

The Valley

One creed in twelve verses for an extraordinary place

1. Identity

So many plans ahead to transform the Dyle-valley. And by changing the valley, changing Leuven in its very core. Because Leuven originated exactly along and because of the Dyle. For so long, the city developed further on its riverbanks leaving the swampy plains for what they are. Undesirable wetlands or at least, unfit for building. As the city grew away from water and mud, only few daredevils took opportunity in claiming the plains. Or rather out of necessity perhaps? A hodgepodge of large institutions and complexes like the Beguinages, colleges, schools and Leuven's very first hospitals that grew out of the monasteries, took no harm in the rural lowlands. A prime location in fact, to benefit from the exquisite proximity of the medieval city centre on the east bank. The appropriation of the valley by odd and over-sized figures continued further into the nineteenth century where they were joined by larger industries and breweries, only to consolidate the abnormal and exceptional appearance of the valley.

2. Big, Bigger and Biggest

Also the University was one of the valley's early residents, setting up its faculty of medicine in the lap of the first hospitals, that in their turn grew in annexe of the monasteries.

The valley became the place where the biggest was tolerated, and even more, where big could flourish. The unique location for all that is too big, too high, or simply too stubborn to fit in the Leuven's immaculate urban tissue higher up the banks.

Brutalist monsters like Saint Raf's Tower, the oversized nursery school with its quirky copper roof, the institute for oncology, always too small and always growing. And all this so close to the dorm of Justus Lipsius, that chubby figure with its flamboyant neo gothic appearance... The valley is not really the collector of beauty prizes, but its selection of ugly bastards, instant elegances, anomalies and exceptions is by all means remarkable. Not many provincial towns host a similar line-up of specials and weirdo's like Leuven. And no standards here. All of them customised, tailored, and mostly cocky(?), on the verge of excess or just too much. Built for eternity. Built hasty or temerariouly. It is all there, shining and showing off.

3. Centrality

No doubt the Valley coloured and characterized what Leuven was and is today. Facilities and programmes that gave Leuven its centrality, gravity and grandeur are located right here: the University Hospitals, reaching out far beyond Leuven's boundaries, the faculty of medicine with its poignant antique auditoria, the Rega Institute of Rector De Somer, who put Leuven on the map for its outstanding research in Genetics, the breweries, colleges, and yes even, the monastery indeed... It is exactly those institutions that have been attracting people for centuries. Harboured in the Valley, and turning Leuven into a destination for the greater region. Why did a student come to Leuven? Exactly, for one of these institutions. Where did (s)he reside? Yes, in the Justus Lipsius dormitory. Where did (s)he party? In that unique Artois ballroom in Vaartstraat that was torn down yesterday. Probably discovering once the marvellous acoustics of Predikherenkerk? Or did (s)he rather enjoy the solfège-, piano- or trumpetclasses swirling out through the windows of the vast conservatorium every saturdaymorning?

4. Extraordinary

So much is clear. The Valley has been gathering all in Leuven that made for "centrality". Boldly collecting bigness with the greatest ease, as if it was always meant to do so. It is the Valley with its diverse but always oversized institutions that pushed Leuven beyond the level one was to expect on the basis of its size or number of inhabitants. It is in the mud of the Dyle that Leuven surmounted its provinciality and petty-bourgeois allure to become a place that is bigger than its actual size. The centrality-making figures in the Valley are indeed the sorts of things that are beyond the ordinary. The kind of things that could get no place in the finely meshed tissue of the city up the banks. The valley proved the only true place to harbour the exceptional and peculiar, in an otherwise ordinary provincial town.

5. City Fragment

The ease and self-evidence by which this valley took shape is striking. And truly remarkable is the way the valley succeeds in embedding its array of misfits amidst the adjacent urban tissue. Smooth and seamless as if designed from the start. One crosses this valley almost unnoticed. Not that one doesn't notice the imposing stack of grey and yellow slabs from Hospital Saint Pierre when crossing the valley at the Brusselsestraat. You cannot miss them. They do stand out, like most of their punk companions in the valley, but overall, Normal Leuven stitched remarkably well with the abnormal river plain. Only few bridges did the job.

6. Mixer (The big blender?)

The valley being the collector of abnormal figures is by definition also the collector of different programmes. As such it is the great mixer of Leuven that breaks the monotonous residential realm with other, non-resi functions (and non-resi they are!). Adding working to living. Housing the odd, the exceptional, the anomaly and the vow. The vow of the monk, sure, but also the vow of science, or of a better future for many. In fact the valley does not hold that much housing at all. Nearby yes, but inside?

Big construction and big programme simply thrived better in these wetlands where building was never obvious. Housing didn't. Not that living is impossible in the valley. It happens. Some housing as part of the greater chunks, and sometimes even in smaller doses... When it comes to it, this valley blends all and everything in a way the tissue cannot: functions, scales, styles and formats, in time and space.

7. Proto-democracy

So not everyone can or will live here. Nevertheless the valley is by far that piece of the city that belongs to everyone and to everybody. Ultimately hospitable and democratic, both for inhabitants and guests. Certainly at some point in life, you would end up in Hospital Saint Rafael, if you weren't born there already. For long, Saint Rafael, has been both place of birth, place of death, and many matters in between. Those crucial moments where all are equal. All sharing one and the same place. Life and death. Away from home. Regardless economical differences, social status or cultural distinction. The most private matters in life appear to take place in equality, when differences are flattened. Therefore we may say the valley is proto-democratic by nature.

8. Health Factory

The Valley indeed is one of the more significant (proto-) democratic spaces in the city, and for sure the same accounts for her role in the city's well being. The scholar, the student, the ill and the old,... all receiving equal care and attention. The valley has always been the collector of public and social services that nurtured the quality and experience of urban living. Proto-democratic, and literally providing well being. This valley takes care and has always done so.

9. Public accumulation

However great the presence of all these institutions and qualities in the valley, and however important they might have been for public life, the future of the public realm seems remarkably fragile and vulnerable today. At closer sight, most of these places and buildings are part of a collective legacy from a richer and more generous past. The accumulation of donations, savings and investments over time has resulted in spaces, buildings and sites of sheer abundance and excess. It is an accumulation of public programme, from churches to schools to hospitals and colleges. It is the sheer result of severe persistence and dedication of many, and of belief in matters that surmount the whims of private interest, speculation and pragmatism. For the sake of well-being, and setting ever new standards.

10. City without market

Most of the valley's patrimony indeed originated and developed rather against or beyond the logic of the market. Many of the institutions that gathered in the valley did not only operate but also built themselves beyond the principles of the free market. The education of our country's intellectual elite, isn't this the task of the university? Healthcare! Community. Art, music, culture, and furthermore healthcare, art, music and culture... Reciprocity, and the re-distribution of means and services, are the driving mechanisms. Charities and commons, and indeed, often by means of public money, but the bare market as such? Not really.

The Valley gathered a lot of what exists next to the market. All what is needed to still acknowledge the City as the crystallising point of civilisation. As the place that does not simply reduce our thinking and being to economy, profit and market.

11. The dead City

But again, the Dyle-valley in Leuven is meeting a turning point. It has grown from an inhospitable empty wetland in the middle ages, to an almost overdeveloped construction site today. Once rooted, institutions could expand at will in size, pace, and ways that would never be possible in the ordinary town up the banks. Privileged outcasts that just could not get an appropriate place in the ordinary, more market driven tissue, yet could not afford other places nearby.

This indeed has led to situations of over-consolidation and excessive densities on the sites for schools, colleges and hospitals that would be despised by any sensible planner. Certainly the industry in the north didn't hold back either. Little open space is left today.

The growth of the valley matched the systematic shrinkage of open space, going hand in hand with pollution, reduction, canalisation and covering of the river(s), thereby reducing the river's ecological significance to peanuts. A few sad trails, some stubborn sparks of green and two and a half desperate attempts to revitalise the waterfront in Leuven is about what we have today.

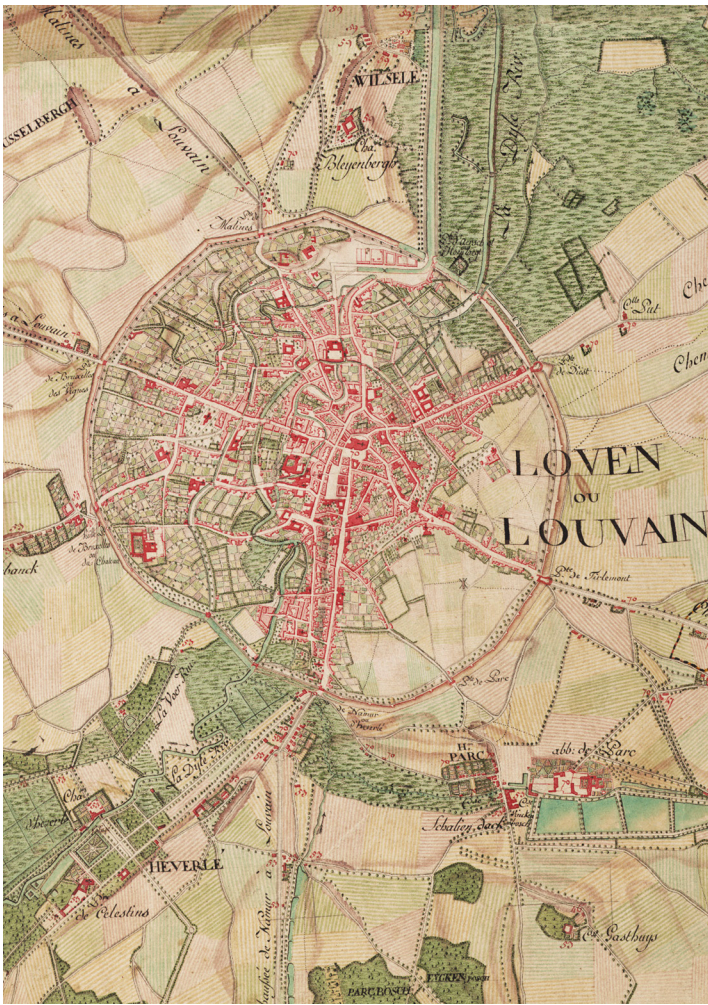
12. The residual City

Or could it be that amidst all recent vacancies and decay that occurs in the valley from north to south, pioneer's green pops up to herald another, new form of ecology? A new ecological dynamic, so utterly needed to restore the well being in/of Leuven, and also restore its resilience and vigour?

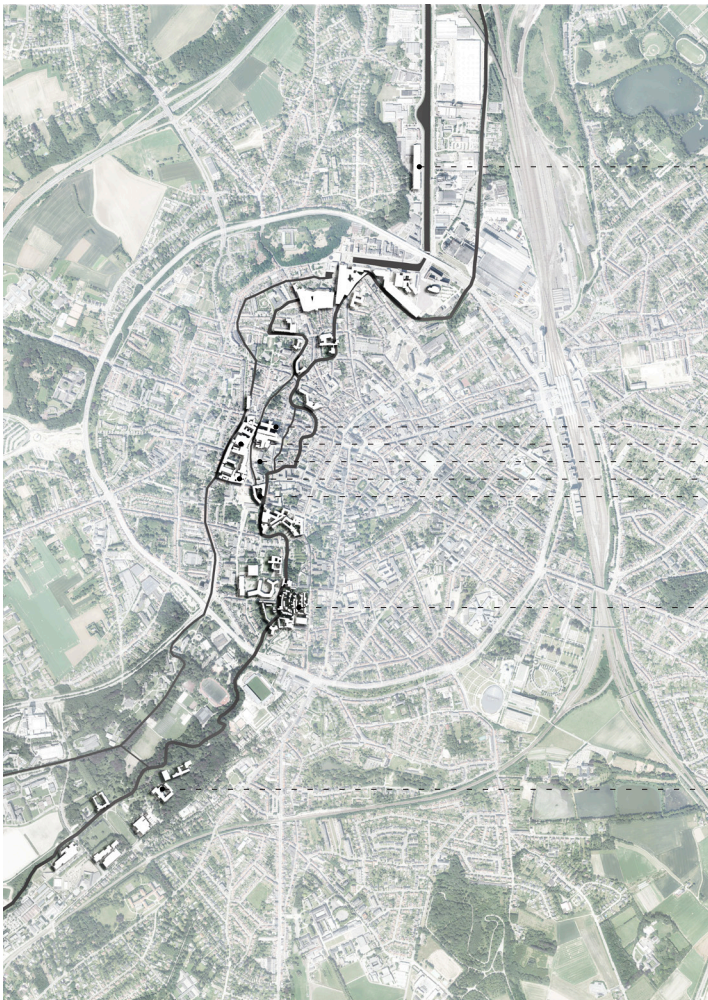
A similar form of such resilience, or resistance perhaps, has been demonstrated on the edge of the inner-city, by the industrial complex of Marie Thumas. The company appeared unable to act out the required restructuring in the 1970's and was forced to abandon ship. The building itself however remained and was spared from the speculation that overall nibbled away industrial patrimony with unstoppable appetite. It has been its great residual value that allowed "other", extraordinary, and different things to happen for which the rapidly re-developing city no longer offered affordable places.

Is this not what the valley still is today? Or can be? A residual condition that grew out of over-development and over-consolidation? In shapes, sizes and occurrences that are not fit for the market? Extraordinary over-development that can host the facilities and programmes our city needs, but only the residual city can offer.

Bruno De Meulder



Ferraris map of Leuven, 1771-1778



----- former Marie Thumas factory

- St. Pierre hospital
- St. Rafael hospital
- Predikherenkerk
- Rega institute
- Justus Lipsius dormitory

----- Beguinages

----- University campus

Map of Leuven, 2015



Beguinages



Rega institute



St. Pierre hospital (left), Justus Lipsus dormitory (right)



St. Pierre hospital (back)



St. Rafael hospital (left), St. Pierre hospital (right)



St. Pierre hospital (front)



view from St. Rafael hospital tower