Promoting the single-family house in Belgium:
the social construction of model housing

by Catherine Mougenot

The urban situation in Belgium and its history make an interesting case. In Belgium, the growth of cities and large built-up areas following industrial development was relatively limited. It is therefore preferable to speak of a form of urbanization when referring to this historical process whereby, against the background of a very high average population density, industrial growth and development led to relatively sparse urbanization. In practical terms, growth initially affected the outskirts of cities. It then evolved into a form of generalized urbanization, typified by densely scattered growth linking large city outskirts to small built-up areas while incorporating large rural areas into an urban network which ended up covering most of the country. The increasing density did not, however, lead to a more rational use of land: far from it. The fact that this type of urbanization was built almost entirely at the initiative of individual families led to a landscape which some authors have not hesitated to call chaotic (Bekaert and Strauven, 1975). Belgium is also a country where the main housing model was and remains the freehold single-family house. We may call it a model, not only because this is the most common type of housing, but also because this model is the accepted reference to which the majority aspires.

As early as 1919, a socialist leader, Vandervelde, remarked during a study on population and drift from the land that it would be justifiable to call Belgium one large suburb. Undoubtedly, this is partly due to the geographic context, i.e., a high population density (especially in Flanders, even before the industrial revolution) in a small country, thus favouring commuting. But another fact typical of urban development in Belgium was that the housing market was rarely subjected to strong pressure. This was probably due not only to the physical characteristics of the country and to the population distribution, but also to policies which, from an early date, were careful to avoid crises and to address the problem of housing, and to some extent, urbanization. Workforce transport policies were indicative of this (Wautelet, 1975). Clearly, by providing a system of workers' season tickets strongly favouring commuting, the authorities influenced the population distribution.

This paper suggests that housing policy, i.e., the set of steps taken by the authorities to influence the quantity and quality of housing, are an important

factor in urban development and, generally speaking, in the specific forms attained by urbanization. In other words, the specificity of the forms of urbanization which occurred appears to be linked to the options taken in the nineteenth century and to the regulations developed against a background of social crisis. This was when the housing policy which was to continue to structure Belgium's urbanization was developed. From 1880 to 1920, not only most of the institutional components of this policy developed, but also most of the perceptions commonly associated with it. In this respect, we intend neither to compile a history of urbanization in this country nor to explain all the forms it took on. We simply wish to understand the historical circumstances under which such public measures were taken, and how a housing model which certainly contributed to shaping these forms of urbanization became predominant.

In order to analyse this policy, and, in this paper, more specifically its capacity to avoid crises and ensure diffused urbanization, it is not sufficient to refer to the mechanisms of the economic interests of the ruling classes at that time, nor do these explain the tacit support for these policies from most of the population. Several authors have already published a series of objections to the hypothesis whereby the state is considered as a monolithic agent whose primary role is to favour the accumulation of capital and therefore to ensure the social order suited to his aim (Harloe, 1978; Van Hecke, 1985). Clearly, the measures taken at the beginning of the century were indeed taken with the explicit purpose of 'moralizing' the working class, thereby controlling and integrating it (Gossens, 1983). But this overall purpose does not suffice to fully explain either what housing policies evolved or the way they were to evolve.

We therefore assume that housing policy responds to social and political requirements other than reproducing labour force at least possible expense. Housing policy may be considered as a means of directing social relationships by moulding the actors' involved perception of these relationships or of the social structure and their position within it. Hence, the way in which housing policy develops may only be understood by examining, in parallel with its immediate relevance, the perception held by the predominant (and possibly competing) groups of the social structure of the condition of the working classes in particular, and the importance of housing within social reality. This implies adopting the hypothesis that housing policy contributes to the fulcrum between things collective and things individual, between things social and things private (see Burlen, 1983).[1] This pivot depends essentially on one's representation and awareness of housing policy. The concept of moralizing the working class through housing implies that provided the ruling class was not totally cynical, its representation of the problem of working class, right or not, was that moral issue. The stance of left-wing political groups was also to show that although housing had a different meaning to them, they also continued to think of the issue in terms of a moral interpretation of the function of housing.

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[1] Fulcrum which, as K. Burlen (1983) said, is one of the crucial issues of sociology.

Another point, which is probably due to the fact that individuals become aware of the social world (by experiencing it) not only in terms of work but in terms of housing, is that to modify urban structures is also, indirectly, to modify people's conception of the social world. So, as housing policy affects the conditions of access to housing and the forms and distribution of habitat, it is one of the ways of influencing what people think of themselves and their position in society. This is why the concrete means of applying these policies (the type of house favoured, the conditions of eligibility for grants or housing provided by the state) are as important as (if not more so) the overall orientations of housing policies and the ideological discourse justifying these.

I   The initial stages of the institutionalization of housing policy in Belgium

Starting with these basic hypotheses, we shall now take a close look at the origins of housing policy, and at the historical development of the fundamental rules which still govern it today.

The investigation we intend to conduct in this paper concerns a particular point in time when the Société Nationale d'habitation à Bon Marché (SNHBM; national inexpensive housing society) was established, and the series of steps taken before or around that time. There are several reasons for restricting ourselves to this period. From a practical point of view, the length of this paper does not allow us to analyse all the measures relating to housing taken in Belgium over the past hundred years. But it should be stressed that the measures taken at the turn of the century were fundamental and still define the basic characteristics of public housing policy. From that time onwards they provided the forms of state intervention (and hence the conditions of access to housing and tenancy) which consequently were intended for various beneficiaries. The way by which the beneficiaries were given an abstract definition in terms of maximum income levels allowed the aid given to the poorest to justify the aid given towards improving and promoting the middle-classes' living standards. The spatial and architectural model adopted at that time (based on the garden-city model) was to play a determining role in the diffuse way in which urbanization was to develop in Belgium.

In 1889, the role of the Caisse générale d'épargne et de retraite (CGER; general savings and retirement fund) was defined as that of the public lending institution. Also, the first aid towards ownership was promulgated in the form of tax relief for workers buying a house. Lastly, patronage committees were set up to provide certificates vouching for the morality of applicants.

In 1914, a law which became effective in 1919 established the Société Nationale d'Habitation à Bon Marché. This appears to have been the first essential step in the development of public housing policy in Belgium. It was the first law with materially visible results as it provided for the setting up of local housing societies, i.e., building societies (and not lending institutions) which were

to be approved and managed by the Société Nationale du Logement, national housing society). These were the first results to be spatially visible as these new companies were to build the first social housing estates, usually called *cités*. These achievements were to substantiate in a concrete way the garden-city model, the forerunner of the housing estate technique which is now well known and widespread in Belgium. However, it is important to stress that this draft law did not simply institute a new organization; it maintained existing advantages, favouring access to ownership and widened the concept of 'working-class house' considered to be too restrictive, replacing it with the concept of 'inexpensive housing', intended for people of 'modest income' instead of the working class which had been defined in a too restrictive and exclusive manner.

In 1920, a system of building grants was set up to repair the damage of the first world war. This was developed with very precise aims and further strengthened existing measures. This type of grant was restricted to homeowners wishing to build or rebuild a house meeting certain conditions: the house had to be built outside villages, it could not be built on existing foundations and the distance between houses had to be at least 10 metres (Gobyn, 1985). Issued in the context of postwar reconstruction, these restrictions were subsequently relaxed. It should, however, be noted that the aid granted for these houses applied essentially to rural areas (such as the Yser area) and that this was therefore a chance to promote a housing model which referred to the rural past and the regional heritage. The spirit of this policy and the actual grants were to survive to a large extent until 1948, when once again during a housing shortage, building grants were improved, although they were still exclusively for building a single-family freehold house.[2] For several years, the income thresholds were even suspended.

In 1935, the Belgian state set up a second national housing society which was to act in the same way: it only allowed access to ownership via a system involving sales or loans, and precise conditions were stipulated as to the layout, a requirement for a vegetable garden and the keeping of small livestock (failure to do so caused the special conditions involved in the aid to be immediately suspended).

This brief review of the early stages of housing policy in Belgium reveals some essential features. Social housing is no longer officially linked to working-class housing and hence no longer refers to a clearly political definition. Social housing is only part of public housing policy, as the latter also grants a large proportion of its aid to middle-class housing which is usually single-family and freehold, and as its basic reference is taken from the rural world. It should also be pointed out that such measures necessarily require families to take initiative of applying for aid if they are to receive it. This mechanism, combined with the lack of town and country planning (at least until the 1950s), increased the visual chaos of the

[2] Building grants only became available for flats in 1967.

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landscape, as an aid was granted or refused on criteria pertaining to the individual qualities of an application, excluding any notion of spatial planning.

II The material consequences of the first public measures taken with respect to housing: questions and social issues

Despite the fact that the very concept of a model implies a clear bias, especially when the model gives rise to such a phenomenon as that of the widespread adoption of the single-family house, it must be said that, on the contrary, at the beginning of the century opinion as to the material solutions to the housing problem was far from unanimous. A controversy existed which it would be simplistic to interpret purely in terms of a clear political cleavage.[3] The debates[4] were extremely varied and did not, as is often the case today, boil down to technical issues. The tone was heavy with ideology and basically paternalistic. Yet four main issues which are still relevant today were involved: the definition of beneficiaries, their legal status, the form of housing (i.e., essentially the choice between house or flat) and its location: centre or outskirts, in homogeneous or heterogeneous neighbourhoods.

1 *The debate on space*

At the beginning of the century, one of the issues with which the conservatives in power were concerned was controlling the population distribution, although concrete ways of doing so were never proposed. Usually, intermixing the different populations was considered advisable: this was to advance their knowledge of each other (Bertrand, 1888) and to avoid creating ghettos. If not for higher motives, this opinion was dictated by caution: excessively large concentrations of workers which might have been 'a threat' to social order were to be avoided. This option, with a tinge of christian ideology, was also adopted by the catholics (e.g. see Meyers, a catholic MP, in a debate at the Chamber: 12 July 1889). Social segregation due to spatial segregation is contrary to christian ideology.

Which choice was to be made? Keeping social control through visibility and proximity, or making 'the overcrowded urban areas less densely populated by casting out the 'dangerous working classes'? The second alternative appears to have been chosen, with the help of the second law on eviction brought in by the liberals.[5] But this did not systematically lead to the feared segregation. Widening

[3] At that time, the liberals (in the continental sense) and the catholics shared power whereas the socialists, moulded by the liberals and having formed a party in 1885 were attempting to increase the weight and credibility of the opposition, especially in view of the struggle for universal suffrage.

[4] We refer to the various debates held in the Chamber and the Senate before a law is adopted.

[5] Their eviction policy enabled them to achieve the same type of result as Haussmann's well known work in Paris, a fact that the catholics reproached them with.

the definition of the beneficiaries of housing aid and and increasing the range of aid available smoothed over what was a key concern for the leading classes. We shall discuss this later.

The forms of housing to be promoted, i.e., single-family or collective, house or flat, were also a matter of some hesitation and the cleavages were not clear cut. Collective housing did not automatically equate with the left-wing political forces which represented the working classes, and their ideas were not necessarily fixed. It is amusing to note that the best example of collective housing that the socialist ideologist de Paepe proposed to his readers was that of a convent in the countryside (Bertrand, 1988).[6]

One aspect of the socialists' stance which needs to be stressed is their desire to obtain power over land, to curb real-estate speculation in order to purchase land for working-class houses:

First things first. The first thing to be done is to buy sufficient land in the areas destined to be at the centre of intensive industrial activity without cheap housing being prevented by speculation.... Large buildings should be constructed on such land to ensure sufficient return. Small houses are only possible where they remain the property of the [housing] society, city or other public administration which has them built (Delporte, A., socialist MP, quoted from session of the Chamber: 12 February 1914).

But once again, the attitude of the socialists was not the only factor, even though they campaigned hardest against real-estate speculation and in favour of reserving land. To quote Mahaim, a liberal whose remarks foreshadowed the type of solution which was later to be applied,[7] i.e., not controlling the land but establishing a technical body whose purpose is to organize and make concrete proposals for the distribution of human activities on land:

We can see how poorly we set about building our cities in the past: the layout of roads, their distribution with respect to traffic, their direction and the use of available land require technical and social studies.... These studies require knowledge which the run-of-the-mill works manager does not have. If nothing is done in this respect, the fashionable 'overall plans' and 'garden-cities' will sprout projects by the dozen, then after a number of years, the imperfections will become apparent and the failure of 'overall plans' and 'garden-cities' will be proclaimed high and loud.... The problem is not purely local, it is *intercommunal*. *(original emphasis)*[8]

This statement is remarkable for its foresight about what the administration of town and country planning and intercommunal companies were to become 30 years later. Despite the fact that private property was and would always remain a major obstacle to applying the principles of urbanization, even then, it had become apparent that that town planning could be a rational substitute for public landownership.

[6] This example illustrates how socialists at this time were seeking but were not successful in finding a specifically socialist housing model to oppose to conservative theses.
[7] A liberal political and scientific personality, Professor at the University of Liège, Director of the Solvay Institute and who was later to become the Minister for Industry and Labour.
[8] Translator's note: i.e., shared by several Belgian communes.

We should also add to this the conservative views of the Ligue du Coin de Terre[9] whose general secretary declared in 1913 that 'it cannot be disputed that the availability of land on which to build inexpensive housing and avoiding speculation in the price of land are becoming two increasingly crucial issues in the task of providing popular housing'. He therefore proposed setting up one or more companies (l'Auxiliaire) for the sole purpose of acquiring land in favourable locations, servicing it and providing it to approved and affiliated building societies and private individuals meeting certain housing requirements, at cost price plus expenses. The land purchased by the Auxiliaire would also enable the various committees for workers' allotments which existed to occupy land which they could not afford to buy themselves.

So paradoxically, although essential issues (which remain essential today) had already been raised at the turn of the century, i.e., type of housing, control over real estate, legal status of the inhabitants -- neither recourse to preconceived solutions nor the apparent social and political cleavages enable us to analyse and understand the debates taking place at that time. And it should be stressed that these debates did not only take place among conservative groups; the leaders of the labour movement, who were both particularly concerned with being recognized as the representatives of the working class (and hence with defining it) and with representing as many people as possible, also took part. They appear to have been a subordinate force in so far as they were unable effectively to provide a different view of housing and habitat from those proposed by the groups in power. But both the socialists and the christian-democrats were seeking recognition as the local actors of housing policy, i.e., the compulsory intermediaries of such policies, thereby increasing the strength of their political base. In other words, it should be recognized that it is not only the institutional make-up of the new policy and the way it was organized into local societies which was important, but also the degree of authority that the workers' representatives wished to, or were able to obtain. This makes the examination of local developments a decisive step in understanding the housing options which were chosen.

The control over real estate called for by reform groups was not unanimously supported because it clashed with the sacred principle of private property. This explains, at least partly, why it has always been difficult to apply national town and country planning policies in Belgium: even here the movements which wished to gain control over land and to fight speculation had to fall back on local strategies. The garden-city concept, and in the longer run, the priority given to the single-family house, provided the basis for a satisfactory consensus, or rather a compromise between the prevailing positions.

[9] La ligue du Coin de Terre et du Jardin (the league for the plot of land and the garden) is well known for its paternalist and populist ideology: it encouraged growing a vegetable garden to ensure domestic economy in order to promote what it considered to be a healthier way of life for workers based on respect for the family.

2 The single-family house: a mutation of the garden-city

In Belgium, the garden-city model produced several housing estates in the 1920s, some of which are still in existence and admired. But these were considered experiments and had no large-scale future, whereas the single-family house surrounded by its garden was to have a massive success. There are several hypotheses as to why the one failed and the other succeeded.

The small number of exceptional garden-city neighbourhoods were built on the initiative of several leading figures in the Parti Ouvrier (the Workers' Party) and architects of the modern school. These town planners believed that the garden-city could solve the problem of anarchic urban development by providing a habitat based on the idea of a harmonious city and society (for further analysis see Mormont and Mougenot, 1987). Particular attention was paid to planning for collective spaces, overall layout and common services. These projects were not intended to be isolated; according to their planners, they were to be the first steps towards methodically planned urban development which would enable both planning and social problems to be dealt with at the same time.

These garden-cities are the reflection of particular views of the social world and specifically architectural choices. These projects were repeatedly stimulated by exhibitions and competitions, and a new discourse developed which was to legitimize this new architecture. The architects Bodeson and Hoste recommended that:

> new construction methods should be applied, even if they are not fully developed and even the initial reaction of the inhabitants is negative. The use of new technology will enable a new beauty to bloom via builders who accept the homes where a reborn race may find fulfilment (quoted by Smets, 1977).

The inhabitants also had to get used to the estates' decoration, which was also original. So architects and town planners invented the new form. In seeking to assert their role as privileged agents in the production of public housing, they added artistic innovation to social innovation and expected the combination to reinforce both components.

But this process seems to have rendered the application of the garden-city model more difficult. For one thing, these new views met with opposition from conservative architects, and the modernists were often rejected, leading to personal difficulties. For another, their enthusiasm for an original and ideal project often conflicted with the wishes of the inhabitants who frequently failed to understand the solutions proposed. In concentrating on providing collective spaces and services, occasionally to the detriment of the actual houses, their ideas were often rejected by the inhabitants whose first consideration was to house themselves and their families.

The form of management for the innovative projects was also original: tenants' cooperatives were to be set up in which the tenants, although providing only a fraction of the capital, would have had a predominant role in management. It was hardly put into practice, although even now it may be considered to be an

exemplar for collective management. First and foremost were the barriers set up by conservative groups who did not like the idea of intensely collective neighbourhoods managed by their inhabitants. They severely limited the amount of public aid available to tenants' cooperatives; that soon stopped the model spreading, because working-class families could not afford the initial investment. Increasing the investment required discrimination against lower income tenants and required them to belong to a relatively stable section of the working-class which was generally not the case for the poorest factions. Finally, the localized nature of these projects, which was due to existing housing policy, forced the promoters to work on the basis in a narrow microeconomic context, i.e., in isolated, single areas. This may have had some advantages, but it made it impossible to link the garden-cities to other neighbourhoods and required separate management and financing for each individual project. This situation was worsened by the fact that the Parti Ouvrier leaders were in favour of the local nature of such projects, as local action was a part of their strategy, relying on the services provided in the communes and on a sort of a customer fidelity to strengthen their political position.

For these reasons the experiments, which were basically attempts to apply an ideal (Stymen, 1975), had no future and remain today a sort of mythical heritage.[10] Arguing that the architects were unrealistic and given the shortage of housing which lasted for a while after the war, the authorities chose quantity rather than quality (Maes, 1985):

> It was impossible to consider creating real garden-cities in Belgium. First things first: it was imperative to build sufficient houses to settle the housing crisis . . . . What is meant here by garden-city is simply a group of buildings of limited density set in scattered vegetation (Smets, 1977).

Nor was it possible for the facilities of the garden areas to be autonomous: they depended on the metropolis. Marginalized by their peers, occasionally by the inhabitants of the new housing, and considered with suspicion even by the political groups that had supported them, the authors of such projects were excluded and their proposals dropped.

All that remained of the work done on the few projects of quality was the influence of their technical specifications (e.g. the sizes of houses and the salubrity and hygiene requirements).[11] Instead, from the 1920s onwards, an increasing number of mediocre, if not poor quality, projects were developed which produced rows of houses for rent, mass produced as cheaply as possible by local building societies:

> Merely the way in which the land was bought says enough: the suitability of land for housing was not questioned, the availability of cheap land was the only criterion. This often meant

10 Such projects were not only abandoned in Belgium (see Magriand Topalov, 1987).

11 These thresholds were a reflection of the growing opinion that it was possible to define universal requirements; such opinions were in step with the claim for universal suffrage, but were in fact changing a claim initially developed in terms of social classes into an individual right.

housing far from the inhabitated centres, far from facilities. The reasoning was so microeconomic that neighbourhoods and groups of houses were built without taking into account the necessary investments.... The entire policy, which after all was quite extensive, could only lead to the habitat's gradual deterioration (Bekaert and Strauven, 1975).

In addition, the single-family house model was widely diffused through processes of social imitation. It should be stressed that these mechanisms of imitation, which could, in a rather intuitive manner, be ascribed simply to human nature had in fact been promoted through the debate on garden cities. For instance, in 1910 Barry published a book which applied the principles of the garden-city to the industrializing area of Campine. This region which until then had been hardly urbanized became an excellent field of experimentation for the garden-city. Barry discussed the construction of housing for the miners of the new coal pits in this area. His illustrations referred to obviously bourgeois houses such as the *Cottage au Coq* or the *Villa de l'architecte Pirenne* in Duinbergen, or the *Nid de Verdure* in Uccle. This was an unambiguous diffusion of an architectural model based on grand private homes. Even more obviously Barry himself said:

La Panne, Westende, Le Coq, Duinbergen and many other beaches are still nearly garden-cities.... Consider what has become of the part of Uccle from the west of the Bois and the Forêt de Soignes to the Observatory and the Petite Espinette: a vast garden-city.

This same ambiguity is frequently to be found in the exhibitions and magazines intended to promote models of inexpensive homes.[12] Thus, it is not surprising that the principle of a formal model was finally clearly set out in 1919:

We have described the garden-city as an institution aimed mainly at the working class; however, all classes of society may also benefit from this model and the above-mentioned concept of private homes set out alongside vast 'walking-avenues' would, to a large extent, reconcile such an arrangement with the ordinary aspect of a garden-city (Duchene, 1919).

In addition the model of a single-family home was also widely encouraged by public housing grants. The construction of social housing estates was probably the most visible material example of this, even if it was not the most important from a quantitative point of view.[13]

We have already referred to aid for acquiring property through tax incentives and also the widening of the definition of beneficiaries to cover a broader span of lower income categories, not only workers. We have also underlined the powers of the CGER which, in its capacity as a public lending institution, also aided prospective homeowners. Later these trends were confirmed by the provision of housing grants and then the aid from the second national housing institution.

As a result of these means of intervention, encouraged officially or implicitly, there was no longer a strict model of the garden-city; in fact the overall concept had entirely disappeared. However, single-family homes were to be built on an

[12] Notably through the magazine *L'habitation à bon marché* (inexpensive housing) which was partly aimed at promoting modest housing.

[13] Today, social housing estates represent one twelfth of real estate in Belgium, whereas it can be estimated that one in three homes has received, at one time or another, a public housing grant.

increasingly wide scale, less the mechanical consequence of the ideology of the ruling classes than the result of several converging forces amongst which we should mention, in particular, the forms of public policy grants, the diffusion of the architectural ideal of this type of house and the strategic importance of the local authority with all the resulting constraints. These factors contributed to sustaining the model of the single-family house in time and in space, as well as through the entire social structure.

Now we return to the question of the beneficiaries of housing grants.

III   Diversity and social definition of the beneficiaries

This paper has shown that a specific housing model became predominant. But this does not mean that the social functions and content of this policy were homogeneous. To explore these issues we have to look at the development of the definition of the beneficiaries of housing grants. In fact, it is no accident that it was precisely the question of exactly who was entitled to aid which was a key issue during the establishment of the grants and their prior discussion. If we focus our observations on the period immediately following 1914–18 we find that there was an important development in this regard as not only was the National Housing Society created at this time, but the social definition of the beneficiaries was broadened.

It should be recalled that in 1889, and up until 1919, housing grants were only given to workers for the building of 'working-class' houses; and this was no tautology. In the eyes of the ruling classes, it was a matter, at the end of the century, of making concessions: placating people after the bloody uprisings of 1886, providing a clean and welcoming home for workers and thus diverting them from undesirable places and events such as cafés and meetings. There was a need to remove physical disease and moral 'disease', i.e., riots, crime, low moral standards. It was also a question of creating new economic circuits: promoting savings and working-class indebtedness, stimulating new building and reorganizing the place of residences, dislocated from the place of work. In other terms, housing was to become a means of deproletarianization by allowing workers access to a small plot of private property.

Such measures may well have appeared to be a trap for the working class, and some did not hesitate to describe them as such; a trap which would allow the conservatives to 'tame' workers by alleviating their living conditions. In other words, by allowing workers to improve their material environment, the conservatives would lay down precise rules to govern the everyday living conditions of the working class. However, this conservative enterprise could only succeed if there was a unilateral mechanism of imposition; in other words, as a result of the leading groups imposing their will. But in fact the material aid which was granted promoted a different picture of the working class, as it may see itself or be seen as worthy of being aided and taking care of itself. Thus, curiously enough, the

launchers of the draft law actually advanced the very concept of the existence of a working class, which had until then been denied on two accounts. In fact the very notice of social class was denied and those who used it were marginalized and repressed. It is with this in mind that we should consider these words of a member of the Liberal Party who was questioning the Catholic government on its measures:

What is a working-class house, do workers form a special class? Where can this definition be found? How has working-class housing been defined? How was this definition established? Has the law not prohibited any distinction of order or class for over a century? Why then are you talking to us about working-class housing? What do you mean by working-class housing? Do you mean a farm? No! Take a look for yourselves, small farmers, those who own their own farms and cultivate a few acres of land are often more badly housed than most workers in our industrial centres (de Kerchove de Denterghem, liberal representative, quoted from session of the Chamber: 12 July 1889).

This is what lay at the heart of this debate which was marked, to a large extent, by the industrial issue: it was a question of the conservatives taking responsibility for the concept of class and, mainly, for giving it precise contents. In this regard, housing grants and the definition of the homeowners entitled to such grants was a concrete opportunity to do so.

Such a position was a step away from the extreme liberalism which considered that the best solution was to do nothing, leaving everything to charitable goodwill. However, the new policy position could not be imposed with the agreement or support of the left-wing groups and in particular of the socialist opposition. We have already underlined the local dimension of the play for power which this housing policy represented for these groups. Beyond this aspect, linked to the mechanisms of political opportunism, we can see that the policy consensus which was then achieved between conservatives and socialists had the appearance of a common moral project for the working class, even though the precise contents of this project were different for the left and the right. In the eyes of the socialists, the function ascribed to housing was as a means of building the working class into an organized and structured social class, worthy of being represented by itself.

We can observe how the life of the people at the turn of the century was mainly characterized by its impromptu and anarchic nature as far as work was concerned. Indeed, it was not rare to see a strike commence in a coal pit and then spread to the entire coal field without knowing exactly why it had started, except as an expression of an overall refusal of the lifestyle and rhythm imposed by the factory or the mine. At other times holidays temporarily interrupted this rhythm. Workers often invested their energies and money in these holidays, forgetting the reality of the following day.[14] In response to this weakly structured lifestyle of the masses, the representatives of the workers wanted to offer them a new, stronger framework. From birth to death, the worker could find all the institutions

[14] In a way, the members of the workers' group could be taken care of from birth to death through the organization set up to frame their everyday life (see Puissant, 1979).

required within the socialist family, for instance, in culture and trade which formed the basis of powerful cooperatives (Puissant, 1979). In addition, the party also proposed more general aims: it suggested that workers reserve their strength for a general strike to obtain universal suffrage. As it was constantly postponed, this strike became in fact a sort of symbol which was characterized notably by a sense of saving (in order to build up a fighting fund).[15] Paradoxically, single-family housing was not incompatible with this collective view. Quite the contrary, it provided a concrete illustration of the notion of individual rights defended energetically over many years through the struggle for universal suffrage and it materializes the notion of an environment which would allow workers to become an organized class.

Thus, a consensus was achieved between the right and the left. According to this consensus, the working class should be educated and given a positive image of itself; interventions in favour of housing appeared to be a concrete means of attaining this goal. This agreement was questioned, if not displaced, when the new legislation of 1919 was drawn up. Once again, it was the definition of the beneficiaries which revealed what was at stake.

From the outset of these postwar debates the question of an extension of the definition of beneficiaries arose. On the one hand, the law of 1889 was not sufficient to 'improve the situation of the most destitute workers' (socialist position, partly taken over by the catholics). But on the other hand, as early as 1889, voices (e.g. Levie, catholic representative, in session of the Chamber: 13 February 1914) had been raised to plead the cause of other groups whose conditions were barely better than that of a worker, such as foremen, craftsmen, lower category employees and others. This position, of the catholics, was also adopted by the liberals. In fact ever since 1889 this issue had been widely discussed but in a vague and indefinite manner, notably by patronage committees when certifying for workers, to allow them to acquire property:

For the last 25 years this definition has been constantly referred to, this wave of ideas and demands developed as the results of the law of 1889 became clearer and, for a number of years, there were congresses on inexpensive housing; the middle classes, employees, tradesmen; everyone expressed the wish to broaden the law on working-class housing to the advantage of either specific new categories or to all those with low incomes in general (quoted from Levie, catholic representative, from session of the Chamber: 13 February 1914).

The legal compromise which resulted from these two types of demands on the one hand, allowed the construction of a whole series of housing estates, intended to be rented out to help the poorest categories and, on the other hand, widely promoted the living standards of low-income families through individual housing grants. At the same time, social housing policy ceased to be defined as a response to a specifically working-class problem. In addition, a two-tier system of housing grants, which still exists today, was set up: through an abstract definition of the beneficiaries of the grants, i.e., a maximum level of income, it became possible to

[15] See the claim for the universal suffrage.

promote middle-class groups whilst continuing to justify the aim which, from an official point of view, remained essential: assisting the poorest categories. Indeed, the promotion of the single-family house as a single formal model (even if, in fact, it allows for material differences) reinforced the coherency of this policy whilst improving the realization of the second objective: promoting the middle classes. It was neither stated nor written anywhere that such housing was reserved as a specific social category; however, it was clear that it did respond effectively to the existence of middle classes and much less to that of working classes. And this model was all the better adapted to the middle classes architecturally (the diffusion from the upper classes), but also because when the family attained single-family housing (through tax incentives and a credit system), it could arrange this home according to its own wishes and establish differences *vis-à-vis* those families forced to live on collective housing estates or in mass-produced single-family housing.

The encouragement of this type of housing in which the middle (lower) classes could feel at ease allowed this social group to express, spacewise, its own lifestyle, its attachment to family values and to property, etc. In addition, by facilitating the various forms of access to housing for socially related groups, social continuity instead of division was encouraged; it was a concrete effort towards avoiding a breakdown of society into too well-defined oppositions. It was as though, in the first stages, the housing policy had been a means for the conservatives to take responsibility for the concept of the working class by giving it a new meaning. Later on, these same groups in power rejected this dichotomic vision of society (considered to be too explosive) in favour of social continuity which could, in its turn, be materialized in the various forms of housing. The entire christian ideology can be found here: harmonization, continuity, but at the same time crystallization according to concrete models of the practices of the social groups for whom a social existence is guaranteed. Indeed, to encourage an individual and moral lifestyle, centred on the family, is not only to comply with the catholic doctrine but also to guarantee social recognition of the groups which corresponds best to these ideals. To guarantee continuity in the social definition of groups and in their material existence, is also to alter the criteria of division and distinction. Thus, according to some: 'the middle classes begin at the point when it becomes possible to save' (Boltanski, 1982). It is also a way of creating a hierarchical organization no longer based exclusively on work (and status) but also on private life.

Finally, when the divisions between classes become ambiguous, it becomes easier to decrease the number of the working class in its materially visible form and the image we have of it. However, if as Boltanski suggests we define the middle class on the basis of its possession of patrimony, the working class can be refused the status of 'class' precisely because most of its members do not possess this capital. Without any property, past or roots, the working class hardly deserves the name of class – the absence of any patrimony, a criterion which affords a negative definition of the working class, renders it an indistinct and

passive mass, made up of interchangeable individuals. They are the ready-made tenants of these collective buildings, of these mass-produced small homes which the local building societies are now able to build. This was 'taxonomical surgery': by allowing the socialist and democratic groups to grant aid to 'the most destitute', the dominant political power was, at the same time, confirming in a naturally obvious manner their inability to belong to the category of real-estate owners. Proletarians, without any social recognition, have only duties towards the housing societies (even today these duties can be described as feudal),[16] the inhabitants of these houses cannot be differentiated or identified in any way. This negative attribute, this inability to be anyone else other than someone 'receiving aid', is materially visible in the very existence of the social housing estates which compare negatively with the vast variety of individual housing.

There are two effects which are linked to the creation of the Société Nationale du Logement: first, socially designating certain categories of inhabitants as being unable to acquire property and, at the same time, rendering invisible (or more exactly without any specific social or political significance) the other forms of grants which used to house them. Public housing became predominant mainly in the suburbs of large built-up areas or in small-scale towns, whereas single-family housing, created on the initiative of families, but also assisted by the state, will progressively cover a substantial part of the territory in a diffused but continuous way.

IV   Conclusion

Housing policy in Belgium shows a major historical continuity in its fundamental trends: grants favouring single-family housing, property and diffused housing as well as the social (or public) housing-estate policy are only partial illustrations of this. This is why it is difficult to understand policies without analysing the way in which they were formed towards the end of the nineteenth century as a ruling-class response to social crisis and working-class riots. However, beyond the obviously underlying immediate economic and political interests, housing policy was mainly developed on the basis of the ruling factions' views about the question of the working class and, subsequently, influenced by middle-class groups which were looking for a form of social recognition. The form of housing developed was a direct result of this situation.

Although deeprooted political disagreements divided conservatives, liberals and socialists on this question, a consensus was achieved on the implicit principle of housing as a means of providing the working class with an image of its social existence. In the eyes of the conservatives, this action had a mainly moralizing and standardizing function, while the socialists considered that it was a basis for

[16] To mention but one aspect, even today housing institutions reserve their right to unilaterally amend the terms of rent; no private landlord enjoys such privileges (Monnier and Moriane, 1985).

organization which will unite the workers in a politically mature class.

In 1920, this implicit consensus was based on the model of the garden-city. The socialists probably favoured collective space and management, while the conservatives saw a healthy individual living environment, designed to mollify social oppositions. However, except for a few concrete achievements, the garden-city remained a model, if not a myth.

The existence of a common model both favoured and masked the diversity of grants and the types of beneficiaries defined at the end of the first world war. Consequently, the housing sector in Belgium became a material continuum made up of multiple references, ranging from bourgeois residences to the working-class house without any distinct break. This situation was encouraged by a system of state measures which favoured individual property and single-family housing grants and which only ascribed to social (tenant and collective) housing an inferior status, where limited rights were associated with the social and moral unworthiness of the inhabitants.

The social function of this housing policy can only be understood by grasping the deep and hidden coherency which it progressively established between a representation of social classes, a space (or the spatial breakdown of these classes) and a form of state intervention. In this paper, the essential function of this policy is seen as ideological: ascribing a representation of social structure. It was involved setting up an equivalence between space – organized without any breaks or oppositions into a hierarchy between the plots allocated individually and not collectively – and the social structure. Thanks to state aid, individuals were induced to accept this space, as finding housing was a matter of individual initiative if one did not wish to be dependent on social assistance.

This fundamental function of housing policy also allows us to understand certain features of the nominal urbanization process as it implies low-density housing due to the stress laid on single-family housing, but also a relationship with the habitat which in the first place is established as a private relationship and not a relationship with the community or the town. It is yet another means of indirect intervention by the state: by setting up a system of individual grants it spared itself the trouble of making explicit spatial and also political choices. This is a work of social *ordering* based on the initiative of individuals, despite the visual *chaos* which has often resulted.

V References

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Urbanization in Belgium is a process of diffusion rather than a process of urban concentration, though this country is very densely populated. In this process the state does not look to have a leading role. This paper examines how the housing policy determines this process of urbanization, namely by promoting the ownership and the individual house.

This housing policy, initiated in years of deep social crisis, can only be understood as an upper-class response to the riots of 1886: the housing policy is intended to give and enforce a social definition of the working class, with various interpretations granted by the political opposing forces.

The 'garden-city' model was then promoted because it allowed to make a political compromise between these interpretations. But it was an ideological model with only a few realizations. However it allowed the dominant preference for individual housing to become the real model which was implemented through the numerous measures which constitute the housing policy. In the following stages, a lot of measures came to enlarge the benefit of the public aid to other social groups.

From this analysis, it becomes clear that one of the social functions of the housing policy is to enforce the different representations of the social structure which do no longer need a moralizing discourse because of the hidden connections between the space, the social structure and the housing policy system.

Le mode d'urbanisation en Belgique apparaît plus comme un processus de diffusion que de concentration bien que la population belge soit néanmoins très dense. Dans ce mécanisme, on doit remarquer que l'Etat ne joue pas un rôle moteur et laisse toute l'initiative aux actions individuelles. Cet article examine comment la politique publique du logement intervient dans ce processus d'urbanisation par la promotion de la propriété et de la maison individuelle.

La politique du logement décidée dans des années de crise sociale profonde, doit surtout être comprise comme une réponse des groupes dominants aux émeutes de 1886. Elle avait pour objet de donner et de renforcer la définition de la classe ouvrière, même si diverses interprétations lui furent accordées par les différentes forces politiques.

Le modèle de la cité-jardin peut être analysé comme un compromis politique entre ces interprétations. Mais ce fut surtout un modèle idéologique suivi de peu de réalisations. Cependant, il permit d'accorder une préférence très nette pour la maison individuelle. Par la suite, les mesures publiques élargirent la définition des bénéficiaires, aidant ainsi d'autres groupes sociaux.

A partir de cette analyse, il apparaît clairement qu'une des fonctions sociales de la politique du logement est de renforcer les différentes représentations de la structure sociale. Celles-ci peuvent se passer de discours moralisateurs puisque les connections entre l'espace, la structure sociale et le système de la politique du logement sont ainsi occultées.

In Belgien kann die Urbanisierung trotz der hohen Bevölkerungsdichte des Landes weniger als Konzentrations-, als als Verteilungsprozeß bezeichnet werden. Die folgende Studie befaßt sich mit dem Ausmaß, zu dem dieser Verstädterungsprozeß durch wohnungspolitische Maßnahmen und insbesondere durch die Förderung von Eigenheimen und Einfamilienhäusern bestimmt wird.

Diese in den von sozialen Mißständen geprägten Jahren ins Leben gerufene Wohnungspolitik kann nur als eine Antwort der oberen Schichten auf die Unruhen von 1886 verstanden werden: Die Wohnungspolitik zielt darauf ab, der Arbeiterklasse eine soziale Identität zu verschaffen, die auf politischer Ebene wiederum unterschiedlichen Interpretationen von seiten der einzelnen oppositionellen Kräfte ausgesetzt ist.

Um eine Kompromißlösung zwischen diesen verschiedenen Auslegungen zu finden, wurde das Modell der 'Gartenstadt' gefördert, ein Modell, dessen Charakter sich im nachhinein jedoch als zu ideologisch erwies und das aus diesem Grunde nur bedingt realisiert werden konnte. Das vorherrschende Streben nach dem Eigenheim konnte sich jedoch dank dieses Modells als Grundlage der Wohnungspolitik durchsetzen und mehr soziale Gruppen konnten in der Folgezeit von den Maßnahmen des Staates profitieren.

Aus dieser Analyse geht klar hervor, daß die Hervorhebung der unterschiedlichen Vertreter innerhalb der Sozialstruktur künftig nicht mehr als eine soziale Funktion der Wohnungspolitik angesehen werden kann. Moralpredigten sind hier aufgrund der verdeckten Verbindungen zwischen Raum, Sozialstruktur und dem System der Wohnungspolitik nicht länger gefragt.

La urbanización en Bélgica es un proceso de difusión en vez de un proceso de concentración urbana, a pesar de que este país está densamente poblado. En este proceso, el Estado no tiene previsto asumir un papel destacado. El presente trabajo examina cómo la política relacionada con la vivienda determina este proceso de urbanización, promoviendo la propiedad y la casa individual.

Esta política relacionada con la vivienda, iniciada en años de una profunda crisis social, sólo podrá comprenderse como respuesta de la clase alta a los disturbios de 1886: se pretende que la política relacionada con la vivienda proporcione e imponga una definición social de la clase trabajadora, con varias interpretaciones ofrecidas por las fuerzas políticas opositoras.

El modelo de ciudad jardín se promovió en aquel entonces, porque permitía hacer una política de compromiso entre estas interpretaciones. Pero era un modelo ideológico con sólo unas cuantas realizaciones. Sin embargo, permitió la preferencia dominante para que la vivienda individual se convirtiese en un modelo real que se implantó a través de las etapas siguientes, muchas medidas ampliaron las ventajas de la ayuda pública a otros grupos sociales.

De este análisis, es evidente que una de las funciones sociales de la política relacionada con la vivienda es poner en vigor las diferentes representaciones de la estructura social que ya no necesitan un discurso moralizante a causa de las conexiones ocultas entre el espacio, la estructura social y el sistema de la política relacionada con la vivienda.