Michael Ryckewaert, ***Building the Economic Backbone of the Belgian Welfare State: Infrastructure, Planning and Architecture 1945-1973*** (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2011, 368 pp., ISBN 978 90 6450 751 9).

Michael Ryckewaert's study of the intersection of economic policy, infrastructure planning and architecture provides a fascinating exploration of the way in which Belgium seized the opportunities provided by reconstruction and modernisation after World War II, but did so in very different fashion from its neighbours. Planning, especially town planning, was seen by many Belgians as tainted by association with the top-down planning imposed during the Nazi occupation and Belgium chose to resist the dirigiste policies adopted elsewhere in Europe. In its place Belgium pursued '*une politique d'abondance'* that sought to stimulate the economy, refusing to adopt the austerity measures enforced in Britain, France or Holland. A measure of the initial success of this policy is the speed with which the Belgium economy appeared to recover in the first post-war years and the limited use that Belgium made of Marshall Aid.

However, as Ryckewaert shows, Belgium's overt resistance to planning should not be understood as meaning that there was, as some would have it, no planning. In a pamphlet, *The Ugliest Country in the World,* published in 1968, Renaat Braem, an architect and urbanist who had worked with Le Corbusier, reproached Belgium for the chaotic nature of the country's urbanisation and the haphazard and seemingly random location of industry, transport and housing. Belgium may not have chosen like France to entrust its future to a succession of national plans, nor to have drawn up the equivalent of the Dutch Industrialisation Memoranda, but, on closer examination, it did develop ways of co-ordinating industrial and economic policies with urban growth that, if not actually celebrated as *de jure* 'planning', had *de facto* much the same effect.

Ryckewaert's choice of examples to demonstrate the way that this form of 'co-ordination' operated is generally chronological. He begins with an account of the modest rebuilding of the docks and associated industrial buildings in Leuven and the more ambitious plans for expanding Antwerp harbour. In both cases he shows not only how wartime or pre-war plans were revisited but how infrastructure projects of this type were linked to the provision of other facilities, to new factories, to roads, to housing and to various forms of social provision as part of the building of new neighbourhood units.

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In the second section, he explores the way in which the Socialist-Liberal governments of the mid 1950s 'flirted' with the application of Keynesian principles, but again without engaging in the comprehensive town and country planning to be seen across most of post-war Europe. Three pieces of legislation exemplify the Van Acker government's dabbling with dirigisme: the creation of the Road Fund in 1955, the ten year plan for the port of Antwerp launched in 1956 and the passing of the Canal Act of 1957. All display that interesting combination of a belief in the virtues of enterprise while engaging in Keynesian intervention that characterises Belgian government policy at the time. The fruits of this policy are to be seen in plans for the revival of the Borinage, the development of the areas along the banks of the Albert Canal and the plans for the construction of the new Espérance Longdoz steelworks at Chertal. With its combination of up-to-the-minute American-inspired industrial architecture and government funding, the new steelworks convey the ambiguities of the ideological underpinnings of Belgian policy of the time.

The contrast between the French and the Belgium approach to economic and infrastructure planning is bought out in Ryckewaert's discussion of the position of Brussels in the modernisation of the Belgian economy. Unlike Paris, the growth of Brussels was not limited by the demands of decentralist policies. Chosen as the site for the Expo 1958, a showcase for the dynamic qualities of the new post-war Belgium, Brussels sought to become the capital of the new European Community and home for the Community's institutions. To equip the city for its position as Belgium's 'City', Brussels benefitted from a system of by-passes and limited access motorways that reflected its position as the hub of the nation's communications network. This attracted a variety of foreign firms, particularly from the USA, drawn to a more welcoming entry point to the European Community than France. The result was a pattern of industrial developments along the new roads which with their distinctive landscaping and buildings, designed by architects like Van Kuyck, created around Brussels a new model of urbanisation not unlike the new industrial and research landscape emerging along route 128 around Boston.

The final section of the book documents yet a different pattern of development that was to emerge from the late 1950s onwards with the coming to power of the Christian Democrats. Their policies, linking economists from the Catholic University of Leuven with Flemish industrial interests, favoured regional rather than national initiatives. Drawing on pre-war English experience, these policies for 'economic programming' – use of the word 'planning' would have appeared too interventionist – to alleviate structural unemployment in West Flanders were realised, under the Regional Economic Expansion Acts of 1959, in the work of the GAAP in Kortrijk and the modernisation of water-related industrial and business areas in the Bruges-Zeebrugge Region. One of the most successful examples of this policy was the plan, launched in the early 1960s, for the Hauts Sarts industrial park. The development of the park, with its minimal infrastructure, its flexible subdivisions and minimum standards of planting and site layout showed how it was

possible to provide an enabling framework at minimum cost, another example of the kind of informal 'town planning' that was to be widely copied elsewhere in Belgium.

Ryckewaert successfully challenges the contention of those like Braem who argue that Belgium grew without town or regional planning during the key period of post-war reconstruction and modernisation that transformed Western Europe. It may not have had the kind of planning provided in Britain by the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 or in France by the policies of the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism. But its policies of economic 'programming' provided the basis for shaping urban developments that was 'town planning' in all but name. Moreover, the resulting pattern of urbanisation adapted the planning paradigms, the satellite town, the linear city and the residential neighbourhood, in use elsewhere, even if the results were a more dispersed pattern of urban growth than was to be found in the rest of Europe. Ryckewaert's book, handsomely produced and well, if densely written, provides an invaluable account of economic, industrial and urban development in Belgium that renders intelligible the complexities and particularities that make this country's recent history so interesting to other Europeans.

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