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The rebuilding of Ypres from a museological perspective “Two exhibitions on post-First World War reconstruction in Ypres at the same time?”

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Recent visitors to the famous Cloth Hall in Ypres have been quite surprised to hear that both the Yper Museum and In Flanders Fields Museum are hosting simultaneous exhibitions on reconstruction: *herSTELLINGEN* (Reconstruction and Recovery) and *Feniks* (Phoenix). In addition to these two temporary exhibitions, visitors can also choose from two thematic walks through the town centre. The first one is accompanied with a guidebook (2020) edited by Dominiek Dendooven and Jan Dewilde, both staff members of In Flanders Fields Museum; the second one with the *Ypres Salient: from the ashes* app. Both concentrate on the remarkable heritage of the reconstruction that is still abundantly in present-day Ypres. The town walks can be regarded as open-air exhibitions on the theme¹.

By using the model proposed by the French geographer Henri Lefebvre in *La Production de l'espace* (1974), we argue that reconstruction is a multidimensional phenomenon. Therefore, it needs to be studied from different angles, as we did for the two exhibitions and two city walks (figure 1). The reconstruction of Ypres can simultaneously be seen as:

1. A physical reality, that can be visually seen and measured (*espace perçu*);
2. A discursive reality, space as conceived by planners and architects (*espace conçu*):

3. A lived reality, as represented by inhabitants (*espace vécu*).

Although the three viewpoints all recognize reconstruction as a spatial phenomenon, they have their particularities that stand out in the exhibitions and the city walks². While the walks guide the visitor past the material remains and the immovable heritage in Ypres, *Feniks* explores reconstruction during and shortly after the First World War. As for *HerSTELLINGEN*, it provides a fresh perspective on reconstruction, starting with the lived experiences of the returned inhabitants during the 1920s.

Sightseeing: reconstruction as a material reality

The town walks present the first of three distinct views on reconstruction. They lead visitors through the architecture of the post-First World War period. Consequently, they focus on what Henri Lefebvre has called the *espace perçu*, the space we can study by looking at maps and aerial imagery. It is the space that we can objectively measure and analyze. In the *Ypres Salient: from the ashes* app, it is possible to select the aerial images of 1916 or 1918 (before reconstruction), 1944 (after reconstruction) and today as a background. The idea behind this option for multiple backgrounds is that users can easily see for themselves how Ypres changed between 1918, 1944, and today. The app, in other words, allows people to discover how Ypres transformed – in a material sense – as a result of post-First World War reconstruction. It also provides background information on 21 reconstructed sites in the town centre. For some of the sites, before-and-after images show how Ypres changed as a result of the complete destruction and reconstruction of the town.

1. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN AND JAN DEWILDE, *The reconstruction of Ypres: a walk through history*, London, 2020;

More information about the exhibitions and walks: STEPHEN LODIEWYCK ET AL., *From the Ashes: Reconstruction of Flanders Fields after the Great War*, London, 2020.

2. HENRI LEFEBVRE, *La production de l'espace*, Paris, 1974.



Figures 1 and 2: The Feniks exhibition at In Flanders Fields Museum (above) and the herSTELLINGEN exhibition at the Yper Museum (below) (authors' collection).

The combination of aerial images and historical photographs and drawings teaches the visitor mainly two things about reconstruction. First and foremost, they can visualize the surprisingly fast pace at which Ypres arose from its ashes after the First World War. Images of 1918 demonstrate how the town was completely annihilated after four years of fierce fighting. Every single house and building had to be rebuilt; all infrastructure needed to be renewed. And yet, most buildings were reconstructed within one decade after the Armistice of November 1918. Photographs of the 1920s and aerial photographs taken during the Second World War are proof of how fast this enormous work was done. The famous Cloth Hall was one of the few buildings in the town centre that was not fully restored before the Second World War. The work only started after the Imperial War Graves Commission's Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing – that served as a bargaining chip for the reconstruction of the Cloth Hall – was inaugurated in 1927. Furthermore, the enormous costs delayed the building process during the 1930s. The Belfry and the western wing were inaugurated in 1934. The eastern wing would remain unfinished until 1967³.

Second, before-and-after photos make clear that Ypres was rebuilt in a way that made it appear quasi-identical to its pre-war form. This can be seen most clearly from the reconstruction of Ypres' town centre, which was rebuilt based on a homogenous architectural style that heavily referred to the medieval past. Sometimes, this contained a "correction" of the pre-war situation. This was, for example, the case with the tower of Saint Martin's Church. Town architect Jules Coomans replaced the pre-war truncated model with a (neo)gothic pointed spire (figure 2). Nevertheless, concessions to modernity were made as well. The medieval façades were, in fact, just that: *façades*. They hid modern interiors behind them. In some cases, town houses even featured integrated garages. This was of course a novelty, since only very few citizens of Ypres owned a car at that time.

The decision to undertake a quasi-identical reconstruction one century ago still has consequences today. When walking through Ypres, it is easy to forget that the town was completely destroyed. But the truth is that Ypres has been defined by reconstruction, even more than by the First World War itself. How Ypres looks today, is to a large degree the consequence of the choices made by architects, town planners and government officials in the aftermath of the war. These choices were often far from straightforward, as the exhibition *Feniks* demonstrates.

Town planning: Ypres as a discursive reality

While the guidebook and app that accompany the walking tours give an indication of why Ypres looks like the way it does today, the temporary exhibition *Feniks* digs deeper into the rationales that underscored post-war reconstruction. For Henri Lefebvre, this is the second spatial reality: the *espace conçu*. This concerns space as conceived by planners and theorists. In the case of reconstruction, the conceived space is how politicians in Belgium and abroad as well as architects and planners thought of post-war Ypres. Although a regionalist approach that favored historicizing architecture eventually prevailed, many different ideas about the reconstruction of Ypres circulated during and shortly after the First World War. A significant part of *Feniks* is dedicated to this discussion: building plans, drawings, plaques, letters and newspapers that all have to do with the question of rebuilding Ypres are on display.

Already during the war, the reconstruction of Ypres, more than that of any other town, became the subject of international debate. The Belgian architect Eugène Dhuicque argued that a reconstruction should not be considered from a theoretical point of view, since every time frame – and thus also the war itself – had the right to be represented in space. He was supported by many Britons who also wanted to preserve Ypres as a relic of war. Their most prominent advocate was the then Secretary of State for

3. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN AND JAN DEWILDE, *The reconstruction of Ypres...*, p. 18-19.



Figures 3 and 4: The tower of the St Martin's Church of Ypres before (top) and after the First World War (below)
© Antony d'Ypres, In Flanders Fields collection.

War Winston Churchill. For a brief period of time, the Belgian government supported this idea to keep the city, or at least the site of the Cloth Hall, as a ruin⁴. Opposing this idea was the local government of Ypres, which shared the opinion of most citizens of Ypres. They wanted a complete reconstruction of their town. As soon as allied forces began their final advance towards the end of 1918, people followed and returned home to assess the damage⁵. When these first pre-war citizens returned to their former homes, the reconstruction and rebuilding of society *de facto* started.⁶ The city council only returned to Ypres in July 1919, several months after the first civilians⁷.

When it became clear that Ypres would indeed be rebuilt, questions arose about how to undertake the reconstruction. Regionalism soon became reconstruction's quasi-official ideology⁸. This was mainly advocated for by rather conservative voices, including the famous Flemish poet Stijn Streuvels⁹. Streuvels and others believed a traditional formal architectural language would help restore traditional (family) values. From their perspective, modernist architecture was connected to socialist ideas and thus a danger to the pre-war social equilibrium. During and shortly after the war, many books were published that propagated this idea. This thinking also formed the ideological background against which the reconstruction of Ypres took place. For planners, architects and politicians, regionalist architecture was a means to (re)shape post-war society.

Spatial and social engineering went hand in hand during reconstruction¹⁰. *Feniks* presents the historicizing reconstruction of Ypres as a deliberate choice made after the war. This is done by showing alternatives for the regionalist reconstruction of Ypres that were discussed during and after the war. Some ideas went as far as reconstructing the town centre of Ypres as a garden city. This was a modern way of thinking about urban planning and housing that only partially found its way into post-war Belgium and Ypres, in the form of new town quarters for the working class¹¹. The choice to preserve the pre-war layout and architecture of the town was thus a deliberate one that went beyond emotional arguments of restoration to replace what is lost.

What seems to have been paramount in this process, was the role of public and private groups, communities and organizations. The most striking examples are of course those related to the war: the organisations that grouped together the *sinistrés* – the people that had suffered material war damage – and the local departments of the Flemish war veterans union. In Ypres, attached to the war veterans union was 'Puinentroost', a theatrical company. They wanted to provide comfort and diversion for the war veterans and their family members through theatre¹².

These various groups played a critical role in the reconstruction of society as a whole. They provided the infrastructure and opportunities for the

4. Concerning this debate: DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, "'This is Holy Ground'. Van ruïnestad over zone de silence tot Menenpoort: Britse plannen voor Ieper na de eerste Wereldoorlog', KOEN BAERT ET AL., eds., *Ieper. De herrezen stad*, Koksijde, 1999, p. 97-123.

5. KOEN BAERT, 'Wonen in de verwoesting. Omstandigheden en getuigen', KOEN BAERT ET AL., eds., *Bouwen aan wederopbouw 1914/2050. Architectuur in de Westhoek*, Ypres, 2009, p. 20-22.

6. Not all pre-war inhabitants returned and the reconstruction attracted new inhabitants as well. For a more in-depth analysis of the population of Ypres in the first decade after the war, we refer to the contribution of Pieter Trogh, in this issue.

7. KOEN BAERT, 'Momenten uit de wederopbouw. Het herstel van de Ieperse samenleving (1919-1934)', KOEN BAERT ET AL., eds., *Ieper. De herrezen stad*, Koksijde, 1999, p. 142.

8. JEAN-CLAUDE VIGATO, 'Between progress and tradition. The regionalist debate in France', LEEN MEGANCK, LINDA VAN SANTVOORT AND JAN DE MAEYER, eds, *Regionalism and modernity: Architecture in Western Europe 1914-1940* (KADOC-Artes 14). Leuven, 2013, p. 15.

9. STIJN STREUVELS, *Land en leven in Vlaanderen*, Amsterdam, 1923.

10. DRIES CLAEYS, *Land, staat en bevolking. De wederopbouw van het Belgische platteland na de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Leuven, faculteit Letteren, KU Leuven, 2019, p. 404-410.

11. JAN MAES, 'De tuinwijkexperimenten in het kader van de Belgische wederopbouw na 1918', MARCEL SMETS, ed., *Resurgam: De Belgische wederopbouw na 1914*. Brussel, 1985, p. 189-213.

12. JOHAN MEIRE, *De Stilte van de Salient: de herinnering aan de Eerste Wereldoorlog rond Ieper*, Tielt, 2003, p. 131.

re-establishment of communities. It was through the creation of these organisations that individual citizens contributed to reconstruction. This was not so much a by-product of their existence, as the reason they were formed in the first place. The case of the music association Ypriana is a key example. Before the war, the music scene in Ypres was divided between two main political factions: the Catholics and liberals¹³. The existing associations disappeared due to the war. After the war, six musicians took the initiative of writing to the members of all pre-war associations¹⁴. They also placed an open call in the newspaper to gather musicians who survived the war and had returned to Ypres. This new association was to be free of ideology or political parties. Here, the initiators recognised that society changed during exile and that the citizens of Ypres needed to be unified, not divided. In the end, some twenty individuals responded to the call, belonging to four different pre-war associations. They met for the first time on 4 July 1920 in the temporary school building on the Minneplein.¹⁵ This was the start of Ypriana. The regulations dating from 1923 stated that the association was 'without political goals'¹⁶. The association would recognise and respect the personal political and religious beliefs of all the members and the citizens of Ypres. The same document contained the goal of this new music association: to contribute to the "re-cheering up of the city"¹⁷ through music. By defining their goal in these terms, Ypriana de facto recognised the importance of socio-cultural practices for the recovery of society, the topic *herSTELLINGEN* focuses on.

Parading: post-war Ypres as a lived space

Guidebooks and building plans tell us how planners and architects conceive space. But they do not reveal how returned inhabitants experienced the new, post-war Ypres. One manner to determine what Henri Lefebvre has called the *espace vécu* (lived space), is to look beyond official documents to more informal sources that tell us about socio-cultural practices of the citizens of Ypres. This is the main objective of Yper Museum's temporary exhibition *herSTELLINGEN*, that explicitly aims to investigate how people exactly moved on with their lives after the war. Ypres, in this sense, is no longer just a city of buildings built of bricks and mortar or the result of urban and construction planning. *HerSTELLINGEN* invites us to see Ypres through the eyes of the citizens of Ypres in the aftermath of the First World War¹⁸.

As direct source material regarding the lived space is scarce, it is necessary to study the topic from a more indirect point of view. One way to do this, is to focus on a case study as a *pars pro toto*. Here, we will be focusing on the reconstruction of the giant of Ypres, Goliath. By taking this one specific example, some of the strategies the citizens of Ypres used to rebuild their lives again become apparent. Before the war, Goliath was a famous giant in Ypres who participated in the yearly *Tuindag* procession (Fig. 3)¹⁹. This procession commemorated Ghent's famous siege of Ypres in 1383²⁰. Goliath resembled a Turkish figure, with turban, tunic and scimitar and had a history dating back to at the least the beginning of the seventeenth century, presumably earlier²¹. There is

13. LUC CLAUS AND KAREL M. DE LILLE, *75 jaar Ypriana: Een stad vol muziek*, Ypres, 1995, p. 28-29.

14. *Idem*, p. 68.

15. *Idem*, p. 62.

16. Regulations of Ypriana (City Archives Ypres, *Ypriana*, box 1 number 2, p. 1).

17. The original document in Dutch reads 'de heropbeuring van de stad'.

18. CHRISTIAN BORCH, 'Interview with Edward W. Soja: Thirdspace, Postmetropolis, and Social Theory', in: *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 3 (2011) 1, p. 113-120.

19. The Belgian giant tradition is intangible cultural heritage and recognised as such by Unesco. <https://www.unesco.be/nl/erfgoed#immaterieel-cultureel-erfgoed>.

20. More information on the siege and procession: ROMAIN VINCKIER (RED.), *Ieper Tuindag. Zesde Eeuwfeest. Een bundel historische opstellen*, 1983.

21. Several sources cite different dates: RENÉ BUCKINX, *Goliath. Reus van Ieper*, Ieper, 1955, p. 3 cites 1500-1525, while LIEVEN STUBBE, *Elf eeuwen Ieper. De negen levens van een stad*, Ieper, 2018, p. 429 quotes 1585. The *Tuindag* program of 1683 seems to be the oldest dated document that describes the giant. The giant mentioned is clearly Goliath: RENÉ BUCKINX, *Goliath ...*, p. 4.

no specific legend connected to the giant as far as we know. Goliath served mainly as a personification of the prestige of Ypres and the loyalty of its inhabitants²². The giant did not survive the First World War, as it was stored in the Cloth Hall that burned to the ground in 1914²³. After the war, the giant was not immediately rebuilt: it wasn't until 1934 that the city ordered a new, official Goliath.

The citizens of Ypres did not wait passively for officials to rebuild their beloved Goliath. By 1922, the first reconstituted Goliath strolled through the streets of Ypres celebrating the *Tuindagen*. It was the local association of Flemish war veterans that had taken the initiative and built the giant. The local newspaper *Het Ypersche*²⁴, wrote on 18 August 1923 how the giant was warmly welcomed and cheered by the population. They expressed their hope that the new giant could replace his 'good looking' father Goliath in the long-term²⁵. Unfortunately, the fate of this first giant remains unclear. It is likely he was not a solid construction, so he probably only lasted a few years.

On Carnival in 1928, a second version of the post-war giant was built, this time by the local football team *Cercle Sportif Yprois*. The new giant was about seven meters high and looked more like the pre-war giant. However, it remained a temporary and rather rudimentary replacement²⁶. *Het Ypersche* discussed the festivities around carnival at length and included a picture of the giant on their front page²⁷. A few months later, Goliath participated in a parade of Giants in Cassel, in the honour of general Foch²⁸. This giant probably suffered

the same fate as the first replacement as he also disappeared from the sources after a few years.

This anecdotal story of Goliath hints at some aspects of the reconstruction that have received scarce attention from researchers up until now. First, it illustrates the emotional and symbolic value people attached to what they perceived as traditional. As refugees returned and the town rose from its ashes during the early 1920s, social life also began again. People started to work towards the restoration of one of the symbols of their town: Goliath. It shows that local communities did not only strive towards a 'brick and mortar reconstruction'. The rebuilding of the houses and urban landmarks was part of a broader cultural resilience, the wish of a population to move on with their lives and to return to a familiar way of living. A communal calendar with annual festivals was part of that resilience. The procession on the *Tuindagen* including Goliath was an indispensable component of the Ypres community's calendar.

The citizens of Ypres did not so much want a return to the authentic and actual past, but to the situation they perceived as traditional and authentic. The tradition of Goliath is a prime example of a fluid and ever-changing tradition. Goliath had been abolished during the French Revolution in 1789 and not re-instated until 1890²⁹. The ancient giant the people of Ypres mourned in 1914 was thus in fact only 25 years old. The desire for a return to pre-war traditions also went hand in hand with the appreciation for the modern. When Goliath was reconstructed, his appearance received an update (Fig. 4)³⁰. He was still, without a doubt,

22. 'Goliath van Ieper', *Reuzen in Vlaanderen* <https://www.reuzeninvlaanderen.be/goliath-van-ieper>.

23. RENÉ BUCKINX, *Goliath ...*, p. 14.

24. *Het Ypersche* – *La Région d'Ypres* was an important bilingual newspaper in Ypres. This was in fact the official mouth-piece of the Federation of Clubs from the Ypres district. From 1920 onwards, the main goal of these clubs was to defend the interests of the inhabitants of Ypres and surrounding villages against the national government during the reconstruction period.

25. *Het Ypersche*, 18 August 1923.

26. RENÉ BUCKINX, *Goliath ...*, p. 15.

27. *Het Ypersche*, 25 February 1928, p. 1-3.

28. KAREL M. DE LILLE, 'Reusje van Yper en zijn collega's', in *Iepers Kwartier*, no. 36, 2000, p. 23.

29. RENÉ BUCKINX, *Goliath ...*, p. 9.

30. 'Iepersche folklore: reus Goliath', in *De Halle*, 29 July 1934, p. 2.



Fig. 6: An illustrative comparison between the 'old' and the 'new' Goliath in the newspaper De Halle.
The city council opted not to make an identical replica of the giant (City Archives Ieper).

Goliath. But at the same time his aesthetics now corresponded with the fashion of the day.

Second, the story of Goliath shows how the lived experiences of the inhabitants were at the centre of the reconstruction of Ypres. The fact that the new Goliath was inaugurated on the same day as the belfry, points to this. Historians today still recognise the symbolic value of the inauguration of the belfry, but have largely forgotten about Goliath. And yet, it seems that at the time, the reconstruction of Goliath carried the same symbolic value as the rebuilding of the belfry. *De Halle*, a local newspaper, enthusiastically described the moment when “Goliath rose out of his ashes after twenty years, like a Phoenix – the mythical figure. Only such an important event like the inauguration of the belfry was a suitable moment to reinstall the giant as a symbol of the city”. The newspaper added: “The return within the city walls of the giant Goliath is a page in the history of Ypres and like the inauguration of the belfry, a symbol of revival of our town”³¹.

Conclusion

At first sight, the display of two simultaneous exhibitions on the reconstruction of Ypres held in the same building – the iconic Cloth Hall – seems redundant. Together with the city walks, they try to give visitors a better understanding of the subject. But while the city walks clearly concentrate on the physical aspects (mainly buildings) still visible today, *Feniks* and *herSTELLINGEN* take a different stance. Although *Feniks*’ scope is broader than Ypres alone, it pays a great deal of attention to the discourses of policy makers and experts during post-First World War reconstruction. The exhibition shows how different views existed alongside each other, but in the end, regionalism was the ideology that determined what Ypres and the Westhoek in general look like today. *HerSTELLINGEN* offers a fresh perspective on reconstruction by focusing on how local inhabitants contributed to the reconstruction of their new town and society. It shows that we should not only focus on the material reconstruction, but also the rebuilding of society.

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Dries Claeys obtained his doctoral degree in History at KU Leuven in 2019 with a thesis on the reconstruction of the Belgian countryside after the First World War. He was co-curator of the In Flanders Fields Museum exhibition Feniks, which focuses on reconstruction after the Great War. He is currently working as a researcher for the Flanders Heritage Agency.

31. ‘Iepersche folklore: reus Goliath’, in *De Halle*, 29 July 1934, p. 2.