

Louvain-la-Neuve

A Modern European New Town

In 1971 this site, southeast of Brussels, consisted only of four farms and beet fields. Today a whole town has sprung up: a university town and a hive of activity. Over 37,000 people live, study or work in Louvain-la-Neuve, which was built in record time. But why build a new town at all (Belgium's first since Charleroi in 1666)? What types of city planning principles were followed? "Bulletin" met some of the designers of this new town – city planners and architects – and talked to some residents, too. They explained the reasons for this vast development project and for its growing success.

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Founded in 1425, the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) is one of the world's most ancient universities. Like everywhere else in Europe at the time, all teaching took place in Latin. In 1835, five years after Belgian independence, French took over as the language of tuition. From the late 19th century, some of the university's official documents became available in Dutch as well, but translation of courses into both languages proceeded slowly, and French retained its dominance. As time went on, the Flemish separatist movement gained strength and its demands became more pressing. Tension mounted and, in June 1968, the university was split. Its Flemish-speaking section, with 12,500 students, remained in Louvain, while the 11,800 students of the French-speaking section had to move out. So the town of Louvain-la-Neuve needed to be built at full speed.

In 1969 a loan from the Belgian government enabled UCL to purchase 920 hectares of farmland southeast of Brussels for the sum of 747 million Belgian francs (30 million Swiss francs). That loan was paid off two years ago. The UCL authorities could have laid out a university campus, as was the fashion in the '60s, but they preferred to build a new town. Town and gown had coexisted in old Louvain for more than five centuries. Over the years, this had created a special atmosphere, which many enjoyed and wished to recreate. To be avoided at all costs was a dormitory or a closed town, lacking interchange with the outside world. The American architect Victor Gruen proposed an initial city planning project. The

university authorities rejected this, finding it too monolithic. They then approached Raymond Lemaire, a professor of art history from their own ranks, and asked him to devise a masterplan for the new town.

Submitted and approved in 1970, this plan still guides the building and development of Louvain-la-Neuve. Its objective is to create a medium-scale urban environment where townspeople outnumber the student population. "We wanted a small-scale urban environment with a maximum radius of one kilometer, in order to foster academic and social exchange. This meant a close-packed, pedestrianized town of limited area, because pedestrians get into their cars when they have to walk for more than 10 minutes," explains city planner Luc Boulet, who coordinates public works at Louvain-la-Neuve. To create a lively town center, and give people an incentive to walk about, the designers of the New Louvain site also sought to spread the university and its students across the town.

A Town Is Built

The foundation stone was laid in February 1971. Twenty-one months later, in October 1972, the first academic year began at Louvain-la-Neuve. At the time, the new town had around 200 residents and some 800 students at the faculties of applied science. In fact it was thought that engineers, whose future lay in construction, would cope more easily with the inconvenience of the omnipresent building work. "It was a permanent building site. You needed to >



Philippe Piette has lived in Louvain-la-Neuve since 1972, when he was one of the town's very first inhabitants. He now works for the town's information service. He made a point of showing us the Place des Sciences, where students were relaxing between lectures, as well as the Science Park, and one of the UCL's university libraries.

go about in Wellington boots in the early months,” reminisces Philippe Piette of Inforville, Louvain-la-Neuve’s information service. “There was a real pioneering spirit among the first inhabitants,” explains Philippe Piette, who was one of them.

Wholly pedestrianized, the town center of Louvain-la-Neuve is built in a valley. Four residential districts radiate from this like the petals of a flower. The center is based on a concrete slab which covers utilities, the railroad, and two to three levels of access roads and car parks. This has avoided laying out open-air parking lots across the town. Slab-based towns are a rarity in Europe: The La Défense business district in Paris is the best-known example. Two other slab-based towns, Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (France) and Zoetermeer (The Netherlands) have decided to abandon the experiment. Another feature of Louvain-la-Neuve is that all its land belongs to the university, which lets it to individuals or corporations on renewable 99-year leases. The leases are granted at 0.15 euro per square meter, plus a share of the site’s infrastructure expenses. Any building or conversion project in Louvain-la-Neuve must be approved by the UCL property management board. “We wanted to retain close control of projects, but we hardly ever reject them. We comment, suggest improvements in materials, the layout of green spaces and parking lots. Above all, we seek harmony between buildings,” points out Luc Boulet, who chairs this board. The choice of materials is limited to prevent building in a patchwork style. Preference is given to local materials. Bricks must be of a certain format and within a specified range of color shades. Roofing must be natural or artificial slate.

“At the start, the building regulations were really strict, but exemptions were widely granted,” emphasizes André Mertens, who has worked on the New Louvain site as an architect since 1970. From an environmental viewpoint, the regulations were revolutionary for their day. In fact they prohibited oil-fired heating and led to the establishment of separation drainage. This means rainwater can be used to feed an artificial lake,” he adds. This is a compact town, with buildings adjoining each other. This gives a powerful boost to walking and to reduced car use. According to André Mertens, it also saves a lot of energy.

Louis Gustin and his family were among the town’s pioneers. They moved there in 1975, attracted by the modernity of the project, the nearby schools, and the pedestrianization of the town. “It was really positive at the start, because there was a community spirit among the inhabitants, and genuine contact between the students and the townfolk. We often used to dine with the students in their halls of residence on Saturday evenings,” remembers Louis Gustin. “Still, those days are over – due to the town’s expansion,” he notes. The non-student population overtook that of students in 1999.

After the real estate boom of the ’70s, Louvain-la-Neuve slid into a property recession in the ’80s following a rise in interest rates. It proved a setback to the town’s expansion. The university town only began to exert a noticeable attraction again in the early ’90s. Daytime population currently stands at 37,000 people, 19,000 of whom also sleep in the town. “Culture, sport and services are exceptional here. There’s nowhere like it in Belgium. Our town has become the capital of the sub-region of Brabant-Wallonia,” stresses Jean-Claude Nihoul, who heads UCL’s property management department. Currently, around 100 households are on a waiting list for land on which they can build houses. That list was actually closed two years ago, given the shortage of building land. “The town can’t

Background to the University Split

In 1962, Belgium’s Federal Government finalized the line of a language frontier across the country. This made a clear separation between Flemish-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia. Some months later, language-teaching laws were passed, requiring Flemish to be used as the sole medium of teaching in Flanders, and French in Wallonia. This posed a problem in Louvain, the location of UCL, which was in Flemish territory. Increasingly, in the ’60s Louvain, Flemish students took to the streets chanting “Leuven Vlaams. Walen buiten” (Louvain is Flemish – Walloons out). They called for the French-speaking section of UCL to leave Flanders. Tension rose, and soon the split of the university became a reality. The government proclaimed the split in June 1968. The process was launched, and a site chosen 30 kilometers south of Louvain, in French-speaking territory.

really be enlarged, because walking would no longer be the first choice, and Louvain-la-Neuve would suffocate,” adds Luc Boulet.

The Science Park

The university is still Louvain-la-Neuve’s largest employer, with nearly 3,500 employees. Nevertheless, the importance of its Science Park to regional research and employment should not be underestimated. Headquartered in the Science Park, IBA – originally a university spin-off – is the town’s second-largest employer. It develops high-precision solutions for the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. IBA also provides sterilization and ionization solutions for improving hygiene. Certain criteria have to be met by any entity wishing to relocate to the Science Park. Priority is given to companies with active relations with UCL – cooperating in research or exchanges of staff or equipment, for instance. Today over 135 businesses, averaging 50 employees, are established in the Science Park, generating a total of 4,500 jobs. Most of these businesses focus on key sectors such as telecommunications, pharmaceuticals and chemicals. However, all sectors of industry are represented, given that the university teaches all academic subjects.

A Town in Constant Flux

Nearly 25 years after its foundation, Louvain-la-Neuve still lacked a lively town center. It was mainly a university campus with residential districts, as property developer Peter Wilhelm points out. He is the director of Wilhelm & Co., a development company. “Success with the founders’ original aims had been muted. The residential districts were developing very well, but growth of the town center had come to a standstill. Indeed, its reputation was far from flattering, because of its unfinished parking lots, bare concrete struts and so on,” notes Peter Wilhelm. There were practically no major competing department stores in the region (editor’s note: shops selling clothes, furniture, home décor, etc). This forced the people of Louvain-la-Neuve and the 600,000 surrounding inhabitants to do much of their non-food shopping in Brussels. It was the university which wanted the town to become a major regional >



City planner Luc Boulet (left) and Head of UCL's Property Management unit Jean-Claude Nihoul work closely together. In particular, they monitor the layout of green spaces across the town. Students and residents of New Louvain can be seen enjoying them here.

center, attracting people from across the region."So it needed more shops, better cultural provision, and a wider social mix and age distribution to meet this objective," explains Peter Wilhelm. His development company approached the university in 1993 and offered to build a 13-screen cinema complex, a shopping mall with space for 120 shops, and houses and offices in the town center itself. The project, dubbed l'esplanade, was accepted and work began in 2000. The first phase of the project concentrated on improvement work and on building parking lots under the town center slab. Five years later, the first 240 apartments were ready and the shopping mall opened. The development is expected to draw over 7 million visitors a year in the medium term. Entirely funded by the private sector, the total cost of the operation will amount to 280 million euros. But Wilhelm & Co.'s project is not over yet. Work will commence on 200 extra apartments and 80,000 square meters of office space in the town center at the end of this year.

"Louvain-la-Neuve used to be a country town benefiting from two lifestyles. Opening this mall has made it a town like any other: a retail town which attracts shoppers from the surrounding area," says New Louvain resident Louis Gustin, ruefully. "Louvain-la-Neuve is rather a victim of its own success. It has become an academic ghetto, an elitist nonentity," he adds. The town mainly attracts young and well-to-do university-educated families for its shops, cultural and sports facilities, and for the nearby schools and university. This has led to an explosion in property prices. A long-term lease of 286 square meters of land recently sold at auction for 110,000 euros. "Far more than it cost to build my house in 1975," comments Louis Gustin.

The Future

Other projects are planned in Louvain-la-Neuve. The Hergé Museum, dedicated to the author of the Tintin cartoons, will open in 2009. The state archives of the province of Brabant-Wallonia are being redeveloped. Another large-scale project is the opening of the RER rapid transit line, which will provide a direct link between the university town and Brussels in just 17 minutes. There will also be a motorway service area with parking for 2,500 vehicles. The RER line should be operational from 2010, making the town even more attractive.

With the Europeanization of university education, competition has become tougher and the University of Louvain-la-Neuve is undergoing far-reaching change. It now numbers 21,000 students. In order to survive, however, it must reach a size of around 40,000 students, explains UCL's Property Director Jean-Claude Nihoul. It has therefore approached three other Belgian university faculties with a view to forming a single entity in the next decade. Allowing for this possibility, UCL has acquired a reserve of 150 hectares of land, just outside the present town boundaries, to enable it to expand its campus.

As the example of Louvain-la-Neuve proves, a town is never ever really finished. It develops over time, and never ceases to evolve. "There are many things to do in the future. The town is not finished," confirms city planner Luc Boulet. "The founders of Louvain-la-Neuve were inspired by the Italian cities of the early renaissance, with narrow streets and only pedestrian access. This has made it the only new town on a human scale," concludes developer Peter Wilhelm. <