



Janina Gosseye

Department of Architecture / School of Architecture
Delft Technical University / University of Queensland
Delft, The Netherlands / Brisbane, Australia
j.gosseye@uq.edu.au

Collectivity and the Post-war European Shopping Centre

Abstract:

This paper puts forth the hypothesis that notions such as 'collectivity', 'play' and 'community' – buzz words of the post-war discourse on architecture and urbanism – were often important elements in the design and conceptualization of post-war shopping centres in Western Europe. To investigate this hypothesis, the paper focuses on three typologically distinct shopping centres that were developed in Belgium between 1968 and 1977 – scrutinizing their design and pairing and comparing their spatial characteristics, and the idea(l)s that underpinned them, with those of other (well-known) buildings and urban models of the period.

Keywords: Post-war shopping centre, community, core, urban design, Belgium

1 Introduction

Legend has it that Victor Gruen, the Viennese émigré who in the early 1940s together with his wife Elsie Krummeck introduced the concept of a shopping centre in the United States, ended his life disclaiming responsibility for this invention, snarling 'I refuse to pay alimony for those bastard developments' (Mennel: 2004, 142). This attitude supposedly sprung from a grave disenchantment with what the shopping centre had (in the eyes of Gruen) by that time become: a capitalist, consumerist shopping machine, depleted of any of the social or communal rewards that he had originally envisioned. When in February 1943, *Architectural Forum* commissioned Gruen and Krummeck to design an ideal shopping centre for a town of seventy thousand, the couple expressed the hope that such a shopping centre would become '[...] an important meeting place for the entire community [...] comparable to the market place or main square of the older cities.' (Mennel: 2004, 119). The plan that Gruen outlined for the 'Southdale Regional Shopping Centre' a few years later clearly expressed these ideas as it placed the actual shopping centre at the heart of the complex, surrounded by playgrounds, schools, medical facilities, churches, parks, ... In the shopping centre's initial schemes, commercial concerns were thus placed in a symbiotic relationship with social programmes. It did however not take long before the former overpowered the latter and the shopping centre accrued harsh criticism on the account of its acute failure to deliver the pledged communal and social compensations.

Since its inception in the early 1940s, much has been written about the shopping centre. Particular emphasis – perhaps as a tribute to Gruen and Krummeck's original plans (?) – has been placed on its ability (or rather 'inability') to function as a public space. While developers and managers of shopping centres usually cast them in a favourable, sunny light, scholars, by contrast, have been uniformly critical. Their views are based on opposing narratives; the former claiming that the shopping centre is a public space, which facilitates community building, while the latter commonly describing it as a space of contrived hyper-consumption and social control (Salcedo, 2003: 1087). Most research into the shopping centre's incapability to function as a public place is however based on user statistics and analyses of implemented security policies and safety regulations rather than on an in-depth architectural understanding. As a discipline, architecture history has commonly dismissed the shopping centre as a valuable research subject, precisely because it is perceived a 'prison of consumerism' (Davis, 1992: 154), which – in turn – has led to the assumption that their formal design is merely a solidification of commercial forces and therefore unworthy of examination. Shopping centre research is furthermore commonly biased towards Northern America. These observations lead to the question: would a profound architectural analysis of the shopping centre as it developed in Western Europe conversely reveal spatial concepts that attest to its desire to function as a public space or (at the very least) its aspiration to engender a feeling of 'collectivity'? Next to the selected disciplinary approach and geographical delineation, also the

adopted time frame strengthens this question, as the paper – in line with the research project that it stems from¹ – focuses on the post-war period, roughly on the 'long 1960s'; starting in the mid 1950s and ending in the mid 1970s. Post-war reconstruction in Western Europe (Diefendorf, 1989) had made great strides by this time, paving the road for the full deployment of the social welfare state system. This gave rise to the construction of planning institutions and new bureaucracies, which facilitated the redistribution of wealth, knowledge, and political power and also implemented a set of new building programs, including mass housing and social amenities. The socio-political environment in Western Europe in which the shopping centre was introduced in the mid-twentieth century was thus quite different from the contemporary liberal climate that reigned in the United States and is likely to have had an influence on the manner in which the shopping centre developed on either side of the Atlantic. As this paper illustrates, shopping centres in post-war Western Europe were regularly funded by governmental authorities² and often formed an integral component of urban reconstruction and urban development projects. The shopping centre was thus apparently not merely perceived as a commercial entity, but as a potential building bloc of the Western European welfare state, assisting in the construction of a more egalitarian society.

The paper is subdivided into two parts. The first part iterates some of the key concepts and ideas that dominated post-war architecture discourse, while the second part questions to what extent these ideas influenced the development of the shopping centre in Western Europe. In this second part, Belgium is adopted as a case study, as the paper focuses on three typologically distinct shopping centres that were opened in the country between 1968 and 1977. The typologies range from an open-air 'urban' shopping street (*Het Pand* in Waregem, 1977) to an enclosed urban shopping centre (*Shopping 1* in Genk, 1968) to a freestanding, ex-urban (or 'suburban') mall (Woluwe Shopping Centre, 1968).

2 The post-war discourse on architecture and urbanism

In 1967, filmmaker Jacques Tati produced the prodigious movie *Playtime*. In this film,

¹ This paper is part of an NWO (Dutch Research Council) funded project, entitled 'The Post-war European Shopping Centre: A Place for Encounter between Avant-garde Discourse and Daily Building Practices, 1945-1973'. This research, which was started in February 2013, is conducted at the Faculty of Architecture of the Technical University in Delft (The Netherlands).

² Two of the three shopping centres that are discussed in this paper (all of which are located in Belgium) were funded and built by municipal authorities. This phenomenon can be ascertained in other Western European countries as well; famous examples include, for instance, *De Lijnbaan* in Rotterdam (The Netherlands, 1953) and *Central Milton Keynes Shopping Centre* in Milton Keynes (United Kingdom, 1979). This type of commercial development by public authorities was also strong in Northern Europe; most notably in Sweden, where the well-known shopping centres of Vällingby and Högdalen were built by municipal societies. Further research is required to determine what the equation was between publicly and privately developed shopping centres in Western Europe.

Tati's character, the clumsy but ever-so charming Monsieur Hulot attempts to navigate through Paris along with a group of American tourists. The film was however not shot in Paris but in 'Tativille', a specially designed concrete, glass and steel set, the size of a real city, built in the Paris suburb of Orly Sud. The Tativille-version of the French capital was constructed of straight lines, glass façades, steel high-rise buildings and cold, artificial furnishings. In this sterile urban environment, as he grapples with swing glass and sliding lift doors, Monsieur Hulot is the epitome of disorientation. *Playtime* thus not only functioned a social critique, accenting the fragmentation³ and disjunction of modern life, but also an architectural critique. By emphasizing its isotropy and mechanical efficiency, Tati brilliantly derides the alienation that modern architecture had induced in people's daily lives.⁴ (Ockman, 2000)

Tati was however not the only one lampooning the flaws of contemporary architecture, the post-war architectural avant-garde also picked up on modernism's intrinsic deficiencies, lamenting that it left no room for reference to local culture, bypassed the importance of phenomenological experiences, ignored the persistence of architectural types throughout time and (perhaps most importantly) gave rise to an 'international style' that undermined the movement's early socio-critical orientation. (Goldhagen & Legault, 2000: 12) The burgeoning critique against these deficiencies effectively reoriented the post-war architectural discourse. Instead of biological needs and material norms, which had led to the formulation of rigid *existenzminima*, attention now shifted towards existential concerns, focusing on man as an acting, feeling and living human being.

This novel attitude was already palpable in 1951 when, during the proceedings of the eight *Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) held in Hoddesdon (England), the built environment was redefined as a culturally determined matter of related objective - and subjective elements.⁵ (Avermaete, 2005: 70-74) Two years later, in 1953, when the following CIAM gathering took place in Aix-en-Provence (France), this reorientation had clearly gained ground. During this meeting, Alison and Peter Smithson - inspired by Geddes' diagram of the relationship of communities to their environment - introduced their 'Urban Re-Identification Grid' or 'UR Grid'. Based on categories such as 'house', 'street' and 'relationship' and informed by the methodologies and perspectives of contemporary anthropological and sociological research, this UR Grid focused on intangible planning goals, aimed at fostering a

³ *Playtime* features several brief, fragmented and meaningless encounters that invariably encompass a great deal of confusion - generally due to Monsieur Hulot's inability to cope with the sterile, alienating modernist environment in which these encounters take place.

⁴ This is also the central theme of Tati's earlier masterpiece *Mon Oncle*, in which Monsieur Hulot struggles with post-war France's infatuation with modern architecture, mechanical efficiency and consumerism. This film was first released in 1958 and won the Academy Award for best foreign language film.

⁵ The topic of the 'core' (officially: 'The Heart of the City') was chosen as the central theme for this meeting and was to illustrate this new approach. Neither a purely physical matter nor an exclusively social issue, the 'core' denoted a perceptual and conceptual entity that inextricably linked the spatial and the social.

closer relationship between human activity and its geographical settings.

The growing attention for the correlation between the spatial and the social also resonated in the radical circles of the Situationist International. As a form of critique against the homogenization of culture and place, they proposed the development of an architecture of transient atmospheres, which was beyond central control and which could bring about a restructuring of society. (Powell, 2005) Several utopian projects were developed throughout the 1960s imaging such environments that could fulfil people's innate desires, provoke spontaneous action, elicit chance encounters and – eventually – alter (oppressive) societal structures. Constant Nieuwenhuys' *New Babylon* is without a doubt one of the most illustrious post-war projects imaging such a radical environment of transience.⁶ Revolving around the concept of *home ludens*, *New Babylon* imagined a vast network of enormous multilevel interior spaces that could be controlled and reconfigured spontaneously. It was to become an Eden for drifters. In this megastructure, environmental conditions like daylight were to be abolished, giving its inhabitants complete freedom to live a life of creative play. Similar ideas underpinned Cedric Price's *Fun Palace* project.⁷ Inspired by the egalitarian philosophy of 18th century English pleasure grounds such as Vauxhall gardens, *Fun Palace* envisaged a massive artificial environment, where imagination was in power and *homo ludens* sovereign – a building-sized toy. (Lobsinger, 2000)

3 Investigating socio-spatial relations in three Belgian shopping centres

This brief introduction to the general atmosphere that dominated the post-war architectural discourse is perhaps most successful in revealing the persistency of the belief that modern architecture had the capacity to (quite literally) build a better world. From Frank Lloyd Wright's *Broadacre City* and Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine* to Price's *Fun Palace*, Nieuwenhuys' *New Babylon* and Gruen and Krummeck's ideal shopping centre, architects invariably saw themselves as social engineers able to – through design – tackle problems far beyond the physical. When in the early 1970s, the London Architectural Press issued a publication on shopping centres – ostensibly designed as a guidebook for both architect and developers – this visionary attitude clearly shines through. Apparently oblivious to the original shopping centre idea(l)s proposed by Gruen and Krummeck thirty years earlier, the introduction of this book iterates:

'The function of enclosed [shopping] centres is [...] being questioned. There is now an increasing unity of opinion that [shopping] centres have a broader and more important role to play than was originally envisaged. Enclosed

⁶ Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005) was a Dutch painter, sculptor, graphic artist, author, musician and architect. He worked on *New Babylon* for more than more than ten years, between 1954 and 1969.

⁷ Cedric Price (1934-2003) was a British architect. He developed *Fun Palace* in collaboration with theatre director Joan Littlewood between 1961 and 1970.

shopping centres are not only expected to be sophisticated retail market places, but to serve the community in other ways. They have a social function in providing an agreeable, and comfortable meeting place for local residents.' (Darlow, 1972: 12)

The book then goes on to discuss a broad range of aspects relating to the development of shopping centres, including interior- and exterior design, financing and management. To substantiate its narrative, a large number of both European and Northern American case studies are included. Oddly enough, of the two (enclosed) shopping centres that were operational in Belgium at that time, only *Woluwe Shopping* is referred to repeatedly in this publication. Compared to *Shopping 1* in Genk (the other functioning Belgian shopping centre), *Woluwe Shopping* was undoubtedly more 'American' in its conceptualization.

3.1 Woluwe Shopping: A freestanding ex-urban mall

Designed by a Belgian architect, Marcel Blomme, in collaboration with the American firm Copeland, Novak and Israël (based in New York), *Woluwe Shopping* was implanted in Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe, a prosperous suburb situated seven kilometres east of the city centre of Brussels. When the shopping centre first opened its doors in 1968, it offered a blend of department, specialty and service stores – such as a bank, travel agent and post office – all comprised in an enclosed space of 36800 square metres. The ground floor was reserved for cars, providing approximately 1700 parking spaces and was connected to the commercial area on the *piano nobile* via a system of escalators and ramps, thus effectively separating the vehicular and pedestrian traffic. (Fig. 1)

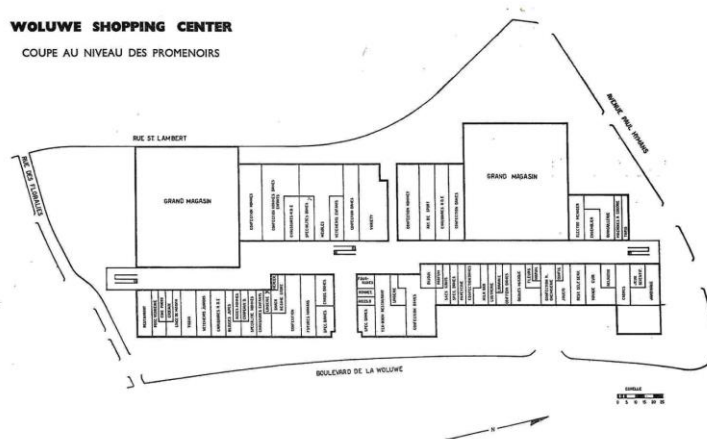


FIG. 1 - Plan of the first floor of the Woluwe Shopping centre, showing the central walkway in the middle, surrounded by shops on either side. (source: private collection AG Real Estate, Brussels)

This freestanding, rectilinear shopping centre was organized around a (so-called) *promenoir central* or 'central walkway', spanning a length of 235 metres. In the original design, Blomme, Copeland, Novak and Israël had intended this walkway to remain uncovered, exposed to the elements of nature. (Fig. 2) This plan was however soon abandoned in favour of an enclosed 'mall', that would allow the shopping centre's governing body '[...] to control the environment, thereby influencing the response of shoppers.' (Darlow, 1972: 52) *Woluwe Shopping* was in this respect a textbook example of an enclosed shopping centre, unambiguously inspired by its American predecessors. A documentary film that was made on *Woluwe Shopping* in 1969 – one year after its opening – however suggests that the controlled character of the *promenoir central* not only stimulated visitors' shopping behaviour, but also encouraged leisurely activities – a modern *flâneur*:

'This covered street is climatized, which means that it consistently has an ideal temperature; during winter, it is heated and in the summer, the air is cooled. The water elements always attract young children; fountains, water jets, slowly descending water drops; all this for the entertainment of the eyes. [...] Several bench features further increase the level of comfort offered to the shoppers. Clients rest here and children enjoy themselves. Some people come [to the shopping centre] merely for the pleasure of strolling around.'⁸ (Govaers, 1969)

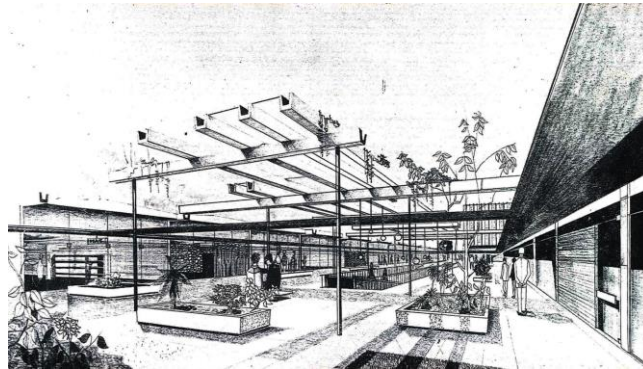


FIG. 2 - The original design that architects Blomme, Copeland and Novak made for the 'promenoir central' in Woluwe Shopping shows an uncovered walkway, incorporating planters and structures for sun shading. (source: private collection AG Real Estate, Brussels)

⁸ Original citation: 'Cette rue couverte est conditionnée. Cela signifie qu'il y règne toujours une température idéale. En hiver elle est chauffée et en été l'air est rafraîchi. Les pièces d'eau attirent toujours des jeunes enfants. Fontaines, jettes d'eau, gouttes descendant lentement – tout cela pour le plaisir des yeux. [...] Quelques bancs augmentent encore le confort offert aux acheteurs. Les clients s'y reposent et les enfants s'amuse. Certaines personnes viennent ici uniquement pour le plaisir de se promener.'

This central walkway is what Gruen had – in his initial designs for an ideal shopping centre – originally termed the ‘mall’. Although the ‘mall’ nowadays denotes the entire complex, planning historian Timothy Mennel asserts that Gruen used this term specifically in reference to the central open area inside the shopping centre, in a similar sense to the Mall in Washington. (Mennel, 2004) This comparison stresses the intended social function of this space, just like the repeated reference to the *promenoir central* as a ‘street’ in the 1969 documentary hints at its desired (or perceived?) urban character. The subtle placement of carefully designed litterbins, benches and phone boots – typical street furniture – along with the integration of exotic birds in delicate cages that would chirp as visitors roamed around the ‘street’ of course reinforced this rapport.

This evocation of an urban atmosphere in a publicly accessible interior space was also unambiguously implemented in another typology that emerged in Western Europe in the post-war period, the key-goal of which was stimulating encounters: the cultural centre or community centre. Several well-known community centres were explicitly conceived (and designed) as permanent equivalents of urban spaces – both streets and squares. In doing so, the architects hoped that they could stimulate behaviour traditionally associated with the public realm: spontaneous action and social interaction – thus responding to their desire to develop an architecture to which people would emotionally respond.

A beautiful example of such a community centre that incorporated the concept of the street quite literally, is *de Meerpaal* in Dronten (The Netherlands), designed by the Dutch architect Frank Van Klingereren. (Van Bergen & Vollaard, 2003) Van Klingereren presented his design as ‘a kind of Kalverstraat (Amsterdam’s main shopping street) with a roof on top’. The building was basically a voluminous shed with glass facades under a large-span roof, the argument for which being that in a northern climate shelter was necessary to create conditions that would have existed naturally in Mediterranean cities. Van Klingereren envisaged this climatized, polyvalent space to function as a market hall, where citizen would not only encounter one another, but also be in contact with the outside world.⁹ (Grafe, 2010)

Another noteworthy community centre designed following a similar concept and located at a mere distance of 15 kilometres from *Woluwe Shopping* in the western suburbs of Brussels, was *Westrand*. The architect, Alfons Hoppenbrouwers structured this building around an internal street that was to embed it in the surrounding street network¹⁰ and integrate it in public street life. This street formed the nerve centre, where all the ‘nerve bundles’ cutting through the community centre inevitably met. Hoppenbrouwers was very upfront about his ambitions for this community centre:

⁹ Van Klingereren manipulated the brief of *de Meerpaal*, which had originally been commissioned as a multi-functional hall for theatre, cinema performances and a public library, and included the additional functions of a market hall and an public foyer with a so-called Eidophor, a device for public TV viewing in its design.

¹⁰ This was never realized because it was too difficult from a functional and security point of view.

'This building shouldn't turn into a functional 'culture-trunk,' he said, but 'should [rather] be a place for encounters, where children, hippies, senior citizens, intellectuals, housewives, . . . in short: everyone feels at home; a market full of life and quiet places, that people can enter freely; . . . a true living room for the community.' (Van Der Pooten, 1975: 1046) The internal street thus became a trump card in the quest to generate encounters and was explicitly detailed to optimize visual and auditive interaction.¹¹ (Gosseye, 2012)

Woluwe Shopping can easily be compared to these two community centres. Even though its main function was commercial activity and not communal pursuits, its design similarly attests to the desire to evoke an urban atmosphere. This replication was – just like in the community centres – not a carbon copy, but a new and improved version of urban space, devoid of traffic and pollution and, in the case of *Woluwe Shopping*, filled with merrily chirping birds. The large, market-hall-like *promenoir central* furthermore enabled a great flexibility in its spatial organisation. Just like the community centres, it allowed for a range of activities to take place; from car shows and exhibitions that required the installation of screens walls to full-fledged rock-n-roll concerts.¹² *Woluwe Shopping* thus presented – in a similar way to the discussed community centres – a detached artificial surrounding, offering a new type of leisurely reality enclosed in a faux urban setting in which environmental conditions were – to a certain extent – controlled. This space thus responded quite well to the proposals by Nieuwenhuys and Price, offering a blend of freedom and intense social regulation premised on the humane application of technological advancement and the firm belief that architecture was capable of influencing human behaviour.

3.2 Shopping 1: An enclosed urban shopping centre

Woluwe Shopping was not the first shopping centre that opened in Belgium. This honour was reserved for Genk, where *Shopping 1* was inaugurated on August 28th 1968. Contrary to *Woluwe Shopping*, which was established by a private enterprise, *Shopping 1* was developed at the initiative of the municipal council of Genk, who saw this commercial entity as an integral component of the municipality's urbanisation plans. (Commissie Commerciële Urbanisatie, 1964) One of the sources that Genk's municipal council consulted in preparation of *Shopping 1*, was the 1960-report prepared by the Belgian Service for the Enhancement of Productivity (Belgische Dienst Opvoering Productiviteit) following a field trip to the United States. This report, which received the straightforward title *Shopping Centres*, was outlined as a guide to assist authorities in dealing with the foundation of a shopping centre within

¹¹ Design sketches clearly show how visual interaction was worked into the plans both horizontally and vertically (between levels), while auditive interaction was (invisibly) materialized in the (conscious) application of a minimal sound insulation.

¹² A rock-n-roll concert was held in *Woluwe Shopping* in 1971, which was (allegedly) attended by ten thousand people. The programme included: *Golden Earring, Hiroshima, Captain Bismark, The Pebbles, Recreation, Jenghiz Khan* and *Carriage Company*.

their administrative (and territorial) bounds. One of the issues addressed in this report, was the negative effect that the development of shopping centres in the U.S. had displayed on the subsistence of existing downtown areas, stating: '[i]t is sad to have to bear witness to the agony – not to mention the death – of urban centres from which life is retreating at a rapid pace.'¹³ (Belgische Dienst Opvoering Productiviteit, 1960: 30) Conversely, the mission was also impressed by the ability of these suburban shopping centres to enable the formation of a nucleus of activity, describing the '[...] extremely rapid development of suburban neighbourhoods thanks to the creation of commercial centres [...] attracting cultural centres, leisure facilities, etc...'¹⁴ (Belgische Dienst Opvoering Productiviteit, 1960: 33) These observations undoubtedly had an influence on the municipal council's decision to construct a shopping centre in Genk.

In the early twentieth century, Genk had embarked on a brisk urbanisation process after charcoal had been discovered in the region.¹⁵ The resulting influx of migrant labourers in the following decades led to a dramatic increase in the municipal population, from approximately 3500 inhabitants in 1910 up to 47500 in 1960. (De Rijck, Kesteloot, Jansen-Verbeke, 1998) Genk's fragmented settlement pattern, which had historically been built up out of a number of dispersed hamlets, was now further articulated, with three mining sites – *Waterschei*, *Winterslag* and *Zwartberg* – functioning as (new) nuclei of growth. The decision to construct a shopping centre thus became an integral component of the municipality's plan to weave together its dispersed urban fabric and (quite literally) create a core.

The plan for the development of this novel core initially took its cue from Sweden, where in earlier decades¹⁶ a number of shopping centres had been constructed in the suburban settlements surrounding Stockholm. The main challenge here, was the realisation of self-sufficient (sub-)urban nuclei around the Swedish capital, which were to be '[...] as independent as possible [...]' (The Stockholm Chamber of Commerce, n.d.: 9) To achieve this, shopping centres were placed at the heart of these settlements in the hope that they would grow into cores of activity: 'At the focal point of each district [...] a [commercial] centre was built to meet the various needs of the inhabitants.' These commercial centres were accompanied by '[a] number of premises [...] allotted to cultural and social organizations, so as to make the centre the real heart of the district.' (Stockholm Chamber of Commerce, n.d.: 10) *Shopping 1* was in a similar way to contribute to the formation of a centre for Genk

¹³ Original citation: 'Het is inderdaad wel zielig getuige te zijn van de doodstrijd, om nie te spreken van de dood, van een stadscentrum waaruit het leven zich op een versneld ritme terugtrekt.'

¹⁴ Original citation: '[...] uiterst vlugge ontwikkeling van de buiten de stadsgrenzen gelegen wijken met creatie van commerciële centra [...] met verplaatsing van kulturele centra, ontspanningsoorden, enz. buiten de stadsgrenzen.'

¹⁵ André Dumont, a professor at the Catholic University of Leuven first discovered charcoal in the province of Limburg in 1901 in As, a municipality close to Genk.

¹⁶ One of the publications that was part of the file in the municipal archives of Genk, was a report on the development of shopping centres in Sweden. It is unclear if the municipal council actually undertook study trips to the shopping centres that are discussed in this brochure, but it is safe to assume that the contents of this book to a certain extent informed their decisions regarding the establishment of *Shopping 1*.

and formed an integral part of the newly developed civic complex, organized around a central boulevard: '[...] along this axis, from west to east, an administrative centre, an urban square, the current commercial zone, the [proposed] shopping centre and the green zone – incorporating the existing park – will be positioned.'¹⁷ (François, 1964: 1)

The initial proposal for Genk's shopping centre by architect Plumier also suggests a Swedish influence. In 1956, about a decade before *Shopping 1* opened its doors, Vällingby, one of the suburban nuclei situated approximately fifteen kilometres northwest of Stockholm opened a shopping centre. The plan shows a collection of freestanding buildings in an open plain, offering (next to the commercial shops) a range of communal facilities; the centre had a theatre, a cinema, meeting rooms, a town hall, a library and even a youth centre. In his 1961 publication *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford – completely in tune with contemporary issues in the architectural discourse – praised *Vällingby Centre* for its 'human scale': 'The human scale is never an absolute one,' he wrote, 'for it is determined, not alone by the normal dimensions of the human body, but by the functions that are facilitated and by the interest and purposes that are served. Thus a group of tall buildings like the widely spaced apartment houses near the Centrum of Vällingby may still maintain the human scale, especially since the lower buildings in the foreground shopping centre, the ridge of low apartments in the background, and the trees on the left, "step down" the aesthetic imposition of bigness, as a transformer steps down electric current to a usable local voltage.' (Mumford, 1961: plate 59)

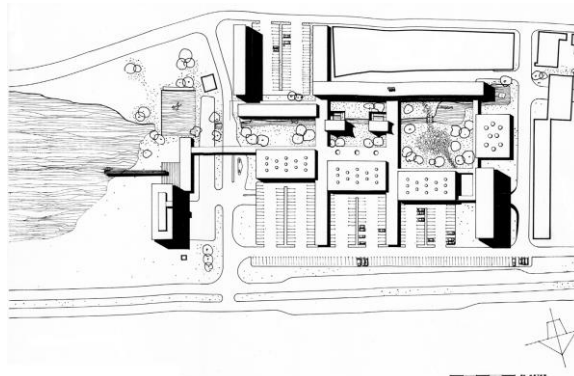


FIG. 3 - Initial design proposal by architect Plumier for Shopping 1 in Genk. The open-air complex incorporates a large housing block, offices, an administrative centre, a hotel, a café, a restaurant and a range of communal facilities. (source: City archive Genk, box 874.1)

¹⁷ Original citation; '[...] as van het stadscentrum [...] waarop zich vestigen, van west naar oost, het administratief centrum, het plein, het huidige handelscentrum, het winkelcentrum en de groene zone bestaande uit het huidige park.'

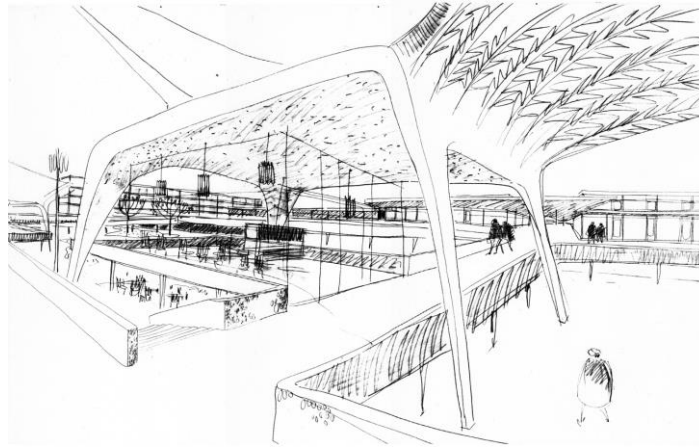


Fig. 4 - Initial design sketch for *Shopping 1*, showing 'streets in the sky', separating vehicular and pedestrian traffic (source: City archive Genk, box 874.1)

Similarly to the *Vällingby Centre*, Plumier's original design for *Shopping 1* consisted of a collection of detached, rectilinear buildings with different height, size and function, all located in a car-free area surrounded by parking lots. This design incorporated – next to commercial activity – a large housing block, offices, an administrative centre, a hotel, a café, a restaurant and a range of communal facilities such as a day-care centre and a swimming pool. (Fig. 3) The buildings were all connected on the first floor level through an intricate system of 'streets in the sky', that were to '[...] separate the vehicular traffic from the pedestrians while maintaining an optimal car-accessibility to the entire perimeter of the shopping centre.'¹⁸ (François, 1964: 2) (Fig. 4)

Sketches of this initial design proposal however suggest – in a similar way to the legendary sketches that Alison and Peter Smithson's drafted for the 1952 Golden Lane housing estate – that these 'streets in the sky' were to fulfil a social function as well. Even though Marilyn Monroe was nowhere to be seen, Plumier's sketches insinuate that these elevated streets were not merely decks that connect point A to point B, but were places where one could *flâneur*, linger, observe activities in other (lower-lying) areas of the shopping centre and have a chat with the casual passer-by. (Fig. 5)

¹⁸ '[...]het verkeer van voertuigen te scheiden van de voetgangers en tevens toch de mogelijkheden te behouden voor de auto's om het winkelcentrum te bereiken over de gehele omtrek.'



Fig. 5 - Initial design sketch for *Shopping 1* in Genk, illustrating the flâneur taking place on the 'streets in the sky' (source: City archive Genk, box 874.1)

The final design of *Shopping 1* is however a far cry from what Plumier had originally envisaged. His plans gradually evolved from the initial multi-level, multifunctional open-air complex to a one-level open-air commercial street and finally, to a fully enclosed, climate-controlled shopping centre, with an 'urban' interior and a parking for one-thousand cars on its rooftop. (Fig. 6) Nevertheless, in the years following its opening, popular press enthusiastically reported on the socio-cultural feats of *Shopping 1*, including the British Week in 1970, the Adamo concert in 1972 and the organisation of the 'builders' fair' (bouwsalon) in 1973. In 1972 *Het Nieuwsblad*¹⁹ furthermore published an article comparing *Shopping 1* to *Woluwe Shopping*, which stated that while Woluwe was a luxury-shopping centre, *Shopping 1* was truly the new heart of the city of Genk, describing it as a '[...] a place for encounter', where 'people seek refuge [and] [...] meet.' (Van Halewijn, 1972)

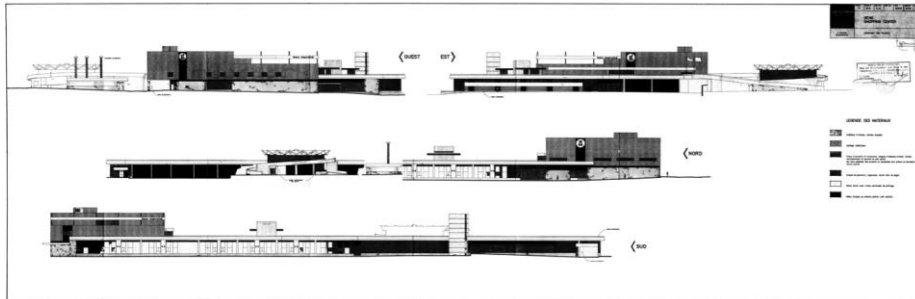


Fig. 6 - Elevations of the final design of *Shopping 1* (Genk): a fully enclosed, climate-controlled shopping centre (source: City archive Genk, box 874.1)

¹⁹ Popular Belgian newspaper, published for the first time in 1918.

3.3 *Het Pand: An open-air urban shopping street*

In 1948, in an attempt to rebuild its war-torn urban fabric, Rotterdam (The Netherlands) embarked on the construction of a shopping centre, which – when it opened in 1953 – became Europe's first: *De Lijnbaan*. Developed by the architecture firm of van den Broek and Bakema – two Team Ten members – this open air shopping centre was organised around a central, car-free walkway and included several residential tower-blocks along its western edge. Urban historian Ed Taverne has described this shopping centre as 'a prototype of [a] post-war urban shopping centre' (Diefendorf, 1989: 136) while Lewis Mumford unambiguously praised it for its 'recreational and social values': '[...] done in modest materials on a modest scale, meant to house a variety of smaller shops, restaurants, and cinemas, [it] is exemplary in almost every way: not least because one of its malls terminates visually in the surviving Town Hall. The flowered plots and the benches, along with the glass-closed outdoor café, emphasize its recreational and social values; while the narrow walk, like that of the Calverstraat in Amsterdam, makes shopping itself easy.' (Mumford, 1961: plate 63)

About a decade later, in 1964, the municipality of Waregem (Belgium) decided to reinvigorate its centre by injecting it with a new urban 'core'. In preparation of this undertaking, the municipal council undertook a study trip to the Netherlands, where it paid a visit to several new shopping centres, including *De Lijnbaan* in Rotterdam. The proposal that local architect Eugene Vanassche consequently developed, was heavily inspired by this new shopping paradigm and – similar to Bakema's and van den Broek's project for Rotterdam – introduced (in a rather radical way) a piece of modern urban planning in an otherwise quaint little town. The new 'core' was to establish a direct link between the old municipal centre and the newly developed sports grounds²⁰ to the south and to that end demanded the demolition of the southern wall of the church square. Contrary to Rotterdam, where this radical modern element was integrated in the urban fabric in an attempt to mend what had been gutted during the war (Diefendorf, 1989: 136), Waregem thus willingly tore down (part of) the old to make place for the new. The ground floor of the new four-storey urban complex that was consequently developed, served as a car park, which effectively bridged the two-metres height difference between the attraction pole in the north (municipal square) and the one in the south (sports centre) and facilitated the delineation of a car-free zone on its first floor level, where – in direct visual and physical contact with the old church square – a new shopping centre was integrated. (Fig. 7)

This new urban centre of Waregem, which was called *Het Pand*, was – in parallel with *De Lijnbaan* – organized around an open air, car-free shopping street sided by two elongated buildings on either side, each of which was three storeys high. These elongated buildings had a modular composition based on a raster of 1.25 metres to

²⁰ The sports centre was constructed in the late 1940s.

allow optimal flexibility. The individual shops inside the buildings were in turn based on a larger module of five metres wide by ten metres deep, spanning two levels. Architect Vanassche furthermore extended this straightforward structuralist approach, which he religiously applied in the planned layout of the buildings, to his choice of construction elements and materials. The facades were to express the rational composition of the complex by leaving the structural frame as visible as possible. The precast concrete elements that were used to make up the façade accordingly complied with the applied 1.25 metres-raster, giving the entire complex a rigid rhythmic sequence, which was only interrupted at a few strategic points to denote the location of the different vertical circulation cores.²¹ (Persoons, 2003)

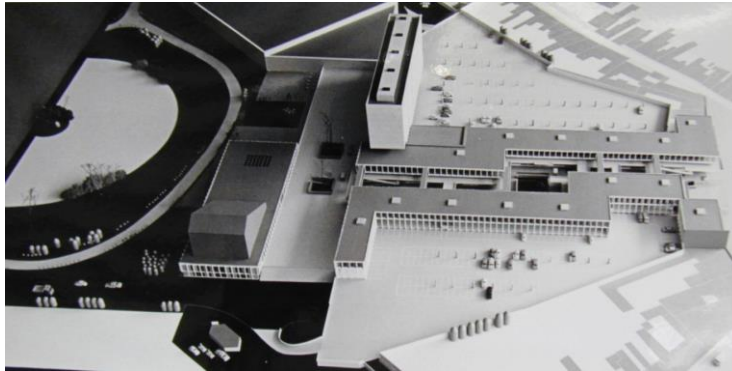


Fig. 7 - Model of Het Pand, a new urban complex in Waregem, connecting the old town square (right) to the newly developed sports grounds (left). The main function of this new urban complex was commercial/shopping (source: private collection of architect Eugene Vanassche)

These two buildings however merely serve as a backdrop for the open-air shopping street in the middle, which is the real spine of the project. Through careful detailing Vanassche attempted to make this structural void not only a prime commercial magnet, but also a pleasant place to roam, linger and meet others. To that end, he lined the facades of the elongated buildings with wide canopies that protected visitors from both sunshine and rain and gave the open-air street a sense of intimacy – a feeling of being inside outside. Another subtle design intervention was the application of different patterns in the pavement of the shopping street, breaking up the monotony of the facades that lined it. These elongated buildings encapsulating the central corridor were however not rectangular in shape but – much like the video game ‘Snake’ – curved in and out, enabling the creation of a larger open square at the heart of the complex. On this prime meeting spot, Vanassche provided a café and a playground and also integrated the main connection to the car park on the lower level

²¹ These vertical circulation cores give access to the offices on the top floor and also connect to the car park, situated below the shopping street level.

via a carefully designed system of ramps surrounding a sunken patio. At the centre of this patio, trees were planted²² (on the lower level), introducing a whimsical green element into the central square on the higher level, as visitors could – almost literally – walk between their leafy branches. (Fig. 8) Several of these sunken tree patios (minus the circulation system) were also incorporated in the southern half of the shopping street, which was a bit wider than its northern counterpart and which debouched in the spacious esplanade providing a view over the sports centre behind the complex. Towards the northern end, the shopping street was split into two narrower tentacles, wrapped around a central commercial building. (Persoons, 2003)

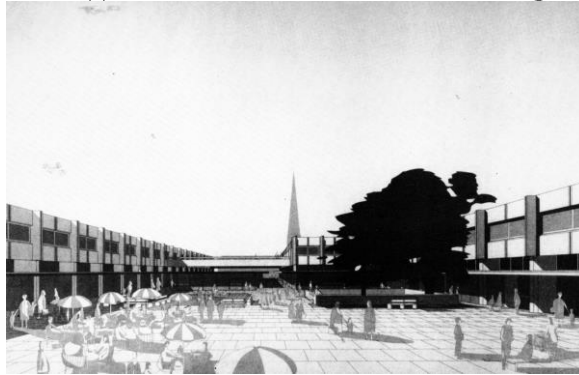


Fig. 8 - Open square at the heart of the new urban (shopping) complex, incorporating a café and a playground (source: City archives Waregem, Collection Frans Delon, folder 210)

Next to commercial functions, *Het Pand* also housed several civic, administrative and socio-cultural facilities. The third level of the buildings lining the central corridor for instance housed the municipal administration in the eastern wing and a number of private offices in the western wing. These were connected via a system of elevated walkways, which crossed the central shopping street, and – hovering above – provided covered connections between the shops on the western and eastern side. The spacious esplanade at the southern tip of the complex furthermore gave access to a newly developed cultural centre, a brand new eleven-storey housing block and a novel town hall. (Fig. 9) This effort to imbue Waregem's modern commercial centre with residential, socio-cultural and civic functions is reminiscent of the novel cores that were conceived in Sweden about a decade earlier, such as the *Vällingby Centre*, and reflects the contemporary popularity of sociological theories about neighbourhoods as developed particularly by Lewis Mumford. According to Mumford, neighbourhoods were to have meaningful relations with all spheres of urban life while retaining a truly human scale.

²² Originally Vanassche attempted to preserve some of the existing trees on site – as a reference to the site's history – and construct the new centre around them. Unfortunately, the majority of the original trees perished and new ones had to be planted.

This compact concentration of a range of 'public' functions surrounding a car-free public domain as developed in *Het Pand* eloquently reflects the basic underpinnings of the discourse regarding 'the heart of the city', which were – as mentioned before – formulated during the 1951-CIAM conference held in England. A few years before this conference took place, Josep Lluís Sert²³ – moved by both physical and social concerns regarding the development of urban centres – already began arguing for the re-appreciation of the 'heart of the city' and formulated some of his theories in his 1942-publication *Can Our Cities Survive?* 'The social function of the new community centres or cores', Sert wrote, 'is primarily that of uniting the people and facilitating direct contacts and exchange of ideas that will stimulate free discussion. [...] The organized community meeting places could establish a frame where a new civic life and a healthy civic spirit could develop.' (Sert, 1942: 6-8) *Het Pand* – even though its design was largely underpinned by commercial motivations – unquestionably reflects this desire to form such a novel 'core' as it combined a range of facilities in an area focused primarily on pedestrian vitality. (Mumford, 2009) Convinced by the project's potential, *Het Wekelijks Nieuws*²⁴ published an article on *Het Pand* only one week after its official opening, headlining 'In Waregem's commercial complex, shopping has become a social activity' (Het Wekelijks Nieuws, 30 September 1977).

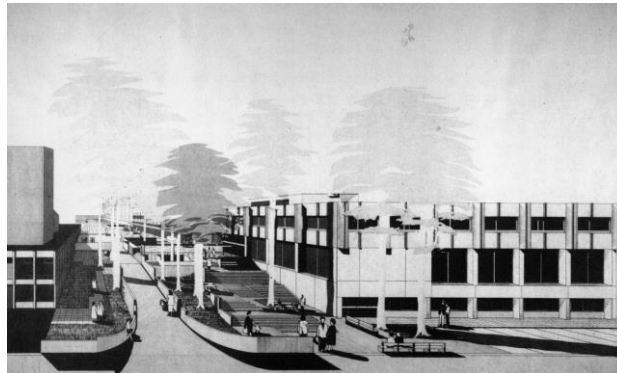


Fig. 9 - Esplanade at the southern tip of the complex, showing the cultural centre on the left and the new town hall on the right (source: City archives Waregem, Collection Frans Delon, folder 210)

4 Conclusion

The rudimentary architectural analysis of a (limited) sample of Belgian shopping centres presented in this paper suggests that their designs were responsive to issues

²³ Josep Lluís Sert i López (1902-1983) was a Spanish Catalan architect and city planner. Between 1947 and 1956, he was the President of CIAM.

²⁴ *Het Wekelijks Nieuws* is a local newspaper for the region of Waregem.

that were raised in the contemporary avant-garde discourse on architecture and urbanism. Notions such as 'collectivity', 'play', 'the core' and 'the human scale', can all be identified in either the design, the early design sketches or the preliminary design briefs that were drafted for these shopping centres. Two of the three shopping centres discussed in this paper were developed at the initiative of municipal authorities (Genk and Waregem). As a result, the idea(l)s underpinning the development of these new shopping centres seem to correspond quite well to those that have been identified (and researched extensively) in the development of other state-sponsored collective facilities that were developed in Western Europe in this period – cultural centres, community centres, sports facilities, ... This unfortunately also signifies that these shopping centres suffer similar 'defects' to those that have been recognised in these novel collective facilities. Architects of the post-war period seemed oblivious to the fact that the interiorisation of activities in new buildings entailed a fundamental alteration of their character, inviting irresolvable contradictions between the ideal of the public space accessible to everyone and the realities of the day-to-day control of behaviour. Bearing this in mind, it is difficult to state that the post-war shopping centre in Western Europe indeed functioned as successful public space. The Belgian examples that have been explored in this paper do however suggest that concerns other than purely commercial were at the base of their design and examples such as *Het Pand* in Waregem even spark the hope that shopping centres may have even succeeded where contemporary socio-cultural amenities failed.

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