Labo S/07
Urbanism and Heritage in Ostend

Commissioned by: AGSO
2007-2008
Collaborators: P. Uyttenhove, M. Liefooghe

The promenade of Ostend around 1900.

Commissioned by AGSO (the autonomous municipal company for city renewal of Ostend), Labo S conducted a literature study in order to support a Plan of Action for the Built Heritage in the city of Ostend. The central question in the research is how the heritage conservation on one hand and city renewal on the other, can be reconciled in a local policy. This issue consists of two sub questions. Firstly a rather general question: how can two policy domains as heritage conservation and city renewal, each with its own practice, instruments and finality, be joined? And secondly a more fundamental question: which criteria define the (heritage) value of a building, site or urban figure and how can these values determine a level of conservation as well as ensure space for development? A literature study and brief study of the current and past local policies in Belgium served as a starting point to answer these questions.

By elaborating a plan of action for the built heritage in Ostend, the city aspires to manage the built heritage not as the intersection between the political agenda's of heritage conservation, urban renewal and spatial planning, but rather to regard it as an integrating project between these different domains.
The city of Ostend does not stand alone in this ambition. The Flemish government becomes increasingly dedicated to manage and valorise the built heritage. Sensitivity for heritage in spatial policy, however, is nothing new, expressed by the urban beautification programs in the 19th century or the cautious city renewal projects in the 1970s.

The research resulted in a report. A first chapter examines the possible interrelation between heritage conservation, city renewal and spatial planning. A historical overview reveals an evolution of the instruments used by the different disciplines on one hand, and the integration of the disciplines in specific projects on the other. Further, the current instrumentarium of heritage conservation and spatial planning is elucidated and the possible relations between both examined. A recurring question remains whether both domains could and should be integrated or whether they should be able to pursue a separate agenda. Essentially, the instrumentarium of the heritage sector should contribute most directly to the care for heritage. Nonetheless, conservations and subsidies do not always seem to guarantee preservation or an suitable redevelopment of heritage.
A screening of the regarding policy in several Flemish cities and a focus on four cases, concludes the chapter.

From the perspective of their respective domains, heritage and landscape are generally valued due to their history, as a relic of the past. Until recently, the policy concerning monuments and landscapes mainly assumed a conservative attitude of maintenance and preservation, with little consideration for the development of heritage. On a higher level of abstraction, this often leads to a collision between 'monument preservation' and 'spatial planning/urbanism'. The vision referred to as 'preservation by development', formulated in the Dutch policy document on the relation between cultural history and spatial layout, attempts to counter the discrepancy between preservation and development. Moreover, in practice this often proves to be the only solution. Numerous (recent) successful projects of reconversion and redevelopment of heritage in Flanders result from a favourable combination of instruments of heritage preservation, such as a conserva-tion decree, and instruments of spatial planning. In that way, built heritage policy is integrated in spatial policy.

Moreover, more arguments plead for this systematic integration: spatial planning is the domain par excellence that induces the consideration of multiple interests in terms of an advisable development. Interests regarding heritage can be taken into account when making up the balance, however equally well, various other concerns can be employed in order to enhance the development of a valuable site.
Finally, one can argue that spatial planning always pursues spatial quality. Considering a future for built heritage or relate new developments to heritage can consolidate the identity of a space and, moreover, can be understood as a form of sustainability.

In Ostend, the Flemish administration of Monuments and Landscapes has already included around 2000 premises as valuable built heritage in the inventory 'Building throughout the Centuries'. The plan of action for the built heritage starts from the premise that this selection of 2000 sites is not feasible as the base for an urban heritage policy. The heritage value itself, however, is not disputed.
Nevertheless, certain aspects of a building and his relation to the city can together grant a site an additional urban quality, regardless of the heritage value, called the locus value. Apart from the heritage value, this locus value should as well be considered in the spatial policy.
As a first component, the proposed method contains a suitable inventory, based on the heritage value that discerns valuable from less-valuable sites and the locus value, classifying valuable premises according to a high, average and low locus value.

A second component regards the conviction that the question around heritage cannot be approached solely from the scale of the building site, but include the perspective on the urban structure.

Thirdly, city development cannot be entirely planned. Whatever dynamic occurring in the city that seems impossible to subject to any limiting condition, has to be followed up process-wise.

Therefore, the implementation of the proposed methodology in a spatial policy, will call for a search for suitable planning and policy instruments that fulfil these three components.

High rise at the Ernest Feys square (photo © De Smet Vermeulen architecten).
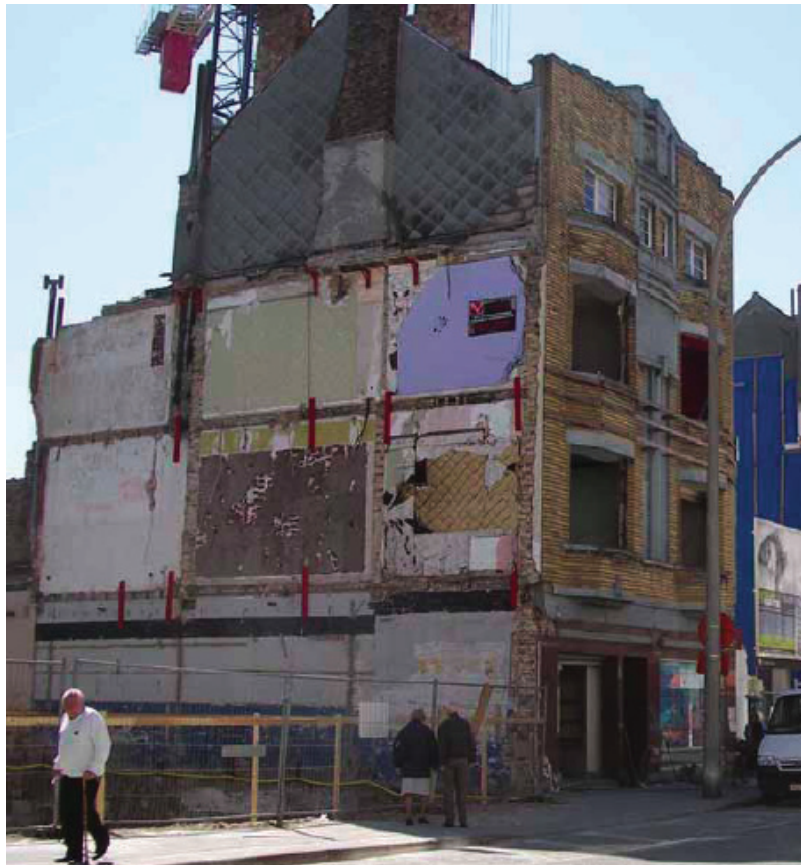
High rise at the Ernest Feys square (photo © De Smet Vermeulen architecten).

The Venetian galleries (photo © De Smet Vermeulen architecten).

Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-ter-Duinen church in Mariakerke (photo © De Smet Vermeulen architecten).