



La Route Belge' and the Prefiguration of a Non-Place Urban Realm (1925-1938)

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In 1925 the magazine *La Route Belge* was published by the Union Routière de la Belgique (U.R.B.), an association of road users founded in the preceding year. The magazine was intended as a means to defend the rights of the road users and to gain followers of their cause. Their ambition was the realization of a modern road network that suited the necessities for a convenient way of travelling with the (new) automobile: a reconstruction of the old roads according to modern standards (using concrete or asphalt), the equipment of the streets with lighting and signposts, etc.

Though never intended to work in this way, the magazine functioned as a prefiguration of several elements of the urban sprawl of the second half of the 20th century – and of the 'lifestyle' which came along with it. The 'syndicate of road users' – as the members of the U.R.B. called themselves – formulated a strong vision about a reorganization of the street, and of public space in general. They demanded a clear hierarchy of public space, giving each road user his own role and a well defined place in the scenery of the street. In a similar way, ideas about a clear organization of the city seem to have slumbered in the debates about the reconstruction of the road network in the period between the wars.

In this paper I will take a closer look at the material that was published in the magazine *La Route Belge*, an important magazine for 'road users' that was published between 1925 and 1938. The fourteen years during which the magazine is published covers the moment in history when the automobile becomes an important means of transport and when the Belgian government starts up the tremendous program for the modernization of the road network (by means of the Road Funds of 1928 and 1932). So, at a moment in history when urban planners were still struggling to get a grip on the development of this new infrastructure and the automobile, a clear and varying set of images appeared in magazines such as *La Route Belge* that showed how infrastructure and the automobile could perfectly fit in the landscape and in the city. These images – in articles, in the publicity of motor companies, in travel reports, etc. – were welcomed at that time because they showed a new way of interpreting and understanding the landscape. They represented a potential relation between infrastructure, urban development and landscape. Only later on – in the 1950's and 1960's – these images would be rejected because, by then, they were regarded as icons of the problematic large-scale appearance of the automobile and the urban sprawl.

In my paper I will examine how the magazine *La Route Belge* functioned as a catalyst in the Belgian sprawl in absence of a clear apparatus for urban planning. One could say that the magazine *La Route Belge* represented the peri-urban interface of the interbellum period as a 'model' – or an approach to the 'urban condition' – that should be followed in the development of the city. A model that was not an instrument of the administration or the government, but a model which was regarded as an ideal situation by the everyday user of the street – the car driver. A model used to fill the gap caused by the absence of urban planning.

KEY WORDS: Urban interface, road construction, landscape.