

Construction and design flaws at the Pharmaceutical Institute (1885-1892). First reflections on the reception process of the Trasenster Institutes at the University of Liège

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Abstract: My doctoral thesis project, titled “Building the University at the End of the 19th Century. A Holistic Analysis of the Trasenster Institutes (1880–1889) of Lambert-Henri Noppius in Liège” (working title), lies at the intersection of architectural history, construction history, and building archaeology. It aims to explore the processes behind the construction of monumental buildings in 19th-century Belgium through a case study of six scientific institutes built in Liège between 1880 and 1889, based on the designs of architect Lambert-Henri Noppius (1827–1889). The doctoral project is being 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, which started at the end of January 2025, is funded by the Fonds pour la Recherche en Sciences Humaines (FRESH) of the FNRS.

This contribution presents the initial research findings related to the Pharmaceutical Institute, focusing specifically on the acceptance of works and the early years of use. The challenges encountered between 1885 and 1892 illustrate how administrative decisions, legal frameworks, and technical expertise shaped the functionality and governance of university buildings.

Despite being newly constructed, the building exhibited major structural and functional issues, including defective roofing, insufficient ventilation, and a damaged heating system. Archival records highlight construction flaws, inadequate site supervision, the use of misunderstood technologies, and a lack of maintenance. However, the resolution process was complicated by conflicts of interest and unclear responsibilities, as various stakeholders (mainly the City Government and the Ministry of Public Works) sought to shift blame. These difficulties not only affected the research and teaching conditions within the laboratories but also influenced the construction and acceptance protocols of later university institutes.

First, the doctoral thesis project will be presented briefly, then the Pharmaceutical Institute will be introduced. The presentation will then delve into the early problems encountered by the occupants, starting with the roof leaking (1885-1889), then the insufficient ventilation system (1892), to finish with the damaged heating system (1892).

Keywords: Public building management; Acceptance of works; Roofing; Ventilation; Heating.