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Residential landscapes—Garden design, urban planning and social formation in Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at providing a historical understanding of the role of gardens and green spaces in urbanization and urban planning, as well as in processes of social formation and social mobility that took place on the background of a changing spatial, socio-economical and political context in Belgium in the period 1889–1940. The research is based on a number of case studies, which represent different stages and themes in the evolution of garden design, urban planning and society: 1) vernacular versus designed gardens and landscapes; 2) the popularization of the garden and the development of a new framework for urban planning; 3) the garden city versus private arcadia and 4) modern garden design and the rise of the middle class (1930–1940). Through an analysis of designs and discourses of, amongst others, leading landscape architects/urban planners Louis Van der Swaelmen, Jules Buysens and Jean Canneel-Claes, the paper exposes a number of ambiguities and tensions, for example between the 'vernacular garden' and the 'garden of the establishment' and between the deep-rooted dream of a privately owned house and garden, and attempts to create new social and spatial frameworks that surpass the individual lot. The paper concludes that these tensions can still be traced in the context in which landscape designers and urban planners work today. This historical awareness, however, can help them to set out strategic goals for the contemporary garden as a place of both production and consumption, and as a place where social identity is shaped.

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1. Introduction

The history of garden and landscape design in Belgium has only been fragmentarily explored thus far. The historical evolution of the Belgian territory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is extensively covered from the perspective of urban planning, focusing on post-war reconstruction, urban development and housing (Smets, 1977; Smets, 1985; Smets and Buls, 1995; De Meulder et al., 1999; Van Herck and Avermaete, 2006), infrastructure (DeBlock, 2011; Peleman, 2013; Van Acker, 2014) and economy (Ryckewaert, 2011). Also the role of urban nature and green spaces in urban policy since the nineteenth century has recently been studied, mostly from the perspective of urban history (Stynen, 2010; Tritsmans, 2014). However, there seems to be a gap between urban (planning) history on the one hand, and the history of garden and landscape design on the other, notwithstanding a number of first explorations (Imbert, 2009; Notteboom, 2009; Notteboom, 2012; Van Damme, 2013). While this has been explored in international literature (e.g. Treib, 2002; Haney, 2010), a reflection on the relationship between gar-

den design, its larger urban socio-economical and political context and the discipline of urban planning in Belgium is still lacking.

Belgium is an exemplary case when studying the potential strategic value of gardens, and especially the vernacular garden. Historically, the social, cultural and economic meaning of the private family garden is inextricably linked to the history of urbanization and urban planning in Belgium. As will be outlined further in this paper, the particular historical evolution of the Belgian residential landscape is characterized by a high degree of private home (and garden) ownership and a relatively weak planning apparatus. The underrepresentation of larger-scale public commissions in the practice of many landscape and garden designers made it, in comparison to other European countries, difficult to 'leap the garden fence' towards collective or public commissions on a larger scale (Van Damme 2013). Hence, constructing social and cultural identity through the garden and gardening was in Belgium in the first place linked to the private garden. This paper has two aims: first, outlining how the ideas and practices related to – both vernacular and designed – gardens evolved in the context of urbanization and urban planning in Belgium in the pre-World War II era, and second, how social formation took place in the process.

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I will argue that this history of both urban planning and social formation through the lens of the garden is not free from contradictions and ambiguities: from the end of the 19th century onwards, the history of urban planning has been marked by a number of attempts to develop residential landscapes that fulfilled the need of different collectivities on a scale that surpassed the individual lot, resulting in a balancing act between collective and public needs and the deep-rooted dream of the private house and garden. Also the construction and constant re-negotiation of social identity – what Denis Cosgrove calls ‘social formation’ in his seminal book *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1998) – by means of gardens and landscapes is a complex process. It is as much related to domination and power relations as to social emancipation, and it is grounded in physical gardens and landscapes as well as their representation (Cosgrove, 1998; Mitchell, 2002). In the period under study, the dominance of the – essentially bourgeois (Fishman, 1989) – model of the private garden led to a process of identity-building among the working and upcoming middle classes (in garden as well as in dwelling culture) that was largely based on a concept of social mobility of the population through the imitation of the higher classes (for a detailed characterization of the distinct social classes, see Bourdieu, 1979). Nevertheless, I will follow the argument that this process became much more complex in the early twentieth century (De Caigny, 2010), as new ideas on the socio-economic organization of society, political constellations and cultural references enter the fields of urban planning and landscape/garden design.

2. Material and methods

The paper is based on qualitative research on a number of historical case studies that deal with the above-described dynamics between the private and the public/collective in landscape architecture and urban planning, and the process of social formation that is related to it. The cases deal with evolutions on the long term, as well as specific pivotal moments in history, resulting in a reading of history that is at once diachronic and synchronic. This qualitative research method thus allows us to formulate a number of general perceptions that surpass the specific case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The timeframe of the case studies is delineated on the one end by 1889, the date of the first Belgian Housing Act, which stimulated the possession of a privately owned house with a garden for large parts of the population, and on the other end by 1940, the start of World War II. This period witnessed a number of important socio-economic, cultural and political evolutions, which thoroughly affected the discipline of the garden and landscape design as well as that of urban planning (Notteboom, 2009; Notteboom and Peleman, 2012). In the course of the early twentieth century, urban planning evolved from a discipline that aimed at a sanitation and embellishment of the city, mainly from a hygienistic and aesthetic perspective reassuring the privileges of the higher classes (the nobility and the bourgeoisie), to a discipline that had the ambition to form a public planning apparatus with an emancipatory character for society as a whole (Uyttenhove, 2003). This new disciplinary context provided a fertile ground for new ideas on the collective and public role of gardens and urban green spaces. The growing emancipation of the workers’ class and the rise of a middle class, made the private house and garden accessible for an increasing part of the population, laying the foundation for complex processes of social positioning and identity building (Notteboom, 2009; Notteboom, 2012; De Caigny, 2010).

The reading of the period 1889–1940 is in this paper subdivided according to four key moments that represent changes in the discipline and policy of urban planning and landscape/garden design, as well as in the socio-cultural, economic and political context in which they took place. These key moments should not be consid-

ered as strict demarcations: they rather serve as stepping stones to address disciplinary and societal evolutions and themes that are at play throughout the whole period under study. In order to grasp the complexity of this evolution, different, often conflicting, discourses and practices of each periods are touched upon, outlining the parallel occurrence of both vernacular and designed, private and collective residential landscapes, and the mechanisms of social exclusion, emancipation and positioning involved.

The first moment, the 1889 Housing Act, marks the start of the democratization of homeownership and a large-scale, seemingly unplanned development of the Belgian countryside into a privatized residential landscape. This is paired, however, with the discussion of a number of examples of designed landscapes whose ambitions to surpass the individual lot serve different types of communities. The second moment, the project of a model house for workers in 1910 and the subsequent foundation of the association *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* in 1913, allows us to uncover a network of professionals of various backgrounds, as well as an amalgam of discourses of ideas on the role of the garden in society. It also leads to a pivotal moment in the discipline of urban planning, as it laid the foundation of the ideas of architect/urban planner Louis Van der Swaelmen and his theory on urban planning. The third key moment is the Conference for the Reconstruction of Belgium of 1920, in which the *Union des Ville* opted for the model of the garden city for collective housing. At the same time, we will outline, the dream of the private house and garden as a means of social positioning remains a dominant socio-cultural and economic force, as illustrated by the work and discourse of landscape architect Jules Buysens in the post-war context of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque*. A fourth key moment is the introduction of the ‘functional’ garden by landscape designer and urban planner Jean-Canneel Claes’ in the 1930s, that sheds a light on the changing role of the garden and green space in the modernist idiom and its attempt to provide an alternative for the *petit bourgeois* garden. By way of conclusion, the results of the research are further discussed in the light of the objectives formulated in the introduction. The historical research is also put in perspective of possible strategic perspectives for gardens today.

3. Results

3.1. Landscapes of labor and leisure. Vernacular and designed gardens and landscapes at the turn of the 19th century

3.1.1. Private homeownership as a cornerstone of urbanization

‘The ugliest country in the world’, is what modernist architect/Renaat Braem called Belgium in 1968, and also: ‘a patchwork, stitched together by a madman’ (Braem, 1968). It has often been observed that Belgian landscape seems to lack any spatial design or sense of aesthetics, a vernacular landscape that seems to be filled in randomly according to the need of its inhabitants. This *laissez-faire* attitude and dispersed settlement pattern are however the result of a specific socio-economical and political context that accelerated this dispersal in the course of the nineteenth century (De Meulder et al., 1999; DeBlock, 2011; Peleman, 2013; Van Acker, 2014). Territorial spread was accommodated by a dense and fine-grained railway system, which became accessible for all parts of the population by a system of cheap railway tickets for employees (De Block and Polasky, 2011). The unification of the labor market was combined with a liberalization of the land market, with as pivotal moment the first Belgian Housing Act of 1889. This law stimulated the individual ownership of new houses with gardens in the countryside, through a system of subsidized loans, which is still the cornerstone of Belgian housing policy today. The law was by many liberal reformers stigmatized as the Catholic law for the

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