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“Tour & Taxis, an exemplary approach to the reconversion of an exceptional urban industrial site”

Brief description of the context

This site was constructed between 1902 and 1910 by the Port of Brussels, the Belgian railways and the Belgian State. Industrialization was in full swing on an international scale. In 1886, Belgium was the fourth largest economic power in the world and Brussels provided the largest number of manufacturing jobs in the country. Working conditions were tragic, trade unions and leftist political parties were beginning to organize.

The country had become independent in 1830 under pressure from the middle classes. Construction of the Charleroi canal was underway. It would be completed in 1832, to carry Walloon coal from the heart of the country, and linked to the sea via the Willebroek Canal, which dates back to 1530. The first railway on the continent, using the famous Stevenson cars, was launched between Brussels and Mechelen in August 1835. Coal, in conjunction with plentiful labour immigrating from the interior, and the financial role of the new capital of a country that represented a threat to no one, were behind the exponential development of industry.

Brussels, the capital, was unable to keep up with the demand for industrial sites within its former limits; the port was saturated and the railway could not get through: so expansion had to go beyond the town limits. A major lobby of bankers and industrialists, as well as civil servants and private persons created the “Cercle des installations maritimes” (Marine facilities circle) to give Brussels a real sea port that could take advantage of the railway at the same time, since Belgium had acquired a certain expertise in trains. So began a 30-year saga that nearly failed, because the city of Brussels did not have the means to acquire large land holdings and to modernize the 50 km maritime canal to the Schelde. Brabant Province finally got involved; King Leopold II firmly supported the project and inaugurated the construction site. The Tour & Taxis site was chosen in 1890 because it could accommodate the development of a customs complex with extremely valuable rail – route - canal transshipment, just outside the capital and at the centre of the country.

This site, like similar sites in Europe and North America, was operational until the end of the 1960s, when it began to deteriorate. New provisions for European customs, pressure from haulers’ lobbies, just-in-time storage, and the explosion of commercial air transport are essentially what caused the decline.

The warehouses continued in operation until the end of the 1980s for road transport. Certain public service organizations such as the Port and the Railway began to sell their lands, due to their management contracts and the dawning of an open European market.

The discovery

As Director of LA FONDERIE, a Centre for the economic and social history of the Brussels region, I organized our first exhibit called “Bruxelles, un canal des usines et des hommes” (Brussels: a canal for factories and men) in September 1986, in the royal warehouse that was still fully active. For the first time, the site was open to a public other than the customs warehouse depositaries and the customs and railway personnel.

A team of historians has continued to demonstrate the economic, industrial and social importance of the Brussels region, only known today for its relation with the European administration.

For many people – particularly for me, this was a discovery. I was overwhelmed by the quality of the site and the history of the men. We saw that it was emblematic of urban and economic development on a national and regional scale, as well as from the standpoint of world industrial history and the architecture and urban planning associated with it.

This is a real catalogue of Belgian civil engineering and know-how at the beginning of the 20th century, in a full industrial boom. At the end of the 1980s it was considered like a 37 ha. vacant urban lot – despite its enormous subsisting assets and the fact that it had employed more than 3000 workers, creating a vast number of companies and jobs in the neighbouring districts, and even the original urban organization that sprung up there, combining social and luxury housing, workshops, factories and warehouses. The site, yesterday and today, is an crucial issue for the future of the region and a sterling asset as part of our international industrial heritage.

I won't go into a detailed description of its architectural and urban qualities – a well-illustrated publication is available in English, French and Dutch. It presents the history of the site and all of the buildings that make it up. Still, much remains to be done, particularly in terms of social memory.

So La Fonderie slowly undertook a photographic inventory and a search of the archives, but was not in a position to devote all the time required. Not much was available other than the original plans, which actually were discovered quite recently.

Under threat

We learned that the Port and the Railway, both public companies, were reorganizing and planning on leaving the premises, concentrating on the port itself or other railway sites.

In 1993, we launched the first enhancement project by proposing the reconversion of the site into a new pole for growth, in continuation of its former activities: transport, including a Museum on communications, transport and the railway. The press reported on the project.

The situation came to a head when that the same year a crazy project was launched by the kind of people who make a huge effort to get official approval for a real estate development project and then sell the project to a developer/investor. This was the "MUSIC CITY" project inspired by an American model. Initially, it was combined with another "Sports City" project in a more elegant neighbourhood that was quickly abandoned under the pressure from local residents. An ministerial cabinet advisor was the one who described the Tour & Taxis site as a vacant urban lot full of worthless warehouses.

Saved

And so the battle began. On one hand, real estate developers had considerable funds and political support. The authorities said that the investment would be private, but very large, that this was a unique opportunity in a new sector that would create job openings and other indirect advantages.

La Fonderie began to mobilize, mainly with urban planning associations and committees supporting the local neighbourhoods and heritage.

The public procedures required "concertation" before approval of projects, meaning that the population was to be informed by posters and could react, and that depending on the size of the project, environmental, economic and social impact studies had to be done.

Historical research continued on the value of the site and each of the buildings on it, in terms of architectural and cultural heritage. A file was compiled and a brochure edited in three languages by a working group called “Tour & Taxis Foundation 21” referring to the 21st century when we wanted to start a real project. This publication was sent to a file of 100 Belgian and foreign personalities, including many members of TICCIH, applying for their support and asking them to take a position in opposition to that of the public authorities. The results were very interesting. Some 50 international personalities replied favourably, but at the Belgian and regional level, almost nothing was said, as if the decision had already been taken.

At several concertation meetings on plans and impact studies that had been submitted, the working group informed the press of its position, with little

success. No radio and television coverage was given to the question. Brussels' main daily paper came out in favour of the Music City project and tried to discredit the “Tour & Taxis Foundation 21. It said that this was an exceptional opportunity to gain an infrastructure for huge shows (12,000 seats!) to be financed by the private sector.

The Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites, of which I have had the honour to be a member since 1989 in the industrial heritage section, took a position, and even took the floor at a press conference, departing from its usual neutral reserve – in principle, its opinions are communicated to the regional authorities only.

The project was presented to the World Monument Watch and, in 1998, was retained among the hundred most threatened world sites. The press hardly mentioned it. The following year, the site was maintained on the endangered list. At that time, I presented it at a WMW meeting at the Council of Europe.

This site was proposed for UNESCO's world heritage list. At the invitation of the Commission of Monuments and Sites, Mr. Cleere came to visit the site personally in February 1998 as part of a press conference organized by the CRMS. He confirmed the opinion of international experts including our former President Louis Bergeron.

A very precise pitch was drafted and distributed to the authorities. The Council and the City of Brussels asked for the opinion of a French architect Philippe Robert from the firm Reichen et Robert, well-known for its work in industrial heritage. He drew up a proposal that maintained the Music City project, but without damaging the architectural heritage. The Council was divided on the question. The socialist and ecological majority refused Music City, the Mayor from the same political party as the regional Minister responsible for urban planning, supported it. Finally, the city gave its authorization, but subject to the condition of not damaging the architectural heritage, which made the project unrealistic. The region decided not to bother with subtleties and accepted the project in February 1998.

I did a feasibility study on the hypotheses that we proposed for the conversion of the site. This was essentially done by taking advantage of the technical potential of site that could meet a strong demand for infrastructures for artistic and cultural productions, conference and exhibit centres.

La Fonderie and the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites filed an appeal with the Council of State against the regional government's decision on the grounds of irreversible damage to major heritage. We lost in the interim proceedings because the court stated that we had shown the experts a project that demolished the shed roofs, whereas the most recent version maintained them, but raised them and demolished the cellars. We appealed, because the argument was fallacious, but it would take several years for a final judgment.

At that point, the investors began to study the return on the project and at the last concertation meeting, they themselves showed what we had been saying for five years – the project was not viable. There is no market for this kind of infrastructure in a country that has as many inhabitants as Paris, while the Parisian infrastructure in Bercy, which is now easily accessible by TGV ... is not profitable: the Music City project was abandoned by the investors themselves.

It must be added that, by that time, no one dared challenge our rigorous analyses of the value of the heritage – the deceitful attitude of certain authorities and backers of this silly concept had become obvious, and we continued to gain international support. Disastrous environmental impact studies (car parks and unmanageable traffic in an old, densely inhabited neighbourhood, plus sound pollution) and social impact studies (lack of jobs, prohibitive ticket prices, strictly commercial approach, lack of support of cultural creation and professional integration), and the appeal by La Fonderie to the Council of State were serious obstacles.

The present and future

The investor dropped the Music City project by paying a penalty to the "sellers" of the concept, and then gave full backing to the architectural heritage. Renewal began on the warehouses with great respect for their heritage, although the property is not protected by law. I had a chance to explain the architectural, urban and historical qualities to the architects, and to work with them on the project.

Today in 2006, the Region has appointed an engineering and design bureau to draft an outline scheme for the entire site, based on mixed usage, large grounds, community facilities ... former schemes, like the urban zoning concept, were refused because they were obsolete and no longer corresponded to the real estate market which had become saturated with offices. Associations had become very critical after their "training" by the Tours & Taxis 21 working group. A platform associating neighbourhood and heritage committees presented a series of objectives and principles for the reconversion, giving priority to the architectural heritage and jobs, access for the public, maintaining the Port activities, sustainable development ... the new scheme takes account of most of the arguments used to date, and the local residents took part on the accompaniment committee. This urban planning approach for the future of what is to become a new section of town must associate all economic, political and social partners in the discussion – this was one of our demands 12 years ago – so the future becomes the centre of a real exchange of views. The reconversion of 40,000 m² of the marine terminal, which is very central to the site, also became part of the issue. What were we going to do under this enormous roof?

At the same time, the Brussels Government has just decided that the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites will set up here, alongside many companies, although that same Commission, like La Fonderie, had lodged legal action with the Council of State against the regional government for its decision to approve the Music City project.

In 2004, with La Fonderie, I set up an exhibit of 82 paintings, in three languages for the developer. This is an itinerant exhibit that consequently is available. The presentation brochure includes these paintings. For that same developer, I have just finished installing a semi-permanent exhibit in the huge store windows on the history of the site and the quality of the buildings.

I have just been appointed by the developer for the scientific accompaniment of the restoration of the marine terminal.

As President of the Federation of Brussels Museums, which includes 90 museums and collections, I am backing a new project with the Federation for an intentionally futuristic display of about 10 collections, that are particularly endangered or have been forgotten, and that deal with Communication and Transport (computer science, printing, horse-drawn carriages, trains, telephones and post offices ...). This project should set up in the marine terminal. This will not be easy to achieve, since it must necessarily entail a cost for the community.

To conclude

I think I can say that saving a site as emblematic as this one was no small achievement. It is hard to gain an audience in one's own country. The support of TICCIH, and particularly its President Louis Bergeron, the WORLD MONUMENT FUND, ICOMOS, EUROPA NOSTRA and other local and international partners, the backing of well-known international and Belgian university scientists made all the difference. I want to thank them warmly here.

The risky role of the Royal Commission of Monuments and Sites was surprising. This Commission of wise men, two-thirds of whom are appointed by the government and one-third by their peers, filed legal action against its government. The sanction was to refuse to renew the members of the Commission for more than one year ... so as not to have to appoint me because I had been unanimously co-opted by my colleagues.

The support I got from La Fonderie, that backed my analyses and actions, was particularly valuable. It is essential to be able to count on an institution like this one to affirm a viewpoint, and it proved to be profitable for the institution's reputation as well.

The neighbourhood committees concerned and the associations for defending our heritage showed great confidence, and their analyses of the environmental and social impacts, as well as the viability study, were very useful. Partners

like the port came out strongly, despite the trend at that time (and still today) to relocate the port to get it out of the urban context and set it up "somewhere else" since the area of the Region cannot be extended. Maintaining the port should help counter the expansion of offices and luxury housing, and support less qualified jobs.

We always endeavoured not to give any room for scientific criticism. From that standpoint, we were foolproof, even if I regret not having more time to verify many historical questions. This is what I'm doing now that I am now longer managing La Fonderie.

We adopted a strategy of local and international mobilization for our work, using a methodology for the analysis and promotion of the site as a component of an urban, economic, social and cultural infrastructure of the past with the same kind of potential for tomorrow for this exceptional site worthy to be considered part of our international heritage.

The way this site has been considered for the last 15 years is exemplary of the evolution of urban, architectural, economic and social approaches to this type of major industrial heritage and the facilities and infrastructures in a region whose function is shifting drastically. Standing fast over time is important – approaches from 20 years ago have changed considerably. Industrial heritage is part of the urban heritage in the Brussels region, and, essentially, it is as important as any other type of heritage.

The main advantage today, for developers and for the man on the street, is the emblematic quality of the site in terms of its value as heritage – a site that was not open to the public until the end of 1989 because it was used by the customs department and was considered by a modern architect like a booth at a fair – has now become a must as a venue for world music festivals, book and antique fairs, European business congresses, riding meets ... and tomorrow as a place to work, live and enjoy collective facilities!

Yesterday, I congratulated one of the officials in charge of the budgets and construction work on the site for the high quality renovation undertaken in the post office building. He answered: "*It's true, we are making progress and continuing to safeguard our heritage, even if the political authorities don't always make things easy when it comes to issuing the permits. For the post office, we are putting everything back into pristine condition, taking out all the Extravaganza discotheque horrors and repairing the roof (which burned partially). It just goes to show, that developers aren't what they used to be!*"

Thank you for your attention.