

Building the University at the End of the 19th Century: Goals and methodology of research on the Trasenster Institutes of Liège

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research project: Building Belgian universities in urban areas at the end of the 19th century. The case of the construction of the Trasenster Institutes in Liège by Lambert-Henri Noppus, between 1880 and 1889.

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website: https://www.diva.uliege.be/cms/c_5387783/en/diva

This doctoral thesis project lies within the fields of architectural history and the history of construction, as well as, through certain approaches, the archaeology of built heritage. It aims to understand the process of constructing monumental buildings in Belgium during the 19th century, through a corpus of six university construction sites: the six “Trasenster” scientific institutes built in Liège between 1880 and 1889, according to the plans of architect Lambert-Henri Noppus (1827-1889). The doctoral project will be conducted under a co-tutelle arrangement, supervised by Prof. Philippe Sosnowska and Prof. Claudine Houbart at the University of Liège (Faculty of Architecture, AAP research unit, DIVA laboratory), and Prof. Inge Bertels at the University of Antwerp (Faculty of Design Sciences, Henry Van de Velde Research Group). The research project, which began at the end of January 2025, has received funding from the Fonds pour la Recherche en Sciences Humaines (FRESH) of the F.R.S.-FNRS.

The Trasenster Institutes, exceptionally close both geographically and temporally, present a remarkable opportunity to study academic heritage as an architectural production resulting from the collaboration between the academic community, the construction sector, and public institutions. The practices, modes of operation, and interactions of these social groups in the design and construction of the targeted buildings will therefore be highlighted. This research will particularly aim to uncover potential formal and technical experiments from the construction sector evolving rapidly at that time, study the management of a university project by the Belgian State and the City of Liège, and determine the role of the University of Liège in urban development, as a project owner.

To address these issues, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining documentation methods from the fields of architecture, archaeology, and history, along with the use of tools from digital humanities to process and visualize the collected data. Furthermore, it employs a theoretical framework based on sociology, specifically Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, to address the material, social, and technical dimensions of the construction process. The methodology is structured into four main components: data collection (archival research, in situ studies, and research within university scientific collections), organization of this information within a relational database, production of reference documents (network maps, dating plans, timelines, etc.), and finally, analysis of the targeted processes (contextualization, analysis of dynamics, and comparisons with other contexts).

This in-depth study and contextualization of previous research conducted on part of the buildings will enable the development of a comprehensive and integrated reading of this remarkable architectural corpus. This work is both fundamental and urgent, given the risks of losing undocumented architectural elements and equipment as these buildings undergo adaptations or reconversions, thereby erasing an entire chapter of architectural, academic, and scientific history. The project thus aims to contribute to the assessment, protection, and promotion of these endangered buildings and initiate a broader dialogue on the safeguarding and specific issues related to academic heritage.