

# Urban Traces

## Preservation of built heritage and urban development: a comparison of practices in Belgium and the U.S.

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The purpose of my BCUS Fellowship was to learn about policies, programs and practices in Flanders and Brussels aimed at preserving the built heritage of towns and cities. My interest was not the protection of individual landmarks and monumental buildings, but rather policies and programs that protect larger swathes of urban fabric that are in private ownership, encourage the ongoing use and adaptation of streetscapes and districts of older building, and regulate alterations and new construction in such areas, to preserve the social, aesthetic, and economic values they embody. What are the policies in Belgium, what lessons can be learned from them that might be transferrable to Boston and Massachusetts, my home state? This research was intended to inform my teaching – i.e., Preservation Planning, a course I teach in the Preservation Studies Program at Boston University; professional work as a historic preservation consultant; and preservation advocacy.

My research strategy, when in Brussels, was to interview heritage planning staff in regional and municipal offices about preservation laws – their history, how they are implemented, issues with implementation, and their relation to physical planning, as well as other related matters that might emerge during conversations. I also planned to interview scholars and practitioners working in this field, and preservation advocates. Prior to my two-month research trip to Brussels, I spent many months reading about the history of preservation law in Belgium, and researching the work of heritage agencies in Belgium as well as European initiatives in this field.

In Brussels, I was able to carry out this research plan with surprising ease, thanks to the assistance of faculty in the ae-LAB Renovation and Reuse at the VUB, and doctoral students connected with the lab, who helped arrange for and accompanied me to interviews, because these overlapped with their own research interests. Among those I interviewed

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during my fellowship were staff of the regional Agency of Immoveable Heritage, and staff in city heritage offices – Antwerp Archaeology and Heritage Conservation, Bruges Historical Monuments and Urban Renovation, Brussels Urban Development Office. I also interviewed a heritage advocate, a team of urban planners in private practice who incorporate heritage preservation in their planning work, a developer and her architects working on the adaptive reuse of an industrial building, and a few faculty members at the VUB.

The picture I took away of heritage protection in Flanders was of a field in transition; recent changes in heritage laws in Flanders have pushed responsibilities once handled at the regional level down to municipalities, but many municipalities have yet to set up processes to pick up this work. Large cities such as Antwerp and Brussels, and of course

Bruges – the centre of which is a UNESCO World Heritage site – do have processes in place, and they also have professional, experienced staff, which is so vital to implementing these policies. Talking to these individuals about their work helped me put U.S. preservation practice in perspective.

Also during my stay in Brussels, I prepared two lectures: one on the history of the historic preservation movement in the U.S. and one on the challenges of protecting utilitarian buildings, specifically warehouses. I presented the first of these, “Historic preservation movement in the United States: from ownership to regulation,” on Oct. 27, 2016 as part of a class session at the VUB. The second, “Preserving unloved and unlovely heritage: examples from Boston’s Fort Point Channel historic

district,” I presented at a doctoral student seminar organized by faculty at the VUB and TU Delft and held in Delft on Nov. 6, 2016.

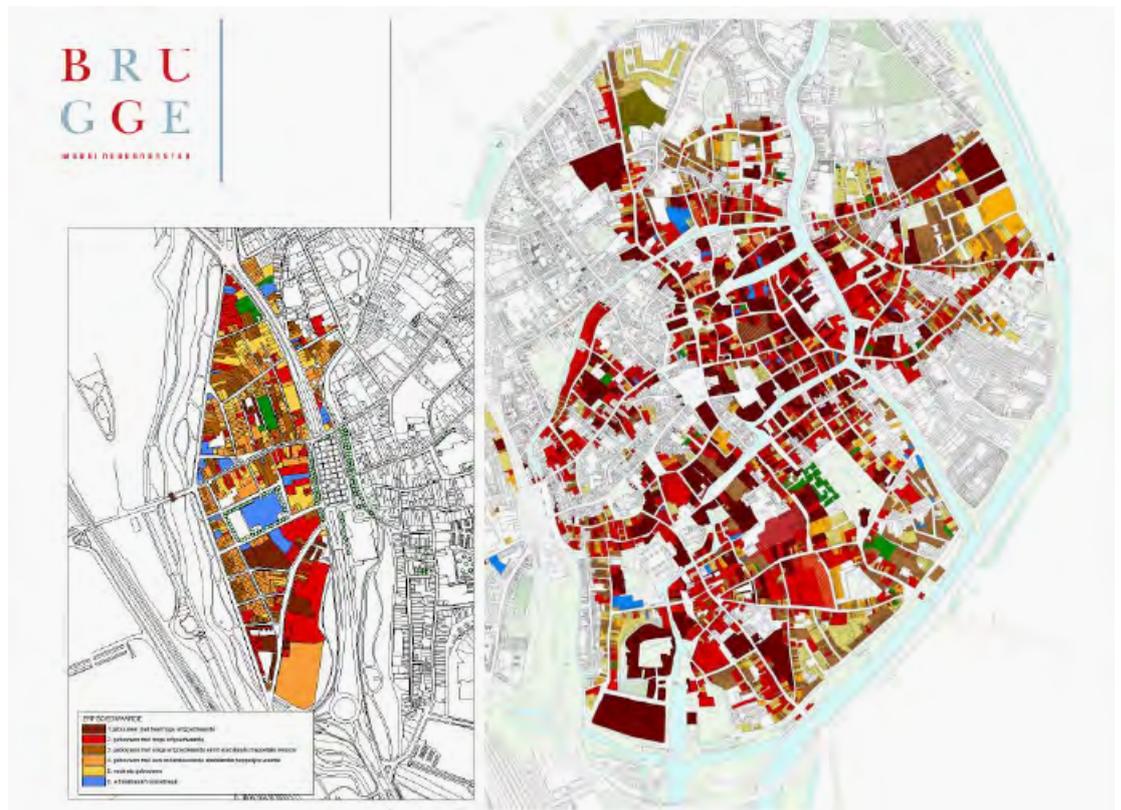
When I was about to leave Brussels, I put together some thoughts on what I learned, which could be applicable to Boston or Massachusetts. Here are some of these:

1. Revolving funds for purchase and rehab of old buildings: the concept of using revolving funds to purchase, rehabilitate, and manage or sell important or vulnerable old buildings has been used in the U.S., but not so much lately. The Marcus Gerards Foundation is an example of this in Bruges, but the Hendrick de Keyser Association, which inspired the Gerards Foundation, is really exceptional in the extensiveness of its work. The idea might be reinvigorated in Boston and other Massachusetts communities, for example, using Community Preservation Act funds.

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2. Optimize unused space in old buildings: the idea, practiced in Bruges, is to identify under- or unused spaces in existing buildings and improve them so they can be used, while also keeping the cost of improvements in line so that rents won't be too high. Often upper floors of buildings are underutilized, but also former ground-floor storefronts, for which there is no longer demand, can be vacant. The idea is to use existing assets first, before building new, which not only reduces resource consumption but also helps make existing buildings viable financially.
  
3. Grade buildings, ensembles, district, views: this idea was inspired by what I learned from the heritage planners in Bruges, who in recent years have been classifying properties in seven categories according to heritage significance (from most important, to possessing little or negative heritage value) and mapping the results ("heritage evaluation map"). (See illustration, below) This allows the city to identify areas ranging from those where new development could be channelled (little heritage value), to those that should not be changed at all. In the U.S., rating like this, using several categories, has been side-lined since the rise of the National Register of Historic Places, which is essentially a binary listing system (listed or not). But for planning and redevelopment/new construction, a more nuanced view, as in Bruges, is preferable. This idea could be incorporated in a city plan, for example in Boston or in neighbourhood projects, so that heritage can be taken into account in zoning revisions and redevelopment plans.

Heritage evaluation map, Bruges, Department of Historical Monuments and Urban Renovation.



4. The cultural, historical, aesthetic zone policy in Flanders: the program allows for large areas to be designated in which review of any change is allowed, and has the benefit of giving local officials a chance to control change to heritage buildings through recommending conditions for building permits. In Massachusetts, the Neighbourhood Conservation District and Architectural Conservation District policies are similar, in that they can cover large areas, but few communities have established these districts. Why is this, can their use be increased?

In all, my trip was very worthwhile. I gained perspective on policies to protect built heritage. And since returning, I have given a lecture on my experience and some findings to the Historic Resources Committee of the Boston Society of Architects (April 13, 2017).