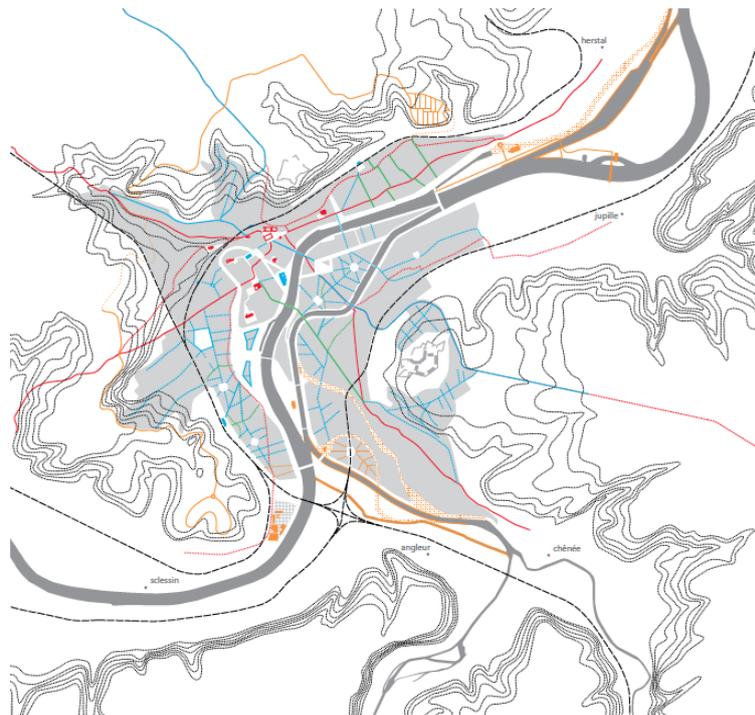
Carried out on different spots, the expositions contribute to some main changes in the cityscape. *Liège's* hydrologic situation being of particular interest, all three expositions enhance local water management through demonstrative projects. The first 1905 event displaces the last remaining natural riverbed of the *Ourthe* into a straight navigable canal, thus liberating a sheltering site for the world fair's venue. The main vestige of the following 1930 exhibition is the city's main water weir, stabilizing *Liège* basin's water-level perennially on altitude 60 above sea level. The last 1936 *International Exposition* is entirely dedicated to hydraulic techniques, celebrating the opening of the *Albert Canal*. This modern waterway is the translation of a century-old aspiration to connect the *Walloon* productive basin to a Belgian maritime harbor (*Antwerp*).

Along with these ambitious enhancements in mechanizing the riverine landscape, the international events define and formalize virtual entry gates to the city, by means of monumental and infrastructural constructions and layouts. In present days, the two main

exposition sites offer generous parks, wisely disposed on the *Meuse* river. In contrast to the prevalent technical quays these public gardens grant congenial appropriation of the waterside.

In a kind of similar structural logic, the 1905 and 1939 expositions concertedly marked the left bank's topographical crack between the sloping river cliff and the high plateau. In fact both events exhibit a park of experimental and exemplary housing projects. The chosen sites for these ideal neighborhoods are located on accentuated promontories referring to the main exposition's venue. In this way the valley's previously mentioned city entries, relate to some kind of equivalent higher lying landmarks. A planted boulevard, judiciously following the level curves, strives to link these two end pieces. Flanked by a variety of collective and social housing experimentations, this manifested structural contour underlines a geomorphological break, trying to accentuate a shift in land use between the densely exploited industrial valley and the high-lying mining and agricultural countryside. Thus one can postulate that *Liège's* major early 20th century events attempted to bridle the city's dispersion beyond the landscapes physical constraints.

Figure 4. Event sites, generating city entries and structuring development of the upper plateau



3.6. The era of “sur-urbanization”, infrastructure as source of deterritorialization

However, deterritorialization peaked through constructive thoughts that did no longer take into account the physical constraints of the territory. The city spreads by using a vast network of motorways. Meanwhile, the *Meuse*, interpreted like a canal rather than a river or urban water landscape, reached the apex of illegibility. Residents no longer grasp it in their imagination nor operate any activities, neither leisure nor other on its banks. Exclusion from daily practice is the main reason for erasing the network of urban spaces.

Despite widespread calls for ecology, detachment of the landscape's constraints is still ongoing. Infrastructural works, even when aiming for redevelopment, put pressure on the venues that transform the landscape, by separating the city from the river, dissecting neighborhoods and alienating people from experiencing places of natural and vegetated

components. They condition the view and all tactile and sensory perceptions that could feed the imaginary of the landscape. It is thus reduced to panels of impoverished practice.

Today the interest of the exposed morphological frames is to be found in the ability to resurrect at any time the imprint of the original landscape. Read as the background of the current city, this approach demonstrates the strong divergence maintained between the city and its site, as long as we continue to only feed functional factors of development.

On the other hand, it still allows us to recover the issues to use for reconnecting with the "as is" landscape, which is still waiting for a new interest.

If landscape's morphology can still be at the forefront of recovery operations, it must come to interact with other layers of the urban and landscape composition. The outcomes it provides have nothing in common with quantitative analysis, and can in contrast be absorbed and reinterpreted through broader systemic readings, to be reworked especially while aiming at qualitative living spaces.

4. FINDINGS and CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research applied to the architectural travel guide relate primarily to:

- The recovery of reading codes and graphical techniques to give back to relief and water their figurative and interpretive potential, capable of subverting the functional and widely used quantitative methods.
- The highlighting of soil, water and time as basis for sustainable balances, focused on landscape conditions preceding any development process.
- The renewed interest in the conditions fostering the existing.
- The rediscovery of the factor time as a condition that accompanies the project.
- Renewed confidence in an implicit *projectuality*, provided with observations in situ and their transposition into assumptions of spatial and temporal continuity.
- The representation as a research topic to accompany and built all phases of the project.

The more ambitious objectives concern morphological settings, that show how a reading method, capable of thinking topography and built environment as interpenetrating layers, allows to rethink *Liège in the presence of the Meuse*. This condition is still attendant and is the most effective indicator of landscape balances either established or still to be ensured.

These same settings stimulate one of the most valuable functions of the landscape and the city: imagination. Stated by K. Lynch as "*imageability*", it guarantees the right orientation, well-being as well as the development of the ability to create and promote the formation of mental images.

Cities, landscapes and territories turn thus into an endless resource of new materials to be interacted throughout experience and knowledge supporting the process of the *located project*.

In conclusion, the recovery of this interacting language has already produced one change: that of its use as a backdrop of an architectural adventure, in a territory with which this discipline broke up repeatedly. As opposed to a false modernity, which erased nature, the *Architecture Guide* will be carrying interpretation keys, giving each visitor the opportunity to choose his own desired in-depth study.

Landscape abides traces. Architecture and nature construct and deconstruct. The traveler strolls up or delves into the layers of *Liege's* palimpsest, according to explorations to be reiterated in time. Hence, architecture, instead of supplying a catalog of objects stays an artifact being part of a landscape's materials, which constitute a continuous collaboration between nature and its inhabitants.

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