



Le Retour aux Champs. Conceiving the Light Railway Network as Urban-Rural Interface

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ABSTRACT

In 1911 the British sociologist Seebohm Rowntree stated that Belgium had gone further than any country in supplying its working class with gardens. His book "Land and Labor: Lessons from Belgium" specifically elaborates on the development of railways and light railways into the densest network of the world, which in combination with cheap railway tickets and housing loans for workers, allowed the population to commute between land and labor, that is between their homes with gardens in the healthy countryside and factories in cities or coal mines. In other words, explained the socialist Emile Vandervelde in "L'exode rurale et le retour aux champs", in Belgium the Industrial Revolution did not produce a rural exodus and unsanitary urban slums like in France, but led to an extreme mobility that converted every piece of land into a potential building lot for laborers. Thus, the Belgian early "urban" landscape differed quite a lot from the traditional European composition of expanding cities surrounded by virgin land. During his train journey London-Brussels in 1903 Vandervelde experienced this difference as an explicit contrast between the deserted fields of Kent and the animated Flemish countryside, "covered with countless white houses with red roof, dispersed or agglomerated to populous villages". According to him, it was whole Belgium, and not some sites in England, that converged with the realization of the Garden City. Inspired by the statements of reformist such as Vandervelde and Rowntree, this paper studies the relation between the early per-urban condition and landscape ideologies/paradigms, by examining whether this condition resulting from the extreme mobility of workers is the planned outcome of infrastructure policy. More specifically, the dialectic between the (socio-technical) conception of the light railway network and landscape ideas on reconciliation of city and countryside is unraveled.

Approaching technological systems as culturally defined objects, the research aims to complement the prevailing "urban history" that depicts territorial and social changes by the concentric growth of cities. As mentioned above, this static model does no justice to the dynamic social and spatial condition of Belgium in the early 20th century. Situated in discourses on trans-disciplinary concepts such as "city systems", "geographical industrialization" and "splintering urbanism", territory is approached from infrastructure networks and their role in urbanization processes. As infrastructure is one of the few spatial components in Belgium that is planned, constructed, owned and managed by the government, the design concepts of these technological systems are mostly based on the pursuit of socio-economic efficiency on the scale of the nation. Thus, since these territorial ambitions are most apparent in the conception of infrastructure, the motives underlying the design can reveal the outlines of the inclusive (landscape) planning of which it is part.

KEY WORDS: Urban-rural interface, infrastructure, implicit urbanism, Belgium.