

The Grand-Place of Brussels

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ABSTRACT: The Grand-Place of Brussels has been on the UNESCO's world heritage list since December 1998.

This recognition led to a new reflection by the relevant management authorities.

Since the 19th century the value of the façades has been recognised, and their conservation related to maintaining the urban image of the square.

Meanwhile, the interiors of the houses were changed without taking into account the existing structures.

The Historical heritage department carried out a historical and architectural study of all the houses on the Grand-Place from 1997 to 1999, in order to find out more about this heritage.

A systematic analysis of the façades and interiors was carried out as well as the identification of the original elements.

This study was completed in 2000 by an analysis of the material and the pathologies of the façades.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE GRAND-PLACE

After the bombardment by the troops of Louis XIV in 1695, there was practically nothing left of the Grand-Place. Some structure from two public buildings, the "Maison du Roi" and the "Hôtel de Ville" were left and the façades of three houses were partially preserved.

The economic and historical centre of the city was destroyed. The city authorities decided its immediate reconstruction. Due to the urgency of the works and for economic reasons, most of the buildings were rebuilt according to the model of a single house and keeping the structure of the medieval parcel.

This reconstruction was characterised by its rapidity and rigorous control of the quality of the project by the city authorities. In 1697, for the first time in Brussels, a law was passed on the outward appearance of the façades.

The state of Grand-Place houses at the end of the 19th century is the result of two hundred years of history and an intensive utilisation of this heritage.

In 1793 the French sans-culottes removed practically all decorative elements from the façades and from the interior of the houses.

The buildings were sold as national property and they continued to deteriorate as the new owners cared little about preserving the décor of the façades. Important modifications like the suppression of the gables and the changing of the level of the floors were carried out.

Around 1850, the state of conservation of the façades was alarming. Pieces in danger of falling were repaired in a bad way or simply removed.

An overall restoration project was carried out during the 19th century, on the initiative of the mayor Mr. Charles Buls.

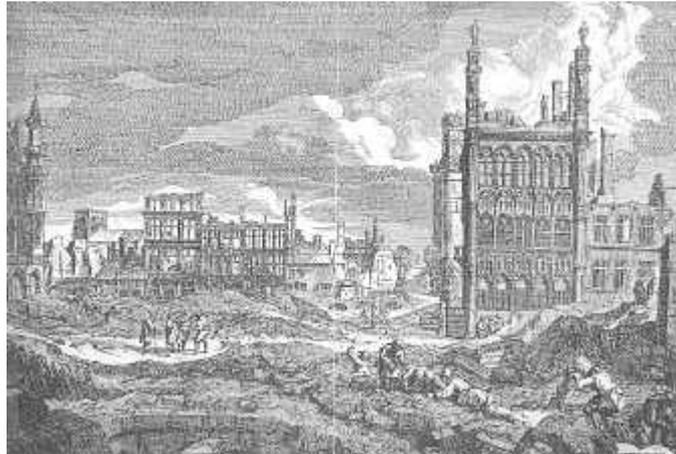


Figure 1:View of the Grand-Place after the bombardment of 1695.
Illustration from R. Van Orley from a drawing the A. Coppens.
Brussels City Archive, G 1269

The City funded and supervised the restoration of the façades. A tax was levied on the owners, based on the surface area of the façade. From then on it was decided that any changes to the façades would require the agreement of the City.

In order to restore the original appearance of the façades, different types of works were carried out on the façades, from simple restoration to total reconstruction.

Throughout the years the houses have suffered a series of modifications due to property speculation and tourist pressure.

Outward appearance was preserved because the façades and the roofs were protected as monuments in 1977. The interiors were changed, sometimes in a brutal way and they progressively lost their heritage value.

In 1998 the Historical Heritage Department began an exhaustive study of the houses on the square to establish their state of conservation. The buildings were considered in their totality; the exteriors, the interiors and the annexes were analysed.

2. HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL STUDY OF THE HOUSES OF THE GRAND-PLACE OF BRUSSELS

2.1. Methodology

The study concerns the 30 houses surrounding the square and two others, the “Roi de Bavière” and the “Balance”. This two houses are located in rue des Chapeliers and rue de la Colline but they are connected to the ensemble by their typological, morphological and stylistic characteristics. The buildings destroyed by the bombardment of 1695 were not analysed; the aim of the study was to understand the existing heritage. Each house (façade and interior) was analysed in detail in order to establish its history and architectural characteristics.

The study is divided in to five volumes corresponding to the five blocks that delimit the square. It was important to situate each house in the block context. This aspect was particularly interesting for the houses of the Ducs de Brabant, a series of seven houses behind only one façade.

This perception allows a better understanding of the connection between the houses. The interpretation of each house, based on archive documents and local visits is divided into three parts:

- A study of the façade from the reconstruction until today. The chronology of repairs and restorations was clearly identified.
- The interiors of the buildings. A comparative study of the original plans and the recent survey allowed the identification of the original elements in the construction. This preliminary study

can be compared to the prospecting phase for an archaeologist, the conclusions must be confirmed, and completed or corrected when the percussion testing on materials is carried out.

An inventory of the archive documents for each house was made.

The study is based on two kinds of information: the houses that were visited, photographed and drawn; and the written and graphic material kept in the different municipal departments.

The drawings were based on the old plans and corrected during the visits.

The study allows a double reading, a graphic one and a descriptive one. On the drawings of the façades and in the plans a colour code show the different construction phases. The descriptions explain the different works carried out, the date, and the elements that lead to the identification, such as the iconography, archive documents, plans and on site observations.

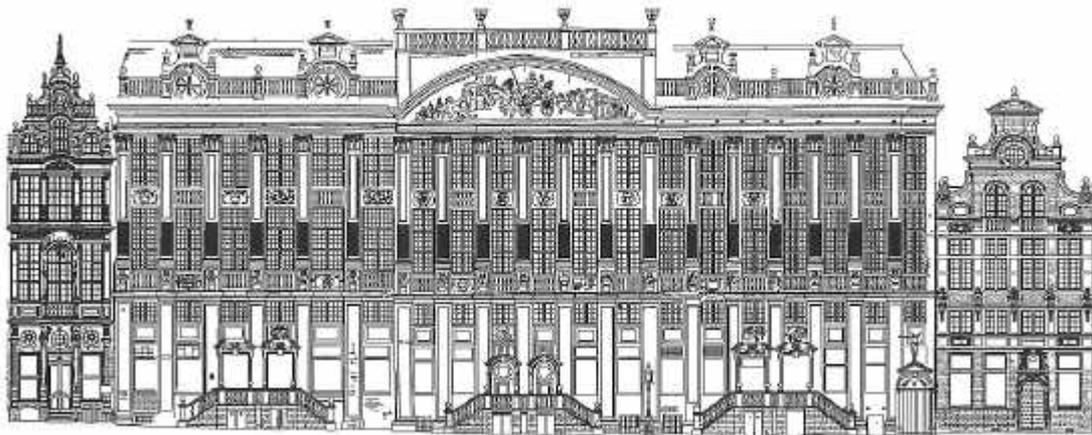


Figure 2 - Elevation and plan from the Duc de Brabant Block.

© Historical Heritage Department. 1999

2.2. Relevant points from the study

2.2.1. The interiors

The analysis of the old cadastre plans showed that the urban shape did not change a lot, but there were some changes in the access.

The distribution of built and open spaces did not remain stable. There was a main building, a courtyard, and a secondary building at the back. Alleys and culs-de sac provided the connections within the blocks. With time these were built on and therefore disappeared.

The construction is very dense on the ground floor level, mainly due to the commercial use.

The interiors of the houses were transformed. It's not always possible to understand what the internal organisation was. There are a few archive descriptions but not very precise. The oldest graphic documents are from the end of the 19th century. Sometimes the survey and the observation of the existing structures allows for the understanding of the volumes and the chronology of the works.

The simplicity of the plan is connected to the narrow shape of the block. The floors are supported only by the party walls, the staircases are self-supported and the separating walls between the spaces didn't have any structural function.



Taken in 1905, this old picture shows the access to the building in the back of the parcel. The staircase to the floors is on the left and a series of arcades are open to the courtyard. Despite its important architectural value this space was destroyed in 1926.

Figure 3 - Brussels City Archive, "Comité du Vieux Bruxelles." 1905.

Figure 4 - © Historical Heritage Department. 1999.

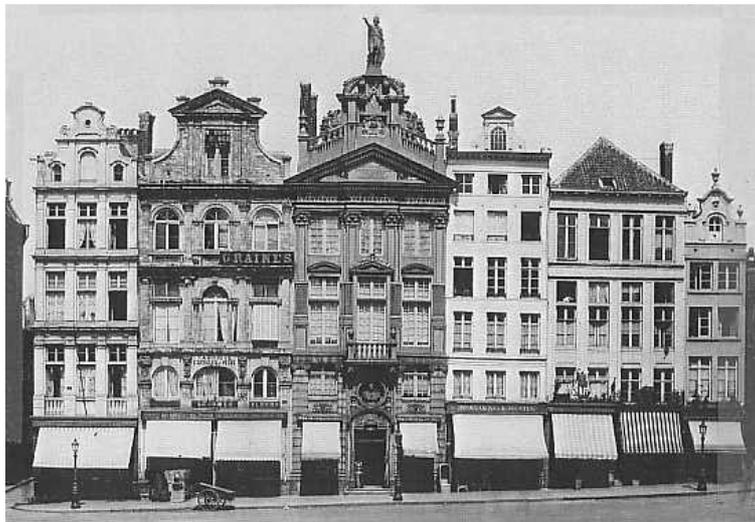
2.2.2. Façades

The restoration programme of the 19th century led to the replacement of several façades. The underlying philosophy was to restore the original appearance. The conservation of the original material was not a priority for the restorers of 19th century. New materials were introduced:

different kinds of stone and brick; metallic cement was used for the repairs; in the case of the complete reconstruction of a façade metallic beams were introduced into the walls.

It would seem that the choice to demolish some façades was in order to restore the original appearance and not for technical reasons. To carry out this work, a special technique was developed: the façades were entirely demolished but the interior was kept. To do this, scaffolding was placed inside and outside main façade. A wall was placed 0,75 cm from the façade. The windows and the doors were dismantled and placed in the new wall to allow the house to be used. On each floor a metallic beam was placed to support the existing structure.

This technique allows for work on the façade whilst keeping all the interior elements. This was due to the fact that each house had a different owner and the owners continued to live in the house. It was not connected to the wish to preserve the interiors.



Block of houses n° 20-28

Figure 5 - Picture around 1895 showing the situation before the 19th century works.

Archive City Brussels, J 2235

Figure 6 - © Historical Heritage Department. 1999.



Figure 7 - Inspection carried out in 2000 to evaluate the state of conservation of the façades.
© Historical Heritage Department. 2000.

3. STATE OF CONSERVATION OF THE FAÇADES OF THE HOUSES OF THE GRAND-PLACE

A preliminary examination of the modifications and the different restoration works was carried out. This survey determined the type of intervention required as well as the conservation methods.

In order to evaluate the state of conservation of the façades a visual inspection was carried out during June 2000.

The pathologies affecting the façades were identified, documented and indicated on the drawing.

During the survey at least four different types of stone were identified (e. g. Baelegem, Gobertange, Euville and pierre bleue). Over the years these stones were subjected to several kinds of alteration. These alterations are mainly due to the effect of natural weathering, including air pollution.

In general, the façades present an advanced state of degradation. The Baelegem stone is difficult to recognise due to several layers of cement. The Gobertange stone has been attacked by atmospheric pollution agents. The surface directly exposed to the rain is constantly washed leading to a faster degradation. The Euville stone is prone to deep degradation, the outer surface is deteriorating into powder.

The main deterioration patterns found are black crusts, flaking, scaling, exfoliation, sugaring and powdering, fissures and fractures.

In addition to the natural deterioration observed, problems of construction also play a role.

The materials used during the 19th century restoration led to serious degradation. The façades were restored and rebuilt partially or in whole and the interior was conserved. Metallic supports were used to support the existing floors, being incorporated into the stone façade.

Since then, due to water infiltration, these metallic elements have corroded and have cause serious problems: elements out of line, fractures and fissures in the stones.

Future work on the façades will focus on their conservation. The work will be kept to the minimum to save the material and the structure.



Figure 8 - Examples of deterioration and alteration.

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4. CONCLUSION

The historical centre is the most important element and at the same time the most fragile. Its preservation is a primordial task and only the municipal authorities are able to launch a large restoration campaign.

At present the City of Brussels owns of five houses on the square. In order to prepare a programme of works for the ensemble, one of the façades will soon be restored. This façade will serve as an example and a test for finding the adequate solution to the restoration problems.

The project only addresses the cleaning and conservation of the existing masonry. The study carried out in 2000 provided information for the development of the restoration project. A first list of work was drawn: removal of biological colonisation; cleaning; removal of non – functional and/or unesthetic mortars, repointing of joints and micro-filling of surface

discontinuities; fixing of surface scales by injection with fluid mortar; treatment of iron elements; resetting, stabilisation and anchoring of the gable.

In addition to the preliminary examination, a testing programme will be carried out during the month of October 2001.

Analysis will be done on the existing masonry for the identification of the materials used on the construction: characteristics of the stones, the mortars, the joints, the plaster (colour and texture) etc;

The methods and materials to be used in the restoration will be tested: cleaning tests, stone repairs, types of mortar and repointing, consolidation and damp proofing of the façade, etc. The test results will be included in the technical specifications and will establish the degree of intervention required for the conservation of the façade.

REFERENCES

This article is based on the studies carried out by an inter-disciplinary team of architects and Art historians working in the Historic Heritage Department of the City of Brussels. This department was created in 1996 and it is in charge of studies connected with Brussels architectural heritage.

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