

The Great Beguinage of Leuven: an early challenge for the Venice Charter

Il Grande Beguinage di Leuven: una prima sfida per la Carta di Venezia

Claudine Houbart

ABSTRACT – Commissioned by the University of Leuven (Belgium) and mainly carried on between 1962 and 1972, the renovation of the Great Beguinage (fig. 1) under the exclusive supervision of Raymond M. Lemaire (1921-1997) has long been seen as an implementation laboratory of the contemporary Venice Charter, of which Lemaire was one of the writers. Nevertheless, an in-depth study of the operation, based on extensive archival and photographic material, reveals that rather than a mere illustration of the charter's principles, the project, considered a pilot operation by the Council of Europe, has been an early challenge for the new

document, contributing to Lemaire and Gazzola's will to get it reviewed as soon as in the early 1970's. After a short introduction situating the project in Raymond M. Lemaire's career, this paper will highlight the complex relations of the project with the charter, resulting from the sometimes competing demands of architectural restoration and urban renovation, at the moment when Lemaire took part in the first reflections that would lead to the concept of integrated conservation.

KEYWORDS – History of architectural conservation; Lemaire Raymond M., Theory of conservation; Authenticity.

1. Context

Trained as an archaeologist in the early 1940's, Raymond M. Lemaire¹ catches the conservation bug from his father and his uncle. Architect at the Ministry of Public works, the first is in charge of important historic sites such as the Cistercian abbeys of Villers-la-Ville and Aulne, where the young Raymond spends some of his summer holidays. The second, Raymond A.G., an important figure of the Belgian conservation milieu in the first half of the twentieth century, plays a key part in the early career of his nephew. Priest, professor at the University of Louvain and member of the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites, he is also involved in many restoration and construction projects, in collaboration with architects. In 1938, as the author of *La Restauration des monuments anciens*, a treaty strongly influenced by Riegl's value-based approach², he has a great influence on the training of young conservation professionals who would become important actors of the second reconstruction, such as Stan Leurs, head of the conservation department of the *Commissariat général à la Restauration du pays*, and Simon Brigode, author of the controversial restoration of the Sainte-Gertrude church in Nivelles. At the end of his uncle's career, Raymond M. Lemaire, who finishes his PhD in 1949, while working as a "monuments man" for the recovery of looted artworks, takes on most of his tasks: becoming himself a professor at the University of Leuven, he continues some restoration and reconstruction projects begun by his uncle.

Canon Raymond A.G. Lemaire is also one of the first, in the 1950's, to strive for a protection of the Great Beguinage (fig. 1). Dating back to the 13th century, the enclosed site, built on two arms of the Dyle river

¹ L. VERPOEST, RAYMOND M. LEMAIRE (1921-1997), *The Charter of Venice and Training in Conservation at the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation in Defence of Heritage, in Defence of Architecture*, in T. PATRICIO, K. VAN BALEN, K. DE JONGE (ed.), *Conservation in Changing Societies. Heritage and Development*, Leuven 2006, p. 19 and S. VAN AERSCHOT, *De restauratie/ renovatie van het Leuvense Groot begijnhof (1963-1993). Een laboratorium op wereldniveau*, in "Monumenten & Landschappen", 5 (2010), pp. 23-46. The research presented in this paper is part of my PhD, presented in January 2015 at the faculty of engineering of the KU Leuven: *Raymond M. Lemaire (1921-1997) and the Conservation of the Ancient City: Historical and Critical Study of his Belgian Projects in International Perspective*, under the direction of Prof. Ing. Arch. Luc Verpoest.

² C. HOUBART, *The lessons of the first reconstruction in Belgium: "La restauration des monuments anciens" by Canon Raymond A.G. Lemaire (1938)*, in P. CIMBOLLI-SPAGNESI (ed.), *Al di là delle trincee. Territori e architetture del Regno d'Italia al tempo della Prima Guerra Mondiale* (Atti del convegno internazionale, Rome, 2015), Rome 2017, pp. 315-324.

1/ The heart of the Great Beguinage, viewed from in front of the church (© C. Houbart, 2009).

and comprising around a hundred buildings, essentially houses, but also convents, a church, a hospital and a farm (fig. 2), is in very bad condition. Managed by the Public Assistance Commission, renting the houses to the poor since after the Revolution, the ensemble paradoxically only owes the preservation of its historic character to the lack of means of its owners. Despite the recognition of the site's picturesque aspect by some amateurs since the nineteenth century, only the church is listed as heritage in 1937, and the houses, belonging to minor architecture and considered unsanitary, would certainly have been further modernised if some funding had been available (fig. 3). In the early 1950's, following the Public Assistance Commission's decision to sell the houses one by one and to invest in modern social housing, Canon Lemaire, as a member of the city of Leuven's Commission of Urban Aesthetics actively contributes to the documentation of the site preliminary to its listing, a project that doesn't come to any successful conclusion.

It is only in 1962, eight years after the Canon's death, that a solution is found: on the initiative of a group of professors lead by Raymond M. Lemaire, the University of Leuven, in full expansion, buys the ensemble with the project to convert it into students dwellings. Lemaire, who is in charge of the conservation courses at the faculties of engineering and humanities, and has just restored the ruins of the Romanesque Saint-Lambert Chapel on the Arenberg campus to provide the campus with a religious facility (fig. 4), is made responsible for the project. The absence of any legal protection of the ensemble, which is, moreover, separated from any public road by





a continuous wall, gives him a completely free hand in the handling of the project, that he carries on with the help of a team composed, at the beginning, of two freshly graduated engineers, two draughtsmen and a secretary. The team doesn't grow much in the following years, but benefits from the help of the university's technical services as well as from Lemaire's assistants, some students during the summer holidays, and a number of interns sent by the Rome Centre (future ICCROM), where Lemaire teaches since the early sixties.

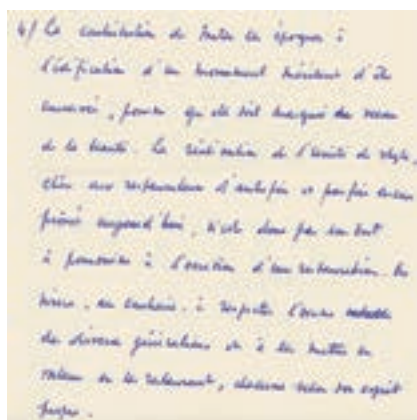
In order to guarantee the quality of the works, that should "be carried on according to international adopted norms regarding conservation and restoration of monuments and in accordance with the teaching provided at the university"³ – a condition Lemaire had set before accepting the project – Lemaire breaks the relations with the technical services of the university in 1965, considering them unqualified for that kind of works. But even more important, as to the technical team, he convinces the university to hire workers rather than appoint a general contractor and he himself, takes care of their training. From the buildings survey to the drawings and their technical implementation on site, Lemaire has a full control over the operation, that can thus be considered his personal project. Knowing that

2/ Plan of the Great Beguinage before renovation (G. Van Zuylén, *Het Groot Begijnhof in Leuven*, in "Krommenie Nieuws", 35 (1969), p. 7).

3/ H. Hoste, *View of the house n. 30, 1952* (KULeuven, University Archive, R.M. Lemaire Collection, hereafter ARML).

4/ R.M. Lemaire, *Restoration sketch of the Saint-Lambert chapel in Heverlee*, nd (ARML).

³ R.M. Lemaire to M. Woitrin, confidential letter, September 21st, 1965, KULeuven, University Archive, R.M. Lemaire Collection (hereafter ARML). All translations by the author.



5/ R.M. Lemaire, *Esquisse de principes directeurs*, excerpt (ARML).

the works really start in 1963-1964, right at the moment when Lemaire takes an active part in the writing of the Venice Charter, can easily lead to the assumption that the project would be conceived in accordance with the document's principles. But an in-depth study of the project leads to a quite different conclusion.

Examining Lemaire's contribution to the writing of the charter goes beyond the scope of this paper, and has been done elsewhere⁴. But without going into too many details, it is useful to provide the reader with a few pieces of information. Without questioning the importance of the Italian contributions to the document – especially R. Pane and P. Gazzola's *Proposte per una carta internazionale del restauro*, a review of the 1931 *Carta del Restauro* presented at the 1964 Venice Congress⁵ – Lemaire's input shouldn't be underestimated. Without confirming his personal assumption to have been the charter's "main author", a close look at his very rich archive reveals that he played a significant part not only in the refinement of the text between the Venice congress, when it was drafted, and the first general assembly of ICOMOS in Cracow the year after, when it was adopted by the newly born organisation: a "sketch of guiding principles", drafted around 1960 by Lemaire in the Belgian context to form the basis of a national "charter of monuments"⁶ (fig. 5), reveals that his role could have been decisive in the writing of articles 9 and 11. It is quite ironic that these two articles, respectively addressing conjectural reconstitutions and historical layering, are the most problematic when confronted to the reality of the Great Beguinage's renovation.

2. "A contemporary stamp": the Great Beguinage as an illustration of the Venice charter's article 9

Free from any control from administrative authorities, Raymond Lemaire was never obliged to set his options on paper, to justify the nature of the works. But the only document he produced in order to present the project, in the international context, confirms his will to follow the principles of the charter. In this 1970 document written for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, he lists, among the three main principles guiding the project, the "scrupulous conservation of all authentic and valuable parts, whether on the façades of the buildings, or in the interiors" and the distinction of "all the different contributions of the changing times, in the architecture as well as in the furnishings, adopting today's forms and materials resolutely, but with restraint and modesty"⁷. Looking at the result gives the impression that it was indeed the case: inside and outside, the stamp of Lemaire's time is clearly visible, and the ancient features of the buildings appear to have been conserved.

Inside the houses, apartments and collective facilities (restaurant, meeting rooms), Lemaire chooses a modern furniture, happily contrasting with restored old floorings, ceilings or fireplaces (fig. 6). According to him, "the clearly functional character of this ancient architecture naturally harmonises with that, functional and flexible, sometimes playful, of our modern design"⁸. Movable furniture is mostly bought from the Belgian firm Belform and part of it designed by Alfred Hendrickx; all kinds of dwellings are provided with modern equipment, like Arne Jacobsen chairs. Facing the reluctance of the university's administrators concerning the cost of these furnishings, Lemaire insists on the fact that "experience proves that students willingly destroy trash, but respect quality objects and furniture"⁹.

⁴ C. HOUBART, *Deconsecrating a doctrinal monument. Raymond M. Lemaire and the revisions of the Venice Charter*, in "Change over time", 4.2 (fall 2014), pp. 218-243.

⁵ P. GAZZOLA and R. PANE, *Proposte per una carta internazionale del restauro*, in *Il monumento per l'uomo* (Atti del II Congresso Internazionale del Restauro, Venice 1964), Padova 1971, pp. 14-19.

⁶ R.M. LEMAIRE, *Commission royale des monuments et des sites. Problèmes de doctrine*, sd, ARML.

⁷ R. M. LEMAIRE, *The Renewal of Historic Cities – In Particular: The Great Beguinage at Louvain*, ECE 1970, p.15, ARML.

⁸ R.M. LEMAIRE, *Bouw, rechtzetting : Groot begijnhof, Leuven*, [1968], ARML.

⁹ R. M. LEMAIRE, *Note pour le conseil d'administration concernant le mobilier du Grand béguinage*, sd, ARML.



6/ View of the interior of a house (Louvain City Archive).

7/ View of the interior of a duplex apartment (ARML).

In order to load the walls rather than the floors, many fixed bedrooms's and kitchens's cupboards are designed by Lemaire's team itself, in a sober style inspired by contemporary designers (fig. 7).

Regarding the outside, walking around in the Great Beguinage gives at first glance an impression of great unity. The picturesque rhythm created by the buildings of different heights and bordering irregular streets and public spaces is unified by the materials (bricks and white stone for the facades, with very punctual half-timberings, flat tiles or slates for the roofs), overall





8/ General view of Rechtestraat
(© C. Houbart, 2007).

forms (pitched roofs) and similar details (mullion and transom windows, gables, dormers, semicircular doors...) (fig. 8). Most of the tourists visiting the area – and even its inhabitants – possibly don't even notice the punctual interventions bearing a "contemporary stamp", however present from the scale of the details to that of the building.

The most common small scale interventions involve the windows, new or recreated on a hypothetical basis. In that case, Lemaire seems to go for a simplified treatment, building the jambs in bricks instead of stone, and sometimes, using white concrete and modern design for the lintels. In one case, the lintel of a new door bears an inscription recording the renovation works (fig. 9). Some other small contemporary details are even more discrete: let's mention the minimalist houses numbers, and the small statues identifying some of the houses. Some of these statues, placed in small niches, often near the door, had been lost through time, and are replaced by contemporary creations by the ceramist Max Van der Linden (fig. 10). Van der Linden is not the only artist involved in the project: the painter Louis-Marie Londot composes a palette of colours used for the interior and exterior doors.

At a larger scale, some buildings are provided with new annexes, to host functional equipment such as collective heating supply, launderettes and garbage and bicycle sheds. Having a look at the successive plans drawn by Lemaire's team reveals that the legibility of their contemporary character has strongly diminished from the first sketches until the realisation. For the annexe of a house in the "Soldier's district" for example, a first sketch shows a flat-roofed horizontal building, strongly contrasting with the traditional

volume of the existing house (fig. 11). Finally, the building adopts a lean-to shape, giving, at a first glance, the impression of always having been there, and only a careful look reveals its contemporaneity, embodied by the form and treatment of the front facade window – and reduced by the presence of traditional stained-glass instead of a modern frame (fig. 12). It is the same case with all extensions of the same type. As to bicycle and garbage sheds, the “contemporary stamp” is even slighter, as they adopt a kind of timeless vernacular style, with traditional volumes and materials without any distinctive modern detail.

When we come to the scale of the building, there are only three examples to mention if we limit the overview to the sixties, when Lemaire was fully involved in the project : from 1969 on, he gets more and more involved in the planning of the city of Louvain-la-Neuve and progressively hands over the

9/ House n.50, detail of the door of
(© C. Houbart, 2018).

10/ Detail of the statue at the angle of
n. 84 (© Houbart, 2009).

11/ Annex to n.37, first version, nd
(ARML).





12/ Annex to n. 37 (© Houbart, 2009).



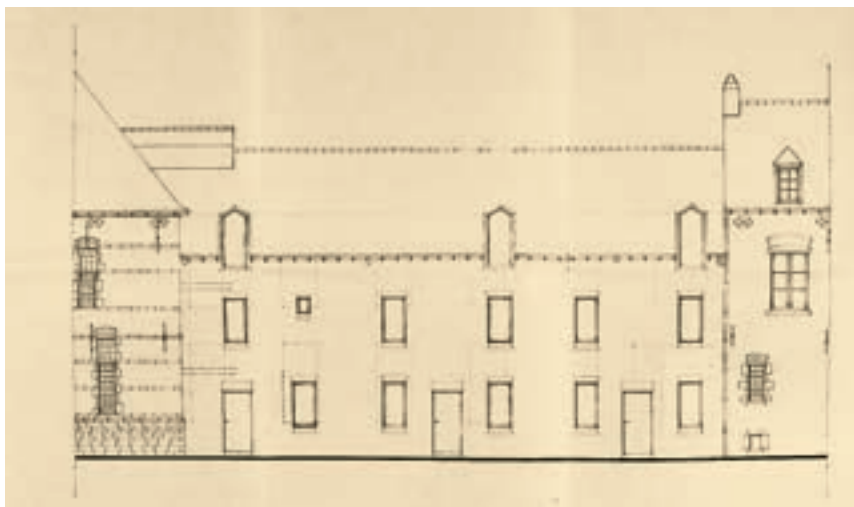
project to his collaborators. For this paper, we will briefly discuss two of these projects, only one of them having been realised. This mostly new building (n. 55) – part of the rear facade of a former building being conserved and integrated into the new construction – takes place at a strategic spot of the site, next to the Convent of Chièvres, a monumental sixteenth-century building with a landmark status. The various sketches elaborated by Lemaire's team for the new construction show, just like for the annexes, an evolution from a quite radically modern style (fig. 13) to a more subtle reinterpretation of traditional features. In this case, the building's facade on *Benedenstraat*, taking place between the already mentioned convent and an eighteenth-century house with earlier remains, adopts a particularly sober look, with a plain brick facade and small windows provided with concrete lintels and sloping brick sills (fig. 14). The doors and dormers are treated in the same sober way (fig. 15). As a consequence, despite its contemporary treatment, the façade is perfectly integrated in the street and leaves the lead role to the ancient buildings around (fig. 16). A second interesting example is the planned reconstruction of the hospital chapel, which was unfortunately never carried out because of lack of funding. Adjacent to the monumental sick ward, and facing the church, this chapel, dating back to the 13th century and transformed in the 16th, had been demolished in 1832. According to Lemaire, its reconstruction was necessary in order to recreate a semi-closed public space in front of the church. The sketches, conserved



13/ First sketch for the reconstruction of n. 55, nd (ARML).

14/ Detail of a window of n.55 (© Houbart, 2018).

15/ n. 55 after reconstruction, 1972 (ARML).



16/ General view of Benedenstraat
(© Houbart, 2009).

17/ Photomontage showing the
planned reconstruction of the
hospital's chapel, nd (ARML).



in Lemaire's archive, show a creative reinterpretation of gothic architecture, where long vertical windows take place at the angles of the apse (fig. 17) while inside, an angular ceiling freely evokes gothic vaults (fig. 18). Just like the building we mentioned before, the architecture consists in a creative but sober interpretation of historic features.

3. "The valid contributions of all periods": historical layering and unity of style

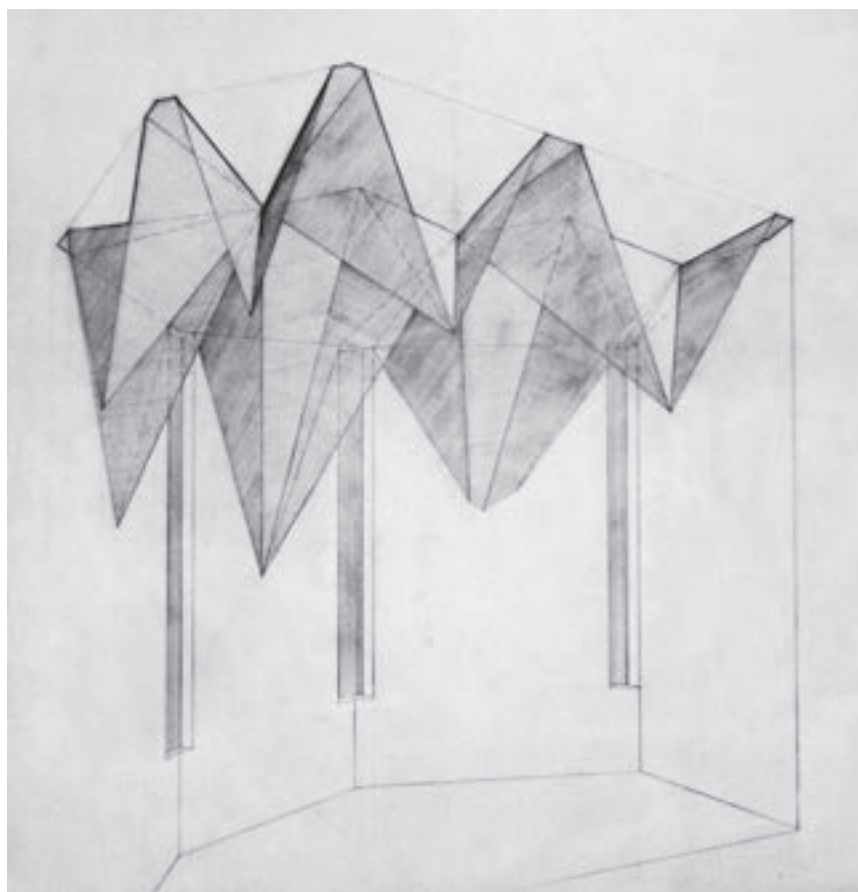
As it was stated before, the first impression given by the beguinage is that of a great unity. But even more, this unity seems to always have been there, or at least result from a continuous evolution process, stopped at the moment when the beguinage lost its religious status at the turn of the nineteenth century. The hundreds of pictures that were taken before and

during the renovation works tells a completely different story. Before the operation, the beguinage was also characterised by a great visual unity. But it was completely different.

At the beginning of the 19th century, even if more than a hundred beguines come back on the site after 1803, they are progressively replaced by poor families. The hospital is turned into a rest home for women, while the Convent of Chièvres and the adjacent buildings host a textile workshop and an orphanage. This means progressive transformations of the buildings, that don't always meet the requirements of their new function. Some large houses are divided into smaller units, while annexes are built in the gardens to host

18/ Perspective of the planned ceiling of the hospital chapel, 1967 (ARML).

19/ View of the backside of n. 85-86, 1968 (ARML).



20/ H. Hoste, *View of Bovenstraat before renovation, 1951-1952 (ARML).*



basic sanitary facilities or small barns (fig. 19). But more important, as far as the exterior aspect is concerned: with the exception of the houses in the “Soldier’s district”, the mullion and transoms of the windows are removed and reused as street pavement. In order to bring some more light into the houses, window sills are lowered, and wooden frames with large panes replace the stone structures and their stained-glasses. Some doors and windows are shifted, suppressed or created. To conceal these heavy transformations, the façades are lime-washed and sometimes, rendered. As to the roofs, many dormers and some gables are suppressed rather than repaired. The overall effect is completely different from the current one: instead of a picturesque sequence of slightly diverse buildings, the pictures show regular alignments of white facades with identical windows and almost no singular feature, an aspect well adapted to the neoclassical taste of the time (fig. 20).

From the start of the project, Lemaire justifies his decision to remove all the layers of white-wash by the necessity to treat the damp walls; it is moreover the only way to discover the earlier layouts of the facades. And despite the fact that it was originally envisaged to again white-wash some of the houses, “depending on their original state”¹⁰, the decision is soon taken, on the basis of the traces discovered, to come back to the “local traditional style, of medieval origins”¹¹, and to expose to the eye of the visitors the brick facades, and their windows with stone mullion and transoms. Even radical, this choice is not, for some of the houses, in contradiction with the principles of the Venice charter’s article 11, stating that “when a building includes the superimposed work of different periods, the revealing of the underlying state can only be justified in exceptional circumstances and when what is removed is of little interest and the material which is brought to light is of great historical, archaeological or aesthetic value, and its state of preservation good enough to justify the action”. If it wasn’t properly in a good state of conservation, the underlying historical layer of the buildings was in many cases easy to reconstruct, on the basis of unquestionable physical traces, especially the small discharging arches indicating the place and rhythm of ancient windows (fig. 21). In addition, the fact that many mullions and transoms had been rediscovered in the pavement of the streets transformed the reconstitution of old windows into a sort of anastylosis¹², and the fact that these stones had originally been produced

¹⁰ R.M. LEMAIRE, *Problemen in verband met de restauratie en de aanpassing van het “Groot begijnhof”*, sd, ARML.

¹¹ R.M. LEMAIRE et al., *L’infirmier du Grand Béguinage de Louvain. Notice historique et archéologique préparatoire à la restauration*, in “Bulletin de la Commission royale des Monuments et des Sites”, XVI (1965-1966), p. 170.

¹² [D. LINDSTRUM], *The World of Conservation: an Interview with Raymond Lemaire*, in “Monumentum”, XXVI, 2 (1983), pp. 93-95.



21/ Backside of n.86 after partial removing of the whitewash, nd (ARML).

22/ H. Hoste, General view of the hospital and Holy Spirit Table on Middenstraat, 1952 (ARML).

23/ P. Cordier, General view of the hospital and Holy Spirit Table on Middenstraat, 1968 (ARML).

using an early kind of standardisation, made them interchangeable from one house to another. But not all buildings delivered sufficient archaeological information in order to be restored in their original state, and for some of them, restoration obviously bordered on reinvention: one of these is the “Holy Spirit table”, next to the hospital (fig. 22).

The hospital is the only building being the object of a publication from Lemaire and his team. Published in the *Bulletin de la Commission royale des Monuments et des Sites*, this long article addresses the archaeological

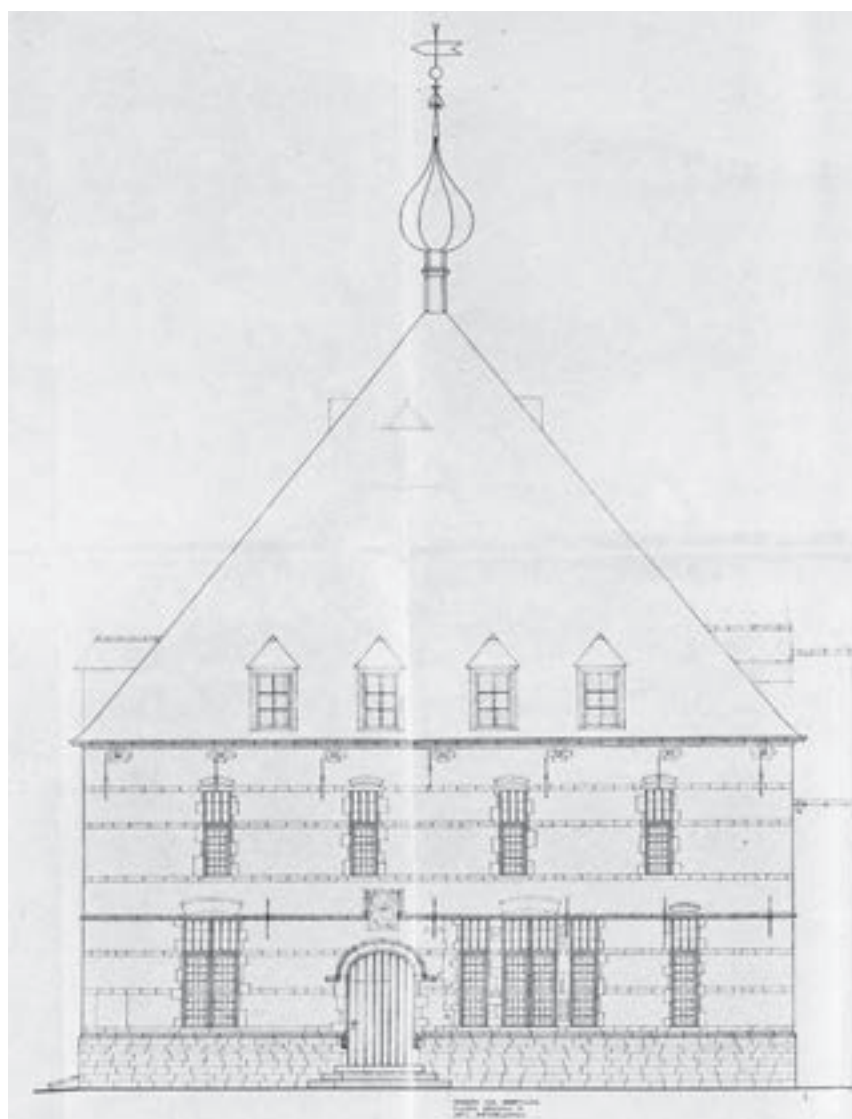




24/ View of the Convent of Chièvres, 1942 (ARML).

25/ Convent of Chièvres, main façade after restoration, 1969 (ARML).

study and the restoration options for this part of the ensemble, and a few paragraphs are devoted to the facades of the building and its neighbour, the “Holy Spirit table”, facing the church in the central street of the beguinage. Like most of the other ones, these facades had been transformed and offered a neoclassical aspect with a regular alignment of similar windows, and like the other as well, they had their finishings removed and their old windows recreated during the renovation. But for the building adjacent to the infirmary, the traces that were discovered were visibly not sufficient to allow a recreation of the original state, so Lemaire chose to create an evocation of this state by aligning windows based on the standardised dimensions of the others, and simplifying the details (brick jambs instead of stone). But contrary to the house n. 55 we mentioned before, the legibility of the contemporary intervention is far from being obvious and remains rather ambiguous (fig. 23). It is also the case for some windows of the Convent of Chièvres, of which the return to the original state meant a very heavy restoration sometimes going beyond hypothesis, at least for some details that were impossible to recreate on the basis of existing traces (for example the details of the door) (figg. 24-25). A systematic analysis of the photographic material leads to a quite disturbing observation: in order to obtain such a beautiful aspect of picturesque unity, with the impression of being brought back to the seventeenth-century heyday of the beguinage,





26/ Main facade of n.84 before restoration, 1968 (ARML).



27/ Main facade of n.84 after restoration, 1968 (ARML).

Lemaire had to depart from the Venice charter's principles more than once, limiting the legibility of his interventions to the minimum possible, and sometimes, forgetting this principle in favour of pure stylistic restoration. It is the case, for example, for the reconstruction of disappeared gables and dormers (figg. 26-27), or for a few facades where available traces were insufficient.

At this stage, the question might arise: why did Lemaire choose this general option, knowing that he would be forced to depart from principles he obviously believed in and taught his students? Several answers can be found to this question, and the truth probably lies in a combination of them. First of all, for practical reasons, the works began by the "Soldier's district", at the west of the site, where most facades had preserved their original aspect and only needed a cleaning and consolidation (fig. 28): after having obtained a seventeenth-century unity in that area, it was certainly tempting to go on in that direction, even if it required heavier interventions, for the rest of the site. Second, the sacrifice of the nineteenth century layer wasn't perceived in the 1960's as it might be today: for the public and most experts, as Lemaire, nineteenth-century architecture was, to say the least, out of favour, and didn't stand a chance when compared to the sixteenth or seventeenth century remains, even incomplete. But the last possible answer might have been the most decisive: according to Lemaire, the beguinage was simply more beautiful in its seventeenth-century state.



28/ H. Hoste, general view of Straat van't nieuw convent, 1952 (ARML).

Evoking an argument such as beauty, and thus, personal taste might seem irrelevant when we talk about a moment when conservationists – Lemaire included – were precisely attempting to define principles as objective and scientific as possible. But at least two texts written by Lemaire himself support this analysis. We already mentioned the first one, dedicated to the restoration of the infirmary. In this text, Lemaire justifies the heavy restoration of the “Holy Spirit table” as follows:

The transformation of the facade, executed around 1850 had been radical. Of course, it constituted an important stage of the infirmary’s history, because it was the expression of an adaptation to the needs of that time. From the aesthetic point of view, it was difficult to grant this 19th-century facade enough qualities to justify its conservation, definitely condemning the more ancient underlying layout¹³.

Beyond the Venice charter, the arguments recall Canon’s Raymond A.G. Lemaire position towards the eighteenth-century stucco decorations inside medieval churches, about which he proclaimed that “a crime is a historical fact as is a praiseworthy action. We can take note of it, draw a conclusion from it, but it mustn’t prevent us from repairing it and erasing its traces”¹⁴. But it even stronger evokes the “sketch of guiding principles” we mentioned before, which gives us a good idea of Lemaire’s thoughts before the writing of the Venice charter when his position was blended into the choral expression of the group of writers. Announcing in some ways the international document, the “sketch of guiding principles” also reveals very clearly the prominence granted by Lemaire to beauty, at the beginning of the 1960’s. In the article 4 of the document, he states that:

the contribution of all periods to the building of a monument deserves to be conserved, provided that it bears the stamp of beauty (...) when, in an edifice, two architectural or decorative compositions are superimposed, the releasing of the first, leading to the destruction of the second, can only be justified when the architectural or decorative value of the original state is much bigger than the value of the second state and that its state of conservation is considered sufficient¹⁵.

Without any mention of historical value, that isn’t taken into account in the decision, Lemaire departs from the principles of philological restoration in favour of a critical assessment of the monument as a work of art. Indeed, as the article 9 of the “sketch of guiding principles” states, “an ancient monument is generally a work of art before being a historical document”¹⁶. As a consequence, in the same way his contemporary Renato Bonelli recognizes “the necessity to eliminate superimpositions and additions, even remarkable and worthy in linguistic terms or as testimony, that can attack or disrupt the architectonic and figurative integrity, by degrading its perception”¹⁷, restoration may, according to Lemaire, “aim to reveal, inside and outside, all valuable parts of a monument that an envelope of elements without any interest, or with less interest than the revealed parts, currently covers”¹⁸. This applies perfectly to the outside appearance of the beguinage’s houses.

Once established, the importance granted by Lemaire to beauty also explains other interventions, that remained difficult to understand from a strict conservation and restoration point of view. Among these purely aesthetic interventions, the treatment of buildings around the Convent of Chièvres, of which the facade are heavily restored to be brought back in a state close to the original, is the most typical. Even if the archive doesn’t keep any written record of the operation, the pictures and plans of the complex

¹³ R.M. LEMAIRE *et al.*, *L’infirmerie ...*, cit., p. 169-170.

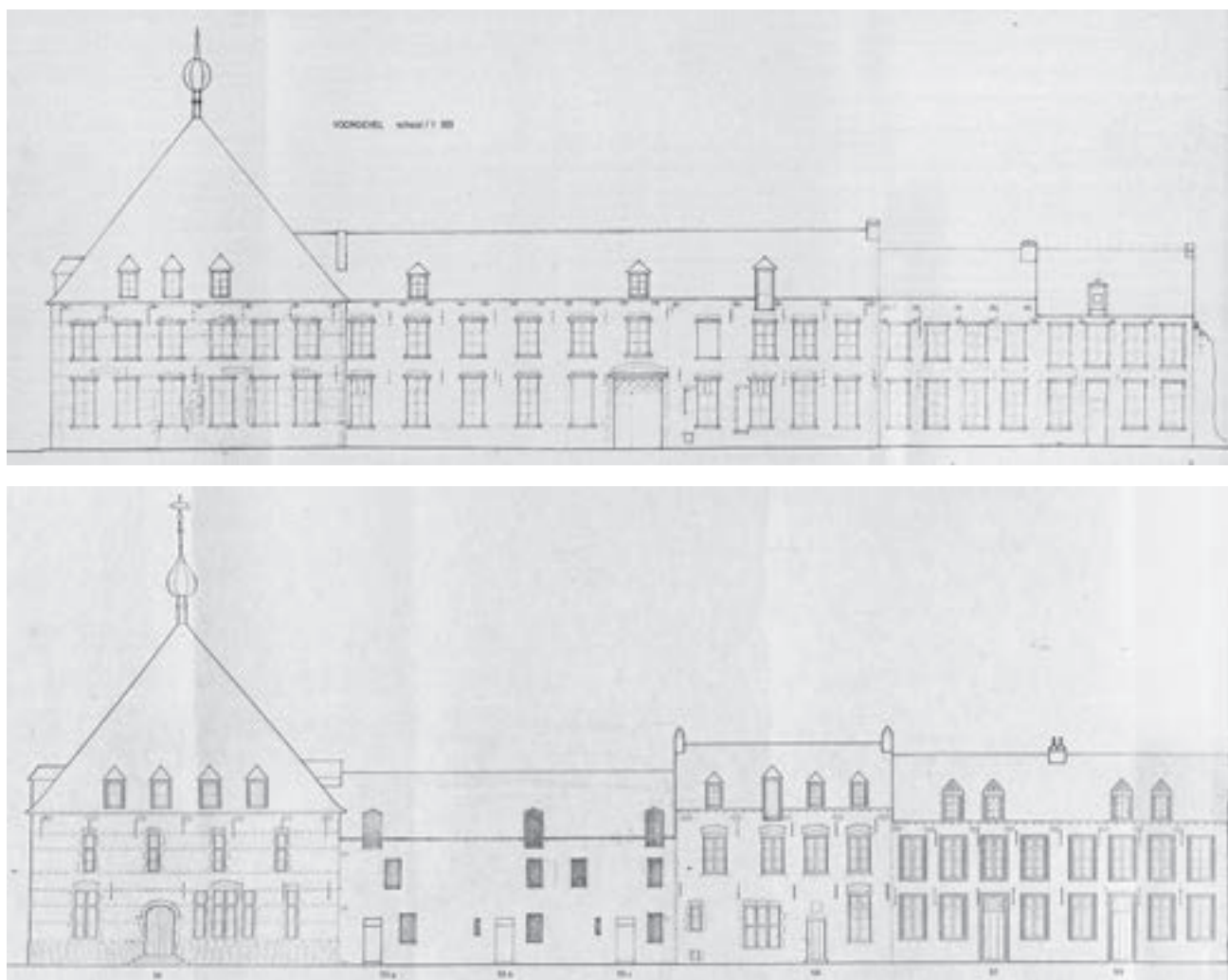
¹⁴ R.A.G. LEMAIRE, *La restauration des monuments et l’oeuvre des siècles*, in “Reconstruction”, 10 (1941), p. 4.

¹⁵ R.M. LEMAIRE, *Commission royale des monuments ...*, cit., np.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ R. BONELLI, *Il restauro architettonico*, in *Enciclopedia universale dell’arte*, Florence, 1963.

¹⁸ R.M. LEMAIRE, *Commission royale des monuments ...*, cit., np.



before and after the works reveal that the two buildings adjacent to the convent were not restored, but completely demolished and reconstructed in order to lower the height of their cornice, which was, before the works, more or less at the same height as the one of the convent (fig. 29). The reason why the building to the right of the convent has been rebuilt with a “contemporary stamp” (we discussed it before, fig. 15) whereas the building to the left, on *Rechtestraat*, dating back to the 19th century, was rebuilt in the same style, remains a mystery, but the most important fact is that on both sides, the buildings have been reconstructed around one meter lower, in order to highlight the landmark character of the convent (fig. 30).

29/ Convent of Chièvres and n.55 to 58 before restoration, 1972 (ARML).

30/ Convent of Chièvres and n.55 to 58 after restoration, 1971 (ARML).

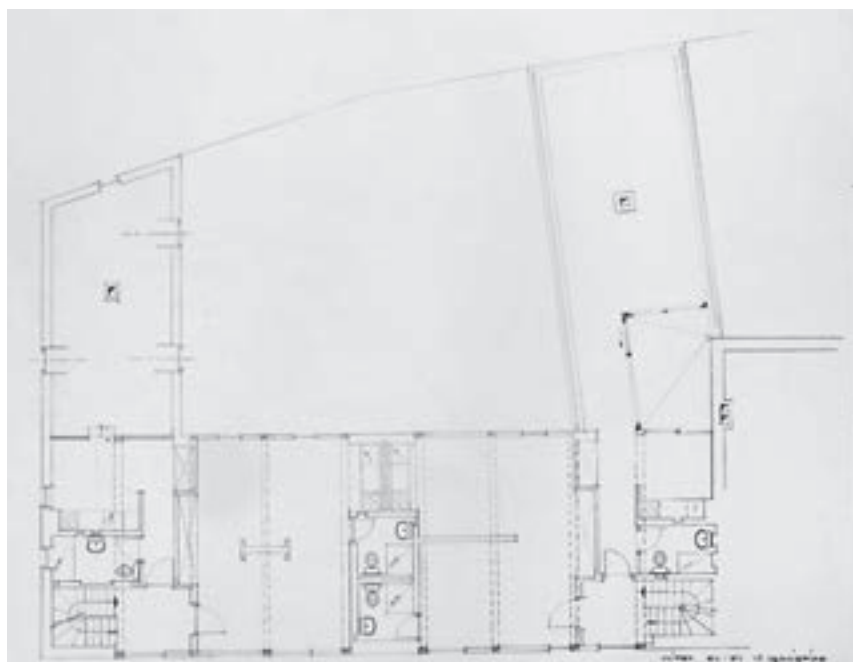
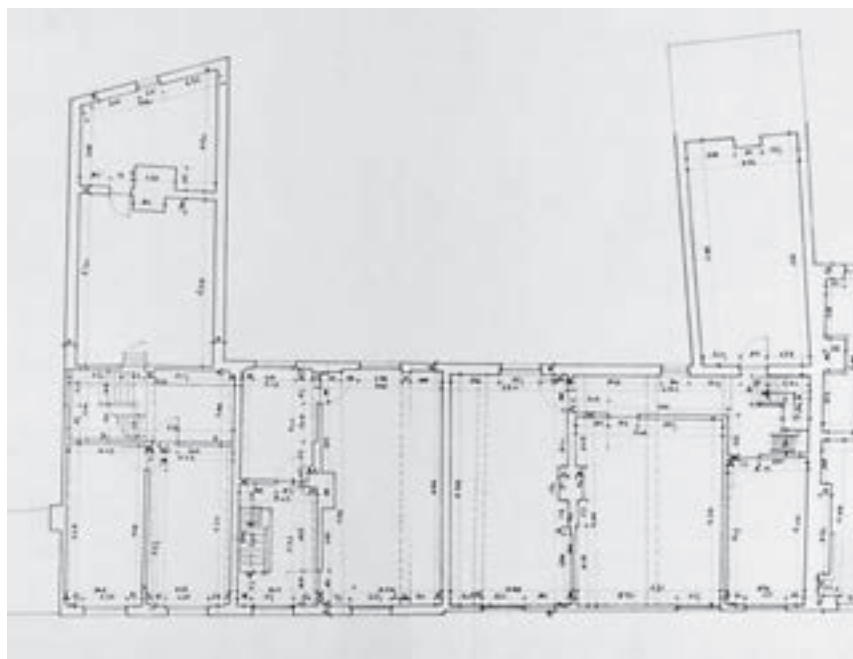
4. “Some socially useful purpose”: reuse vs conservation

After discussing the treatment of the building envelopes, we still have to examine the way in which the buildings are adapted to their new function. Did Lemaire succeed in “find[ing] current solutions for a set of dwellings containing everything from a student’s room to a house for a large family”, while sticking to a “scrupulous conservation of all authentic and valuable parts”, also “in the interiors”?¹⁹ In addition to the freedom granted to Lemaire for the options and organisation of the works, the specificities of the operation, with the one and only client – the university –, allows a great flexibility in terms of planning. Furthermore, the relative mixed use, including collective

¹⁹ R. M. LEMAIRE, *The Renewal of Historic Cities...*, cit., p. 15.

31/ n. 50, plan of the ground floor
before restoration, 1966 (ARML).

32/ n. 50, plan of the ground floor after
restoration, nd (ARML).



and singular dwellings, for students as well as for professors, administrators and guest, and community functions, is in theory ideal to make the most of the existing spaces, in respect of their characteristics. In most cases, indeed, the program respects the existing entities, and the reorganisation takes place within each building, except for those which were already interconnected in the past. The cases when the limits between two houses are modified are uncommon. But despite this fact, unless rare exceptions, the internal organisation is not respectful of the existing layout, in answer to profitability requirements and the need for specific types of dwellings.

A careful look at the plans reveals that the staircases of almost half of the houses and convents are modified and moved, with important consequences on the layout of the plans (figg. 31-32). In most cases, walls and partitions, even original, are suppressed, in answer to the contemporary taste for open spaces. Thus, despite the declared objective to think the reuse on



33/ n. 92, interior view during the works, 1967 (ARML).

the basis of historic or existant arrangements, this attitude is only an exception, limited to some single-family houses and punctual cases, such as Lemaire's office, placed in the former *Kerckekamer*, at the entrance of the site from *Schapenstraat*. In general, single-family program and student rooms require fewer adaptations of the existing spaces than apartments and studios, that often lead to a complete remodelling of the building's partitions and circulations. In some cases, such as n. 40-41, 91 and 92 (fig. 33), the renovation implies the full replacement of the existing internal structure by concrete slabs, leaving no trace of the existing layout. Among the necessary adaptations, sanitary and heating equipments are the most intrusive. Absent from the original layouts, they require dedicated spaces and the pipes imply rooms superimpositions leading to heavy changes in the existing organisation of buildings. Lemaire limits the effects of these installations with the choice for a collective heating – eight boiler rooms are set on the site – and the grouping of most pipes in the circulation spaces.

34/ R. Colin, *View of the sick ward during the works, 1968 (ARML).*

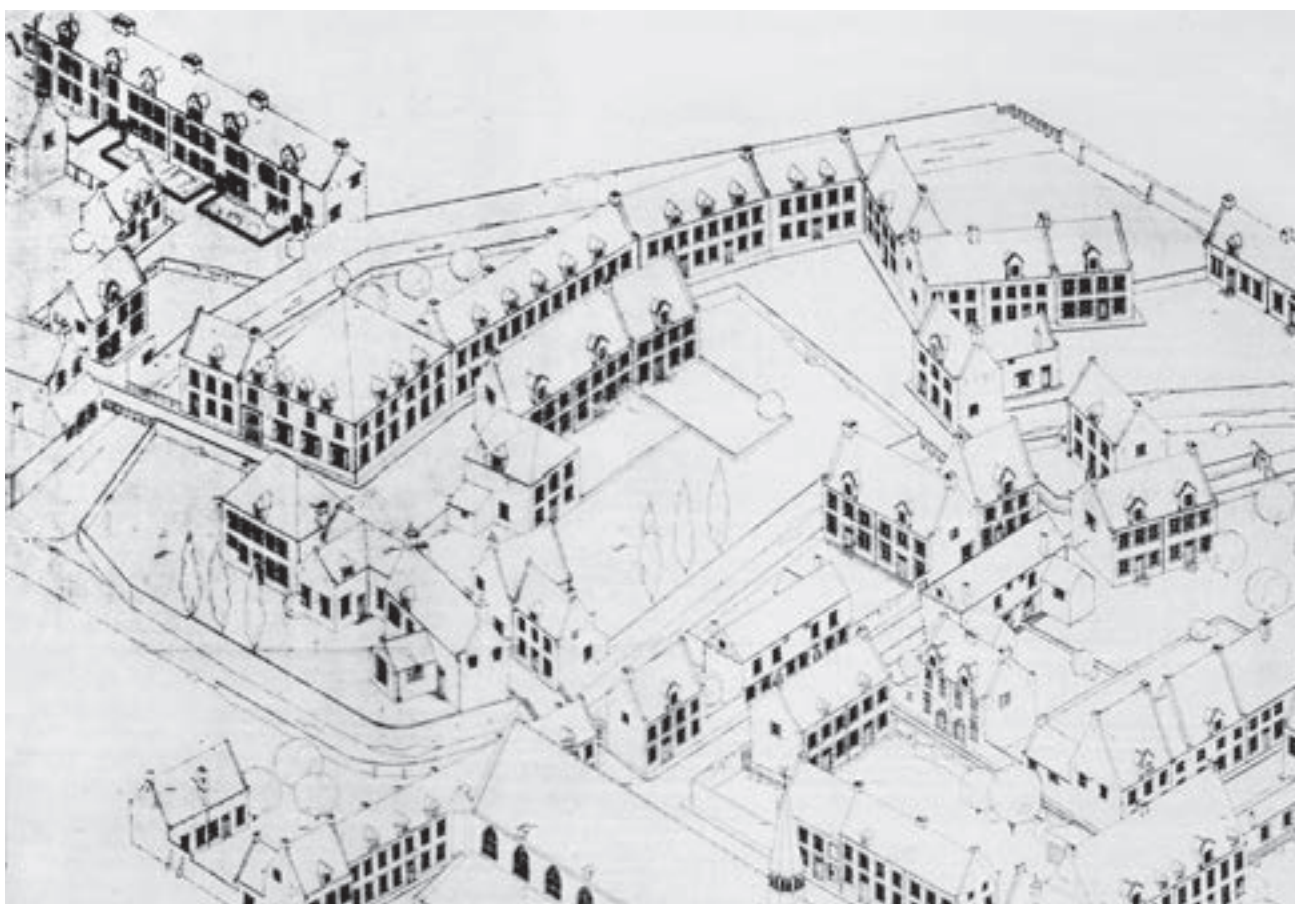


It is also worth noting that during these transformations, some valuable elements, such as stairs and fireplaces, are sometimes moved from one house to another when they don't fit in the new layout of the apartments.

Taking advantage of the architectural qualities of the two emblematic buildings of the site, the community functions allow, contrary to the dwellings, to enhance the existing spaces, more diverse and for some of them, wider than those of the houses and most convents. At the infirmary, the sick ward, cleared of its partitions and ceiling, becomes the heart of a group of varied rooms hosting the reception, bar, grill, services and meeting rooms of the "Faculty club" (fig. 34). At the Chièvres convent, vertical circulations are transferred into the reconstructed adjacent buildings, as well as stocks and toilet blocks of the congress centre. In that way, each and every interesting feature of the rooms of the former convent can be fully appreciated, as well as the structure of the roof, in which three new levels take place.

5. The Venice charter to the test of a historic area: from restoration to "reviving"

As the previous paragraphs illustrate, examining the Great Beguinage renovation in light of the Venice charter's principles, in terms of legibility of the intervention, respect of historical layering and conservation of existing valuable features, inside and outside, leads to a mitigated impression. While it is clear that Lemaire tries to illustrate some of these principles, the cases where he departs from them are also numerous. Does this mean that he didn't fundamentally believe in the rules he had contributed to formulating? On the basis of the archive, we can definitely answer this question in the negative.



R.M. Lemaire's collection, kept at the University archive at the KU Leuven, contains a very rich collection of ICOMOS documents. As secretary-general (1965-1975), and president (1975-1981) of the organisation, Lemaire kept a copy of each letter and document produced by the general secretarial office and all answers from national committees and other correspondents. Many letters exchanged between Lemaire and Piero Gazzola, president of the organisation until 1975, are also part of the collection, and some of them reveal, concerning our analysis, that both men had the project, as soon as in the early seventies, to get the Venice charter reviewed, to better answer the questions raised by the renovation of historic districts. In a note addressed by Lemaire to Gazzola, in February 1971, he underlines that "this aspect is scarcely initiated in the charter's text", and declares that "the experience of the ten last years brought out that a pure and simple application of principles devoted to monuments as such, is not always possible, nor always desirable for the ensembles"²⁰. Further correspondence confirms that only six years after the adoption of the charter by ICOMOS, at least two of its writers were convinced that it didn't work for projects such as the Great Beguinage renovation. Despite the fact that its article 1 included in the scope of the charter, "the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilisation, a significant development or a historic event", thus applicable "not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time", the writers of the documents lacked significant experience in the field of ensembles and minor architecture, and had mostly monumental examples in mind²¹. But conscious of the necessity not to limit themselves to monuments, they had at least stated, in article 14, that "the work of conservation and restoration carried out in such places should be

35/ Aerial perspective after restoration, and (ARML).

²⁰ R.M. LEMAIRE, [Note for Piero Gazzola], February 18th, 1971, ARML.

²¹ This was confirmed to me by Paul Philippot in an interview in July 2014 in Chiny (Belgium). On the aborted review process of the Venice charter, see: C. HOUBART, *Deconsecrating...*, cit.



36/ *The urban facade (Groep Planning, Brugge. Structuurplan voor de binnenstad, Brugge 1976, p. 211).*

Front page

37/ *The square in front of the Chièvres convent (© Houbart, 2018).*

38/ *Picture of the model for the Sainte-Anne district in Brussels, 1970 (ARML).*

inspired by the principles set forth in the foregoing articles". The Great Beguinage, as well as other similar projects, proved the contrary : more than a restoration, they needed, at the same time, what the Council of Europe called a "reviving".

As President and Secretary-general of ICOMOS, Piero Gazzola and Raymond Lemaire are invited to take part in the "Scientific advisor's committee" of the Council of Europe as soon as in 1965. Leading the reflections on "preservation and rehabilitation of monuments and sites", launched by a 1963 recommendation, the committee organises, from 1965 until 1968, five symposia aiming to define the outlines of a new policy. During the third symposium, in 1966 in Bath, Raymond Lemaire synthesises for the first time his ideas in terms of "restoration and reviving of historical ensembles". Going beyond the objectives of a mere transmission of historical heritage, he emphasises the services provided by monuments and ensembles to the community in terms of "fulfilment of physical and moral needs"²². Since this first text, more than the historical or artistic value of the ensembles, it is the quality of their urban character that justifies their "reviving": "the message of the monumental ensemble resides as much in the spiritual point of view and the atmosphere it creates as in the high quality of its elements". Therefore it is necessary to give back to these ensembles their "full value of human habitat", which implies, more than "safeguarding a scenography", sanitation and adaptation of the interiors²³: an echo to the options of the Great Beguinage's renovation.

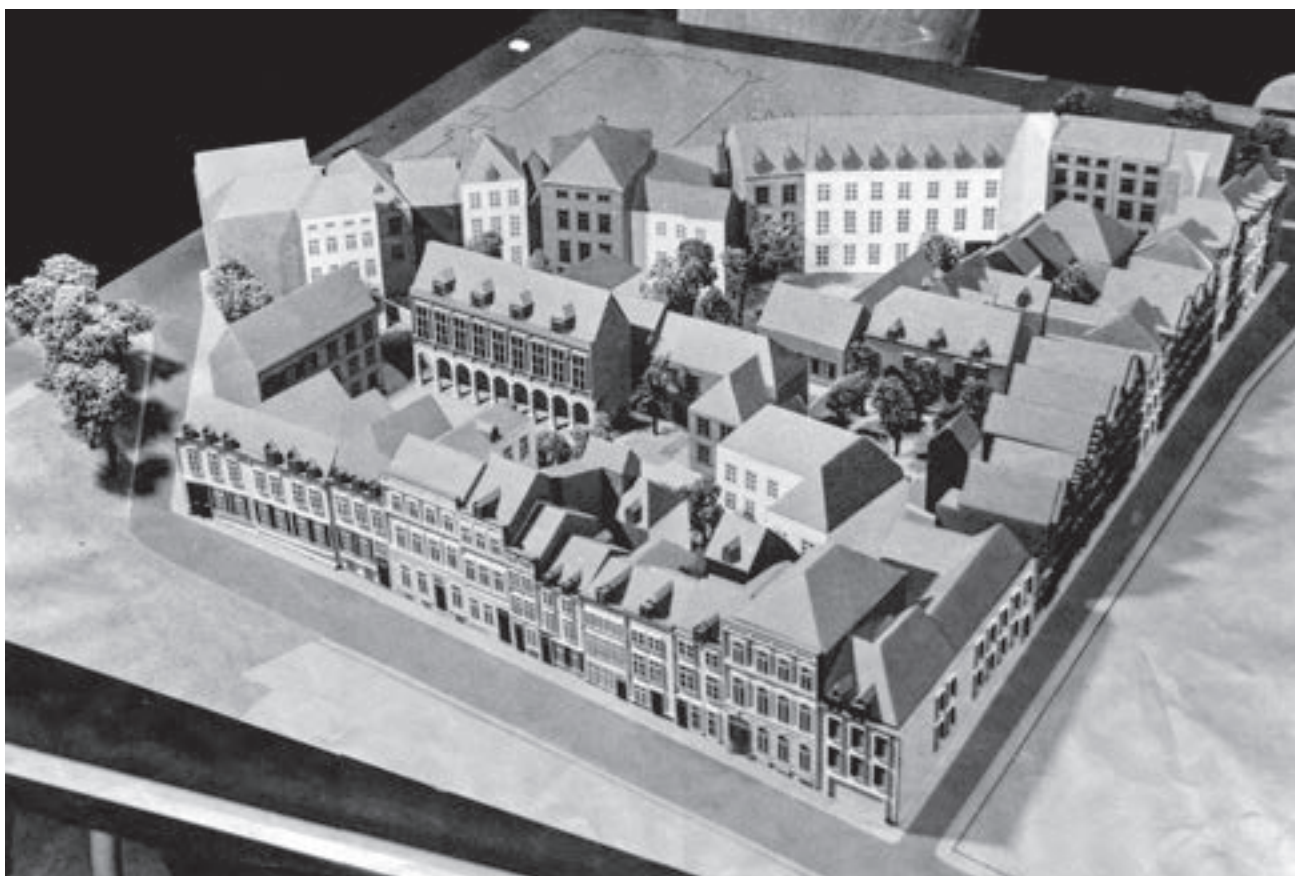
And indeed, the renovation options chosen by Lemaire for the Great Beguinage are easier to understand when we look at them at the scale of the whole : more than each building's restoration, according to its own values, Lemaire aims to recreate an overall value, including not only the built envelopes and the interiors, but also public spaces. In addition to the demolition of late valueless annexes, he chooses to suppress most separation walls between gardens, and to create, or recreate, at the heart of the area, meeting spaces (fig. 35) – an approach that recalls Giovannoni's *diradamento*. Just like deep internal transformations allowed the adaptation of the interiors to the needs of individual or family life, an idealised vision of social life in traditional cities leads the treatment of public spaces. It has direct consequences on the facades restoration: beyond the expression of each building's singularity, they are the envelope of streets and squares. The "structure plan" of Bruges, for which Lemaire collaborates with the studio *Groep Planning* and one of its leaders, Jan Tanghe, from 1972 on, calls this envelope the "urban facade": right where interior space – or positive space – meets exterior space – negative space –, this facade has its own identity, beyond the limits between buildings (fig. 36). Thus in many cases, restoration choices for a facade are led not by the enhancement of a particular building, but by its contribution to the overall scenography. This definitely happened for the Great Beguinage as a whole, and most clearly for the Convent of Chièvres zone.

6. The Great Beguinage: an urban manifesto

As the Great Beguinage well illustrates, for Raymond Lemaire, shifting from the monument to the historical city doesn't only mean to change the scale of the operation. More than the sum of units – monumental or not –, the historical city is a living organism, including buildings, gardens and public spaces, all of them seen as envelopes of social practices. Without denying the importance of the aesthetic argument in the decision to come back to a more picturesque state of the ensemble, it is crucial to mention

²² R. M. LEMAIRE, *Restauration et réanimation des ensembles historiques*, in *Principes et méthodes de la conservation et de la réanimation des sites et ensembles d'intérêt historique ou artistique* (Confrontation C. Défense et mise en valeur des sites et ensembles d'intérêt historique ou artistique, Bath 1966), Strasbourg 1967, p. 58.

²³ *Ibidem*.



²⁴ Ivi, p. 61.

²⁵ Interview with Suzanne Van Aerschot, Brussels, July 23rd, 2014.

²⁶ R. M. LEMAIRE, *Restauration et réanimation...*, cit, pp. 61-62.

²⁷ On these projects, see: C. HOUBART, *Raymond Lemaire et les débuts de la rénovation urbaine à Bruxelles*, in *Revue d'Histoire Urbaine / Urban History Review*, XLI, 2 (fall 2012), p. 37-56 and C. HOUBART, *Bruxelles, laboratoire d'une politique européenne de "réanimation" urbaine. L'exemple du quartier du Sablon*, in *Bruxelles Patrimoines*, 27-28, September 2018, pp. 28-49.

²⁸ J. RÉMY, *Louvain-la-Neuve, une manière de concevoir la ville*, Louvain-la-Neuve 2007.

²⁹ R.M. LEMAIRE, *La mémoire et la continuité*, 1976, ARML.

that the recovered diversity, at the expense of the relative uniformity of the transformed state of the whole, contributes above all to the creation of an existential climate centred on non-countable needs rather than functional demands, emphasised by the contemporary functionalists:

The man felt home in cities from before this century. He could work, live, enjoy himself and blossom there. He found the scale that suited him, diversity in order, the unexpected that excluded boredom, the constant care for beauty. (...) The economic performance wasn't the first objective, but the satisfaction of his needs, and the quest for a setting at his disposal²⁴.

In order to recreate such a setting, Lemaire doesn't hesitate to reinforce the "togetherness atmosphere" by elements functionally anachronistic but bearing a symbolic community message²⁵: for example, he reconstructs a number of wells and, on the small square facing the Convent of Chièvres, a water pump in stone bought from the Franciscan convent in Leuven (fig. 37). With its picturesque streets, its varied architecture and its diversified small-scale public spaces, the Great Beguinage is the antithesis of the functional city. It just takes a few easy steps to grant the ideal traditional city it embodies, a model value. And indeed, already in 1966, Lemaire declares:

In the service of humans, new urbanism and architecture are still looking for the ways to reach a balanced synthesis between their needs and the means to fulfil them. The cities from the past are the still living expressions of such a synthesis. They were built for and around humans and the diversity of their ways of being and their needs, and not almost exclusively in function of the economy that allows their subsistence. They have thus acquired a human dimension of which we are often deprived in the new ensembles. And this is why, most likely, they have an essential educative value and a great lesson to teach us²⁶.

In addition to a challenge for the Venice Charter, and a convincing illustration that old insanitary districts could be "revived", as the Council of Europe attempted to prove by its program culminating with the adoption of the European Charter of the Architectural Heritage and the Amsterdam Declaration in 1975, the Great Beguinage is thus a true urban manifesto. In the late sixties and the seventies, the revived area appears to have been the guiding model of Lemaire's works, not only in the field of urban rehabilitation, but also, as an urbanist. From the rehabilitation of Brussels's historic district, like the Sainte-Anne or the Saint-Gery areas²⁷, and the Bruges structure plan until the planification of the new city of Louvain-la-Neuve²⁸, the recreated urban characteristics of the Great Beguinage are constantly present. Looking at the project only through the lens of the Venice charter is thus to say the least, restrictive, and even misleading. While a first conclusion of the analysis could have been that Lemaire, driven by his preference for traditional architecture, hadn't been able to follow the principles he had contributed to putting on paper, the beguinage turns to be precisely an illustration of his ability to question principles and change his position in front of new problems.

We leave the conclusion of this paper to Lemaire himself. In an unpublished 1976 text, *La mémoire et la continuité*, facing the difficult question of combining safeguard and reuse, he declares: "it would be too simple to believe that the mere implementation of a few rules would allow solving such a delicate question. Beyond the talent indispensable to create any valuable work, it is before anything else the state of mind that is the guarantee of success"²⁹. This is perhaps the most essential lesson we should learn from the Great Beguinage.