PROSPECTIVE APPROACH. A LINEAR GEOGRAPHICAL TOWN IN WALLONIA.
Learning from an in-depth analysis of the initial Louvain-la-Neuve planning experience
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Abstract

Since its foundation in 1973, Louvain-la-Neuve (LLN) (a New Town established around the French-speaking Catholic university campus, to which we shall refer as a feminine entity) has been explicitly considered – by her first settling managers - as a small neo-medieval town enclosed in a rampart-like beltway, acting as an isolated competitor and colonial civilization holder in her region (Walloon Brabant). Located at the very hearth of the Brussels metropolitan area’s richest suburban area, LLN has now grown as a university and as a comprehensive residential and industrial area. Due to her extraordinary attractiveness she is today bursting at the seams and unable to accomodate the rising demand for housing and activities – which have been untidily transferred to surrounding rural areas suffering of a lack of public facilities and of suitable planning policies for future development.

Our hypothesis is that the original planning scheme for the Louvain-la-Neuve new town (avant-projet de plan directeur –May 1969) and, to a certain extent, her actual structure, which is partially based on this first sketch, contains another urban idea of the city, alternative to that of the enclosed neo-medieval town. Explicitly influenced by the paradigmatic linear pattern of the English new town Hook, this alternative layout principle could initiate more intimate and balanced relationships between the city, its countryside and its landscape. Drawing on this linear pattern would allow to address the ongoing mutations of this now-not-so-new town and of her region, taking the countryside into higher consideration and preparing other tracks for this new town to play a legitimate sub-regional role.

Keywords : regional planning - newtown – linear city – Wallonia - Louvain-la-Neuve

Paper

It would be absurd, today, to address the question of territorial – and urban - models in Europe without including it into a more general inquiry about the Europe’s actual structure as multilayered sedimentary realm. The hypotesis underlying this contribution is that a European territorial project could be defined as an attempt to associate in an equilibrated way three formally defined main territorial structures: the provincial, the national and the eurocontinental structures, each of which ought to be quite clearly distinct and recognizable. A project that cannot be simply understood as “protective” nor as “completely re-founder”, but multi-dynamic and co-operative, and intelligently, historically (= by prospective research), asserting the European structure as a multilayered structure.

While curating the exhibitition “LLN 1968-73” held in Brussels from may to september 2007, we’ve highlighted :
- that the first (and also very late) attempt to create a metropolitan new town in our west-european belgian regions has brought in opened conflict two main architectonic ideas of the city both commonly caracterized by confusing the metropolis and an older initiative territorial layer’s urban concept : the one (Gruen 1968) confusing the newtown to a hypertrophied national capital-city (as the garden-city in practice had already done) and the other (Lemaire 1973) confusing the newtown and the provincial ville bourgeoise (Louvain-la-Neuve as mirror of Louvain-la-Veuve (Widow-Leuven))

- that, during this first planning experience, and in the short timespace separating the two former apparently contradictory hypothesis assertion (end 1968 to spring 1969), a third hypothesis was addressed to the university’a academic council – due to the young urbanists from UA group – and adopted by the university authorities as the newtown’s “avant-projet de schema directeur” in may 1969.

- that the two main hypothesis in conflict are based upon the traditional bourgeois concept of the town understood as radioconcentric, pyramid-shaped (convex) and quite indifferent to topographical inscription, and that the third hypothesis lies on completely different formal rules : linear, vulcan-shaped (concave) and extremely sensible to topographical inscription (the discussion of this last aspect of the third hypothesis has been further developed in an article published two years later in cahiers du CERTU, 20091).

- that part of today LLN as built-structure contains quite readable traces of this third hypothesis, although mixed and confused in the later radio-concentric developments.

In this short contribution to the common discussion at international level about the twentieth century newtown, I will try to show that the LLN birding process continues in the more direct way to act as the prototypical experiment for a frustrating regional planning in Wallonia and that an in-depth exploration of territorial possibilities based upon the “third way hypothesis” proposed in 1969 by the young UA group urbanists could help Walloon planners to get out from the contradictions and confusions lying into the choices deduced from the officially asserted LLN winning – but now loosing – magical formula.

Trying to identificate a new territorial model, facing today’s environnemental challenge, and trying – in particular – to embrace a way out from the dominant metropolitan pattern based upon the couple central control district/suburban residential sprawl, Wallonia, and if we except the radical decreasing hypothesis, claims nowadays for two main scenarios : the first one based upon the densification of ancient (or “existing”) town and village cores, the second one (but quite indecisive) based upon new town settlements.

Although possibly able to face the environmental challenge from a merely scientific point of view, the first scenario (densification of existing town and village cores) already appears not to be convincing from a cultural point of view. Are we sure we are ready to restructure all our old small towns under the pressure of new density and energy standards ?

Summarizing, this “new” “virtuous” scenario – pushed back by industrial interests – is based upon the same confusing principle as the one which mainly produced LLN (LLN as distorted image of the provincial ville bourgeoise) and now conduces Wallonia on the way to destruction of its authentic old country and town nucleuses.

The second scenario (new towns) hasn’t yet been improved, although it could be a
good sign of an European effort to face his construction. But, here too, we would
have interest to go further into an indepth critic of the LLN as-built experience, and
face the contradictions of it. Mainly questions of localisation (avoiding too close
localisation and hard competition with another ancient town), questions of access
and means of transport (avoiding the need of huge car parkings under or at close
proximity of the town), and – last but not least - questions of cultural choices (which
alternative models to bourgeois models of settlements based upon private property,
harsh opposition between urban and rural, etc). This second scenario ought to be
approached in a European perspective, besides levels of regional or national
architectures but trying to cultivate some equilibrated relationship with them, in
addressing – in particular – the questions of the general formal principles of it’s
multilayered architecture and avoiding confusion between the layers.

In conclusion, we would like to embrace a path, suggesting a possible future way of
understanding LLN as part of a European newtowns system clearly distinct from the
national and from the pre-national formal structures with which LLN has been
tendentiously confused during it’s first 45 years of life.
This suggestion is directly deduced from the third hypothesis discovered in
reexamining the groupe UA (the initial LLN planners group) old papers.

Looking back to the whole series of building operations pursued into and in the
surroundings of LLN during these last decades, we notice how strong has been and
continue to be the attractive power of the newtown – located at the right heart of the
rich and dynamic Walloon Brabant -, as a focal research and development place for
types of advanced industries, as residential and commercial area and as
transportation gate to Brussels as core of the Belgian metropolitan region.
The “small old town” model that conduces LLN development from 1973 until now,
based upon Raymond Lemaire’s “visionary” hypothesis, demonstrates now its very
limits : the 450 ha university ground has been completely covered by low rise
residential developments (20,000 inhabitants instead of the initially planned
50,000). The core is unable to grow in surface due to the increasing massive
extension of the industrial belt that surrounds it, but also due to the obsession of
“concluding the town” (achever la ville) expressed by the old newtown founders that
conducted them to promote a huge shopping mall and the aula magna as “definitive”
stoppers of the town linear spine. The region around the town is completely covered
by suburban detached houses. The automotive model remains dominant. The train
access to this suburban detached houses region around LLN (urgently needed, to
consent the easy access to the metropolitan core of Brussels, now very difficult to
reach by car) conduces to the imperious need to a huge car parking closed by the
centrally located LLN train station. The whole phenomenon has become unreadable,
indifferent to countryside (the rural ground is going everywhere colonized by houses
and factories) and to the possibility to be understood and experimented as cultural or
ecological intelligent collective work.

The rediscovering of the third hypothesis on LLN newtown could support the
following alternative proposal :
- instead of being exclusively read as centralized, closed on itself and belted
phenomenon, LLN could be read as linear phenomenon (based upon his
fishbone structure) physically opened on the outside of itself
- instead of being exclusively read as unique and monocentrically attractive,
LLN could also be read as part of a larger linear residential and activities
metropolitan region
instead of been read as a pure artefact, as a pure relief, indifferent both to his natural (ecological, topographical) and human (economical and cultural) location and relief, LLN could be read as part of a larger artificial lip developing itself on the natural border of the roman-walloon continental plateau looking North and the Baltic plain. This lip would be built by fragments, on the fringe and on the top of the valleys dug in the border of the Walloon plateau, and, as detached as possible from existing villages and towns, asserting the thalweg of the valleys as support of the main public sequential space of the town.

The many fragments of this European city should be preferably linked by the railway, as initially previewed by the young LLN planners, who insisted and obtained a trainstation conceived as going through station.

Crucial questions – as those related to formal, architectonical choices, but also those related to the conditions and legitimacy of creating new towns in our declining and doubtfull continent – have been left out of this short account. Through these few suggestions, my attempt is above all to encourage my contemporaries to go thoroughly what can seem to them a blocked present situation and to wake up the pioneer who sleeps into themselves.

**Bertrand Terlinden.** Born on April 3rd 1965, practising architect since 1987, Bertrand Terlinden was granted his PhD in “composizione architettonica” from the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (ciclo 8°) in 1996 after discussing a dissertation entitled Villa Madama. La ricostruzione del progetto, supervised by prof. arch. Giorgio Grassi (Milan). Senior lecturer in Brussels at La Cambre school of architecture (now faculty of architecture at ULB) since 1996, he curated the exhibition “LLN 1968-73. The idea of a (new)town” held in Brussels (2007). His other research interests range across: landscape, territory, sedimentation, rural-urban, European building History, building types. He also teaches and conducts research in Morocco and Congo (RDC). All documentation, writings, projects and works completed or in progress are available at: [http://www.bertrandterlindeninarchitecture.wordpress.com](http://www.bertrandterlindeninarchitecture.wordpress.com).
Figure 1. The upper Malaise-valley, on the edge of the Walloon continental plateau (25km SE Brussels), before LLN university-town settlement (spring 1968)

Figure 2. Hypothesis 1 (Victor Gruen - 1968). LLN newtown as part of a capital-city involving "cellular metropolis of tomorrow"
Figure 3. Hypothesis 2 (Raymond Lemaire and UA - 1969-). LLN newtown as a provincial town

Figure 4. Hypothesis 3 (UA young urbanists – 1968-1969) and our prospective approach. LLN as part of a topographical linear city on the edge of the Walloon continental plateau
Figure 5. Hypothesis 3. Prospectic view of the university-newtown (drawing: Pierre Bugod) (1969)