Brugge (Belgium)
No 996

Identification
Nomination The Historic Centre of Brugge
Location Province of West-Vlaanderen (West Flanders)
State Party Belgium
Date 1 July 1999

Justification by State Party

Brugge (Bruges) is a special case in the sense that it already includes parts of two World Heritage nominations, the Flemish Béguinages (inscribed in 1998) and the Belfries of Flanders and Wallonia (inscribed in 1999).

The Historic Town of Brugge is testimony, over a long period, of a considerable exchange of influences on the development of architecture.

Brugge participated in the development of brick Gothic, which is characteristic of northern Europe and the Baltic; its major architectural impact is seen in early medieval churches, and particularly in the Burgundian period, which represents the apogee of Brugge. This architecture determines strongly the character of the historic centre of the town. Brugge has been an important commercial centre, the last part of the large Hanseatic chain. In this position, it has favoured innovative artistic influences, including the introduction especially of Italian but also of Spanish artists into the region.

Brugge is a town which has conserved spatial and structural organizations that characterize its different phases of development, and the historic centre has continued covering exactly the same area as the perimeter of the old settlement.

The site is an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble, illustrating significant periods in human history.

Brugge is known as a commercial metropolis in the heart of Europe. Still an active, living city, it has nevertheless preserved the architectural and urban structures that document the different phases of its development, including the Grand-Place with its grand bell-tower, the Béguinage, as well as the hospitals, the religious and commercial complexes, and the historic urban fabric that document the different stages. Brugge is characterized by continuity reflected in the relative harmony of changes. As part of this continuity, the late 19th century renovation of facades introduced a Neo-Gothic style that is special for Brugge, interpreting the medieval “Hansa” style with elements drawn from 19th century Romanticism.

The site is associated with masterpieces of art, which are of outstanding universal significance.

The city has been the centre of patronage and development of painting in the Middle Ages when artists such as Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling came to Brugge to work. The city is the birthplace of the Flemish Primitives. Many of these paintings were exported and influenced painting in Europe, but exceptionally important collections also remain in the city itself.

Note This is a slightly abridged and modified version of the text in the nomination dossier.

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

Archaeological excavations have shown evidence of human presence in the area of Brugge from the Iron Age and the Gallo-Roman period. In the 8th century, Brugge was described as Municipium Frandrense, the headquarters of the Pagus Frankensis and the residence of the Merovingian counts. It was the military and administrative centre of the region, and commercial links with Scandinavia started at the same time. The name of Brugge is first mentioned in the 9th century and is documented in Carolingian coins bearing the name Bruggia. In this period, it was part of a defence system against the Normans, and the first fortification existed in 851 at the site of the present-day Bourg. The settlement developed gradually and it became a harbour and commercial centre with European connections. The first city walls were built in 1127: the traces of these can still be read in the inner canals of the city centre. A sea canal was dug up to Brugge to facilitate navigation, thus consolidating its maritime role, which lasted until the 15th century, with Damme, Hoeke, and Middelkerke as transition sites.

From 1200 to 1400 Brugge was the economic capital of Europe north of the Alps. The Brugge fair was established in 1200 and contacts with Britain were the first to develop, particularly related to wool. This was followed by other regions – northern Europe, the German countries, and the Mediterranean. The growing prosperity of the city was reflected in the construction of public buildings, such as the imposing belfry in the Grand-Place, and Brugge was quickly established as an economic capital of Europe. The palace of the van der Buerse family became the monetary centre, giving its name to the concept of the Bourse (stock exchange). Following its growth the town developed a series of social institutions from the 14th century onwards, including the Saint-Jean Hospital and the typical small God’s Houses (Hôtels-Dieu) and hospices. The Gothic town hall of 1376 remains the oldest in the Low Countries.

From 1384 to 1500 Brugge enjoyed its Golden Age under the Dukes of Burgundy. Under Philippe le Bon (1419–67) in particular, Brugge became a centre of court life, as well as...
that of Flemish art, involving Jan van Eyck, who contributed to the development of the Flemish Primitive school of painting as well as exercising an influence on European art in general. Other painters include Petrus Christus, Hans Memling, Gerard David, and many who have remained anonymous. At the same time Brugge became the centre for miniature painting, and also for printing soon after Gutenberg: it was responsible for the first books in French and English. Owing to the presence of Italians Brugge soon became a centre of Humanism and the Renaissance. Building activity continued and Brugge was provided by a series of noble palaces and religious ensembles of great prestige.

From the late 15th century, Brugge gradually entered a period of stagnation. The Flemish regions were integrated into the Habsburg Empire, and the discovery of America displaced economic interests from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. Brugge continued dealing with the textile industry and retained its Spanish connections, but its role in maritime trade was soon replaced by that of Antwerp. Nevertheless, it remained active in the international monetary market and continued as a centre of Humanism; Erasmus called it “the new Athens” and Thomas More wrote his *Utopia* there. Architecturally the medieval Gothic remained the common reference and was merged into a characteristic Brugge style.

From 1600 to 1800, as a result of the construction of canal systems, Brugge re-established its maritime connection, but only at a modest level. Building activities continued, however, and a ban of 1616 on the use of wood in building facades led to renovations in more substantial materials. The population of Brugge remained relatively small all through this period and the need to extend beyond the medieval city walls only arose much later. The influence of the Counter-Reformation was strong in Brugge, resulting in a series of religious ensembles. At the end of the 18th century the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II ordered the demolition of “useless” convents, and others were destroyed as a result of the French Revolution, including the cathedral of Saint-Donatien.

From 1815 to 1830 Brugge was part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands and since 1830 it has been part of Belgium. The railway reached to Brugge in 1834, causing some changes in the urban fabric. Starting in 1854, the municipal administration prepared plans for urban transformations in the spirit of Haussmann, but only one of these was implemented, in the area of the new theatre, where the medieval fabric was destroyed. During the 19th century, a colony of English aristocrats influenced the cultural life of the city and contributed to a renewed interest in the artistic heritage of Brugge and the restoration of historic buildings, including the founding of the *Société d’Emulation pour l’histoire et les antiquités de la Flandre Occidentale*. Some of the restorations were fairly substantial, resulting in the building of copies of lost historic buildings. At the same time, tourism found a new interest in the old town. Some damage was incurred during the two World Wars, but as a whole, however, the historic town survived well. From 1968 policies focused on the conservation of the historic town, resulting in the establishment of the *Service de la Conservation et de la Rénovation urbaine* and the first urban structure plan.
The historic town of Brugge has some 10,000 buildings, of which about half are considered to be of architectural or historic character. The Town Hall dates mainly from 1376–86 and is one of the oldest town halls in the Low Countries. The three medieval parts that survive were used until the middle of the 19th century; since then they have been transformed for other uses. The 19th century part of the hospital was restored and transformed into a congress centre after 1976.

The public buildings include the 13th century ensemble consisting of the commercial Halls and the Belfry (83m), which symbolize municipal autonomy. The Town Hall dates from the 13th century; its Romanesque interior, while the upper part was restored in the 19th century. The double chapel of Saint-Basile (1134–57), known as the Chapel of the Holy Blood, was built in the mid 12th century. The lower part has retained its Romanesque interior, while the upper part was restored in the 19th century.

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Constitution and Authenticity

Conservation history

Conservation management of the city has been continuous since 1877. In this period, thanks to the governor Amédée Visart de Bocarmé, restoration became an integral part of the city’s policy. Numerous buildings, and especially their artistic street fronts, were restored. The period also promoted a debate about restoration principles. Thomas Harper King, James Weale, and Jean de Béthune, disciples of Ruskin and Pugin, were in favour of respectful treatment based on scientific study of the buildings, and care to use historically authentic materials so far as possible. Others were disciples of Viollet-le-Duc, including the city architect Louis Delacenserie. Several historic buildings have thus been subject to rather heavy stylistic restoration (eg the Town Hall, Greffe Civil, Gruthuse Palace), and similar restorations have continued even after the two World Wars. However, since the 1960s the approach has become more conservative.

In 1968, a scientifically accurate inventory of historic buildings was published by Dr Luc de Vliegher, and this has
remained a basic reference for conservation. Gradually attention has thus addressed non-monumental buildings, the ordinary residential fabric of the town. As a result of the communal fusion, Brugge was subject to new dynamism; it was the first town in Belgium to create a special Service for the Urban Conservation and Renovation, as well as approving the first Structure Plan in Belgium in 1972. In 1975, thanks to its conservation programmes, Brugge was selected as one of the examples of the European Architectural Heritage Year. Since 1978, there has been a constant policy to finance conservation projects. This includes also structural and functional improvements, and has made it possible to guarantee the conservative rehabilitation of many run-down areas, such as those of Sainte-Anne, Saint-Gilles, West-Brugge, Marais, and along rue Longue.

**Authenticity**

The historic centre of Brugge illustrates continuity on an urban site that has been occupied since the 11th century. Records survive to show control having been exercised over development since the 15th century. Since the late 19th century there has been conscious attention to the history of the town, and the debates about modalities have followed the international trends in the field of restoration and conservation.

The continuity of occupation in the historic town has retained the original pattern of streets, canals, and open spaces. For the most part, buildings have retained the original parcels of land. The transformations that have taken place over time respect the functional changes in the town, and have become part of its historic authenticity, in a parallel way to Siena in Italy. Even though the city walls have been lost, the perimeter of the historic town is clearly readable today, marked also by the surviving gates and the defence tower.

The history of the town and its buildings is well represented in the historic structures that embody practically all periods of history since the foundation of the city. Even though there have been some modern transformations, these can be considered of minor impact on the whole. The Brugge style of restoration itself has become an item of interest. The different renovations reflect the international restoration movement and have become part of the city’s character today.

**Evaluation**

**Action by ICOMOS**

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Brugge in January 2000. ICOMOS also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages.

**Qualities**

Brugge is an outstanding example of a medieval historic settlement, which has maintained its historic fabric as this has evolved over the centuries. Brugge is also a place where the original Gothic manner of building has been retained and revived, even up to the present day, becoming part of the identity of the town.

Having been one of the commercial and cultural capitals of Europe, with links to different parts of the world, Brugge has been a promoter of cultural and artistic movements, and is particularly associated with the painting school of Flemish Primitives.

**Comparative analysis**

The nomination documents refer to other comparable cities in Europe, such as Cologne, Lübeck, and Florence in their form or Gand and Ypres in their economic development. In this comparison, however, Brugge comes out as an outstanding example, particularly in the light of its exceptional state of preservation. Compared with Malines, Antwerp, and Brussels, Brugge is the only town that has been able to retain the entirety of its medieval fabric and urban structure.

**Brief description**

Brugge is an outstanding example of a medieval historic settlement, which has well maintained its historic fabric as this has evolved over the centuries, and where the Gothic manner of building has become part of the identity of the town. One of the commercial and cultural capitals of Europe, Brugge has had cultural links to different parts of the world, being particularly associated with the school of the Flemish Primitives.

**Recommendation**

That the site be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria ii, iv, and vi:

- **Criterion ii** The Historic Town of Brugge is testimony, over a long period, of a considerable exchange of influences on the development of architecture, particularly in brick Gothic, as well as favouring innovative artistic influences in the development of medieval painting, being the birthplace of the school of the Flemish Primitives.

- **Criterion iv** The Historic Town of Brugge is an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble, illustrating significant stages in the commercial and cultural fields in medieval Europe, of which the public, social, and religious institutions are a living testimony.

- **Criterion vi** The town of Brugge has been the birthplace of the Flemish Primitives and a centre of patronage and development of painting in the Middle Ages with artists such as Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling.

ICOMOS, September 2000