

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Grand-Place, Brussels (Belgium)

No 857

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	La Grand-Place
<i>Location</i>	City of Brussels, Bruxelles-Capitale Region
<i>State Party</i>	Belgium
<i>Date</i>	16 June 1997

Justification by State Party

The Grand-Place of Brussels is indisputably a masterpiece of human creative genius, with a special quality of coherency resulting from a regulatory measure of 24 April 1697, which is exceptionally early in the history of architecture.

Criterion i

The Gothic facade of the City Hall, with its tower, does not simply provide essential evidence of the civil architecture of the period but is also perfectly integrated into the collective imagination.

The Maison du Roi is one of the most successful examples of the Neo-Gothic style which is a feature of the architecture of the second half of the 19th century.

The buildings around the Grand-Place, all different but built within a very short period, admirably illustrate the Baroque architecture of the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, with special treatment in a local and therefore unique style of the gables and ornamentation.

Criteria ii and iv

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

The earliest written reference to the *Nedermarckt* (Lower Market), as it was originally known, dates from 1174. The present name came into use in the last quarter of the 18th century.

It is located on what was marshland on the right bank of the river Senne, to the east of the *castellum*, a defensive outwork of the castle built around 977 by Charles of France, Duke of Lower Lotharingia. It was bounded to the north by the Spiegelbeek stream and on the south and east by a sandbank, and sloped down from east to west, as the

names of some of the houses testify (No 6 *La Montagne*, Nos 10 and 18 *La Colline*). The marsh was drained in the 12th century (or perhaps slightly earlier).

The present rectangular outline of the Grand-Place has developed over the centuries as a result of successive enlargements and other modifications, and did not take up its definitive form until after 1695. It has, however, always had seven streets running into it. In the 13th and 14th centuries the market-place was surrounded by haphazardly disposed *steenen* (the stone-built Cloth, Bread, and Meat Halls or Markets) and timber-framed houses, separated by yards, gardens, or *ambiti* (passages serving as fire-breaks).

In the second half of the 14th century an enormous Cloth Hall was erected on the south side of the square. In 1396 the city authorities expropriated a large number of buildings on the north side in order to extend and straighten it. During the 15th century the houses on the south side were replaced by the east and west wings of the City Hall (1401-44) and its bell-tower (1449). A new Bread Hall was built on the north side in 1405. In 1441 the irregularly aligned houses on the east side were demolished and replaced by six contiguous buildings on the same alignment. From around this time the houses around the square were systematically taken over by the corporations and the guilds that had since the 1420s played a role in the city government and were committed to the improvement of the Grand-Place. The Bread Hall was demolished in 1512-13 and replaced by a large building that was given the name of the King's House (*La Maison du Roi*). During the course of the 16th century many of the houses were rebuilt with new facades in Renaissance or Baroque style.

On 14 August 1695 Louis XIV of France ordered Marshal Villeroy to bombard the City of Brussels as a reprisal following the destruction of French coastal towns and ports by Dutch and English warships. Since the Dutch and English troops were on campaign at Namur, a French army of 70,000 men was able to place its considerable artillery on the Scheut heights, from where 3000 bombs and 1200 incendiary shells rained down on the heart of the city. By the evening of 15 August only the City Hall, the King's House, and a few house walls were still standing in the Grand-Place.

Despite the severity of the bombardment, reconstruction was rapid, thanks to the action taken by the City authorities and the generous support of other towns and provinces. In a remarkable ordinance promulgated in 1697 by the City Magistrate, all proposals for the reconstruction of facades had to be submitted to the authorities for approval, so as to preserve the harmony of the square. In four years the Grand-Place had been completely restored to its original layout and appearance. The opportunity was taken at the same time to widen and straighten several of the streets leading into the square. The Cloth Hall, which had been reduced to ruins, was replaced shortly afterwards by the south wing of the City Hall.

Description

The *Hôtel de Ville* (City Hall), which covers most of the south side of the Grand-Place, consists of a group of buildings around a rectangular internal courtyard. Its present form results from the reconstruction after the 1695 bombardment, when it sustained some damage, and restoration in the 19th century. The part facing on to the square is from the 15th century, consisting of two L-shaped buildings. It rises to three storeys, topped by a steeply pitched saddleback roof pierced with four rows of dormers. The main entrance beneath the tower is flanked by arcading. The massive tower rises to five storeys, capped with an elegant octagonal lantern and a slender pyramidal spire. The entire facade is decorated with statues dating from the 19th century. The southern part of the complex is a restrained classical building that closes the U-shaped plan of the Gothic structures, built in the 18th century. The interior conserves much of the original layout and decoration, including mural paintings and tapestries, elaborately carved chimney-pieces, and mouldings; modifications have taken place over the last two centuries to accommodate the evolving requirements of the City administration.

Facing the City Hall across the square is its other main feature, the *Maison du Roi* (King's House), now used as the City Museum. The original of the present building was erected in 1515-36 on the orders of Charles V, whence it derived its name. It was a three-storey building in late Gothic style with a Renaissance roof. After being damaged in 1695 it was restored, first summarily and then more comprehensively in 1767, when it underwent some modifications. In 1873 the City Council, by now proprietors of the property, decided that its state of conservation was so bad that it should be demolished and rebuilt. The reconstruction by the architect P.-V. Jamaer was based on the original, but suppressing all the post-Gothic elements. The result is a three-storey brick building with an arcaded facade, saddleback roof, and centrally placed tower with lantern.

Each of the houses around the Grand-Place, which vary considerably in size, has its own name. A few have been selected for this evaluation, as being representative of the ensemble. Superficially, the largest appears to be that known as *Les Ducs de Brabant*, but this is in fact a monumental facade in classic Baroque style built on the orders of the City Council in 1695 which covers seven individual buildings that originally housed trade corporations and craft guilds.

Le Roi de l'Espagne, on the corner of the Rue au Beurre in the north-west corner of the square, was built by the bakers' corporation in 1696-97 on several earlier distinct property plots. It is a large dignified structure with a balustrade decorated with allegorical statues and surmounted by a graceful dome.

On the same side of the square is *Le Cornet*, formerly the house of the watermen's corporation. It has a narrow frontage with a Baroque facade that incorporates some early Rococo features, such as concave bays and a gable in the form of a ship's poop.

Across the Rue Charles Buls from the City Hall on the south side of the Grand-Place is *Le Cygne* (which takes its name, like many of the houses around the square, from a relief on the facade). It was originally an inn but after the 17th century reconstruction it was acquired by the

corporation of butchers, who greatly embellished it with the proceeds of the sale of wool, as an inscription at the top of the facade proudly states. Next to it is the *Maison des Brasseurs*, with a striking Baroque facade that bears an inscription boldly proclaiming its original role as the house of the brewers' corporation; it is surmounted by a gilded equestrian statue of Charles de Lorraine.

One of the narrowest facades is that of *Le Cerf*, on the corner of the Rue de la Colline in the north-east corner of the square. It is only two bays wide and has a sober facade in white stone, probably the work of the architect and master-mason to whom it belonged in the early 18th century. The *Maison des Tailleurs*, immediately to the west of the King's House, covers two original plots. It has a well balanced classicizing Baroque facade on which there is an inscription attesting to its function as the house of the tailors' corporation.

The degree of conservation of original features inside the houses around the Grand-Place is somewhat variable. In some cases almost no changes have been made since the early 18th century, whilst in others there has been radical conversion and modernization. In a number of cases the ground floors have been converted for use as shops, restaurants, or cafes.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The City Hall and King's House were designated protected monuments by Royal Decree on 5 March 1936. The other buildings around the Grand-Place (Nos 1-39) were designated protected monuments by Order of the Regional Government of Bruxelles-Capitale on 19 April 1977; two further buildings (24 Rue de la Colline and 12A Grand-Place) were added in 1994.

Any interventions on protected buildings require authorization by the competent authority, in this case the Sites and Monuments Service of the Ministry of the Region of Bruxelles-Capitale (*Service des Monuments et Sites du Ministère de la Région Bruxelles-Capitale*).

Management

The City Hall, King's House, and five of the houses are the property of the City of Brussels; the remainder belong to private individuals or companies.

A structured planning programme was defined by the Regional Government in August 1991, of which to date only the first stage, the Regional Development Plan (*Plan régional de développement - PRD*), has been completed and come into force (March 1995). This identifies the Grand-Place and its immediate surroundings as being within a protected residential zone, and also a zone of cultural, historical, or aesthetic interest. Special reference is made in the PRD to the Grand-Place as requiring special attention. At the present time work on the Special Land-use Plan (*Plan particulier d'affectation du sol - PPAS*) is in progress; this will confirm the buffer zone proposed in the nomination dossier.

This was studied in detail by the ICOMOS expert mission (see below). It was recognized that it constitutes a zone of clearly defined historical significance, known to the Brussels planners as the “Sacred Island” (*Îlot sacré*), created by a medieval network of small winding lanes. A PPAS devoted solely to this area is currently in preparation. In the opinion of ICOMOS this will fully conform with the requirements of the *Operational Guidelines*; in the opinion of the ICOMOS mission, an expansion of the buffer zone would have the adverse effect of weakening its effectiveness.

The levels of subvention available to private owners from the City and regional authorities for maintenance and restoration work are 40% and 25% respectively. It should be noted that in the present case “maintenance” covers a wider range of operations than is normally considered to come within the meaning of that term, whilst “restoration” relates to large-scale interventions.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

An institutional approach to the conservation of the Grand-Place as a whole began in the mid 19th century, when the City authorities subsidized the restoration of the facades of several of the private houses. A programme for the general restoration of the City Hall had already begun earlier. The demolition and reconstruction of the King’s House formed part of this policy.

Between 1882 and 1920 there was a systematic programme of restoration of privately owned properties. In 1883 the Burgomaster Charles Buls approved a plan whereby the City undertook to maintain the facades of properties that produced low revenues, but at the same time made it obligatory to seek authorization for any building projects. This policy has continued to the present day, and a large amount of restoration and conservation work has been carried out since the end of World War II, especially in 1950-60 and since the mid 1980s. The City Hall has been the subject of a continuous programme of restoration and conservation. The tower was restored in 1951 and 1981-82, its upper section being reconstructed in 1987-97, and all the facades were cleaned between 1962 and 1963; these were special projects, additional to routine maintenance programmes.

Authenticity

There can be no doubt about the authenticity of the ensemble of the Grand-Place: the central open space that grew organically in the Middle Ages and early modern period was reconstructed in its totality after the French bombardment of 1695, and has retained that form for the past three centuries without change.

Of the individual buildings, the City Hall conserves its Gothic and 18th century components intact and visible. Having been in constant use as an administrative centre it has undergone some relatively minor modifications required as a result of its function, but its overall authenticity in terms of material, style, and function is irrefragable.

Most of the individual buildings around the square retain their authenticity to a similar degree, although some have had radical internal modifications. Only in the case of the King’s House can there be any reservations about authenticity. This building was demolished in the 19th

century and reconstructed, according to the accepted tenets of the day, in a single style, omitting later details of the demolished structure. It may be claimed, nevertheless, that the reconstructed building possesses a considerable measure of authenticity of form, since its design is based on meticulous recording in the 18th century and careful analysis of the building that it replaced as this was being dismantled.

It should also be added that the competent authorities have been punctilious in applying the parameters of the 1964 Venice Charter and the 1987 ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas in all work on the Grand-Place for the past thirty years.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Brussels in January 1998.

Qualities

The Grand-Place is an exceptionally harmonious ensemble of public and private buildings which vividly illustrates in its architecture both the cultural and the social history of a critical period of history in the Low Countries.

Comparative analysis

The central square is a virtually omnipresent feature of European towns, serving both as a market and as a meeting place for the citizens. There are already several outstanding examples in historic towns and town centres on the World Heritage List - the Piazza San Marco (Venice), the Piazza del Campo (Siena), the Rynek Główny (Cracow), and Red Square (Moscow), for example - whilst the Places Stanislas, de la Carrière, and d’Alliance in Nancy are inscribed as such. It may be claimed, however, that the Grand-Place differs significantly from all of these. The three squares in Nancy were designed and constructed as entities, without having evolved organically over centuries. The others quoted certainly are the result of an organic urban process, but none so vividly illustrates in its architecture the social and cultural evolution of a major city in so small a compass.

A feature of the Grand-Place that is unique is the fact that in its present form it is a faithful representation of the square destroyed by French artillery in 1695. It is symbolic of the power and pride of the Brussels burghers that they chose to recreate their city in its former state rather than rebuild it in the contemporary idiom, a phenomenon that is more common elsewhere.

It is also interesting to note that this is a very rare example of a central place without a church or other place of worship, something which underscores the mercantile and administrative role of the Grand-Place.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

ICOMOS recommended that the competent authorities should take action to ensure that the PPAS for the buffer zone is implemented with the

minimum delay. As proposed in the nomination dossier, the boundary of the buffer zone runs down the centre of a number of streets. ICOMOS recommended that the outer boundary be moved to the rears of the building plots on the sides of the streets furthest removed from the nominated area. It also drew attention for the need for rigorous control over the level and nature of advertising signage around the Grand-Place, so as to preserve its historic ambience.

At its meeting in June 1998 the Bureau referred this nomination back to the State Party, requesting the redefinition of the buffer zone as proposed above. The State Party has provided a revised map showing the extension of the buffer zone as proposed by ICOMOS.

Brief description

The Grand-Place of Brussels is a remarkably homogeneous ensemble of public and private buildings, mainly from the late 17th century, which encapsulates and vividly illustrates the social and cultural quality of this important political and commercial centre by means of its architecture.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*:

Criterion ii: The Grand-Place is an outstanding example of the eclectic and highly successful blending of architectural and artistic styles that characterizes the culture and society of this region.

Criterion iv: Through the nature and quality of its architecture and of its outstanding quality as a public open space, the Grand-Place illustrates in an exceptional way the evolution and achievements of a highly successful mercantile city of northern Europe at the height of its prosperity.

ICOMOS, October 1998

