

ROUND TABLE INDUSTRIAL AND MODERN

Little red Vienna? - Ghent's urban image in the interwar period

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Ghent (Belgium) was one of the first industrialised cities in continental Europe and therefore traditionally a 'red' city: the presence of a large working-class population was fertile soil for the expansion of socialism in the 19th century.

Starting in the last quarter of the 19th century, the Ghent socialist movement developed an active building policy, which led to local meeting-rooms, co-operative shops, chemists, and two festival halls that could compete with the bourgeois opera and theatres.

The so-called "Ghent system" of socialism was characterised by the creation of socialist manufacturing businesses that were listed on the Stock-Exchange (unlike the cooperative companies) and the foundation in 1913 of "The Workers Bank" as the pre-war "jewel in the crown".

The introduction after World War I of the universal suffrage (for men) led to a national victory for the socialist party, which for the first time now participated in the country's government. For a short time in the interwar period, socialist ideology would have a significant impact on how the country was governed, and was particularly visible in social housing policy. In 1919 The National Society for Affordable Housing (NSAH) was founded. This was a breakthrough for social housing policy in Belgium. Although the National Society didn't actually commission its own buildings, it promoted the foundation of local and regional building societies and supervised their works. Local societies had to submit their construction plans to the NSAH for approval. The NSAH also developed model plans for use by the local societies. On special building sites, it experimented with new (and cheaper) building techniques

In Ghent, there were as many as ten local housing societies and, uniquely for Belgium, the city council developed a proper housing policy.

Taking avail of their reinforced position on a national scale, the Ghent socialists realised a "red project" for their city, inspired by the socialist reshaping of the city of Vienna (Austria). The Viennese example was made known through study-tours and lectures (e.g. "How the City of Vienna resolves the housing problem?" by the socialist senator Emile Vinck, Volkshuis Brussel, 14/01/1928).

In Ghent, the socialist party was about the same size as the catholic party, and they governed the city in a "tripartite" with the smaller liberal party. A "modus vivendi" was found in which each political party could, through the adjudication of the magistrate's offices, develop his specific vision on the city. The socialists held the offices of education and social welfare. A delicate balance was created between the expansion of Ghent as a city of trade and industry - the catholic-liberal project - and the realisation of facilities that could guarantee the welfare of the large working-class population.

The materialisation of this socialist vision on the city was on one hand realised through the urban political power they held. The net of city-schools was expanded and used as a means of preventive healthcare through the attachment of GP's offices and public showers. Ill and

undernourished children were traced by the school's GP and temporarily placed in the city's open-air-school to regain their strength through exercises and healthy food.

This open-air-school - named after the socialist magistrate of education - was founded in 1925 and was intended to care for ill, debilitated and 'backward' children. It was a boarding school, because *"the children that attended the school, where the air was unspoilt d by industry, should be able to stay over, in order to enjoy the fresh air."* The Ghent open-air-school didn't boast spectacular modernist architecture, as we see in the famous international examples of this building type. The open-air characteristic was not achieved through a transparent architecture in concrete, steel and glass, but through a rural setting, far from the city-centre's pollution, and a large garden and recreation ground. *"For the children, this is paradise on earth, especially for those who live in the narrow streets, deprived from air and light, where traffic represents a permanent danger"*.

Classes were mainly given in roofed classrooms, with open windows, if the weather allowed. Outdoor activities were organised regularly: "Specially developed lessons, in which physical exercise in the open air plays an important part, keep the children busy in a joyful and productive way." On postcards, we see the pupils working in the garden, playing in the sandpit or just enjoying an afternoon rest ('la sieste') on the lawn. Also for drawing lessons, they sit in the grass, drawing boards on their knees.

The school was an enormous success: *"The weak children could be returned to their parents after a stay of 3 to 6 months, flushed with health."* For a short period, even day-care was provided for children of working parents.

As a pioneer in Belgium, the city of Ghent created a municipal housing service, which provided 750 housing units in the interwar period.

Already in the 19th century, Ghent, as an industrialised city, knew only too well the problem of slums and sub-standard housing. The stop to building programmes during WW I served only to aggravate the lack of decent housing. In 1921 a Special Commission for Housing Shortage was founded, which led to the foundation of a Housing Service as part of the public services for the city. After some unrealistic plans (of which a tax on single men occupying their own houses was the most original) in 1923 they started to bring wooden barracks that weren't needed any more in the Devastated Areas, to serve as 'emergency housing' in Gent (a situation that lasted till the sixties!). In 1927, the City Council started its own building programme - as I mentioned earlier a unique strategy in Belgium. The plans were drawn-up by a private architect (Paul Detaeye). After a series of rather traditional groupings of terraced houses sometimes on newly created estates, in the thirties two modernist housing complexes were designed. The first, Het Scheldeoord, consists of cubistic apartment buildings, 5 to 6 floors high, grouped around several enclosed streets and places, and obviously inspired by the famous "Wiener Höfe". The second, the "Retreat Désiré Cnudde" was the first retreat in Ghent, created for elderly couples. Up until then, destitute elderly couples were split and admitted to separated institutions for men and women. Unfortunately, the rental of the apartments in Het Scheldeoord declined, in part because of the economic depression of the thirties, in part because the working class didn't take to the apartment-formula. From the moment their financial situation improved, they moved on to an individual house with garden. Financial problems - among other things caused by so many apartments being left empty - caused the housing policy of the city to stop.

The Ghent socialists realised their "red dream" for the city not only by their position in the Municipal authority. The socialist party itself enhanced its building policy with a socialist

hospital, several socialist factory-buildings, two socialist printing-offices (one for the newspaper, one for books and printed matters) and a "University for the People". The two last-mentioned institutions betray the socialist ambition not only to take care of the worker's material welfare but also his general education.

In 1926 the well-equipped hospital "Clinic for the People Bond Moyson" was built. In the interwar period medicine had evolved so far that hospitals were no longer "waiting rooms for death", but had become real places for cure and healing. At the same time decent medical treatment also became available for the general public.

The clinic's ground plan was designed to enable the clinic to function with optimal efficiency. I quote the architect: "*One essential thing distinguishes a socialist clinic from a private hospital, and that is that - in a certain way - a sort of 'Production-line medicine' is practised. In some of the clinic's services up to 90 persons an hour are examined. One sees that, under those conditions, everything must be planned to assure a swift and efficient service.*" ("Un point essentiel distingue la clinique mutualiste de la clinique privée: on y pratique, en quelque sorte, la médecine en série (...). Dans la clinique (...) certains services furent chargés d'examiner jusqu'à 90 malades en une heure. On comprendra que, dans ces conditions, tout doit être combiné pour assurer un service rapide et ordonné.") In order to allow this 'assembly line medicine', the architect came up with the concept of '*bureaux de dépistage*'. In these rooms, nurses and assistant-doctors conducted preliminary tests on patients to diagnose the exact nature of the problem, so that patients could then be forwarded to appropriate waiting room for the specialised service. The consultation rooms were separated from the waiting rooms by several changing-rooms. A bell-system allowed the doctor to call a waiting, undressed patient in for the medical examination. Because there were always at least two changing rooms, the doctor never had to wait for a patient to undress, which meant an important gain in time.

The social aspect of the 'red factories' could mainly be found in the management organisation of the companies: the workers got paid a share of the company's returns, they had a (limited) say in how the factory was ran, there were several social clubs, and there was a social policy for wages, working hours and recruitment.

In addition, extra attention was paid to ensure comfortable working conditions - as one of the socialist leaders was to describe in 1929: "*The halls are spacey and high, there's always sufficient fresh air: the a continual refreshment of the air is achieved using large ventilators. There's a healthy temperature. Each member of staff has a private locker, where he can keep his clothes and - in a separate compartment - his lunch. Know that the changing-rooms are completely separate from the work-floors. Several washbasins are available for our workers and - although this remark may sound indelicate - I would like to stress that when it comes to hygiene and tidiness, the WC's can compete with any palace furnishing. We can go on with this description for much longer, and tell you about other equipment, such as the automatic vacuum cleaners that continuously suck up the cotton dust, or for example, the expensive humidifier system, that sprays a very fine dew to combat the heat in the working halls.*" From an architectural point of view the socialist factories do not differ in a significant way from other industrial complexes. In the interwar period there was a general increase in attention paid to working conditions. In all likelihood it was driven by the weight of the argument of increased productivity rather than for pure humanitarian reasons: a well-planned working environment resulted in productive workers... As put by one of the leading industrial architects of the time: "All industrialists that, moved by philanthropic thoughts, have paid

attention to the improvement of working conditions in their factory-buildings, unanimously acknowledge the positive impact of their initiative on the worker's mind and on his productivity." (*"Tous les industriels qui, mus par une pensée généreuse, se sont attachés à éclaircir l'atmosphère de leurs usines, sont unanimes à reconnaître l'heureuse répercussion de leur initiative sur l'état d'esprit de l'ouvrier et sur son rendement."*)

Although the industrial buildings in the interwar period were less monumental and overwhelming compared to their 19th-century predecessors, it was intriguingly the socialist printing office that - as one of the few buildings in Ghent - still incorporated the idea of a 'panopticum'.

The printing office was a concrete structure with a central inner court 5 storeys high. The different departments all opened onto this inner court, which was spanned with a concrete bridge with glass tiles on which the foreman's office was situated. This allowed him to control all activities.

The position of the different departments in the building was determined by a cascade-process: starting from the written text and resulting in the printed book, the paper followed a well-considered route that descended one floor in each phase.

The concrete structure allowed the building to fill with light through large windows and flat roofs with glass tiles. The open structure symbolised the socialist ideals of the business: a 'transparent' structure and with the involvement of staff in every stage of the production process: *"Now he is a happy man, he that is conscious of being a useful member and an indispensable link in the production process: he has his share in the joy of labour"*.

The 'red dream' for Ghent didn't last very long... The bankruptcy of "The Workers Bank" in 1934, which caused the resignation of the socialist members of the city's government, combined with financial problems in the slipstream of the worldwide economical depression of the thirties, brought this progressive materialisation of a "red utopia" for Ghent to an end - almost simultaneous with the Austro-fascist coup that put an end to the Viennese reforms...