

PHD RESEARCH

A short overview of recent PhD research on Belgian modern and contemporary history

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Sights/Sites of splendor. The shopping landscape in nineteenth-century Brussels

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This dissertation discusses the history of the shopping landscape in Brussels during the nineteenth century. Historians have long focused on the new, big commercial institutes of the nineteenth-century city, such as the arcade and the department store. They paid next to no attention to the broader context of other novel commercial institutes, such as auction houses and market halls, and even less to more traditional commercial circuits and spaces, such as open air markets and small, ‘insignificant’ shops. The commercial isolation in which they often studied the big commercial palaces did not correspond with the historic reality. Markets, market halls, shops, department stores, arcades, auction houses, bazaars, and branches of multiples and cooperatives shared streets, pavements and clients. This dissertation thus starts from the sum of these places : the shopping landscape. It uncovers the different places where people shopped and examines their mutual relations. It investigates the way these shopping sites and their reciprocal relations developed throughout the nineteenth century. It scrutinizes how the development of the shopping landscape determined the development of a shopping culture and how that culture influenced the way the shopping landscape evolved.

This dissertation demonstrates that the shopping landscape in the center of Brus-

sels densified intensely as the century progressed. The century of modernity did not bring Brussels revolutionary new sites for shopping, but it saw an increase in the scale of different sites where people could shop. Shopping became a quintessentially pedestrian activity. Window-shopping thus became an increasingly indispensable part of the shopping experience. Shop windows and streets were designed to facilitate the practice more efficiently. The development of the shopping landscape was therefore strongly intertwined with municipal projects of city beautification, sanitation and rationalization. Both the successes and the limitations of municipal policy are clearly distinguishable in the development of the shopping landscape. This dissertation demonstrates that the development of shopping culture was a complex process that was engrained in a full range of shopping spaces. New sites for shopping, such as shopping arcades, market halls, auction houses and department stores, functioned as catalysts. Both old and new – and everything in between – sites for shopping were characterized by a surge of splendor all through the century – even if it did not always lead to the anticipated results.