

# Raymond M. Lemaire, the Great Beguinage of Leuven and the traditional city reinvention

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## Abstract

Commissioned by the University of Louvain and mainly carried on between 1962 and 1972, the renovation of the Great Beguinage under the exclusive supervision of Raymond M. Lemaire (1921-1997) has been a crucial milestone in the development of conservative urban policies at the turn of the 1960's. Widely celebrated as a implementation laboratory of the contemporary Venice Charter, of which Lemaire was one of the writers, the operation was considered a pilot project by the council of Europe and contributed to the promotion of the concept of integrated conservation. It is now inscribed on the world heritage list.

The in-depth study of the beguinage I had the opportunity to carry on during my PhD research, based on an extensive archival and photographic material, revealed that rather than a conservative project, respectful of the historical layering of the place, the operation had often consisted in a deep restoration of the individual buildings (houses and convents), bordering on reconstruction, in order to provide an ideal overall image of the pre-industrial city. At the light of Lemaire's contemporary texts and reports presented on the international scene (Council of Europe, Unesco, ICOMOS), emphasising the benefits of a « traditional » environment for a healthy social life in response to the rising criticism towards the modernist model, the project appears to have been a manifesto rather than a laboratory.

At the turn of the 1970's, the success of the project helped Raymond Lemaire to get many commissions in Brussels, and while promoting a quite scientific approach of the urban areas to renovate, he cannot help but try to reproduce the ideal beguinage model. Confronted to a much more heterogeneous built environment, with a more complex historical layering than in Leuven, he can't escape the temptation of reinventing the pre-industrial city architecture and urban layering on the basis of scarce fragments. Ranging from pastiche to late-modern re-interpretations, his projects, often not or very partly realised, illustrate not only his aesthetic *parti pris* but above all, his faith in the power of pre-industrial architecture, even reinvented, to make the city a better place to live in.

*Keywords:* rehabilitation - integrated conservation - Venice Charter - postmodernism - Raymond Lemaire - Beguinage

Ce n'est qu'en étudiant les oeuvres de nos prédécesseurs que nous pourrons réformer l'ordonnance banale de nos grandes villes.

Camillo Sitte, *L'Art de bâtir les villes*, 1918, p.118.

## Context

Trained as an archaeologist in the early 1940's, Raymond M. Lemaire (1921-1997)<sup>1</sup> catches the conservation bug from his father, architect at the ministry of Public works, and his uncle, an important figure of the Belgian conservation milieu in the first half of the twentieth century. Priest, professor at the university of Louvain, member of the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites, Canon Raymond A.G. Lemaire (1878-1954) is also involved in many restoration and construction projects, in collaboration with architects. He authors, in 1938, *La Restauration des monuments anciens*, a treaty strongly influenced by Riegl's value-based approach<sup>2</sup>. At the end of his career, his homonymous nephew, Raymond M. Lemaire, who finishes his PhD in 1949, while working as a « monument man » for the recovery of looted artworks,

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<sup>1</sup> The research presented in this paper is part of my PhD, presented in January 2015 at the faculty of engineering of the KULeuven: *Raymond M. Lemaire (1921-1997) and the Conservation of the Ancient City: Historical and Critical Study of his Belgian Projects in International Perspective*, under the direction of Prof. Ing. Arch. Luc Verpoest.

<sup>2</sup> C. Houbart, *The lessons of the first reconstruction in Belgium : "La restauration des monuments anciens" by Canon Raymond A.G. Lemaire (1938)*, in P. Cimbolli-Spagnesi (ed.), *Al di là delle trincee. Territori e architetture del Regno d'Italia al tempo della Prima Guerra Mondiale* (Atti del convegno internazionale, Rome, 2015), Quasar, 2017, pp. 315-324.

takes on most of his tasks: becoming himself a professor at the university of Louvain, he continues some restoration and reconstruction projects begun by his uncle.

Until the early sixties, nothing indicates that Raymond M. Lemaire, mainly active in the conservation of monuments, would take such an interest in the question of historic cities. But a combination of factors decides otherwise : in 1962, at the moment when he is involved in the organisation of the Venice Congress, the University of Louvain, in need of dwellings for its growing community, buys the urban site of the Great beguinage, on the recommendation of a group of professors lead by Lemaire, who is immediately entrusted with the renovation works. The ensemble, considered unsanitary, is ruled since after the Revolution by the Public Assistance Commission, that doesn't have the financial means to adapt the buildings to modern norms in terms of comfort and prefers to build new social housing complexes. In 1965, after having been elected Secreteray General of the newly born ICOMOS, Lemaire joins the Council of Europe's Technical Advisor's Committee in charge of thinking a new policy in the field of safeguard of heritage. Having a complete free hand in the management of the Beguinage rehabilitation, he turns the operation into a pilot project at the European scale and a significant contribution to the setting of a "reviving" policy for the ensembles. But at the same time, the project is a challenge for the Venice Charter rather an illustration of its principles, immediately after its adoption.

### **An early challenge for the Venice charter**

Composed of around a hundred edifices – church, convents, houses, hospital, farm –, the Great Beguinage is founded in the 13th century. At the moment when it is bought by the university of Louvain, most of the existing buildings date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the golden age of the area. Rented to the poor since the beginning of the 19th century, the ensemble is in a very bad condition and despite the recurrent attempts of the city administration, in the fifties, to get it listed, its traditional architecture isn't protected in any way (fig.1). Separated by walls from public roads around, the beguinage is a enclosed world, a small city within the city, where Raymond Lemaire, in charge of converting the buildings

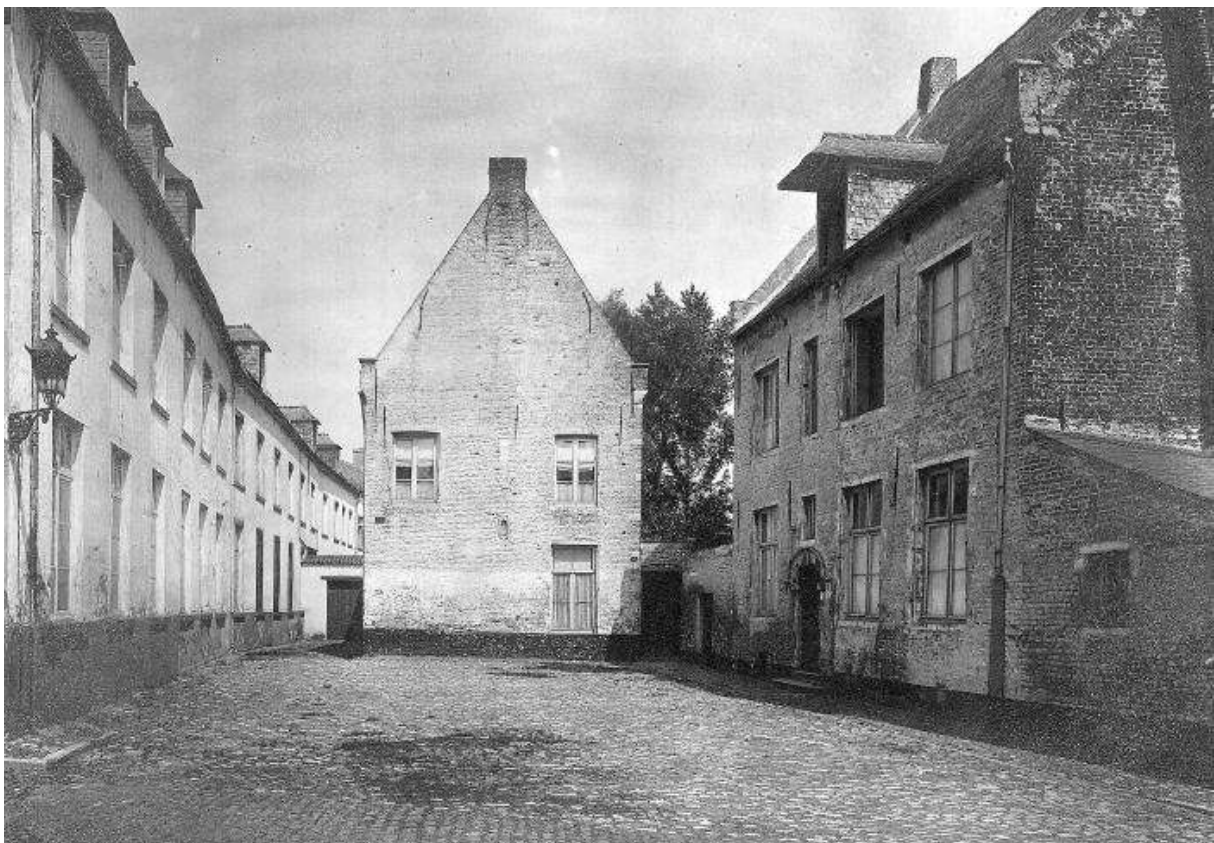


Fig. 1: Louvain, Great Beguinage, *View of Benedenstraat before rehabilitation*, ARML.

into dwellings for the university community, is free to conduct the project as he pleases without any constraint except a control from the university on the budget<sup>3</sup>.

The renovation being free from any external control, the archive, containing hundreds of plans and pictures of the site and its buildings, say very little about choices and justifications of the project's options<sup>4</sup>. The only explicit explanation is produced by Lemaire in an international context; in 1970, when he presents the project to the « Committee for Housing, Construction and Planning » of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, he lists the three general principles that guided the works: the “scrupulous conservation of all authentic and valuable parts”, inside and outside the buildings, the rejection of a “museum setting” and the search “to find current solutions for a set of dwellings containing everything from a student’s room to a house for a large family” and finally, the legibility of interventions, adopting “today’s forms and materials resolutely, but with restraint and modesty”<sup>5</sup>. A detailed study of the project, based on graphic and photography material, and complemented with an in-situ observation, reveals many exceptions to these principles in accordance with the contemporary Venice charter that Lemaire contributes to write<sup>6</sup>.

At the moment when the ensemble is bought by the university, its buildings are not only unsanitary, but most of them have been heavily transformed. In addition to the construction of annexes, reducing the size of courtyards and gardens, many buildings’ front facades were adapted at the beginning of the 19th century in order to bring more light inside the rooms. Involving the removal of the stone mullions and transoms, the lowering of window sills and the replacement of stained-glass windows by wooden frames, these transformations also implied an overall white-washing of masonries in order to conceal the reshaping. In general, the site’s architecture was simplified and systematised, substituting to the picturesque rhythm of the contrasted brick and stone polychromy, the repetitive aspect of similar rectangular windows in the taste of neoclassicism. In a few cases, the volume was also simplified, through the suppression of gables and dormers.

Lemaire’s choice to reconstitute, for all buildings, a state as close as possible to the original one, at the cost of the building’s more recent history, is surprising when we think of the respect of historical layering recommended by the Venice charter. Even if some mullions and transoms put back in place during the works had been conserved on the site, reused as streets pavement, the changes in the size of windows, the moving of a number of doors, and the reconstitution of gables, dormers or half-timberings seem to sometimes rest on very tiny archaeological basis or even, in some cases, on stylistic analogies. In the same way, the complete change of most interiors seems in contradiction with the transmission of the building’s historic message and a consistent interior-exterior relation (fig.2). But without going to much into details, judging the project in the light of principles mainly thought for the restoration of monuments proves to be misleading. As soon as in 1971, Raymond Lemaire himself admits the charter’s unsuitability for the ensembles, and this awareness leads him, together with Piero Gazzola, to launch a reviewing process of the charter in 1975<sup>7</sup>. Since 1965, both Lemaire and Gazzola had been invited, as Secretary general and President of ICOMOS, to be members of the Council of Europe’s Technical Advisor’s Committee, in charge of framing the reflections on “preservation and rehabilitation of monuments and sites”, launched by a

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed overview of the project options, see: S. Van Aerschot, *De restauratie/ renovatie van het Leuense Groot beginhof (1963-1993). Een laboratorium op wereldniveau*, “Monumenten & Landschappen”, 2010, 5, pp. 23-46 and C. Houbart, *The Grand Beguinage of Louvain: an early challenge for the Venice Charter*, “Opus. Storia, architettura, restauro, disegno”, 2018, 2 (in press).

<sup>4</sup> This archive was handed in the early nineties by R.M. Lemaire and is kept at the KULeuven’s University Archive (hereafter ARML).

<sup>5</sup> R. M. Lemaire, *The Renewal of Historic Cities – In Particular: The Great Beguinage at Louvain*, ECE, 1970, p.15, ARML.

<sup>6</sup> On Lemaire’s role in the writing of the Venice charter, see: C. Houbart, *Deconsecrating a doctrinal monument. Raymond M. Lemaire and the revisions of the Venice Charter*, “Change over time”, 2014, 4.2, pp. 218-243.

<sup>7</sup> On this aborted process, see: *Ibidem*.



Fig. 2: Louvain, Great Beguinage, *View of Benedenstraat after rehabilitation by R.M. Lemaire, ARML.*

1963 recommendation. The ideas developed by Lemaire in that context throw another light on the Beguinage project.

### **A pilot project for the European “reviving” policy**

In 1963, when both the Council of Europe’s reflections and the Beguinage project are launched, despite the emerging will to preserve, beyond monuments, some historic ensembles, significant field experience is lacking : except very specific cases, such as the city of Pérouges in France, and operations carried on in the specific context of the postwar reconstruction, there aren’t any guidelines available. What could have been a disadvantage for the Louvain project, turns into a benefit for Lemaire: forced to innovate, he appears as a pioneer and benefits from an international audience.

From 1965 until 1968, the Council of Europe’s Technical Advisor’s Committee organises five symposia addressing various aspects of preservation and rehabilitation of heritage, understood in a broader sense than the only historical monuments. Based on theoretical reflections and case-studies presented by experts coming from all over Europe, they lead in 1969 to a conference of Ministers in charge of heritage in Brussels, followed by the organisation of a European Year of Architectural heritage in 1975, when the concept of integrated conservation is defined by the Amsterdam Declaration<sup>8</sup>.

During the Bath symposium, in 1966, Raymond Lemaire synthesises for the first time his ideas in terms of “restoration and reviving of historical ensembles”. Going beyond the objectives of a mere transmission of historical heritage, he emphasises the services provided by monuments and ensembles to the community

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<sup>8</sup> On Lemaire’s contribution to these debates, see: C. Houbart, *Bruxelles, laboratoire d’une politique européenne de “réanimation” urbaine. L’exemple du quartier du Sablon*, “Bruxelles Patrimoines”, 2018, 27-28, pp. 28-49 (in press).

in terms of “fulfilment of physical and moral needs”<sup>9</sup>. Since this first text, more than the historical or artistic value of the ensembles, it is the quality of their urban atmosphere that justifies their “reviving” : “the message of the monumental ensemble resides as much in the spiritual point of view and the atmosphere it creates as in the high quality of its elements”. It is therefore necessary to give back to these ensembles their “full value of human habitat”, which implies, more than “safeguarding a scenography”, sanitation and adaptation of the interiors<sup>10</sup>.

The renovation options chosen by Lemaire for the Grand Beguinage and more particularly, the many exceptions to the principles of the Venice charter, are indeed easier to understand from that point of view : more than each building’s restoration, according to its own values, Lemaire aims to recreate an overall value, including not only the built envelopes and the interiors, but also public spaces. In addition to the demolition of late valueless annexes, he chooses to suppress most separation walls between gardens, and to create or recreate meeting spaces at the heart of the area. Just like deep internal transformations allow the adaptation of the interiors to the needs of individual or family life, an idealised vision of social life in traditional cities lead the treatment of public spaces. It has a direct consequence on the facades’ restoration: beyond the expression of each building’s singularity, they are the envelope of streets and squares. The “structure plan” of Bruges, for which Lemaire collaborates with the studio *Groep Planning* and one of its leaders, Jan Tanghe, from 1972 on, defines this envelope as the “urban facade” : right where interior space – or positive space – meets exterior space – negative space –, this facade has its own identity, beyond the limits between buildings (fig.3). Thus in many cases, restoration choices for a facade are lead not by the enhancement of a particular building and its internal arrangement, but by its contribution to the overall scenography. This definitely happened for the Grand beguinage as a whole.

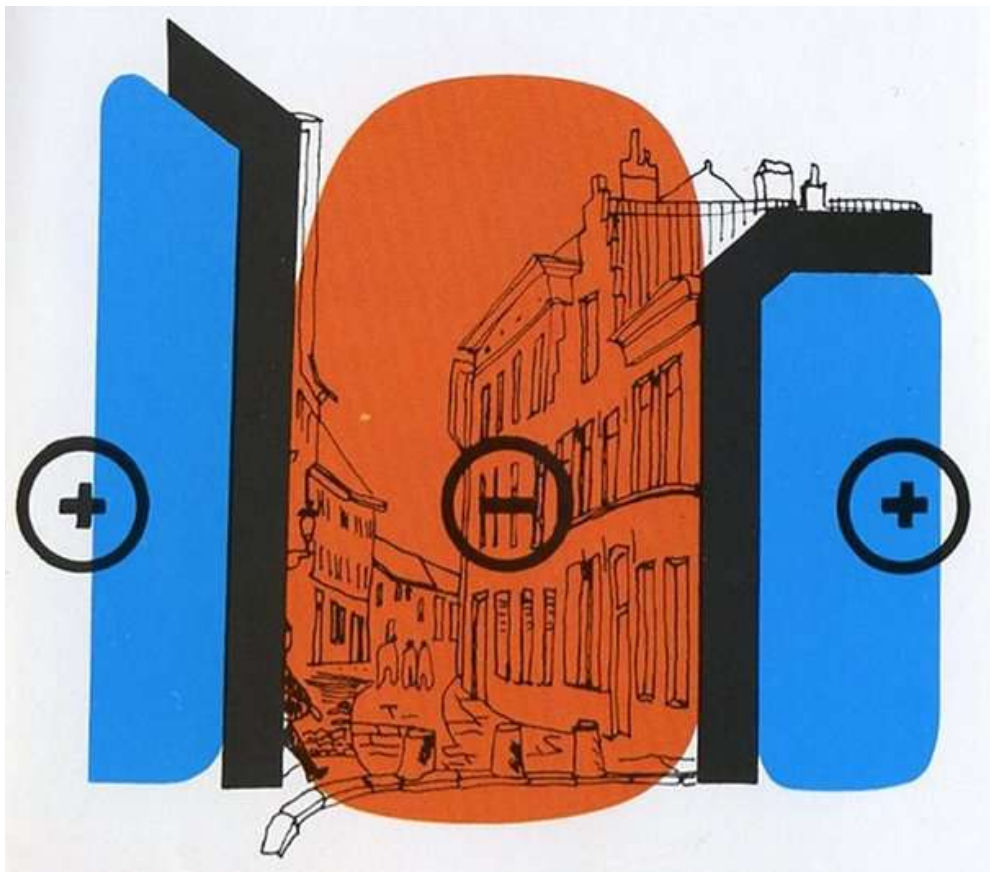


Fig.3: *The urban facade*, from: Groep Planning, *Brugge. Structuurplan voor de binnenstad*, Brugge 1976, p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> R. M. Lemaire, *Restauration et réanimation des ensembles historiques*, in *Principes et méthodes de la conservation et de la réanimation des sites et ensembles d'intérêt historique ou artistique* (Confrontation C. Défense et mise en valeur des sites et ensembles d'intérêt historique ou artistique, Bath 1966), Council of Europe, 1967, p. 58. All translations by the author.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

Without denying the importance of the aesthetic argument in the decision to come back to a more picturesque state of the ensemble, at the cost of the nineteenth century transformations – beauty remains a key argument in Lemaire’s decisions<sup>11</sup> –, it is worth mentioning that the recovered diversity, at the expense of the relative uniformity of the transformed state, contributes above all to the creation of an existential climate centred on non-countable needs rather than functional demands:

The man felt home in cities from before this century. He could work, live, enjoy himself and blossom there. He found the scale that suited him, diversity in order, the unexpected that excluded boredom, the constant care for beauty. (...) The economic performance wasn’t the first objective, but the satisfaction of his needs, and the quest for a setting at his disposal<sup>12</sup>.

In order to recreate such a setting, Lemaire doesn’t hesitate to reinforce the “togetherness atmosphere” of the Beguinage by elements functionally anachronistic but bearing a symbolic community message<sup>13</sup>: for example, he reconstructs a number of wells and, on the small square facing the Convent of Chièvres, a landmark at the centre of the site, a water pump in stone bought from a Franciscan convent in Louvain. With its picturesque streets, its varied architecture and its diversified small-scale public spaces, the Grand Beguinage is the antithesis of the functional city. It just takes a few easy steps to grant it a model value.

In the service of humans, new urbanism and architecture are still looking for the ways to reach a balanced synthesis between their needs and the means to fulfil them. The cities from the past are the still living expressions of such a synthesis. They were built for and around humans and the diversity of their ways of being and their needs, and not almost exclusively in function of the economy that allows their subsistence. They have thus acquired a human dimension of which we are often deprived in the new ensembles. And this is why, most likely, they have an essential educative value and a great lesson to teach us<sup>14</sup>.

Thus the beguinage appears to have been a very delicate operation: while attempting to respect and illustrate the newly adopted principles of the Venice charter – for example, by giving to a number of new interventions a “contemporary stamp” – Lemaire also uses the beguinage as a living and convincing example of the housing potentials of historic areas. This means an attention, not only for the historic and artistic qualities of the buildings – important in the Venice charter – but also, the potential of the whole site in terms of harmonious social life – which sometimes meant to depart from the principles of monumental conservation. From that point of view, the projet was a turning point in his career, not only because it was unanimously appraised by the international conservation milieu, but also as a demonstration that principles can never outweigh field reality. Until the end of his life, while playing an active part in the writing of many important international documents in the field of heritage – in 1994, he is the writer of the French version of the Nara Document – Lemaire will always question established principles and encourage ICOMOS not to rest on its past achievements. As an illustration, in a 1976 unpublished text, he proclaims, facing the difficult question of combining safeguard and reuse, that “it would be too simple to believe that the mere implementation of a few rules would allow to solve such a delicate question. Beyond the talent indispensable to create any valuable work, it is before anything else the state of mind that is the guarantee of success”<sup>15</sup>.

But the Grand beguinage is not only important as a lesson in humility. Studying the projects Lemaire develops in the late sixties and the seventies reveals that the result of the project remains a model, an ideal that he keeps on trying to reproduce again and again, not only in his rehabilitation projects, but also, as an urbanist: in parallel with his reflections on conservation, Lemaire indeed develops a critical position towards functionalist urbanism.

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<sup>11</sup> C. Houbart, *The Grand Beguinage of Louvain: an early challenge for the Venice Charter...*

<sup>12</sup> R. M. Lemaire, *Restauration et réanimation...*, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> *Interview with Suzanne Van Aerschot*, Brussels, July 23rd, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> R. M. Lemaire, *Restauration et réanimation...*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>15</sup> R.M. Lemaire, *La mémoire et la continuité*, 1976, ARML.

## An urban manifesto

“I don’t have the ambition of having created a new trend in urbanism. I am simply convinced that there is more genius and intelligence in the long experience accumulated by the generations, facing the problems of life, than in one single man’s head, even brilliant”. Raymond Lemaire synthesises, in these words, in 1988, his vision of urbanism, in an interview on his project of Port-la-Rochette, a neo-traditional tourist centre on the shore of one of the Eau d’Heure Lakes in Belgium<sup>16</sup>. The rapid link operated by Lemaire between “reviving” and urbanism is stimulated by another project of the university : the construction of a new town to host the French-speaking university born from the linguistic divorce of the University of Louvain. Very critical towards the functionalist vision of Victor Gruen, a shopping mall specialist hired by the university administrators to plan the new city, Lemaire succeeds in replacing him as head of the team in charge of the masterplan. The contemporary success of the Beguinage carries much weight in that decision: this model is more seducing to most professors than the American one, not only because in the continuity with the European tradition, but also and even more, for the way of life embodied by its atmosphere and human scale.

Lemaire’s critical position towards the strict application of the Athens charter’s principles is far from being isolated, and is to situate in the continuation of a protest born in the previous decade. Let’s mention, in France, situationists’ criticism towards the “architecture of ordinariness and massification” incarnate by the large housing complexes, of which “formal poorness imposes the monotony of a standardised lifestyle”<sup>17</sup>, or the questioning of the functional city discourse by Alison and Peter Smithson as soon as 1953<sup>18</sup>. Here, there is no question of reactivating traditional cities as forms, but rather to find “new equivalents”, but this reconsideration of the CIAM established discourse illustrates the revalorisation of a “basic emotional need” such as belonging. “‘Belonging’ is basic emotional need – its associations are of the simplest order. From ‘belonging’ and the awareness that to answer this need, “the short narrow street or the slum succeeds where spacious redevelopment frequently fails”<sup>19</sup>.

Considering the “sprawling and uniform city”, and “large series” housing “an assault on individual values”, Lemaire opposes them “the infinite variety, in terms of urbanism and housing, of the traditional city, from before the mid-nineteenth century more particularly”<sup>20</sup>. The model he refers to is an idealised version of this city, embodied, among other examples, by the renovated Great beguinage. But as a bureaucrat from the Brussels administration will cynically note in the margin of a report in which Lemaire praises “the beauty, the poetry, the mystery, the welcoming ability of ancient cities”, “we could also recall for these times the lack of hygiene, cholera, plague, the social situation, the fanaticism and intolerance that reigned in these charming environments”<sup>21</sup>. As other culturalists before him, Lemaire only retains from its model the characteristics that justify its choice : Augustus W. Pugin did just the same when, in the figures of *Contrasts*, published in 1836, he opposed to the industrial urbanism, illustrated by cold drawings full of factories smoke, an idealised medieval model, immersed in greenery and hosting a united community. For the followers of the culturalist model, “the material needs’ preeminence”, put forward by the progressive

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<sup>16</sup> R.M. Lemaire, *Port la Rochette, une ville touristique fidèle aux valeurs constantes de la tradition*, “Les cahiers de l’urbanisme”, 1988, 3, mars 1988, pp. 74-82.

<sup>17</sup> P. Simay, *Une autre ville pour une autre vie. Henri Lefebvre et les situationnistes*, “Métropoles”, 2008, 4 [online: [metropoles.revues.org](http://metropoles.revues.org)].

<sup>18</sup> E. Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, MIT Press, 2000, pp. 236-237.

<sup>19</sup> Alison & Peter Smithson et Aldo Van Eyck quoted by K. Frampton, *Modern architecture. A critical history*, Thames & Hudson, 2007, p. 271.

<sup>20</sup> R. M. Lemaire, *La signification du patrimoine des monuments et des sites pour l’homme d’aujourd’hui*, Conseil de l’Europe. Comité des monuments et des sites. 1ère session. 29 novembre - 3 décembre 1971. Rapport introductif au débat général préparé sur demande du secrétariat par M. Raymond Lemaire, Professeur à l’Université de Louvain, 15 novembre 1971 (ARML).

<sup>21</sup> Quartier des arts, *Etude d’assainissement, de restauration et de revitalisation de l’îlot Sainte-Anne – Bodenbroek*. Rapport général établi par [le] Prof. R.M. Lemaire, Urbanism Department Archive, Brussels.

model, “fades away facing that of the spiritual needs”<sup>22</sup> : according to Lemaire, “a harmonious environment should be a social right, just like fresh air and drinking water”<sup>23</sup>. On the contrary, guided by the quest for economic performance, the development of the functionalist city leads to individual deficiencies ; through its excessiveness and its undistinguishable and repetitive character, it pays no heed to human uncountable needs.

In the sixties and seventies, in parallel with a development of this criticism towards functionalism, new theories come to support Lemaire’s intuitive analysis. He punctually refers to the neurobiologist Henri Laborit, author, in 1971, of « L’homme et la ville », and who, building on he ideas of Prof. René Dubos, rejects “the sterilising atmosphere of many modern housing complexes, which are hygienic and rational but absolutely don’t stimulate the blooming of human potentialities”<sup>24</sup>. In the same way, the “Réponses à la violence”, a report written in 1978 in front of what a number of people consider an insecure climate, by the “Study committee on violence, criminality and delinquency”, supervised by the French minister of Justice, Alain Peyrefitte, suggests limiting the size of big building complexes, encouraging the inhabitants to “personalise their neighbourhoods” and, among other ideas, to “turn the city into a meeting point rather than an intersection of solitudes”<sup>25</sup>. The same year, at the World Congress of the Union of Architects, Lemaire’s discourse goes in the same direction:

The functionalist and materialist vision of urbanism (...) doesn’t care for diversity, for the nuances of social life and the groups’ and individuals’ cultural needs. Thus, they don’t find an adequate answer to their expressed and inexpressible needs, well-reasoned and subconscious, rational and irrational, that the traditional city naturally fulfils. If the quality of housing has been improved, the same cannot be told from all values grouped under the name of “quality of life”. Big housing complexes, wide green spaces in which they are built according to the principles of opened urbanism, or the deep gorges they generate when they are built along classic streets, didn’t contribute to the creation of social links. The city-dweller has become indifferent to the other. Thus, neighbourhood solidarity, one of the fundamental characters of the traditional cities’ society, is generally absent in these places”<sup>26</sup>.

In short, focusing on “rational”, conscious” and “countable” human needs, cities built on functionalist principles miss their target: humans also have “irrational”, “psychological”, “subconscious” needs : despite their functional deficiencies, historic cities remain attractive for a large part of the population. To illustrate this fact, Lemaire will often mention the long waiting lists for renting a house or an apartment in the Great Beguinage, while modern housings were available. More difficult to grasp, these needs aren’t less essential. To understand them, ancient cities “that have grown through centuries without any other interference than the natural answer to diverse needs, in function of the inhabitants’ sensitivity and their distinctive cultural characteristics”<sup>27</sup>, are rich and reliable sources information: “architectural and urban heritage can learn us what a recent pas has attempted to let us forget”<sup>28</sup>.

From the sixties on, Raymond Lemaire’s projects in the field of urbanism are to situate in the same spirit as those of the Team Ten. Both echo the return to Henri Lefèbvre’s vision of space as a “use value” rather

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<sup>22</sup> F. Choay, *L’urbanisme, utopies et réalités*, Seuil, 1965, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> D. Lindstrum, *The World of Conservation : an Interview with Raymond Lemaire*, “Monumentum”, 1983, XXVI, 2, p. 93-95.

<sup>24</sup> H. Laborit, *L’homme et la ville*, Flammarion, 1971, p. 123.

<sup>25</sup> A. Peyrefitte, R. Schmelck, R. Dumoulin, *Réponses à la violence. Rapport à M. Le Président de la République présenté par le Comité d’études sur la violence, la criminalité et la délinquance*, juillet 1977 (<http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/774023100/index.shtml>).

<sup>26</sup> R.M. Lemaire, *L’urbanisme, l’architecture et le développement social et culturel*, Discourse for the World congress of the International Union of Architects in Mexico, April 1978 (ARML).

<sup>27</sup> R.M. Lemaire, *Does history remain an essential reference for future town-planning?*, Discourse for the first Urban Design Forum in Yokohama, 1992 (ARML).

<sup>28</sup> R.M. Lemaire, *Quelle doctrine de sauvegarde pour demain?*, “Restaurio”, 1990, 107-108.



than an “exchange value”, and the promotion of an “appropriate space” rather than a “commercial space”<sup>29</sup>. Nevertheless, Lemaire’s experience in the field of historic cities’ rehabilitation, and also, his training as an archaeologist, lead him to develop a more literal inspiration from pre-industrial cities. Without being opposed to more abstract transcriptions of their features, his work as an urbanist illustrates the tendency to go over the only reinstatement of the “idea” to find in the architecture from the past the inspiration for a new formal language.

In theory, however, Lemaire rejects any “misunderstood imitation” of the ancient cities’ forms: it is a question of rediscovering “values, constants, ways to conceive that can help us to find richer solutions, more suitable to our cultural identities, without disavowing neither our means of expression, nor our artistic sensitivity”<sup>30</sup>. Just like Camillo Sitte had attempted, with his “imaginary museum of urban planning” to perceive, “behind the scenes”, the mechanisms of the “unconscious artistic sense” that animated the creators of the past<sup>31</sup>, Lemaire draws from his experience in restoration and rehabilitation some essential factors that could allow contemporary architecture and urbanism to be in the cultural continuity with the past models and thus, benefit from their qualities. Nevertheless, unlike Sitte and his followers – among who Charles Buls and Gustavo Giovannoni – who were above all interested in “strongly denying the triteness and the banality of the geometry that has done so much harm to modern cities”<sup>32</sup>, Raymond Lemaire associates the return of beauty in the living environment to a resurgence of a lost sense of collectivity. It is thus not only a question to find in the past a rediscovery of a “sense of beauty”, but more fundamentally, like in Louvain-la-Neuve, to “find back the norms that have inspired the humanism of the past cities where humans could meet humans”<sup>33</sup>.

Discussing the masterplan Lemaire and his team Urbanisme-Architecture establish for Louvain-la-Neuve goes far beyond the limits of this paper<sup>34</sup>. But working at the same time on the Beguinage and the new city doesn’t only give him the opportunity to test the application of some valuable features of traditional cities to prospective urbanism; it also more generally leads him to blur the limits between rehabilitation and creation. In the projects he develops in Brussels and in other Belgian cities from the end of the sixties, rehabilitating historic areas means the recreation of a piece of the idealised pre-industrial city. Some of these projects are based on existing urban fabric, which must be rehabilitated and “corrected” in order to recover a unity of scale and aspect. In other cases, some entire building blocks are conceived anew, using the lessons of the rehabilitated ones. It is striking that both kinds of projects share a series of characteristics borrowed from the Great beguinage: the layout of pedestrian road networks inside the building blocks, punctuated by small and varied public spaces, the conservation, creation or evocation of narrow parcels recalling the structure of the traditional city, of which the volumes are respected or re-established, and finally, the search for a picturesque effect, avoiding straight alignments and repetitive series.

In Brussels, the Sainte-Anne and Saint-Géry blocks are the most complete projects of Lemaire in the field of rehabilitation – even if the first has only been scarcely realised<sup>35</sup>. In both cases, comparing the plans of existing and planned states reveal Lemaire's will to demolish later annexes, filling gardens and courtyards,

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<sup>29</sup> Office national du film du Canada, *Urbanose*, 15, *Entretien avec Henri Lefèbvre*, 1972.

<sup>30</sup> R.M. Lemaire, *Quelle doctrine de sauvegarde...*

<sup>31</sup> C. Sitte, *L'art de bâtir les villes. L'urbanisme selon ses fondements artistiques*, L'équerre, 1980, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> G. Giovannoni, *L'urbanisme face aux villes anciennes*, Seuil, 1998, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> *Cahier noir études schéma directeur*, np, “exposition LLN 1968-1973” collection, Architecture Archives and Libraries, ULB, Brussels.

<sup>34</sup> See, among other publications, J. Rémy, *Louvain-la-Neuve, une manière de concevoir la ville*, Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> On these projects, see C. Houbart., *Raymond Lemaire et les débuts de la rénovation urbaine à Bruxelles*, “Revue d'Histoire Urbaine / Urban History Review”, 2012, XLI, 2, pp. 37-56 and C. Houbart, *Bruxelles, laboratoire d'une politique européenne...*

to replace them by public spaces with human scale and atmosphere. In the case of the Saint-Géry block, two pedestrian squares are laid out on both sides of a former convent brewery. Trees as well as an evocation, under the restored brewery, of an arm of the Senne river that used to supply it, contribute to the picturesque character of the whole, reinforced by a heavy restoration of the most ancient buildings of the site, such as the “Lion d’Or”, compensating the more repetitive character of late nineteenth-century houses nearby. At the Sainte-Anne block (fig.4), the existing Saint-Jacques dead-end road, concluded by a small square – the only realised part of the project – is the starting point of a promenade inside the block, punctuated by a second square at the back of the picturesque “House of the Curates”, of which the gables are restored for the occasion and face the reconstructed facade of the “Crossbowmen’s Guild”, dismantled in the 1950’s in a street nearby and kept by the city of Brussels in a warehouse.



Fig. 4: R.M. Lemaire & team, *Rehabilitation project of Sainte-Anne block*, model, 1970, ARML.

The project conceived by Lemaire’s team for the square in front of the Brussels cathedral is a very illustrative example of the transposition of these rehabilitation principles in the creation of a new block (fig.5). In order to emphasise the monumental scale of the cathedral, diminished by the construction of a wide road over the railway junction and rather tall offices buildings, Lemaire plans to build a traditional scale block on the square, so the pedestrian coming from the city centre could recover the right perception of the monument more or less as it was in the middle ages. With an irregular geometry, composed in function of the other surrounding blocks, the new ensemble is composed of buildings around a courtyard with two different levels and divided by trees rows. The fact that the entrances to the courtyard are not aligned prevent a direct vision of the church facade. The buildings’ rhythm evokes the ancient plots, and the architecture is composed of elements borrowed from regional traditional architecture (vertical windows, arches, gables, dormers...). Lemaire also plays with recesses in the alignments, with variations of the roofs directions, sometimes parallel, sometimes perpendicular to the roads, and with punctual variations in height, all this contributing to the impression of a group of small units. Just like in the Great Beguinage, unity in diversity characterises the project : for Raymond Lemaire,



Fig. 5: R.M. Lemaire & A. Stevens, *Project for the square in front of the cathedral of Brussels*, ca 1979, ARML.

urban “reviving” and urbanism are nothing but one and the same practice, aiming to produce an environment at human scale.

Many other projects could illustrate how R.M. Lemaire uses his experience with historic cities to find another way to build neighbourhoods than the functionalist one. Without being a theoretician, he develops an empiricist knowledge of cities and human behaviours, that leads him to propose a new model, “looking ahead to the past”. In a way, his work can be situated in the early post-modern movement. But his particular profile, shifting from archaeology to urbanism, through monuments conservation, gives his work a specific tone: contrary to many postmodernists adopting ironic or provocative positions, Lemaire seriously believes in his own tales. At the same time, his openness to contemporary architecture prevents him from being only perceived as a forerunner of Prince Charles’ INTBAU<sup>36</sup>. Lemaire being mostly known as a conservationist, due to his brilliant international career within ICOMOS and Unesco, his work in the field of urban rehabilitation is often analysed through the lens of monuments conservation’s principles and thus misunderstood and underestimated. But it deserves a closer look to perceive its importance in the recent architecture history, all the more so as some of the questions raised by his projects are still valid today.

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<sup>36</sup> International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture and Urbanism ([www.intbau.org](http://www.intbau.org)).