

7 Walks (Rêveries d'un collectif de promeneurs)

A project by artist duo Vermeir & Heiremans in collaboration with Professor David Aubin (Political Science-UCLouvain) for the UCLouvain programme *Fonds pour la Recherche-Création*.

Exhibition and starting point of 5 public walks:

09 – 26/10/2024

Learning Center Pasteur – BST – 1st floor Bibliothèque des sciences et technologies
Place L. Pasteur, Louvain-la-Neuve.

Participation is free. Language: French

Reservation required: info@jubilee-art.org



Introduction

Rêveries d'un collectif de promeneurs is an artistic research project that initiates a dialogue on common goods – like water, land and art – and on the notion of their property relations and governance. As such it is part of our walking practice *7 Walks*, which has been ongoing since 2019. In this new installment we will also be looking at cartography from an alternative pedagogical angle.

The project title references Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712 – 1778) *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, which is also the name of the walking path around the lake of Louvain-la-Neuve. The book offers a reflection on man and his relation with nature, thoughts Rousseau developed in ten walks. Rousseau's thinking formed the basis for a new development in pedagogy grounded in the observation of everyday phenomena in their direct environment.

The debate on private property was highly influential among the Enlightenment philosophers of the 18th century. Rousseau saw property as the basis of corruption and inequality between people. For Voltaire (1694-1778) however a person without property could not be free. He saw property as the foundation of citizenship and of every social institution.

Rousseau's ideas on education and property were much later picked up in the field of geography by Élisée Reclus (1830-1905), an anarchist geographer, who was teaching at the progressive *Université Nouvelle* in Brussels between 1894-1905. Reclus was very critical about the use of 2D-maps. He found they were not only deforming the representation of the earth but were also biased in favor of the powerful individuals or states that had commissioned them. In his Geographical Institute in Brussels he started developing curved reliefs and globes to be used in alternative schools. These tools represented the skin of the earth more truthfully.

But his favourite way to start his observations was through walking to the nearest stream, insisting that we learn 'through the soles of our feet', which he describes in his book *Histoire d'un ruisseau* (1869). Walking together enables participants to be directly involved in a relational, place-determining and non-hierarchical exercise of perception. Our project *7 Walks* attaches great importance to this form of experimentation, immediately involving audiences in the process. Participants are invited to add their own stories and in that way become co-producers of 'situated knowledge' generated by the walks. Special guests are invited to nourish the discussions. Storytelling and discussing in public space fosters a shared value system and an increased appreciation of the public good.

Public spaces consisting of a sequence of public fora where people could easily meet, were part of the initial architectural designs for the new city of Louvain-la-Neuve (1968). These public fora would be situated on concrete platforms that were planned to gracefully follow the undulation of the Malaise river valley. They were called the 'communautaire'. They were totally devoid of cars, which were passing on a lower level underneath the layer of concrete.

The initial plans for LLN, based on ideals that were opposed to the abstract principles of modernism, were directly inspired by the work of Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), a biologist, botanist and urban planner. Geddes based his *valley section model* on Elisee Reclus' *hydrographic basin model*. Both were in favour of a holistic approach to urbanism, looking at physical, historical, political and social contexts that together would create the city as a living form, built from the bottom up, and with its roots firmly in space and time.

The work of Reclus and Geddes was influential for the English Garden Cities and later the New Towns, which were both also an inspiration for LLN's planners. But would this go beyond the visual resemblance? Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928) who developed the Garden Cities, had quite novel views on property relations. In order to prevent land speculation he proposed to keep ownership of the land in a common trust. That way the increment in land value would be captured for and spent on the common good. Howard based his ideas on the work of the American economist Henry George (1839-1897) who claimed that the value of land is a social creation, rather than a private one.

The administration of UCLouvain chose a similar property form to develop the new city of Louvain-la-Neuve.¹ With a loan of the Belgian authorities UCLouvain acquired 9 square kilometers of farmland from the original owners. By law the land could not be sold for the next fifty years. It would be developed by handing out long-term leases of 99 years to individuals and developers who could build on the land. That way the university as 'naked owner' would remain in control of what would happen with the land, and in the same gesture prevent land speculation. At least that was the initial idea.

Rêveries d'un collectif de promeneurs will consist of a documentary exhibition that allows us to unravel the utopian thinking that had laid the foundations of the new city. Our work in different archives has surfaced historical documents that reveal lesser-known narratives that we can re-read from the present. We will 'activate' these documents at the start of five public walks in and around Louvain-la-Neuve, in the company of a number of invited guests.

Programme of walks

Walk#01 : PLURA DOMINIA

Wednesday 9 October 2-6 PM

Welcome by Ruth Kalf and Frédéric Brodtkom at the BST - 1st floor

Introduction by Vermeir & Heiremans and David Aubin

Water cannot be separated from the landscape it has helped to create and which, in turn, shelters water. In 1969, the UCLouvain administration wondered how the construction of a new city and a university in the Malaise and Dyle valley would

¹ LLN is a newly built town which was born from the Leuven Crisis in 1968. This triggered a split of the University of Leuven along linguistic lines. It led to the creation of the KULeuven, the Dutch-speaking university, that would stay in Leuven, and the UCLouvain, which had to move to the future site of Louvain-la-Neuve, near Ottignies. Next to a campus the area would be developed as a new town that would host a diverse population. Construction started in 1969.

influence water management in the region. With David Aubin, we will explore the notion of *plura dominia*. The concept introduces the simultaneous use of the same resource, in this case water, by different entities. Plura Dominia could outline a possibility of collective governance of the aquatic landscape, but it also demonstrates how important it is to take into account the structuring role played by policies in regulating the use of natural resources.

Walk#02 : CARTOGRAPHIE ET CONTRE-CARTOGRAPHIE

Saturday 12 October 2-6 PM

Guest: Gaspard Geerts

The documents, maps, drawings and reliefs selected for the exhibition will provide a critical look at maps and their development, particularly in relation to the plans for the new city of LLN and the various sources of inspiration from the 19th century. The focus on the work of urban planners and alternative education advocates Patrick Geddes, Élisée Reclus, and the garden cities of Ebenezer Howard, have created radically different maps and counter-maps of the city and very different relationships with the topography of the site. During the walk, we will explore the city in relation to its proposed and executed plans.

Walk#03 : À LA RECHERCHE DU BASSIN FLUVIAL

Thursday 17 October 2-6 PM

Guests: Veerle Vanacker, Sophie Vanwambeke

Following Reclus's advice to start working from the nearest river, we had hoped to begin our research with La Malaise, an affluent of the Dyle, but it disappeared under the huge concrete slab of the city centre. With Veerle Vanacker and Sophie Vanwambeke, and their students from the Integrated Project in Geography course, we want to explore the reliefs and plans of LLN. We travel through the basins of the rivers La Malaise, Blanc-Ry and Dyle, drawing on Geddes' *valley section model* and Reclus's *hydrographical basin model* to explore the complex dynamics between physical geography, geology and human systems.

Walk#04 : TRACING UTOPIA

Saturday 19 October 2-6 PM

Guest: Vincent Pourcelle

The preparatory plans (1968) and the *Plan Directeur* (1970) both reflect the utopian visions of the designers for the city of LLN. One of the ideals was to make a city on a human scale, a pedestrian city without cars, where people could meet. With Vincent Pourcelle, nature and urban guide, we will find and test the viability of the utopian traces that still exist today. Vincent has been working for some time with Gaspard Geerts on a map project for La Baraque, an experimental district that resists expropriation by UCL for over 50 years. This map, which puts vegetation in the foreground, is the counterpart of LLN's initial urban planning projects.

Walk#05 : RELATIONS DE PROPRIÉTÉ ET BIEN PUBLIC

Saturday 26 October 2-6 PM

Guests: Nicolas Bernard and Vincent Wattiez

LLN offers a unique case study in land governance. UCLouvain is the naked owner of the land. In the form of long-term leases of 99 years, and in exchange for a symbolic ground rent and an infrastructure fee, individuals or developers (who do not have to pay the price of the land) obtain the right to build on it. This form of ownership, quite exceptional in Belgium, separates the land from the buildings on it. This stratification of land ownership allows UCLouvain to retain control of the land, but could it also contain speculation?

We will address these questions with Nicolas Bernard who will share his expertise on the pros and cons of the long-term lease and his knowledge of alternative property relations.

We will also be joined by Vincent Wattiez, a resident of La Baraque, who cooperated in the participatory process of developing a decree on light housing (*habitat léger*). Drawing on local and international housing initiatives, he is studying, with the RBDL, ways to challenge the relationship between property and speculation. Can alternative forms of housing and direct democracy applied to the alternative neighbourhood of La Baraque inspire other forms of property that would better protect the general interest and the social function of housing?

Biographies

David Aubin is professor of political science at the School of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve. He teaches on public policy analysis and evaluation. Aubin is conducting research on the comparative analysis of environmental policy, and the use of expertise and knowledge in the policy process.

Nicolas Bernard is a Doctor of Law and a graduate in philosophy. He specializes in the right to housing and tenancy law. He was appointed professor of property law at the Saint-Louis University in Brussels.

Gaspard Geerts is a 2018 graduate of La Cambre Horta Faculty of Architecture at the Free University of Brussels. He devoted his dissertation to the alternative neighbourhood of La Baraque in Louvain-la-Neuve, where he was born and has lived until 2013. Since September 2018, he is coordinator of design, research and project management projects at Rotor, a cooperative design practice.

Vincent Pourcelle has a scientific background. He is a nature guide interested in the city as a natural space in its own right. By combining scientific and artistic approaches, the nature walks he organises seek to take a fresh look at our environment.

Veerle Vanacker is Professor of Geomorphology at the School of Geography at UCLouvain. Working on human-environment interactions, her research focuses on the impact of global change on continental physical environments.

Sophie Vanwambeke is a professor at the School of Geography and Earth and Life Sciences at UCLouvain. She works on spatial interactions between human societies and their environment, and in particular on the relationship between the environment and health.

Vincent Wattiez is coordinator of the Brabant Network for the Right to Housing at the Centre Culturel du Brabant Wallon (RBDL). He is a member of the Halé collective. He lives in La Baraque.

Collaborators and partners

For this project we enjoyed the privilege of working first and foremost with David Aubin, Professor of political science-UCLouvain, with Ruth Kalf bibliothécaire en cartothèque, and Frédéric Brodtkom, director, both at the Bibliothèque des sciences et technologies.

And with following archives and their collaborators:

Véronique Fillieux, Le Service des Archives de l'UCLouvain

Flore Guiot, Réserve patrimoniale et précieuse des bibliothèques de l'UCLouvain

Groupe des Archives de la Baraque, Archives de la Baraque

Irene Lund, Archives de la faculté d'architecture de l'ULB ("La Cambre architecture")

City archives of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve

Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library, Antwerp

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