BUILDING A NEW COUNTRYSIDE

THE MODERN VILLAGE AT THE 1913 WORLD'S FAIR IN GHENT AND THE BELGIAN MODEL SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2013, following a tip from a local resident, the Vlaams Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed (Flemish Immovable Heritage Agency) investigated whether a modest little school building in the vicinity of Ghent University Hospital was in any way connected with the one at the 1913 World's Fair in Ghent (fig. 1). They quickly established that it was: the school building proved to be a reconstruction of the model school in the Modern Village, the most socially significant pavilion at that World's Fair.[1] The reconstruction was carried out according to the original plan and presumably with authentic building materials.[2]

1. Posteard of the Modern Village with view of the model school between the church and the town hall, 1913 (Ghent Archives)

Not long after this discovery, there was a concerted effort to demolish the school. The proponents cast doubt on the reconstruction story and twice – in 2015 and 2018 – sought to obtain a demolition permit. A court of law and over a hundred objectors thwarted these attempts. These circumstances were not conducive to historical research. The Flemish heritage agency was unable to consult an important archive, while research into the construction history was impossible; evidence of reuse in the stone was not investigated.

A study of the available literature by the heritage agency revealed a paucity of academic research into the Modern Village and the model school building. Yet every subsequent study has served to highlight the social importance of this Belgian rural model school. This article offers a critical assessment of that importance. A brief outline of the historical context in which the Modern Village and the model school came about is followed by a description of their social significance and impact on Belgian and European society. The starting point is an analysis of the evaluation reports of the Modern Village published in book form by the then director general of the Ministry of Agriculture, Paul De Vuyst, and a member of parliament, Emile Tibbaut. The authenticity of the reconstruction of the model school was assessed based on recent construction history research. Finally, with the help of local cultural and archival agencies, the question of the extent to which the model school design was emulated was explored during field research.

RURAL DEPOPULATION IN EUROPE AND THE AGRICULTURAL FAIRS

By the end of the nineteenth century Europe was suffering the consequences of what was termed 'the flight from the countryside': the drift of farm labourers to the cities, which were bursting at the seams as a result. This migratory movement was driven by higher factory wages in combination with the lower quality of life in rural areas.[3] The exodus from the countryside to the city stimulated industrialization, which in turn generated impressive economic growth, but by the turn of the century it had become a source of great concern for many European countries.[4] Urbanization was thought to facilitate the rise of socialism and communism and that put the political elites under pressure. They cultivated a romantic image of the countryside. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Ghent World's Fair in 1963, Gontran Van Severen wrote about the great anxiety felt by the middle class in 1913 concerning 'the loss of the countryside'.[5] Despite the rapid population growth in the cities, most people in Europe still lived in the countryside; in Belgium the figure was almost fifty per cent.[6] This sizeable population, often obliged to live in deplorable conditions, was the target audience for the Modern Village (fig. 2).[7]

In the first half of the twentieth century, fairs were a popular means of bringing social matters, such as agriculture, to the attention of a wide public. At the same time as the World's Fair in Ghent, for example, The Hague was hosting the National and International Agricultural Fair.[8] While the earliest agricultural fairs, with their presentations of exclusive products or the latest techniques, were purely commercial affairs, at the beginning of the twentieth century the range of agricultural themes became more diverse. For its part, the Belgian government let no opportunity slip to raise issues concerning the quality of life in the countryside. At the World's Fair in Liège (1905), the Provincial Agricultural Fair in Brussels (1907) and the World's Fair in Brussels (1910) this took the form of new model houses, model farms or a pavilion for farmers' wives.[9] It is here that the idea of building an entire village – eventually realized at the World's Fair of 1913 – took shape.[10]

The World's Fair in Ghent revolved around art, industry and peace. The organizers had not reckoned on war.[11] Despite the growing international tensions, there was even a German delegation.[12] As the last pre-war international fair, the Ghent expo marks a watershed in European history. Traditional cultures were coming under increasing pressure from modernity. Social tensions were on the rise, including as a result of the rural exodus. Despite these tensions, the 'long nineteenth century' was characterized by a high degree of stability, increasing prosperity, faith in progress and an enormous blossoming of art and science.[13] This period, also known as the belle époque, is seen as a golden era. The Ghent World's Fair was clearly a product of this: the Modern Village and the rural model school were suffused with social positivism and a belief in progress. The First World War brought it all to an abrupt end (fig. 3).

THE MODERN VILLAGE: THE BELGIAN MODEL IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

At the end of the nineteenth century, Europe was importing cheap grain from abroad. This 'Agricultural Invasion', as it was known in Belgium, spawned an agricultural crisis that could no longer be resolved through higher productivity or more intensive cultivation.[14] This led to radical socio-economic changes that further exacerbated the flight from the countryside. Drastic reform of the agricultural economy was essential.[15] It was in this context that the Belgian government decided to group the rural buildings at the 1913 World's Fair so as to create a modern-day rural village: the Modern Village.[16] It was a first in the history of World Fairs. In the words of the man who came up with the concept of the Modern Village, Paul De Vuyst[17]: 'Finally, at the International Exhibition in Ghent we

2. Traditional farming family from the Belgian coastal area, around the end of the First World War (private archive)

were able to admire the biggest undertaking of that kind: The "Modern Village".' It brought together 'a number of rural buildings, presenting visitors with farms of varying sizes, milking shed, garden, forge, bakery, etc. There were even public amenities, church, town hall, school, library, post, telegraph, telephone offices, etc.'[18] Several ministries were involved in the construction of the village under the leadership of the pro-Flemish Minister for Agriculture, Joris Helleputte (1852-1925).

In this Modern Village Belgium presented an international public with practical proposals for revitalizing the countryside and improving the quality of life in rural areas.[19] This was to be achieved by modernizing the rural economy, beautifying villages and creating a new rural culture.[20] Inspiring model buildings, constructed according to the local building tradition and culture, rendered the whole idea in a clear and tangible fashion. In constructing this fully realized modern farming village, Belgium fulfilled a pioneering role.[21] Its example was emulated by the Swiss National Exhibition in Bern in 1914.[22]

PERSUADE WITH PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

The organizers of the Modern Village at the World's Fair in Ghent wanted to raise public awareness of the important issue of rural life by taking an emphatically practical approach to farming, still the main economic activity in Belgium at that point in time. The educational set-up of the Modern Village enabled visitors to experience every facet of a modern rural village.[23] As well as the latest insights and techniques relating to agricultural production methods, communal amenities like the church, town hall, schools, library, and postal, telegraph and telephone services and public utilities like sewerage were on display (fig. 4).

Visitors to the Modern Village were asked for their opinion and invited to voice any criticisms or suggestions they might have.[24] These were carefully noted in daily reports. The same practical, critical approach informed J. Giele's visitor's guide.[25] After the World's Fair had closed the reports were compiled in book form. *Het Moderne Dorp op de Wereldtentoonstelling te Gent 1913. Nota's, verslagen, zichten en plans* by Paul De Vuyst and Emile Tibbaut was published in that same year, thereby making the experiences gained during the World's Fair immediately available so as to benefit the modernization of the countryside.

Emile Tibbaut, a member of the Kamer van Volks-

NORTH EASTERN RAILWAY

BELGIUM

GHENT INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION 1913

MAY-NOVEMBER

Travel to the GHENT EXHIBITION (Opening 26th April 1913)
via **HULL**

REGULAR SAILINGS BY FAST STEAMERS. THROUGH FARES AND BOAT TRAINS. CHEAPEST ROUTE. Further particulars from Booking or Station Enquiry Office, or from the Passenger Manager, Continental Agency, N. E. Railway, York.

PRINTED BY J.-E. GOOSSENS, BRUSSELS.

◄ 3. Poster for the 1913 World's Fair in Ghent (Ghent University Library)

vertegenwoordigers (Chamber of Representatives) and chairman of the Hogere Landbouwraad (Higher Agriculture Council), wrote in the foreword: 'The discussion of the [agricultural] issue, in which everyone was able to participate, in this instance concerned real and existing topics: it was of a specific, objective and practical nature and contributed more to progress than the finest speeches.' This practical approach was intended to appeal to visitors and to persuade them of the possibilities the Modern Village offered for the future. It represented a break with prevailing exhibition traditions: in the Modern Village everything related to rural life was gathered together in one huge pavilion, whereas in previous World's Fairs they had been spread over a larger area.[26] Educational presentations, for example, had previously been largely confined to displays of educational methods and outcomes.[27] By contrast, the rural model primary school allowed visitors to experience the exhibited education first-hand: twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, actual lessons were held.[28]

At the same time, organizations like the Boeren- en Boerinnenbond (Farmers and Farmers' Wives Union) campaigned for a new rural culture that would guide modernization and raise the quality of life while respecting traditional values.

TOWARDS A NEW RURAL CULTURE

From around 1900, more and more initiatives to improve rural life were rolled out in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe.[29] In Italy there were projects aimed at making rural housing healthier. Switzerland built its own version of the 'Modern Village' based on a love of the region and the local (building) culture.[30] In Hungary there were organized walks along country roads and paths aimed at introducing people to the beauty of the countryside. In Sweden there were associations devoted to reviving traditional skills and crafts.[31] In Belgium the Farmers' Wives Union was founded in 1911, while in the Netherlands the historian Frederic Adolph Hoefer founded the Vereniging voor Volkskunde 'Het Nederlands Openluchtmuseum' (Association for Folklore 'The Netherlands Open Air Museum'), where visitors learned about folk traditions.[32] In Germany around 1913 there were various associations that presented the population a wide range of rural customs and traditions along with practical support in the construction of houses, schools and farmhouses. Beyond Europe, too, there were similar initiatives aimed at improving life on the land around this time.

The folkloric associations in Germany were the main source of inspiration for Belgium.[33] At the time of the World's Fair in 1913 they were already engaged in wide-ranging cultural work in the countryside: establishing museums; setting up travelling exhibitions, and fair stands offering useful and affordable art

4. Postcard of the Modern Village under construction, 1912 or 1913 (Ghent University Library)

5. The model primary school with 'pleasure garden' in the Modern Village during the 1913 World's Fair (Ghent University Library)

objects; protecting heritage and landscapes; organizing games for young people; developing courses (and schools) for adults, offering general education as well as instruction in home economics, agricultural science and the advantages of rural life; improving the standard of cottage industries (basket-weaving, woodworking, pottery, etc.); designing and helping to build affordable rural buildings; propagating norms and values and disseminating knowledge about hygiene, a balanced diet, housekeeping and national law.[34]

During the 1913 Ghent World's Fair (26 April-3 November), the first Internationaal Congres van Landbouwverenigingen en Landelijke Volkenkunde (International Congress of Farmers Associations and National Folklore) was held. Its purpose was to promote a modern rural culture across the world and to achieve this it wanted governments to set up advisory committees that would promote culture and art appreciation in the villages by way of information and advice.[35] The goal was to beautify the villages and establish associations that would ameliorate rural life via new services. During one of the preparatory discussions for the World's Fair, for example, a representative of the l'Oeuvre du Coin de Terre association was present. This Belgian organization hoped to keep labourers in the villages by establishing kitchen gardens and was an exponent of a European civilizing offensive that consisted of disseminating knowledge of plants and flowers.[36]

These European rural movements ran counter to modern tendencies in architecture, which had been spreading from the cities to the countryside since industrialization. The organizers of the Modern Village championed an architecture that integrated the new industrial techniques with a traditional architectural style.[37] Only this form of architecture was considered capable of evoking the beauty of the countryside. A return to regional, traditional styles was promoted in both new and renovated buildings.[38] The neo-traditional architectural style of the model primary school is an example of this (fig. 5). While stone was used in the front elevation above the windows, the rear elevation featured steel with floral motifs. This focus on historical architecture was also evident in the fourth Congrès International de l'Art Public in Brussels in 1910. In the words of the Dutch architect P.J.H. Cuypers: 'If our predecessors had been better custodians, the state of deterioration of historical monuments would not have been as serious and we would not now find ourselves confronted with major and very complicated preservation issues.'[39] This awareness resulted, at the end of the belle époque, in the founding of various heritage associations.[40] Neo-traditional architecture, in keeping with local architectural traditions and in combination with a specific flower and plant culture, was expected to stimulate the beautification of villages. Schools and other public buildings set the tone with well-cared-for front gardens (so-called *lusttuinen* or pleasure gardens). Teachers were expected to promote these school gardens as an inspiration for the houses in the village.

6. The Sint-Gerardus school, reconstruction of the 1913 Belgian model school, 2019

A ministerial circular of 1909 emphatically urged them to turn their school into a 'house of flowers'.

Belgium occupied a leading position within the Europe-wide movement to cultivate a love of one's own living environment; in fact, the movement had originated there. According to De Vuyst and Tibbaut, the regionalist spirit was most strongly rooted and well developed in Belgium.[41] During the World's Fair in Ghent the organizers of the Modern Village founded the Nationale Commissie voor de Verfraaiing van het Platteland (National Committee for the Beautification of the Countryside), which was dedicated to realizing the ambitions of the World's Fair throughout the country.[42]

THE BELGIAN RURAL MODEL SCHOOL

Educational institutions – regarded as the pillars of the new countryside –received special attention in the Modern Village. Of the various schools exhibited, the model school building for primary education occupied a prominent position close to the village square, between the church and the town hall. This school is the last remaining building from the Modern Village and also the only remaining complete and authentic building designed exclusively for the 1913 World's Fair.[43]

The first thing that strikes one about the model school is its simple and modest appearance (fig. 6). This reflects the practical objectives of the organizers of the Modern Village. In 1913, Belgium was preparing for the implementation of a new Education Act mandating schooling for children from six to twelve years of age, supplemented with two additional (specialized) years in anticipation of an extension of compulsory schooling to the age of fourteen. While the cities were generally well prepared for the foreshadowed changes, the situation in the countryside was completely different; even where there were sufficient school buildings, they were often in a poor state of repair.[44]

The model school in the Modern Village was intended to be an exemplar for the construction or refurbishment of rural schools.[45] J. Corman, director general of the Ministry of Arts and Sciences, which was responsible for education, opted for a specific design for this model school that would facilitate the construction of new schools. The minister at that moment was the pro-Flemish Prosper Poullet (1868-1937).

TAILORED TO RURAL CHILDREN

Although designed as a primary school, the model school included a classroom for one specialized subject; in the countryside this was geared to domestic science or agricultural education. Apart from educational posters in the classroom and the obligatory school library, the model school boasted a large kitchen garden, an orchard and greenhouses. The kitchen garden was a form of experience-based learning.[46] By growing vegetables, fruit and herbs, children learned to provide for themselves. It was a teaching method that was closely related to the world in which

7. View of the playground with hygienic outdoor toilets. In the background the famous fruit and vegetable garden of the model school in the Modern Village, 1913 (Ghent University Library)

the children lived. This was important for combatting absenteeism and maintaining a low threshold to (compulsory) primary education.[47] Many rural children grew up in families for whom a kitchen garden was essential to survival (fig. 7).

Remnants of fruit trees encountered during the course of field research as well as conversations with former teachers confirmed that during the interwar years several rural primary schools had kitchen gardens.[48] The extent to which these gardens were a fully-fledged educational tool, as suggested in the model school, requires further investigation.

Plants, trees and flowers were not purely educational, but also served to create a pleasant learning environment. Flower gardens, like the front garden of the model school, have already been mentioned. Playgrounds were planted with trees that would protect children from the blazing summer sun.[49] These broader visions were also to be found in the Netherlands: the Nederlandse Vereniging ter bevordering van het Schoonheidsbeginsel in het Onderwijs (Dutch Association for the promotion of the Beauty Principle in Education) propagated 'well-cared-for classrooms; filled with flowers, sun and light; adapted to the environment, neither barrack-like nor luxurious; airy, and spacious enough to allow freedom of movement; sober and simple; no overly sumptuous decoration, and no ornaments, but a form of decoration in keeping with childlike ideas and expectations; furniture that does not surpass its purpose … in short, an interior filled with warm, homely comfort that the children experience as something rich and benevolent.'[50]

NEW CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES

The Modern Village provided an opportunity to present the model school for primary education to a large and varied public. Local governments saw a practical, easy-to-build and affordable model of a school building that satisfied statutory requirements and regulations for rural education.[51] The 1874 general building regulations had been supplemented with more recent guidelines and important innovations.[52] The model school featured the latest lighting and ventilation techniques and reflected the latest insights in the field of health and hygiene.[53]

Lighting was improved by large windows that brought copious daylight into the classrooms. Modern construction techniques made it possible to replace the brickwork lintels above windows and doors with steel I sections. To ensure an adequate supply of fresh air, classrooms were fitted with the 'Knapen' system, an innovative technology that drove rising damp out of the walls and so helped to regulate the indoor climate. The Knapen system was a forerunner of the cavity wall and recognizable by small gratings in the outer wall, often at plinth height.[54]

The extent to which this model school influenced school construction has not yet been fully investigated. One important source, the archives of the ministry responsible for primary education, were lost in a devastating fire in 1947.[55] The preservation research carried out by the Flemish administration in 2016 and 2017 rated the model school very highly in terms of authenticity, recognizability and representativeness, but describes its emulation as 'limited'.[56] However, those studies were based exclusively on archival and literature research.[57] A construction history analysis, involving exhaustive research into school construction after 1913, is lacking. As is field research, yet a 2002 Dutch study considers this indispensable in school construction research.[58] This prompted our own field research in 2018, exploring the extent to which schools built after 1913 were fitted with innovative lighting and ventilation techniques. The provisional results of that research strengthen the hypothesis that the model school had many more imitators than has thus far been assumed. The model school in the Modern Village reached many thousands of interested parties at home and abroad. In 1913, many Belgian rural communities lacked the resources to implement the 1914 compulsory education legislation and this situation did not improve after the First World War. The already well-known model school, which complied with all legislation, was easy to build and affordable, consequently remained an inspiring exemplar.

The 2018 field research revealed that in the 1920s and '30s over a hundred schools were built or retrofitted with large windows (comparable to those in the

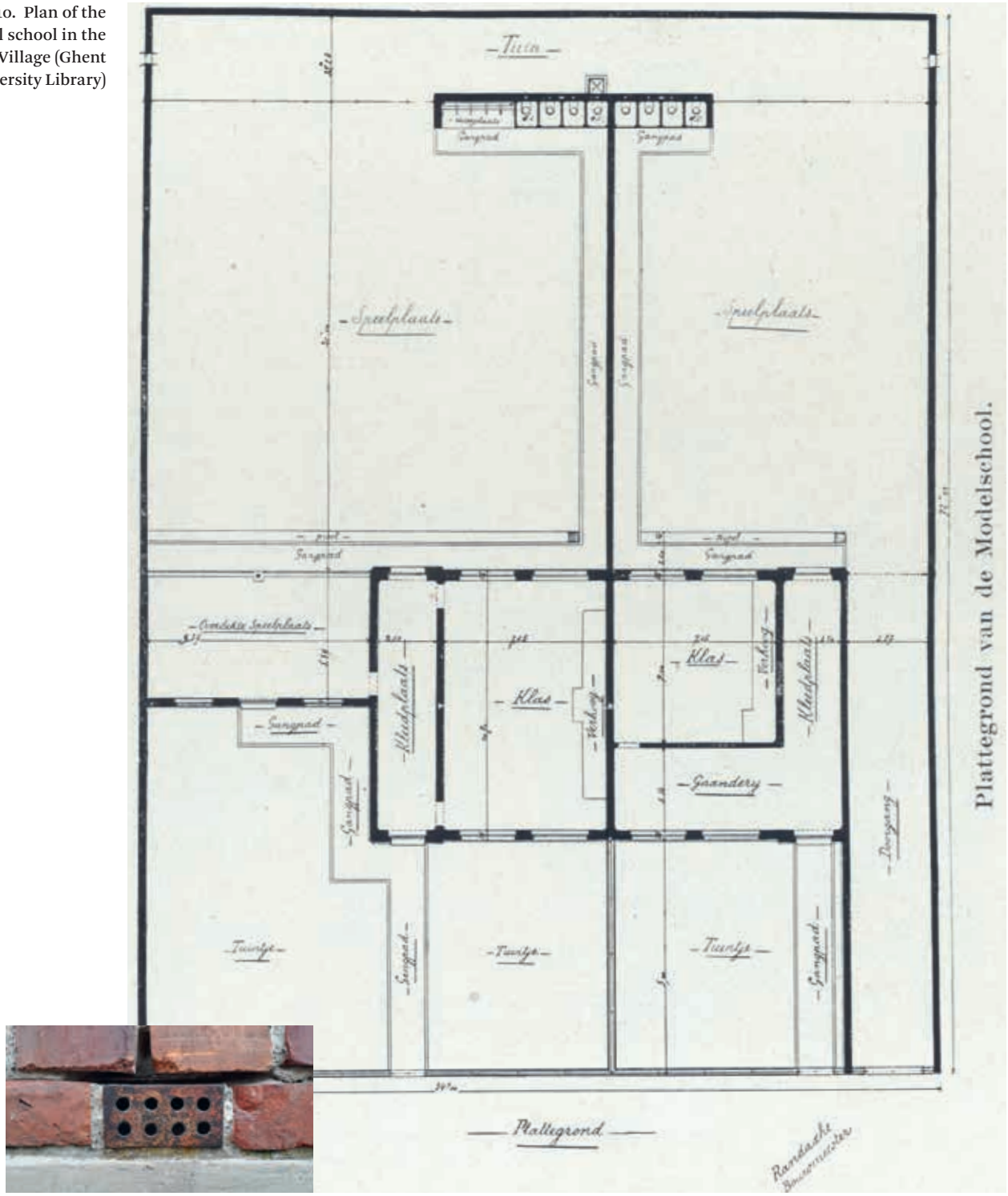
8. Lo-Reninge municipal school from 1868 with narrow, arched windows, (Westhoek Verbeeldt)

9. Lo-Reninge municipal school from 1868 with wide, rectangular windows, post-1949, (Westhoek Verbeeldt)

model school) in rural Flanders.[59] A cautious extrapolation based on previously studied communities suggests that the real number is higher. We concluded that this method of lighting was standard during the interwar period. Although we also encountered this type of window in school buildings predating the 1913 World's Fair, they are few in number and it is by no means certain whether these windows are original or of a later date.

Examples of the latter are the local schools of Lo-Reninge (1868) and Ooike (c. 1890). Like most nineteenth-

10. Plan of the model school in the Modern Village (Ghent University Library)



century schools, both were originally fitted with narrow, arched windows, but in the twentieth century they were modernized with the same type of windows as the 1913 model school. Clear signs of alteration are visible in the brickwork around the window openings (figs. 8 and 9).

We also encountered the new ventilation system as used in one of the model school classrooms during our field research. Although later renovations sometimes erase any physical traces of this system, references to them may appear in the original building plans, as in the new wing of classrooms for the local school in Gentbrugge, from the early 1920s.[60]

Modernization and the use of innovative techniques in school construction occurred in other countries as well. In Hungary, which was represented at the 1913 World's Fair in Ghent, over five thousand new rural schools with large windows were built in the late 1920s under a scheme overseen by the Minister of Religion and Education, Kunó Klébelsberg. Although tra-

ditionally constructed, the materials used in these schools were of a higher quality than those used in the surrounding houses and farms in those villages.[61] The exemplary function of these Hungarian village schools recalls the philosophy behind the design of the model school in the Modern Village.

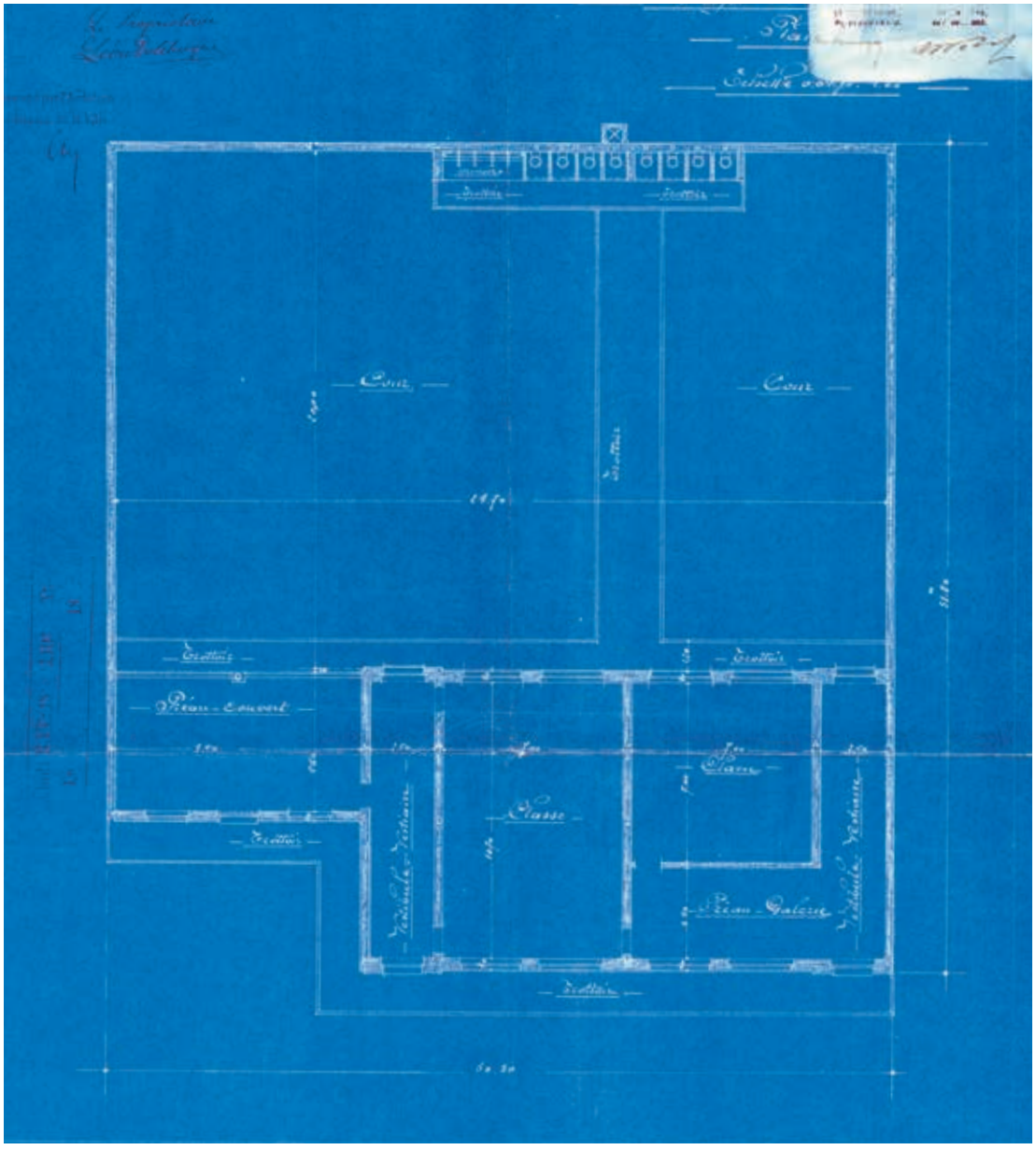
THE SINT-GERARDUS SCHOOL

In 1914 the Belgian model school in the Modern Village was removed from the site of the World's Fair and rebuilt, brick by brick, on the estate of Leon Delebecque and his wife Anne Rotsart-de-Hertaing in the same rural district of Ghent. The rebuilt school acquired a name: Sint-Gerardus. A historical investigation into the fabric of the building carried out in 2018 confirmed its authenticity: the Sint-Gerardus school is indeed the model school from the Modern Village.[62] The specific splitting contours in the stone in various places in the front and rear elevations can only be explained by since-vanished walls. These walls, as a comparison of the building plans reveals, were not rebuilt during the otherwise meticulous reconstruction (figs. 10, 11, 12).

Delebecque, in his capacity as lord of the manor, had low-cost allotment gardens laid out in the vicinity of the Sint-Gerardus school for the use of local residents, hereby putting into practice what he had advocated as the representative of the aforementioned l'Oeuvre du Coin de Terre association during the preparations for the World's Fair.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF (COMPULSORY PRIMARY) EDUCATION

When Belgium introduced universal compulsory education on 19 May 1914, it was one of the last European



11. Construction blueprint for the Sint-Gerardus school dated 20 March 1914 (Ghent Archives)

countries to do so. Some, like France, England or Hungary, had done it decades earlier, the Netherlands in 1901.[63] Prussia had compulsory education as early as the eighteenth century. The introduction of compulsory education in Belgium banished child labour and paved the way for universal education.[64]

In the cities mass education had already demonstrated its benefits for the modernization of the economy. The aim was to repeat that success story in the countryside. It was also hoped that mass education would bring about a general edification of the rural population. The organizers of the Modern Village were keen to ground this edification in traditional values. Thus, in addition to its familiar economic function, education acquired an important socio-cultural significance with an explicitly local embedding. Local authorities and associations were expected to ensure that this new rural culture gained acceptance with the local population (fig. 13).[65]

PUBLIC EDIFICATION WITH TRADITIONAL VALUES

The construction of the Modern Village occurred at a moment when regional cultural differences, traditions and crafts were in danger of fading away as a result of industrialization. A variety of groups in Belgium were opposed to certain aspects of this modernizing society. Elsewhere in Europe, too, there was opposition to the negative effects of modernization and this gave rise to a countermovement devoted to preserving traditional popular cultures.[66] The organizers of the Modern Village espoused a similar philosophy, believing that a reinvigorated popular culture would steer modernization in the right direction and inculcate the rural population with a love of their immediate surroundings. The improvement of the quality of life in the countryside was seen in broader terms than its contribution to economic prosperity alone.[67] The new rural culture embraced a modernization that included 'respect for regional traditions' and 'an art education

12. The specific splitting contours in the stone in various places in the Sint-Gerardus school demonstrate the authenticity of the reconstruction of the model school from the Modern Village

13. Liberation tribute photo taken after the First World War in the playground of the municipal school in Ooike (private archive)

designed to elevate the sensibility, the state of mind and thus also the existence of the rural population'.[68]

So the Modern Village at the 1913 World's Fair was not solely concerned with promoting new techniques and innovations.[69] Attention was also paid to art and culture and to people's attachment to their village. This is evident in the visitor's guide to the Modern Village and was particularly visible in the fitting out of the village: the colourful village square with its floral decorations, graceful ornaments and street furniture, the choice of neo-traditional building styles and the carefully tended gardens of both the public and private buildings on display. The presence of cultural organizations like the Farmers and Farmers' Wives Union and other agricultural associations was further evidence of this. The international congresses held by these agricultural organizations concurrently with the World's Fair underscore that culturally formative significance. One example of this was the Third International Congress of Farm Women, chaired by Anne Rotsart-de-Hertaing, later co-owner of the model school together with her husband.

So the Belgian government's ambitions in building schools and promoting universal primary education in the countryside went beyond the mere literacy of the farming population. Children should feel comfortable at school. The education programme should be such that children became part of and remained closely connected to their surroundings. At school children were introduced to the history of their living environment and learned to cherish the beauty and customs of the region in which they had grown up.[70] The expectation was that this would result in fewer people deserting the countryside.

THE BASIS FOR AN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY OF THE FUTURE

A successful modernization of the agricultural economy benefited from good education and an efficient dissemination of knowledge.[71] The acquisition of theoretical and technical skills was considered crucial for the modernization of farming and for raising the quality of rural life. In the cities, education proved its worth every day. The advantages of the school's central role in the lives of children resulted in a general acceptance of this institution and encouraged parents to send their children to school.[72]

In 1900 the countryside lagged behind the city (fig. 14). Literacy was low, due in part to higher absenteeism,[73] and that stood in the way of modernization because the transfer of knowledge via the written word had become the norm. The introduction of compulsory universal primary education in 1914 was expected to effect great changes, especially in the countryside.

14. Jules-Adolphe Breton, *The Gleaners* (De Arenlezers), 1854 (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin)

15. The interior of the boys' classroom with library bookcase at the back, in the model school in the Modern Village during the 1913 World's Fair in Ghent (Ghent University Library)

Establishing new schools or renovating existing school buildings was one thing; but success was only ensured when the population itself – as in the cities – was convinced that learning to read and write would guarantee a better future. Not until every farmer or farm labourer was literate would they have access to new techniques and practices.[74] Libraries had a key role to play in the dissemination of this knowledge. In the Flemish countryside the introduction of libraries proceeded with difficulty at first, and usually via mini libraries, so-called Lilliput collections.[75] More research is required into the role played by the mandatory small school libraries which, although they often consisted of no more than a single bookcase, may have been of great significance, especially in the 1920s (fig. 15).

The primary model school and the Modern Village marked the first clear presentation of the Belgian government's policy to modernize rural life in its entirety. It was an endeavour that would bear fruit in the wake of the First World War. The war is seen as a watershed in the transition to a modernized agriculture characterized by technical innovation, specialization and reorientation towards more livestock farming.[76]

CONCLUSION

The 1913 World's Fair in Ghent took place at a moment of mass rural migration that was contributing to poverty and social unrest in many places in Europe. The Belgian government wanted to tackle this by creating a new countryside with a higher quality of life. At the Ghent World's Fair, therefore, it exhibited the Modern Village, a practical and educational demonstration of its policy. The aim was to modernize the rural economy and beautify the villages. Through the introduction of compulsory primary education, the government hoped to teach people the necessary skills and techniques to modernize the economy, while simultaneously achieving a general edification of the rural population centred on love of one's own region. The influence of the Modern Village on the modernization of agriculture and the enhancement of the quality of life was felt mainly after the First World War – not just in Belgium, but in other countries, too, witness the school building programme in the Hungarian countryside. The model school in the Modern Village was conceived as an affordable and easy-to-build school building that would facilitate the practical realization of this new rural culture. Research into the fabric of the present Sint-Gerardus school shows that it is the relocated model school from the Modern Village. As the only remaining authentic structure from that Modern Village, the school building makes it possible for people to visit a historical time capsule – as if time had stood still for 107 years.

Recent field research supplements the latest investigations by the Flemish government and has established that over a hundred school buildings from between 1913 and the late 1930s are fitted with the innovative lighting and/or ventilation systems we are familiar with from the model school in the Modern Village (fig. 16). This reinforces the hypothesis that the model school was widely emulated and – as the Belgian government had hoped – played an important role in the implementation of compulsory schooling for children of six to fourteen years of age in Belgium. Further research is needed into the social significance of the school, which was only rediscovered in 2013. It would explore, for example, the extent to which new teaching methods presented at the World's Fair were also emulated and the role of small primary school libraries in the general edification of the rural population.

16. The municipal school in Val-Meer te Riemst, founded in 1930, 2018

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BUILDING A NEW COUNTRYSIDE

THE MODERN VILLAGE AT THE 1913 WORLD'S FAIR IN GHENT AND THE BELGIAN MODEL SCHOOL

HANNES DE ZUTTER

In the summer of 2013, the Vlaams Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed (Flemish Immovable Heritage Agency) investigated a modest little school building in the vicinity of Ghent (Belgium). The old building proved to be a reconstruction of the model school in the Modern Village, a Belgian government pavilion of great social significance at the 1913 World's Fair in Ghent. The model school is the only surviving building from the Modern Village.

Since this discovery, further investigations by the heritage agency have revealed the dearth of scholarly studies of either the Modern Village or the model school building. The great social importance of this Belgian rural model school is, however, becoming increasingly clear. This article is a critical assessment of that importance. A brief outline of the historical context in which the Modern Village and the model school came about is followed by a description of their social significance and the impact on Belgian and European society. The starting point is an analysis of the evaluation reports of the Modern Village published in book form by the then director general of the Ministry of Agriculture, Paul De Vuyst, and a member of parliament, Emile Tibbaut. The authenticity of the reconstruction of the model school is assessed based on recent construction history research. Finally, the question of the extent to which the model school design was adopted was explored during a field trip with the help of local cultural and archival agencies.

The 1913 World's Fair in Ghent took place in a period of mass rural migration that resulted in poverty and social unrest in many parts of Europe. The Belgian government was keen to do something about this by building a new countryside with a better quality of life. To that end they exhibited the Modern Village – a practical and instructive embodiment of their policy – at the Ghent World's Fair. The ambition was to modernize the rural economy and beautify the villages. Via the introduction of compulsory education for children between the ages of six and fourteen, future generations would be taught the skills and techniques needed to modernize the economy and simultaneously achieve the edification of the rural population, central to which was a love of one's own region and traditions. The effects of the Modern Village on the modernization of agriculture and on the improvement of the quality of life were felt mainly after the First World War, not just in Belgium but in other countries, too, such as Hungary.

The model school in the Modern Village was conceived as an affordable and easy-to-build school building that would facilitate the realization of this new rural culture. The construction survey has demonstrated the authenticity based on the specific roof shapes in stone dating from over a hundred years ago.

Recent field research complements the latest investigations by the Flemish Government and strengthens the hypothesis that the model school was widely emulated and played an important role in the implementation of compulsory schooling in Belgium. Further research is necessary, not least to obtain clarity about the adoption of the new teaching methods presented in the model school and the significance of small primary school libraries for the general edification of the rural population.