

CROSSROADS OF COLLABORATION. CONSTRUCTION HISTORY AND INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE IN BELGIUM

Summary

Construction history research in Belgium has undergone substantial growth in recent years. In this article, a comprehensive study on the current state of construction history research in Belgium is presented, employing indicators such as the number of scholars and PhDs in the past decade (up to May 2023) to gauge the progress of this dynamic field. Notably, the quantitative and qualitative analysis reveals a growing trend towards interdisciplinarity, where collaborative efforts from different academic realms have spurred innovative initiatives. To illustrate this, two exemplary projects that embody the potential of cross-disciplinary exchanges and collaboration in driving advancements within the field are elaborated upon.

Zusammenfassung

Die Baugeschichtsforschung in Belgien hat in den letzten Jahren ein erhebliches Wachstum erfahren. In diesem Artikel wird eine umfassende Studie zum aktuellen Stand der Baugeschichtsforschung in Belgien vorgestellt, wobei Indikatoren wie die Anzahl der Forscher und Promotionen in den letzten zehn Jahren (bis Mai 2023) verwendet werden, um den Fortschritt dieses dynamischen Fachgebiets zu bewerten. Besonders die quantitative und qualitative Analyse zeigt einen wachsenden Trend zur Interdisziplinarität, bei dem gemeinsame Anstrengungen aus verschiedenen akademischen Bereichen innovative Initiativen vorantreiben. Zur Veranschaulichung werden zwei exemplarische Projekte erläutert, die das Potenzial interdisziplinären Austauschs und Zusammenarbeit zur Förderung von Fortschritten in diesem Bereich verdeutlichen.

*Introduction. State of Affairs (May 2023)*¹

Following the state-of-affairs drafted by Dirk Van de Vijver (in 2004)² and Inge Bertels (in 2014)³, this article aims to illuminate the current landscape of construction history research in Belgium. Despite almost a decade has passed since Bertels' analysis, many elements still hold true. On the one hand, there is still no formal society for construction history in Belgium,⁴ nor a dedicated publication series. Yet, on a more positive note, the number of scholars contributing to construction history is still growing, and construction history is increasingly incorporated in educational programs. There are now four courses on construction history in academic training programmes in Belgium that formally include 'construction history' in their title.⁵ The existing efforts to foster knowledge exchange between academics, policy makers and experts in the field of history and heritage are maintained and intensified⁶, while also architectural and archival institutions (e.g., the Flemish Architecture Institute⁷

1 I would like to thank the organizers of the symposium and the editors of this publication, as well as all the colleagues who contributed to the development of Construction History research in Belgium. Special thanks to the colleagues who provided data for the quantitative analysis in this essay, including Inge Bertels, Paulo Charruadas, Thomas Coomans, Matthijs Degraeve, Tim De Kock, Heidi Deneweth, Rika Devos, Bernard Espion, Merlijn Hurx, Johan Lagae, Petra Maclot, Chang-Xue Shu, Ine Wouters and Denis Zastavni (these colleagues are mentioned in alphabetical order, as all the other enumerations in this text). The data and analysis presented in this article reflect the state of the field as assessed at the time of the symposium (May 2023).

2 Van de Vijver, Dirk: *Construction History in Belgium*. In: Becchi, Antonio; Corradi, Massimo; Foce, Federico e.a. (eds.): *Construction History. Research Perspectives in Europe*. Fucecchio 2004, p. 157–196.

3 Bertels, Inge: *Construction History in Belgium (2004-2014). From Attas to Zastavni*. In: Becchi, Antonio; Carvais, Robert; Sakarovitch, Joël: *L'Histoire de la Construction/Construction History. Relevé d'un chantier européen/Survey of a European Building Site*. Vol. 1. Paris 2018, p. 35–70.

4 Although not a formal society, the joint VUB-ULB research group ›Construction HistorieS Brussels‹ (CHsB) is relevant to mention in this respect. This research group was established in 2015, under the chair of Ine Wouters (VUB) and Bernard Espion (ULB). Since 2019, it is chaired by Rika Devos (ULB) and Stephanie Van de Voorde (VUB).

5 1) ›Architectuur- en constructiegeschiedenis 19de en 20ste eeuw‹ (prof. Stephanie Van de Voorde, 1st bachelor in Architectural Engineering, VUB). 2) ›Architectural and Construction History (before 1850)‹ (prof. Stephanie Van de Voorde, 3rd bachelor in Architectural Engineering + master in Urban Studies, VUB and ULB). 3) ›Post-war history of construction and architecture‹ (prof. Rika Devos, 1st master in Architectural Engineering, ULB and VUB). 4) ›Culture architecturale 2 - Histoire de la construction - Antiquité - XIX^e siècle‹ (prof. Philippe Sosnowska, 1st bachelor in Architectural Engineering and 2nd bachelor in Architecture, ULiège). Additionally other courses (especially architectural history courses) include topics related to construction history, although not explicitly mentioned in the title.

6 For instance, urban.brussels (the public administration for cultural heritage and urban development in the Brussels-Capital Region) actively contributes to research in joint PhDs (e.g., the PhD of Marylise Parein) and through publications (e.g., Wibaut, Romain; Coomans, Thomas; Wouters, Ine: *Un patrimoine insoupçonné. Charpentes en bois, métal et béton armé dans les églises de la Région de Bruxelles-Capital, 1830-1940* (urban.research, vol. 1). Brussels 2021).

7 Since 2015, the Flemish Architecture Institute (Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, VAI) devotes particular attention to the history and (archival) heritage of the Belgian construction sector (see <<https://www.vai.be/projecten/bouwbedrijf>> for more information). This has resulted in, among other things, heritage management plans for several construction companies and two exhibitions: ›Werf‹ (Antwerp, 2017, in collab. with Inge Bertels) and ›Unfolding the archives #4. Bouwbedrijven‹ (Ostend, 2021, curator Jelena Dobbels).

and CIVA⁸) are increasingly sensitive towards preserving sources on ›the art of building‹. While these similarities may suggest that that, as Bertels concluded in 2014, »construction history is making headway«⁹, a closer look at research activities over the past decade in fact demonstrates that construction history research in Belgium is now going at full speed. To illustrate the significant growth and development of the field, we will first put forward some quantitative data, primarily based on the extensive network of scholars and PhD researchers that contribute (d) to the field, as well as the presence of Belgian scholars in the international field. Secondly, we'll take a more qualitative approach, considering the topics and direction of the PhD research (being) conducted. As interdisciplinarity emerges as one of the main trends in the field, two projects that illustrate this approach will be elaborated upon.

Facts & Figures

To provide a comprehensive overview of research activities, a thorough examination was conducted on online repositories and publications related to construction history. This investigation revealed a remarkable presence of construction history researchers within the Belgian academic landscape. Despite the challenges in obtaining a complete record,¹⁰ a notable group of 149 scholars who have contributed to construction history research over the past decade was identified.¹¹ To put this into perspective, considering Belgium's relatively small size (ap-

8 One of the major events in this respect is the acquisition, in July 2013, of the Fonds Blaton by the Archives d'Architecture Moderne (AAM, now CIVA). The funds (approx. 70 cubic metre) documents the history of one of the largest construction companies in Belgium and opens up new perspectives in construction history research. Pesztat, Yaron (ed.): *Blaton. Une dynastie de constructeurs/Een dynastie van bouwers*. Brussels 2018.

9 Bertels 2014 (Note 3), p. 36.

10 Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information, drafting a complete and accurate list is almost impossible. Especially former colleagues and visiting researchers were difficult to trace, as websites often only list researchers that are currently affiliated to the various research groups.

11 These 149 scholars are: Addis Bill, Angillis Jelle, Ardui Charlotte, Barker Simon, Bassens David, Baudry Antoine, Baumgartner Jasmin, Beeckmans Luce, Bekers Willem, Bertels Inge, Bertrams Kenneth, Blancquaert Doris, Blary François, Bloch Igor, Boone Veronique, Boonen Sofie, Braham Marc, Broes Tom, Bruggeman Dieter, Bruno Alessandra, Bulckaen Laurens, Charruadas Paulo, Cierkens Pieter-Jan, Cohen Maurizio, Collette Quentin, Collin Jean-Philippe, Conan Sandrine, Coomans Thomas, Cornilly Jeroen, Da Silva Pereira Natalia, da Silva Rodriguez Karoline, De Boeck Sarah, de Bouw Michael, De Fossé Marianne, De Jonge Krista, De Kock Tim, De Kooning Emiel, De Meyer Ronald, De Munck Bert, De Nys-Ketels Simon, De Raedt Kim, De Raedt Nele, De Raedt Pieter, De ruysscher Dave, De Ruyt Claire, Debonne Vincent, Degraeve Matthijs, Dehaene Michiel, Dekeyser Liesbeth, Deligne Chloé, Deneweth Heidi, Deschuyteneer Aurelie, Devlieger Lionel, Devos Rika, Dobbels Jelena, Drugmand Baptiste, Erkan Yonca, Espion Bernard, Feyaerts Jozefien, Fivet Corentin, Fizez Robby, Frere Geraldine, Fuentes Gonzalez Paula, Galavan Susan, Genin Soraya, Ghodbane Dalila, Govaerts Yves, Grieten Stefaan, Han Shuyuan, Heindryckx Laurence, Hellebois Armande, Hendrickx Roel, Houbart Claudine, How Chris, Huba Louise, Hurx Merlijn, Inglis Alison, Kik Olivier, Kosykh Aleksandra, Kuban Sabine, Lagae Johan, Lammens Ward, Lampariello Béatrice, Langouche Liesbeth, Latteur Olivier, Lauriks Leen, Lefebvre Pauline, Lefftz Michel, Lemineur Philippe, Lievevrouw Laura,

proximately 30,000 square kilometre): if these scholars were evenly distributed across the country, the distance between them would be less than 15 kilometre.

A second indicator that confirms that construction history research in Belgium is 'going at full speed' is the high number of PhDs completed over the past decade. In 2014, Bertels listed fifteen completed PhDs in 2004–2014, but in 2023 the number has risen to 43 completed PhDs during the last decade, with approx. thirty more currently in progress, indicating a continued momentum in the field. However, it's essential to acknowledge that the number of scholars or the number of PhDs may not be entirely unambiguous indicators. Indeed, not all scholars on that list strictly identify as construction historians, yet their work aligns with the themes addressed at construction history conferences. Likewise, the list of completed PhDs includes also PhDs that are not solely focused on Construction History but encompass related areas. Yet, this inclusivity corresponds to the field's character and dynamic evolution, as will be argued later.

When taking a closer look at the list of scholars, its composition showcases both the robustness of the field and its potential for future development. It includes approx. 44 percent PhD researchers, 14 percent senior, post-doctoral and visiting researchers, and 43 percent professors.¹² During the past decade, some scholars have 'travelled upstream' from one category to the next, yet these are a fortunate few. Therefore, despite the high number of PhD students, the number of post-doctoral researchers is limited. This phenomenon is true for all academic disciplines, but is especially troublesome for a relatively young disciplinary field like Construction History, because post-doctoral researchers can build on specialized knowledge and expertise and are consequently well equipped to tackle complex research questions and push the boundaries of the field.

During the past decade, Belgian scholars have made a notable impact on the international stage. Looking into the three most recent international congresses on construction history (2015¹³,

Linssen Willemijne, Loir Christophe, Lombaerde Piet, Lund Irene, Luo Wei, Maclot Petra, Mainet Grégory, Marino Giulia, Martens Pieter, Melsens Sarah, Merrill Elizabeth, Missoorten Margot, Packet Tom, Pacquée Robbe, Parein Marylise, Parmentier Isabelle, Piavaux Mathieu, Provost Michel, Raaffels Linsy, Radelet-de Grave Patricia, Raymaekers Pieter, Reyniers Lara, Richard Julian, Rinke Mario, Roels Christine, Rondeaux Jean-François, Ryckbosch Wouter, Ryckewaert Michael, Schlessers Thomas, Schreurs Eireen, Schrijver Lara, Sentissi Sophia, Shu Chang-Xue, Sosnowska Philippe, Souviron Jean, Sterken Sven, Stoyanova Iva, Strauven Iwan, Van Acker Wouter, Van de Maele Jens, Van de Voorde Stephanie, Vandamme Esther, Vandenabeele Louis, Vandeweghe Evert, Vandyck Frederik, Vanhaute Thomas, Verdonck Ann, Verhoeven Gerrit, Verstraete Robrecht, Verswijver Koen, Voet Caroline, Volkov Vitaly, Wermiel Sara, Weyns Eva, Wibaut Romain, Wilmet Aline, Wouters Ine, Zastavni Denis and Zhao Di.

12 When scholars held different positions throughout the period considered (2013–2023), only the most recent position is taken into account. Overall, there is an gender balance (47 percent F – 53 percent M), yet it is different for the different positions (e.g., PhD researchers: 55 percent F – 45 percent M, professors: 39 percent F – 61 percent M). A proper assessment using the categories F/M/X was not possible with the data that was primarily retrieved online.

13 Bowen, Brian; Friedman, Donald; Leslie, Thomas (eds.): *Proceedings of the Fifth International Construction History Congress*. 3 vol. Chicago 2015.

2018¹⁴, and 2021¹⁵), 61 papers were authored or co-authored by Belgian scholars, accounting for 10 percent of all papers. These papers were however not uniformly distributed among the three congresses: the 6th International Congress on Construction History (6ICCH, 2018), organized in Brussels, evidently witnessed a significantly higher presence of Belgian scholars. The 6ICCH proceedings contain 167 full papers, including 25 by Belgian scholars.¹⁶ For the first time in the history of the international congresses on construction history, 6ICCH included a call for thematic sessions, leading to seven thematic sessions being organized.¹⁷ Since then, the inclusion of thematic sessions has become a tradition. Belgian scholars actively contribute to this, by (co-)authoring a total of ten session proposals for subsequent congresses in Lisbon (7ICCH, 2021) and Zurich (8ICCH, 2024).¹⁸ This reflects the ongoing commitment of Belgian scholars to enriching and advancing the field of construction history on a global scale.

6ICCH not only strengthened the international network, but also stimulated the fruitful exchange of knowledge and ideas within Belgium. The interuniversity collaboration that was at the base of the congress (by nine scholars affiliated to five Belgian universities¹⁹) continued afterwards, with four interuniversity research seminars organised.²⁰ As these seminars provide a space where scholars can meet, discuss research results, share ideas and set up collaborations,

14 Wouters, Ine; Van de Voorde, Stephanie; Bertels, Inge e.a.: *Building Knowledge, Constructing Histories*. 2 vol. Brussels 2018.

15 Mascarenhas-Mateus, João; Pires, Ana Paula: *History of Construction Cultures*. 2 vol. Lisbon 2021.

16 In total, 343 abstracts were submitted, of which approx. 75 percent for the open sessions and 25 percent for the thematic sessions. Approx. 70 percent of all the abstracts was accepted. In December 2017, 200 papers were submitted. After the final review procedure, 167 full papers have been included in the proceedings. The four keynotes by Thomas Coomans, Robert Thorne, Werner Lorenz and Tullia Iori were published in *Construction History. The International Journal of the Construction History Society* (vol. 3, No. 2, 2018).

17 This includes one thematic session co-chaired by a Belgian scholar: 'Modern »comfort« in colonial/postcolonial settings beyond the »centre/periphery« framework' (Johan Lagae, Jiat-Hwee Chang).

18 The call for papers for the 7ICCH (Lisbon, 2021) included thirteen proposals for thematic sessions, including five that were (partially) proposed by Belgian scholars. In the end, eight thematic sessions were effectively organized, including two that were (co-)chaired by Belgian scholars: 'Historicizing material properties: Between technological and cultural history' (Robby Fivez, Simon De Nys-Ketels, Katie Lloyd Thomas) and 'Construction cultures of the recent past. Building materials and building techniques 1950-2000' (Stephanie Van de Voorde, Ine Wouters). For the 8ICCH (Zurich 2024), the call for papers again includes thirteen proposals for thematic sessions, of which five are (co-)authored by Belgian scholars: 'Collaboration in historical buildings: self-evident but intangible' (Laurens Bulckaen and Rika Devos), 'Construction contractors. New perspectives on the culture of construction from the 18th to the late 20th century' (Inge Bertels, Mike Chrimes), 'From Foundation to Rooftop: Architectural Engineering Drawings Between 1400 and 1700' (Krista De Jonge, Merlijn Hurx), 'How Construction History shaped Globalisation: The 19th and 20th century Eurasian cases' (Chang-Xue-Shu), 'The history of deconstruction, salvage and reuse in a larger perspective' (Stephanie Van de Voorde, Ine Wouters, Maxime L'Héritier, Philippe Bernardi).

19 These scholars are Inge Bertels, Michael de Bouw, Krista De Jonge, Rika Devos, Bernard Espion, Patricia Radelet-de Grave, Stephanie Van de Voorde, Ine Wouters and Denis Zastavni. They are/were affiliated to: KU Leuven, UCLouvain, University of Antwerp, Université Libre de Bruxelles and Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

20 These seminars took place in Antwerp (2019 & 2023), Brussels (2021) and Liège (2022). In 2024, the seminar will take place in Brussels.

they are (in the absence of a formal society) very valuable for creating a coherent research community across universities.

Prevalent research topics. From materials and built objects to socio-cultural significance and environmental impact

To gain an overview of prevalent topics in construction history research, one possible approach is a historiographical analysis of publications from the past decade. However, due to the vast number of scholars and publications, this is not feasible within the framework of this paper. Instead, an analysis of the 43 completed PhDs in the last ten years has been conducted (Table 1). Although this analysis primarily considers the titles and may not encompass the entire breadth of research, still some prominent themes emerge. Some of the themes relate to traditional topics in construction history, for instance building actors and building materials, while other trends reflect a growing interest in understanding construction history beyond technical aspects, with a focus on urban, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions.

Studies on professional demarcations focus primarily on the history and evolution of (general) contractors, engineers, and architects, the discourse surrounding these professions, knowledge transmission among them, as well as their impact on building practices and urban spaces. PhDs related to material science and building technology examine historical techniques and construction materials, such as architectural glass, brick, reinforced concrete structures, riveted connections, and timber roof structures. Closely related to this are studies on preservation and restoration strategies, focusing on specific techniques (e.g., decorative cement render) and building types (e.g., warehouses, churches, abbeys). Taking a scope that goes beyond the immediate context of the construction site, many theses explore urban history and the development of cities, including the role of entrepreneurs in shaping urban spaces, urbanization, urban identity, urban economic policy, and planning perspectives for cities. Geographically, this research varies between Belgium (with a focus on Brussels and Antwerp), Africa (e.g., Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Dakar, Dar es Salaam), China, and India. A number of these projects engage in transnational studies, examining colonial and postcolonial impacts on architecture, construction, urban development, and cultural landscapes. Architectural exchanges between regions are often studied from multiple perspectives, including socio-cultural, technical and political aspects. Likewise, evolutions of techniques and materials are also studied from diverse perspectives, encompassing social and cultural aspects but also technical trajectories. This also relates to the growing concern for environmental issues in historical contexts, such as energy consumption and energy efficiency.

Many of these PhDs are not confined to one field, but combine fields like history, architecture, urban planning, engineering, technology, material science, cultural analysis, preservation, archaeology,

and sociology to gain a comprehensive understanding of the built environment. This overarching trend towards interdisciplinarity is even more pronounced in the ongoing PhDs (Table 2). The analysis of the preliminary titles of these PhD studies shows that many of the themes mentioned above are maintained (e.g., building materials and technology, heritage, urban development, social and cultural perspectives, transnational exchange, professional practices), yet it also demonstrates an increasingly holistic perspective on the construction sector. For instance, rather than focussing on one profession, the interactions between different professions are examined. The scope is also extended beyond the act of building to include also the production of materials and processes like demolition and reuse, as well as the adaptability of building structures. Additionally, also the role of the construction industry in shaping social inclusion, circularity, and urbanization is studied. As such, many of the ongoing PhDs explore the historical and societal impact of construction. Moreover, many projects establish connections between the past and present, offering valuable insights for contemporary challenges. Consequently, interdisciplinarity, sustainability and circular economy emerge as the most prominent upcoming themes.

Interdisciplinary collaborations

This perceived trend towards interdisciplinarity is not a coincidence. It is inherent in the discipline, as many international scholars have already pointed out in the past two decades: characterized as an »objet de frontière«²¹ and »une discipline carrefour«²², Construction History has been considered as the link between »the history of technology and cultural history«²³ or »technical anthropology«²⁴, balancing »engineering sciences with the humanities and social sciences«²⁵. The interdisciplinary heterogeneity, which is not only considered characteristic but also a distinct quality of the field²⁶, is also present in Belgium.

21 Carvais, Robert; Dessales, Hélène; Nègre, Valérie e.a.: *Une histoire de la construction à la française, 2004-2014*. In: Becchi/Carvais/Sakarovitch 2018 (Note 3), p. 74.

22 Carvais, Robert; Guillerme, André; Nègre, Valérie e.a. (eds.): *Edifice et Artifice. Histoires Constructives*. Paris 2010, p. 5.

23 Picon, Antoine: *Construction History: Between Technological and Cultural History*. In: *Construction History* 21 (2005–2006), p. 5–19.

24 Kurrer, Karl-Eugen; Lorenz, Werner; Wetzck, Volker: *Proceedings of the Third International Congress on Construction History*, vol. 1. Cottbus 2009, p. v.

25 Carvais, Robert; Guillerme André; Nègre, Valérie e.a. (eds.): *Nuts & Bolts of Construction History. Culture, Technology & Society*. Paris 2014 (back cover).

26 Lorenz, Werner: *From Stories to History, from History to Histories. What Can Construction History Do?* In: *Construction History* 21 (2005–2006), p. 31–42.

27 These research groups (grouped per university) are: 1) Ghent University: Department of Architecture and Urban Planning. 2) KU Leuven: Architectural Cultures of the recent past; Perspectives on Architecture

The 149 scholars referred to earlier are associated with eight different universities and are embedded in twenty research groups.²⁷ The primary focus of these research groups is not construction history though, but rather related fields such as architectural history, design sciences, heritage studies, archaeology, structural engineering, urban planning, urban history, contemporary history, and art history.²⁸ An analysis of the research groups' expertise and ambitions reveals that many of them actively pursue interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the built environment. All research groups also bring together scholars from different backgrounds, incorporating insights from various fields. Additionally, due to the presence of multiple intersections, overlaps, and common themes, many research groups collaborate with each other, effectively facilitating the development and dissemination of (interdisciplinary) knowledge. Two projects exemplifying this interdisciplinary and collaborative approach are ›Re/Building Brussels‹ and ›Construction History, Above and Beyond‹.²⁹ ›Re/Building Brussels‹ comprises two phases.³⁰ The first phase (2016–2021) was entitled ›Building Brussels. Brussels city builders and the production of space (1794–2016)‹. It explored the evolving relationship between the building sector and the city during the 19th and 20th centuries. While the construction sector played a pivotal role in shaping urban spaces, it faced challenges in maintaining its position within the city. Economic shifts, urban policies, and regulations compelled numerous companies to reorganize and relocate. Paradoxically, the current demand for skilled craftsmen, qualified firms, and knowledge about local historical

from the Distant Past. 3) UCLouvain: Structures and Technology LAB. 4) ULiège: Documentation, Interprétation, Valorisation des patrimoines (DIVA). 5) University of Antwerp: AntweRp Cultural HEritage Sciences (ARCHES); Design Science Hub; Henry Van de Velde. 6) University of Namur: Fontes Antiquitatis; Material traces, creation and heritage (AcanthuM); Patrimoines, Transmissions, Héritages (PaTHs). 7) Université libre de Bruxelles: Building, Architecture & Town planning (Bâtir); Centre de Recherches en Archéologie et Patrimoine (CREA-Patrimoine); Histoire, Arts, Cultures des Sociétés anciennes, médiévales et modernes (sociAMM); Mondes modernes et contemporaines (MMC); Research Centre for architectural history, theory and criticism (Hortence). 8) Vrije Universiteit Brussel: VUB Architectural Engineering; Cosmopolis; Historical research into urban transformation processes (HOST); Histories of Art, Architecture and Visual Culture (VISU). 28 Notably, the list of research disciplines that is used by the main funding agencies in Belgium to classify people, organisations, and projects does not include ›construction history‹. This is true for Flanders (cf. ›Flemish Research Discipline Standard‹, used by the FWO, listing 2493 disciplines) and Wallonia (cf. ›Scientific Commissions, descriptor fields and keywords‹, a 30-page document used by the FNRS).

29 Within the framework of this paper, it is impossible to give full credit to all the interesting projects that are (being) conducted. In addition to the interdisciplinarity character, the selection has been narrowed down by focussing on ongoing projects that involve a large number of scholars (the two selected projects together involve 28 of the 149 scholars mentioned earlier).

30 The project is funded through the Interdisciplinary Research Programme (IRP) of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The scholars involved in the first phase were David Bassens, Inge Bertels, Sarah De Boeck, Matthijs Degraeve, Heidi Deneweth, Linsy Raaffels, Philippe Sosnowska, Stephanie Van de Voorde, Frederik Vandyck, Ann Verdonck and Ine Wouters. The following scholars are involved in the second phase: David Bassens, Jasmin Baumgartner, Karoline da Silva Rodriguez, Matthijs Degraeve, Heidi Deneweth, Louise Huba, Lara Reyniers, Wouter Ryckbosch, Stephanie Van de Voorde and Ine Wouters. For more information on the project, see <<https://www.vub.be/arch/project/buildingbrussels>> and <<https://www.vub.be/arch/project/rebuildingbrussels>>.

material resources has become urgent due to the increasing interest in building reuse, high-quality restoration projects, local labour, and sustainable urban environments. By drawing on expertise from construction history, business history, heritage, and geography, the project examined the characteristics, evolution, and viability of small and medium-sized construction enterprises in Brussels. An exhibition and symposium in early 2022 presented the outcomes of the first phase and marked the beginning of the second phase (2021–2026). The second phase, titled ›Re-Building Brussels (1695–2025)‹. The construction sector as an engine for social inclusion and circularity, capitalizes on the acquired knowledge and addresses pressing challenges that emerged from the first phase. Scholars and PhD researchers with diverse backgrounds investigate various aspects, including demolition and the reuse of building materials, spatial considerations in the circular construction economy, and the historical dynamics of labour and social inequality within the construction sector over the past 330 years. Consequently, the project aims to provide insights into the political, economic, cultural, and social processes that can support both a transition to a circular economy and the achievement of a more equitable labour market.

While interdisciplinary explorations, including those mentioned in ›Re/Building Brussels‹ and some of the PhDs mentioned earlier, were considered fruitful and promising, it was recognized that more systematic exchanges and methodical cross-overs were necessary to create a solid return to the field. Therefore, the project ›Construction History, Above and Beyond. What History can do for Construction History‹ focuses on a systematic exploration of interdisciplinary cross-overs.³¹ Its primary objective is to unveil the richness of construction history as an inherently interdisciplinary field by engaging in direct dialogues with other historical fields. The project strategically centers around the interaction between Construction History and three other history domains: Colonial History, Legal History, and Planning History. Each of the three dialogues explores uncharted territories, to address shared knowledge gaps and advance the state of the art in each respective field. For instance, Colonial History, which typically explores extractive economies and unequal power relationships, can benefit from a material turn, while construction history topics like construction techniques and labour division gain particular significance in a colonial context. Moreover, in each dialogue, the range of actors, sources, and types of knowledge is expanded. Going beyond the conventional focus on architects, engineers, and contractors, overlooked actors such as developers, lawyers, financial investors, brokers, and urban administrations, among others, are highlighted for their significant roles in construction history. The project also considers alternative sources

31 The project is funded through the ›Excellence of Science‹ programme (a collaborative initiative of the Flemish Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek FWO and the Walloon Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique FNRS). The scholars involved are Igor Bloch, Tom Broes, Simon De Nys-Ketels, Dave De ruysscher, Michiel Dehaene, Rika Devos, Robby Fizez, Laurence Heindryckx, Johan Lagae, Ward Lammens, Stephanie Van de Voorde, Robrecht Verstraete and Ine Wouters. For more information on the project, see <<https://www.vub.be/arch/project/eos>>.

like archives of professional organizations and administrations, as well as ›grey‹ literature (e.g., real estate brochures, unpublished reports), to bring forward the implicit and explicit processes and mechanisms that shape building practices. Additionally, the exploration of other types of knowledge, such as situated, practical, and tacit knowledge, broadens the narratives in construction history. This project will run for five years (2022–2026) and involves three PhD researchers and four post-doctoral researchers, making it the most extensive endeavour in the field of Construction History in Belgium to date.

Broadening the field, setting the agenda

Construction History research in Belgium is thriving, evident from the active involvement of diverse and numerous scholars, a substantial body of publications, and the ongoing projects mentioned above. Moreover, it is safe to assert that we have outgrown Summerson's 1985 classification.³² While ›the history of structural design‹ and ›the history of building practice‹ remain relevant research strands, the dynamic development of the field has given rise to new research areas that intersect with urban, social, economic, cultural, environmental and legal history, as well as building archaeology and preservation. These interdisciplinary cross-overs not only uncover novel topics and sources but also foster the development of fresh methods, theories, and perspectives. Furthermore, as these interdisciplinary exchanges gain momentum, they bolster the potential and significance of Construction History as a central field that meaningfully connects (with) other historical fields. Yet, this ›inter‹disciplinary position also presents challenges and invites us to recalibrate the field. In this regard, (further) interdisciplinary exchanges (can) support the emerging focus on sustainability and increasingly holistic perspective on the construction sector and its societal implications, in order to shape the research agenda for the coming years and recalibrate the trajectory of Construction History.

32 Summerson, John: *What is the history of construction?* In: *Construction History* 1 (1985), p. 1–2.

Table 1 Overview of PhDs in relation to Construction History, completed in Belgium from 2013 to 2023, in chronological order

Author	Title of the PhD	University	Year
Beeckmans, Luce	Making the African City: Dakar, Dar es Salaam, Kinshasa; 1920–1980, PhD thesis	Groningen University/Ghent University	2013
Raymaekers, Pieter	Makers van een nieuwe wereld. De socioprofessionele geschiedenis van ingenieurs in België 1850–1914	KU Leuven	2013
Luo, Wei	Transmission and Transformation of European Church Types in China: The Churches of the Scheut Missions beyond the Great Wall, 1865-1955	KU Leuven	2013
Cornilly, Jeroen	Architect/Ambtenaar. De betekenis van het ambt van provinciaal architect voor de 19 ^e -eeuwse architectuur in West-Vlaanderen	KU Leuven	2013
Linssen, Willemijne	Engineers in Belgium 1830–1865. Archaeology of a Profession	KU Leuven	2013
Shu, Chang-Xue	The blue and the red: The plain brick wall in architectural heritage of Shanghai 1866–1929	Politecnico di Milano/KU Leuven	2013
Hellebois, Armande	Theoretical and experimental studies on early reinforced concrete structures: contribution to the analysis of the bearing capacity of the Hennebique system	Université Libre de Bruxelles	2013
Sosnowska, Philippe	De briques et de bois: contribution à l'histoire de l'architecture à Bruxelles: étude archéologique, technique et historique des matériaux de construction, XIII–XVIII ^e siècle	Université Libre de Bruxelles	2013
Vandeweghe, Evert	De verouderde steden of hoe de historische stad vorm kreeg in een eeuw van modernisering (1860–1960): Aalst, Dendermonde, Oudenaarde en Veurne	Ghent University	2013
Maclot, Petra	The Status of Stone. Urban Identity and the Typological Discourse of Private Houses in the Antwerp City during the Long Sixteenth Century	KU Leuven	2014
Genin, Soraya	Voûtes à nervures manuelles. Le caractère innovant de João de Castilho	KU Leuven	2014

Collette, Quentin	Riveted connections in historical metal structures (1840–1940). Hot-driven rivets: technology, design and experiments	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	2014
Debonne, Vincent	Uit de klei, in verband. Bouwen met baksteen in het graafschap Vlaanderen 1200–1400	KU Leuven	2015
Houbart, Claudine	Raymond M. Lemaire (1921–1997) et la conservation de la ville ancienne. Approche historique et critique de ses projets belges dans une perspective internationale	KU Leuven	2015
Dekeyser, Liesbeth	Material history and study of cimorné decorative cement render: from interwar craftsmanship to contemporary restoration guidelines	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	2015
De Raedt, Kim	Policies, people, projects school building as development aid in postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa	Ghent University	2017
Wilmet, Aline	Le décor sculpté des supports de l'architecture gothique en vallée mosane: Analyse des formes et des techniques pour une approche renouvelée du chantier médiéval	University of Namur	2017
Cierkens, Pieter-Jan	Architectural culture and building practice in 19 th -Century Belgium : the case of Louis Roelandt (1786–1864), architect, academic, Civil Servant	Ghent University	2018
Dobbels, Jelena	Becoming Professional Practitioners. A History of General Contractors in Belgium (1870–1970)	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	2018
Vandenabeele, Louis	Roofs with Roots. The historical developments of timber roof structures in 19 th - and early 20 th -century Belgium	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	2018
De Fossé, Marianne	Preserving historical urban warehouses in Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp by understanding their architecture and technology	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	2018

Deschuyteneer, Aurelie	Geometrical characterisation for structural robustness	UCLouvain	2019
Bruggeman, Dieter	Urban questions in the countryside: urbanization and the collective consumption of electricity in Belgium, 1900–1940	Ghent University	2019
De Raedt, Nele	Injured residences: fame, reputation and self-preservation in Renaissance Italy	Ghent University	2019
Boonen, Sofie	Une ville construite par des ygens d'ailleurs: développements urbains à Elisabethville, Congo belge (actuellement Lubumbashi, DRC)	Ghent University	2019
Van de Maele, Jens	Architectures of bureaucracy : an architectural and political history of ministerial offices in Belgium, 1915–1940	Ghent University/University of Antwerp	2019
Conan, Sandrine	L'abbaye cistercienne de Vaucelles aux XII ^e et XIII ^e siècles: étude architecturale et archéologique	Université de Lille/KU Leuven	2019
Collin, Jean-Philippe	De la mine à l'habitat: Économie des productions minières du Bassin de Mons au Néolithique. De la fin du 5 ^e millénaire à la fin du 3 ^e millénaire	University of Namur	2019
Govaerts, Yves	Restoration strategies for stone imitating renders: Development of a tool for composing repair mortars	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	2019
Grieten, Stefaan	The Material Image-Building of Erard de La Marck, Prince-Bishop of Liège. Strategy, Components and Significance of a Versatile Discourse	KU Leuven	2020
Melsens, Sarah	Architect, engineer or builder? A history of professional demarcation through practice and discourse, Pune (India), 1930–1992	University of Antwerp	2020
De Boeck, Sarah	Making space for the foundational economy: urban economic policy and planning perspectives for Brussels	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	2020

Vandyck, Frederik	Built to construct: learning from the architecture of construction workplaces in the Brussels-Capital Region	Vrije Universiteit Brussel/University of Antwerp	2020
Kik, Olivier	Children of Mercury. Studies on the Transmission of Geometrical Design Knowledge in the Netherlands Workshop Practice: 1480–1560	KU Leuven	2021
De Nys-Ketels, Simon	Myths and realities of the Belgian medical model colony: a genealogy	Ghent University	2021
Broes, Tom	Urbanisons! Urbanising the Antwerp agglomeration, 1907–1939	Ghent University	2021
Baudry, Antoine	Intervenir sur les édifices historiques en Belgique au XIX ^e siècle	ULiège	2021
Lateur, Olivier	Cohabiter avec l'Antiquité (XVI ^e -XVIII ^e siècles): Antiquarisme, traditions locales et impact paysager des vestiges antiques dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux et la principauté de Liège (1565–1794)	University of Namur	2021
Degraeve, Matthijs	Building Brussels. Construction Entrepreneurs in a Transforming Urban Space (1830–1970)	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	2021
Wibaut, Romain	Hidden Innovation. Roof Frame Design and Construction in Parish churches of Brussels and Charleroi (1830–1940)	Vrije Universiteit Brussel/KU Leuven	2021
Langouche, Liesbeth	The look of window glass. A social and cultural history of clear window glass from the 15 th to the late 19 th centuries in the Scheldt-Meuse-Rhine-region	University of Antwerp	2022
Souviron, Jean	Glazing Beyond Energy Efficiency: An Environmental Analysis of the Socio-Technical Trajectory of Architectural Glass	Université Libre de Bruxelles	2022
Fivez, Robby	A concrete state: constructing materials and building ambitions in the (Belgian) Congo	Ghent University/Université Libre de Bruxelles	2023

Table 2 Overview of ongoing PhDs in relation to Construction History in Belgium, in alphabetical order

Author	Preliminary title	University
Angillis, Jelle	Building in a transforming society: practitioners and the Belgian postwar construction industry (1945–1985)	University of Antwerp
Ardui, Charlotte	Re[charging the Parish]church – A research by design approach to the adaptive reuse of religious heritage in Flanders	KU Leuven
Baumgartner, Jasmin	Re-building Brussels (1695–2025): the construction sector as an engine for social inclusion and circularity	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Bekers, Willem	On intersections of 20 th -century military history, construction history and architectural design thinking	Ghent University
Blancquaert, Doris	Silent heritage. Asbestos objects in collections	University of Antwerp
Bloch, Igor	Construction History, Above and Beyond. What Colonial History can do for Construction History	Ghent University /Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Bruno, Alessandra	On learning-by-doing education in architecture schools	Université Libre de Bruxelles
Bulckaen, Laurens	A Culture of collaboration: how architects, engineers and contractors interacted on complex projects in Belgium (1890–1970)	Université Libre de Bruxelles
Da Silva Pereira, Natalia	Where are the boundaries? Foreign engineers in Belgium in the European industrial race (1840–1914)	Université Libre de Bruxelles
da Silva Rodriguez, Karoline	Re-building Brussels (1695–2025): the construction sector as an engine for social inclusion and circularity	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
De Raedt, Pieter	History and heritage of the Belgian power industry (1885–2015)	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Drugmand, Baptiste	Les abris ferroviaires pour voyageurs en Belgique de 1835 à 1960. Approches constructive, architecturale et patrimoniale	ULiège
Geraldine, Frere	De sable à fenêtre. Productions et usages du verre à vitre entre les I ^{er} et V ^e siècles dans l'Empire Romain	University of Namur
Han, Shuyuan	Rigid Frame: Historical and Design Approaches	UCLouvain
Heindryckx, Laurence	Housing developers in the metropolitan nexus: Etrimo and Amelinckx (1918–1985)	Ghent University

Huba, Louise	From demolition towards preservation. A paradigm shift for building in Brussels	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Liejevrouw, Laura	Pioneering practices project	KU Leuven
Lund, Irene	Pierre-Louis Flouquet's writings on architecture and design	Université Libre de Bruxelles
Packet, Tom	On Belgian-American architectural exchange in the interwar period	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Pacquée, Robbe	On the adaptability of building structures and the design for re-use	University of Antwerp
Parein, Marylise	The Brussels housing stock (1975–2000): building materials and heritage value	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Reyniers, Lara	Reviving the circular building industry. Looking into construction, demolition and reuse from the past to the future	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Schlesser, Thomas	De la circulation à la mutation urbaine, la ville réticulaire au prisme de la mobilité. Bruxelles, 1817–1910	Université Libre de Bruxelles
Schreurs, Eireen	The Iron Column: Understanding Architecture for its Material Manufacture	KU Leuven/ UAntwerpen
Sentissi, Sophia	Adapter l'architecture moderne? L'œuvre construite de Marcel Lambrichs: un état de lieux prospectif	UCLouvain
Vandamme, Esther	Bio-based architecture, timber engineering and adaptability	University of Antwerp
Verstraete, Robrecht	Construction History, Above and Beyond. What Planning History can do for Construction History	Université Libre de Bruxelles/ Ghent University
Weyns, Eva	Catholic Territories in a Suburban landscape: Religion and Urbanization in Belgium, 1945–1975	KU Leuven