

From Contrast to Compatibility: Raymond M. Lemaire and New Infill Architecture at Historic Sites in the 1970s

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As conservation's geographical focus has expanded from individual monuments to "urban historic landscapes," the question of how new architecture should relate to historic fabric has only increased in importance. Debate has centered on the choice between imitation of historic forms and emphasis on the difference between new and old, with an intermediate approach seeking an abstract compatibility usually labeled "contextual." At issue has been the nature of "contemporary" design, its antagonism or harmony with historic settings, and the degree to which conservation authorities feel obligated to promote it. The experience of Raymond Lemaire and the drafting of the Venice Charter of 1964 reveal the terms of this debate that was just beginning at that time and continues today. Beyond questions of style, we have learned that humility and a sense of responsibility for the faithful transmission of heritage ultimately decide the success of the new design in a conservation setting.

—The Editors

The mid-1960s were a crucial moment in the evolution of architectural conservation theory and practice. In the years from 1963 to 1965, three initiatives laid the groundwork for developments that would guide the discipline over the following decades: In 1964, the Venice Charter affirmed principles that are still widely considered authoritative today, despite periodic questioning. The foundation of ICOMOS the following year ensured the worldwide diffusion of these principles and gathered a group of influential experts who would later play an active role in the developing field of world heritage. The year before, in 1963, the Council of Europe launched a program to raise awareness of heritage and, more particularly, historic cities. One could say, simplifying a little, that while the Venice Charter closed the reign of monuments, the Council of Europe declaration opened that of urban heritage.

On one hand, the Venice Charter was the result of a process of revision of the principles adopted at the Athens conference in 1931—the

first international statement of conservation principles related to historic monuments—and transcribed more precisely in the Italian Charter of Restoration drafted by Gustavo Giovannoni the following year. On the other hand, the work of the Council of Europe launched brand new reflections based on field experiences in historic cities that were a less familiar object for conservators at the time. Even if these initiatives were largely carried forward by the same actors—conservation was an increasingly globalized but still small world—they would encounter some principled dilemmas by the end of the decade. Although "urban settings" were taken into account by the Venice Charter (Article 1), the will to extend the doctrine of the document from individual monuments to a more comprehensive concept of heritage was, above all, a decision of principle. Although the drafters of the text were aware of the necessity to take an interest in "historic sites" (Article 14), they had not tested whether or how this extension to more complex urban organisms would work in practice.

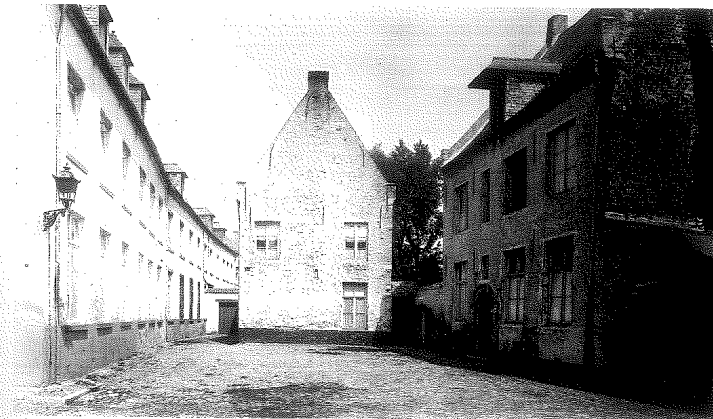
The case of Raymond M. Lemaire (1921–1997) is particularly enlightening from this point of view because, as well as being one of the authors of the Venice Charter, he was confronted at the same time in his practice with the emerging issues of historic cities, especially the introduction of new architecture into heritage settings. In addition to serving as secretary general of ICOMOS and participating in the debates of the Council of Europe that would lead in 1975 to the European Heritage Charter and the Declaration of Amsterdam, he designed a pioneering project for the rehabilitation of the Great Beguinage of Leuven. This experience led him, from the early 1970s onward, to question the validity of the Charter's principles when applied to historic districts¹ and to press for a revision of the Charter itself. Here we will focus on the integration of new construction or "infill architecture" in historic settings through two case studies: the Great Beguinage of Leuven and the "ilot Sainte-Anne" in Brussels.

THE GREAT BEGUINAGE OF LEUVEN

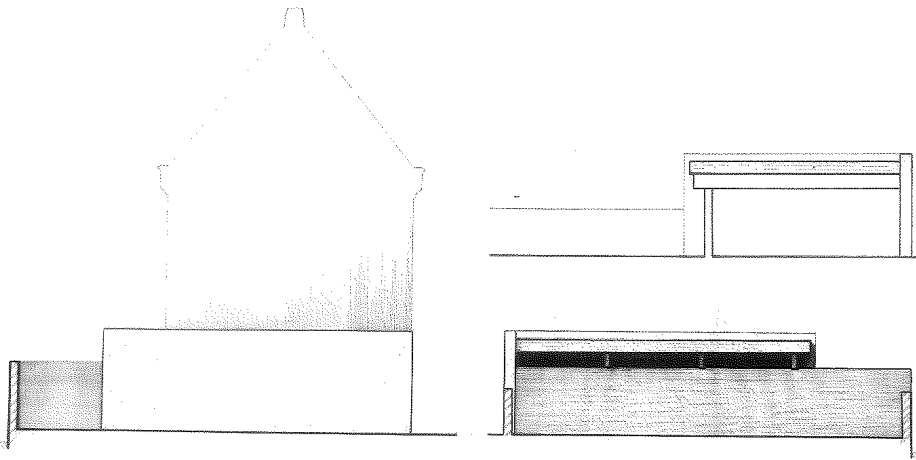
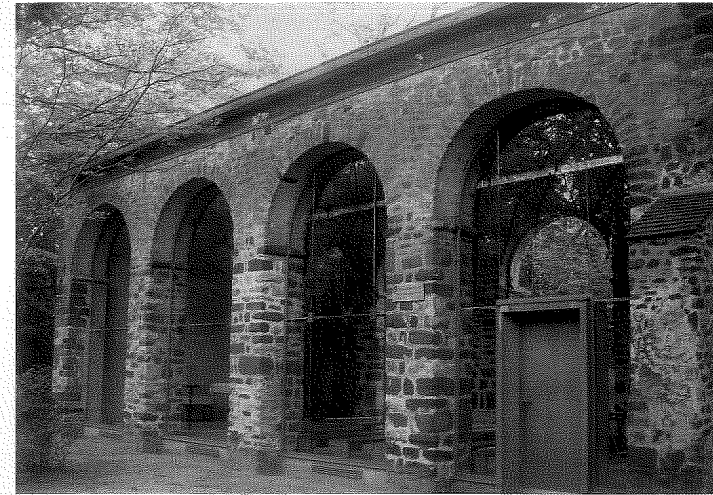
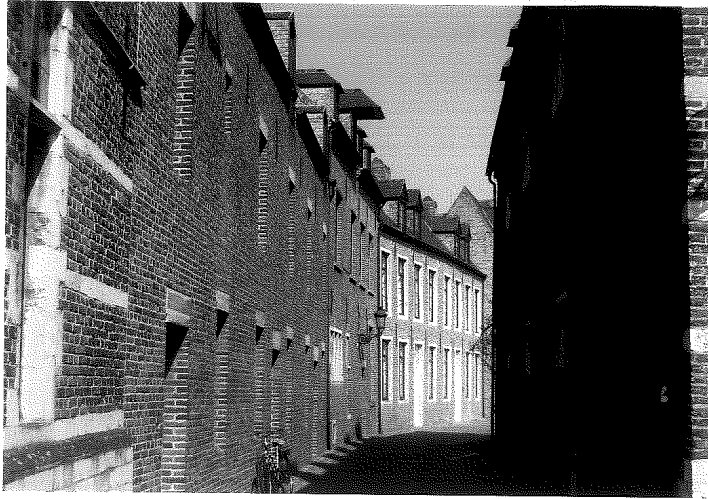
Purchased by the University of Leuven in 1962 to be transformed into housing and services, the Great Beguinage was a rather unusual case. Consisting of around eighty buildings, including houses of various sizes, convents, a church, and a hospital, it had passed through history

as a unitary whole, and was in the hands of a single owner. Being surrounded by walls and not officially protected, it was subject neither to the rules governing the public space of the city nor to the control of heritage authorities. Lemaire was free to pursue the project as he wished, apart from budgetary issues. At the time of purchase, the Beguinage was in very poor condition. Since the nineteenth century, the old religious complex had been made available to poor families by the Public Assistance Commission, and the very low rents did not support its maintenance. The buildings, constructed of brick and white stone, had been pragmatically adapted to new purposes, and the picturesque aspect of their facades, initially marked by the tight and varied rhythm of the stone window mullions and transoms, had been trivialized by a regularization of the openings and a generalized whitewashing (Figure 1).

Lemaire made the decision, contrary to Article 11 of the Venice Charter, to return the ensemble to the reimagined picturesque aspect of its heyday. This was, in fact, a state that had never existed but which constituted a manifesto in favor of the qualities of the traditional city as a living environment, strongly contrasting with the standardized dwellings offered by modernist developments.² While the facades were



This page: Figure 1. Leuven, Great Beguinage, view of the Benedenstraat in 1918. Photo: KIK-IRPA, Brussels.



heavily restored to their seventeenth- and sometimes sixteenth-century state, the interiors were provided with modern comforts and some of them were divided into cells of varying sizes to accommodate different categories of university members. But this adaptation to new functions required some new construction, and these necessary additions reveal a notable evolution in Lemaire's approach to design.

Walking through the streets of the Beguinage today, one barely notices the additions. However, if the most modest of them—like bicycle sheds or mailboxes—take the form of small volumes of ageless simplicity, others were closely studied in terms of design and architectural details. To the attentive and informed eye, the additions are distinguished by the sober treatment of the doors or windows, or the use of concrete instead of white stone for some lintels. Without being direct imitations of existing buildings, they harmoniously blend into the whole (Figure 2). But original materials in the Lemaire archives indicate that the project could have taken a completely different direction. One sketch shows a project for an annex to one of the houses conceived in a radically modernist

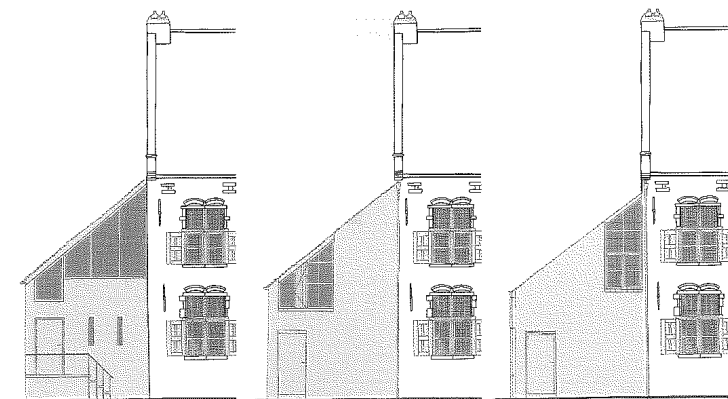
language, with flat roofs and proportions in sharp contrast with the picturesque existing streetscape (Figure 3).

This approach can be explained in two ways: First, although he was trained as an art historian and devoted his research to medieval architecture, Lemaire was very interested in the Modern Movement. During his studies, he took courses with engineer-architects and, from the early 1950s, he often collaborated with his colleagues Paul Félix and Georges Pepermans, both adepts of pragmatic functionalism. His first realized project, the Auditorium Oude Molen in 1961, in Heverlee, testifies to his taste for a neat functionality and a sober expression of materials in direct relation to the monumental Arenberg castle. Another early project, the rehabilitation of the St. Lambert chapel in the park of the same castle, the historic ruin was covered with a concrete roof and its arcades were closed with large sheets of glass in the early 1960s, revealing Lemaire's conception of the "contemporary stamp" called for by the Charter (Figure 4). Second, and even more interesting, the Beguinage project is contemporaneous

Opposite page, top: Figure 2. Leuven, Great Beguinage, detail of the restored Benedenstraat in 2009. On the left, an infill building designed by Lemaire. Photo: C. Houbart.

Bottom: Figure 3. Leuven, Great Beguinage, project of an annex to n. 37, elevations, undated (before 1966). Image courtesy of KU Leuven, Universiteitsarchief, R. M. Lemaire collection.

This page top: Figure 4. Heverlee, Sint-Lambert Chapel after restoration by R. M. Lemaire in 1961–63. Photo: C. Houbart.



with the drafting of the Venice Charter, and the archival documents show that Lemaire played an active role in this process, especially related to Article 9, which deals specifically with the issue of additions, promoting a clearly contrasting expression.³

His involvement in actual projects for historical ensembles changed his approach to the issue of infill design. As his work progressed, the language of the additions came to be inspired by the proportions and materials of the existing historic architecture, and Lemaire also gave the new elements a more deferential role (Figure 5). Beyond the satisfaction of new functions, several new structures were clearly designed to reinforce the picturesque character of the site, which was a strong marker of its original identity. This is notably the case for the building directly adjacent to one of the site's monumental landmarks, the convent of Chièvres. Replacing this neighboring building with a new structure—whose design shows a significant evolution in architectural language—allowed Lemaire to lower its previous cornice level. In this way, the monumental volume of the convent was highlighted and additional animation was introduced in the streetscape (Figure 6). At the other end of the site, the project to reconstruct the infirmary chapel

facing the church did not respond to archeological considerations but, rather, aimed to recreate a human-scale square at the entrance to the site, freely reinterpreting the architecture of the medieval building destroyed in the early nineteenth century (Figure 7).

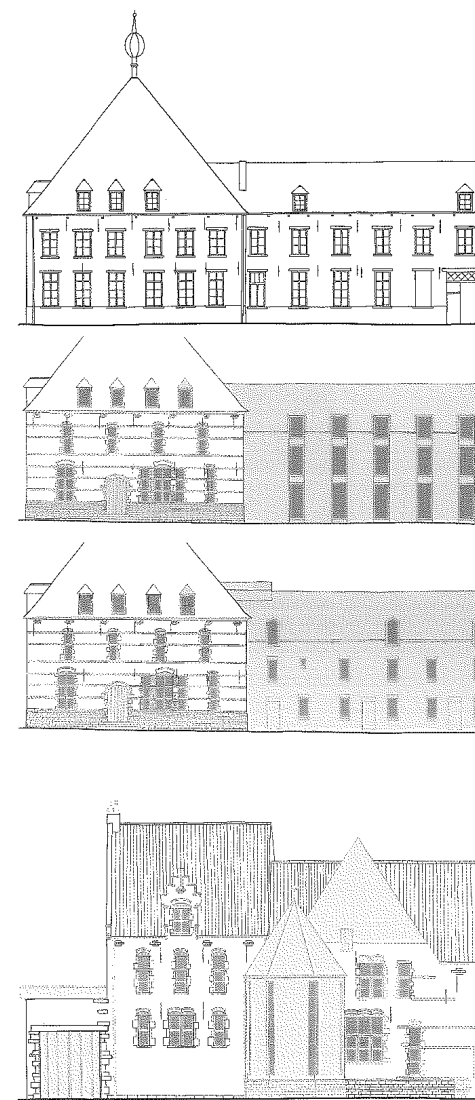
PROJECTS IN BRUSSELS

The success of the Great Beguinage operation, considered a pilot project at the European level, led to Lemaire's involvement in many more urban conservation projects in Belgium. In Brussels, more particularly, the context was quite different from that of Leuven. Lemaire was confronted not only with multiple actors and advisory bodies, but also with an existing fabric much less homogeneous, marked by the transformations of the previous two centuries. Only scattered traces of the pre-industrial architecture had been conserved, often in a heavily altered state. These were all the more precious to Lemaire and guided most of his projects (Figure 8).

In a proposal for the study of several blocks of the "quartier des Sablons" written for the municipal authorities in 1968, Lemaire clarified his position regarding the new buildings to be erected there: They "must be of current design. Their plan, their structural elements, their materials determine in a decisive way the individuality

and the age of these buildings." This clarification placed Lemaire's proposed work at odds with what the city had been doing since the early 1960s in the only urban complex subject to protective measures at that time, the "îlot Sacré." Within this perimeter established around the Grand Place, the construction of new work imitating that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was encouraged in order to improve the coherence of the ensemble with its intense touristic value. On the contrary, Lemaire was convinced that "the fundamental factor of the value of a monument or an old building is its historical authenticity," and that "surrounding authentic buildings with others, designed in an old-fashioned style, only distorts history and interrupts the expression of the continuity of life."⁴ However, he specified that the new construction would have to adapt to the structure of the district, to the old parcelization and alignments, as well as to the traditional volumes, rhythms, and scales. His project for the "îlot Sainte-Anne," in the heart of the quartier des Sablons, illustrates this position.

Located near the center of power in Brussels since the Middle Ages, the area still contained many testimonies of the traditional habitat of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, marked by an alternating use of brick and white stone and with gabled facades like those of the Beguinage. While heavily altered or transformed, these buildings appeared alongside classical structures of the eighteenth century as well as several of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including industrial buildings in the interior of the block. The overall project for the îlot Sainte-Anne thus presented challenges quite different from those of the Great Beguinage (Figure 9). First, the voids to be filled in the urban plan were more numerous, whether they pre-existed the operation or were deliberately created by the removal of "awkward" buildings—these being mainly industrial or recent structures considered valueless by Lemaire. Second, the heterogeneous character of the ensemble required that the new construction take on a more conspicuous role in creating an overall harmony. Consequently, whereas in Leuven the main objective of the new interventions was discreetly to reinforce the qualities



This page: Figure 5. Leuven, Great Beguinage, successive versions of an annex to n. 37, northern elevation, undated (before 1966 and May–June 1966). Lemaire's interventions are highlighted by a gray tone. Drawing: C. Houbart.

Opposite page, from top: Figure 6. Leuven, Great Beguinage, Convent of Chèvre and n. 55, elevation on Benedenstraat, existing state, intermediate and final restoration and reconstruction project, 1972. Lemaire's interventions are highlighted by a gray tone. Drawing: C. Houbart.

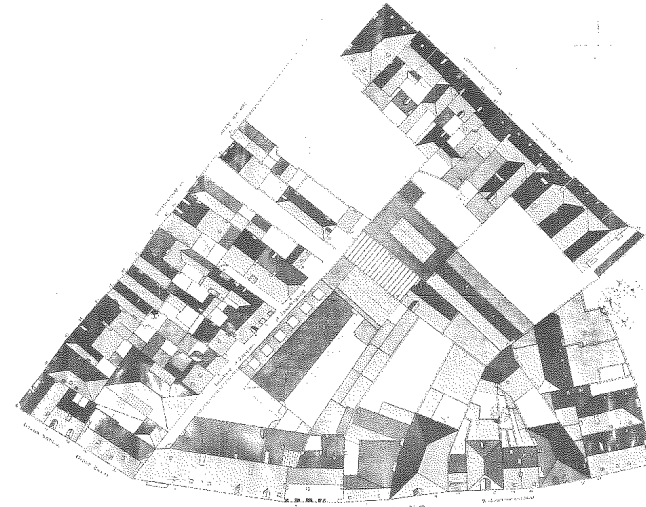
Bottom: Figure 7. Leuven, Great Beguinage, Reconstruction project of the infirmary chapel, elevation on Middenstraat, 1967. Lemaire's interventions are highlighted by a gray tone. Drawing: C. Houbart.



of the whole, in Brussels it was to express the new elements with force sufficient to impose their presence and create a strong partnership with the few restored “traditional” buildings.

The many new buildings shown on the elevations accompanying the 1974 General Plan for the zone showed the spirit in which an infill architecture should be designed and all responded to identical principles (Figure 10). Maintaining the volumetric constants of the restored traditional buildings—number of floors, pitched roofs, etc.—the new structures contributed to the animation of the street by the presence of gables or dormers. The design of the facades was marked by the verticality of the openings, recalling the traditional as well as the classical architecture of the block. However, they differed from these models by virtue of the irregularity of the bays, whose proportions were extremely variable, and the punctuation of balconies and bow windows that emphasized the overall picturesque effect. Without being an imitation, these new structures established a relationship of continuity with the remaining ancient fabric in order to recreate a harmonious environment on a human scale.

Lemaire’s plan was never fully implemented due to administrative complexities and competing interests. However, he had the opportunity to realize a part of it in the restoration and construction of a group of houses belonging to the city on Sainte-Anne Street. The successive versions for the construction of house numbers 12–14 and 16 testify to the difficult reception of Lemaire’s approach in the Brussels context (Figure 11). Starting from a sketch very faithful to the spirit of the overall project, he proposed a design which, though more conventional, presented a differentiated treatment of the gables, where the liberties taken with a strict interpretation of the traditional characteristics were concentrated. Although they were in conformity with the General Plan ordered by the municipality itself, the two houses were refused a building permit. Lemaire was forced to return to a form of imitation, not unlike the examples in the “ilot sacré” he had previously condemned. While illustrating the evolution of his thinking and constant search for an appropriate infill architecture, this episode also shows the reluctance of municipal authorities to accept solutions that were neither fully modernist nor simple imitation of historic models.



Opposite page: Figure 8. Brussels, view of the ilot Sainte-Anne from the church Notre-Dame-du-Sablon, undated. Photo courtesy of KU Leuven, Universiteitsarchief, R. M. Lemaire collection.

This page, top and bottom: Figure 9. Brussels, ilot Sainte-Anne, Existing situation and general plan, 1970. Image courtesy of KU Leuven, Universiteitsarchief, R. M. Lemaire collection.



CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES AND THE RELATION OF OLD AND NEW

At the beginning of the 1970s, Lemaire became one of the main experts of the “Committee of Monuments and Sites” created by the Council of Europe. It is within this framework that he co-wrote, in 1975 with François Sorlin and Piero Gazzola, a report that would be an important basis for the development of “integrated conservation.” Among other topics, the report dealt with “architectural creation in old urban environments.” The authors, all three members of the drafting committee of the Venice Charter, admitted that “the interpretation of the notion of ‘modern’ is often the subject of discussion.”⁵ Joining the position defended by Sir Frederick Gibberd in his recent book *Town Design*,⁶ they considered that an “absolute creative freedom and the application, without any

compromise, of an architecture conforming to contemporary criteria, without regard for the places where the building is to be raised” did not correspond, “contrary to appearances . . . to the spirit of the really modern architecture.” The authors agreed “to recognize the absolute necessity to take the setting into consideration, all the more so when it is a question of an old complex of high value.”⁷

While the authors of the report concluded that the principle valid in medicine, *primum non nocere* (first, do no harm), must be applied to new architecture in old environments, Lemaire’s projects show that in reality, the role of contemporary architecture often went far beyond simply accompanying the existing environment in a discreet and harmless way. The new design work sought to reinstate coherence to urban fabrics badly treated by the clearance

policies of the last century, before their heritage values were recognized. Even more than these values attached to the past of the rehabilitated districts, the conservation operations reinforced the value of contemporaneity, of the urban quarter as a living environment. At a time when the benefits of the urbanism of the old towns were gradually being rediscovered, and in the face of the failure of rigid functionalism, these projects took on the character of architectural manifestos in favor of an urbanism responsive to a wider range of human needs. Faced with these ambitions, the principles of the Venice Charter, designed to guide the restoration of individual monuments, could not be applied blindly—especially in complex urban environments.

In his theory of *diradamento*, Gustavo Giovannoni had already pointed out that in the case of “secondary works whose overall value is greater than that of individual buildings, when the sense of art and context has prevailed, one can well compromise with the inflexible principles of a scientific restoration and rejoice in the result when the collective work finds itself rehabilitated after having been abandoned.”⁸ More than just the material substance of old neighborhoods, it is their “*manière d’être*”⁹ that Lemaire tried to safeguard or reactivate. This term, which he often used but never defined, seems to refer both to the buildings themselves and the way they were lived in and the particular atmosphere of the whole ensemble—in other words, the *genius loci* or “spirit of the place.” Convinced that “it would be too simple to believe that the mere application of a few

rules would resolve such a delicate issue,” he soon emphasized the crucial role of an appropriate state of mind, characterized by “respect for the old work and modesty in the conception of the intervention.”¹⁰ However, study of his many projects, most of them unrealized, illustrates the difficulty he had getting such an approach across in the 1970s. Sometimes described as “heavy restoration,” “historical fantasy,” or “restorer’s architecture” because of its faithfulness to historic urban character, Lemaire’s projects suffered from the monodisciplinarity of their critics, who saw in them only a betrayal of the principles of the Venice Charter on one hand, or a refusal of what they saw as the positive achievements of modernist urbanism on the other.

The challenges of today are no longer those of the 1970s. At a time when heritage has expanded to embrace the entire environment and holistic approaches are being encouraged, the partnership between the old and new as developed by Lemaire may still have lessons to teach us for the benefit of a harmonious urban setting and a healthy building culture.

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Opposite page, top: Figure 10. Brussels, Sainte-Anne Street, project, 1974. Lemaire’s interventions are highlighted by a gray tone. Drawing: C. Houbart.

Below: Figure 11. Brussels, Sainte-Anne Street, reconstruction project of n. 12–14 and 16, 1978 and 1981 versions. Lemaire’s interventions are highlighted by a gray tone. Drawing: C. Houbart.

1 Claudine Houbart, “Deconsecrating a Doctrinal Monument: Raymond M. Lemaire and the Revisions of the Venice Charter,” *Change Over Time* 4.2 (Fall 2014): 218–243.
 2 Claudine Houbart, “The Great Beguinage of Leuven: An Early Challenge for the Venice Charter,” *Opus, Nuova serie*, 2 (2018): 105–128.
 3 “Any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp” (Venice Charter, art. 9).
 4 Raymond M. Lemaire, “Étude destinée à éclaircir les décisions concernant le programme de rénovation des îlots entourant les places du Sablon et la rue aux Laines dans le ‘Quartier des Arts.’” May 13th, 1968 (KU Leuven: University Archive, R. M. Lemaire collection). All translations from French by the author.
 5 François Sorlin, Piero Gazzola, Raymond Lemaire, “Sauvons le visage de l’Europe,” (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1973).
 6 Sir Frederick Gibberd, *Town Design* (London: The Architectural Press, 1969).
 7 Sorlin, Gazzola, Lemaire (1973), 90–91.
 8 Gustavo Giovannoni, *Urbanisme face aux villes anciennes* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 294–295 (Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova, UTET Liberia, 1931).
 9 Raymond M. Lemaire, “Restauration et réanimation des ensembles historiques,” *Principes et méthodes de la conservation et de la réanimation des sites et ensembles d’intérêt historique ou artistique* (Bath confrontation, October 1966), (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1967), 58.
 10 Raymond M. Lemaire, “La mémoire et la continuité,” unpublished, 1976 (KU Leuven: University Archive, R. M. Lemaire Collection).