



## ***Paysage urbain. Louis Van der Swaelmen and the classification of the urban, rural and national problem in *Préliminaires d'Art Civique****

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*Préliminaires d'Art Civique* (1916) was written by Louis Van der Swaelmen as a handbook for urban planning and a guideline for the reconstruction of Belgium after WWI. Van der Swaelmen added a proposal for the *Encyclopédie des Villes*, a universal decimal classification of all documentation concerning 'the urban, the rural and the national problem' in line with the bibliographical work of Paul Otlet. Although the book was clearly a product of the war, it was influenced by ideas that were developed during the Belle Époque. Edited by the *Comité Néerland-Belge d'Art Civique*, *Préliminaires* can be situated at the crossroads of an international network of ideas, persons and institutions.

First, the paper sketches the national and international context in which *Préliminaires* was written. Van der Swaelmen compiled an amalgam of ideas that were presented at the Town Planning Conferences of 1910, 1913 and 1915. A central notion was the analogy between biology and urbanism which can be found in the work of Scottish biologist and urban planner Patrick Geddes and French philosopher and biologist Felix Le Dantec. However, we argue that the influence of Belgian botanist Jean Massart should not be underestimated. Van der Swaelmen largely based his 'physionomical districts' - the framework for regional planning - on Massart's classification of the Belgian territory in geobotanical districts.

Second, the paper analyzes in depth the classification method proposed by Van der Swaelmen. The purpose of *Préliminaires* was to create a legible settlement structure on the urban, rural and national scales. Therefore the planner needed a thorough survey, guided by the structure of the *Encyclopédie des Villes*. The paper investigates the successive versions of the classification proposed by Van der Swaelmen, the commentaries of contemporary urban planners and the similarities and differences from Lanchester's survey method on which the structure of the *Encyclopédie* was based. The main argument is that Van der Swaelmen's struggle with the classification of knowledge in the field of urban planning seems symptomatic for the changes the discipline went through at the end of the Belle Époque. On the one hand *Préliminaires* reflects the longing for an overall picture - in the words of Van der Swaelmen a *paysage urbain* - overseen by the planner. On the other hand it foreshadows the disintegration of the discipline in a puzzle of specialized disciplines, leading to the spatial and functional zoning characteristic for interwar planning.

Third, the paper reflects upon the question of social change. We raise the question whether the emancipation through knowledge, aimed at by Van der Swaelmen, did imply a thorough social change or did simply make the existing social structure more legible.

### **Biography**

Bruno Notteboom is an engineer-architect and urban planner. He worked in several architectural and urban planning offices in Belgium and Holland, in the Flemish Architecture Institute and as a researcher at the Universities of Ghent, Leuven and Tel Aviv. In 2009, he obtained his doctoral degree at Ghent University with the dissertation '*Ouvrons les yeux*'. *Stedenbouw en beeldvorming van het landschap in België 1890-1940 / 'Ouvrons les yeux*'. *Urban planning and landscape iconography in Belgium 1890-1940*. He is currently working as a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Architecture & Urban Planning at Ghent University. He is co-founder of the research project *Recollecting Landscapes* (since 2006, see [www.recollectinglandscapes.be](http://www.recollectinglandscapes.be)) and co-director of the research project *The Photographer and The City. The practice of Edmond Sacré* (2008-2011).