



Projet Erasmus+ Namur - Marsala

*" Patrimonia "*



*A la découverte du patrimoine historique, architectural et culturel*

# *« La Grand-Place » in Brussels*



Fanny Dervaux



Institut « Ilon Saint-Jacques » - Namur

# ABSTRACT

## General presentation

The Grand Place in Brussels is deemed as one of the most beautiful squares in the world.

In 1998, it was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage Site.

### *Its origins ...*



In the 10th century, the dukes of Lower Lotharingia, having built a castle on an island of the Senne River, were at the origin of the birth of Brussels. Towards the end of the 11th century, an open air market settled near this castle, called "Lower Market".

This shopping area (future district of the "Grand-Place") is on the site of an old drained marsh along the Steenweg (stone pavement road), an important road at the time, which connects two prosperous regions, Flanders and the Rhineland.

At the beginning of the 13th century, three commercial halls were built between the square and the roadway: a meat market (rue des Bouchers) and a bread hall and a clothes hall (on the square). These halls, belonging to the Duke of Brabant, make it possible to expose the merchandise sheltered from bad weather and to control its warehousing and its sale in order to collect taxes. The developments of the square from the beginning of the 14th century mark the emergence of the importance of the city authorities, constituted by merchants and tradesmen, in front of the lords. Short of money, the duke gradually sold to the Magistrate, the City representative, a part of his prerogatives on the trade control.

In 1362, the city built a new clothes hall on the other side of the square, then bought to demolish shops that cluttered the square and defined limits. The building of the City Hall in several phases between 1401 and 1455 transforms the square into a seat of municipal power. In front of the Town Hall, however, the duke's power is still present: the old bread hall is renamed "King's House" because that's where the princely tax has been paid since 1406. Around the square are built the houses of some rich merchants and, above all, corporations whose influence is more and more important.

In August 1695, during the War of the Augsburg League, most of the wooden houses and buildings that border the "Grand Place", are set on fire during the bombardment of the city by French troops commanded by marshal de Villeroy. Only the front and the tower of the Town Hall, which served as a target for gunners, and some stone walls resisted the incendiary bullets.

The houses surrounding the square were rebuilt, this time in stone, by the different corporations and large families. Apart from the town hall, all the buildings of the Grand Place were built in the late 17th century and are all Baroque style.





## *Architectural analysis of the “Grand Place”*

In 1695, when the center of the city was destroyed by a violent and intense bombardment by the French Army, the Communal Council of Brussels thought it could rebuild it in two years. It was not as easy ...

Indeed, the architectural choice of the reconstruction was not unanimous.

The city government was divided between the patrician lineages (the great Brussels families) close to the young governor Maximilian of Bavaria with very modern ideas, and the corporate groups which at that time were very conservative.

This contradiction will be reflected in the urban planning ideas during the rebuilding.

Conservatives still hold to the social model of the medieval city that operates without strong central power. For them, the social organization is made up of a whole network of associations: professions at the professional level, oaths at the military level and confraternities at the religious level.

This particularism is also expressed in the town planning:

The houses are built on long and narrow plots. The facades are decorated to emphasize the particularity and importance of the house owner. The result is a city of vertical and varied architecture.

On the other hand, the modern vision of the city is different. It corresponds to a society articulated around an important central power. Now the goal is no longer to be different from your neighbour. On the contrary, identical facades must highlight the solidarity within the elite. The city becomes horizontal and uniform.

The confrontation between the old and the modern makes the Grand-Place a real urban battlefield. The two main protagonists, architect Guillaume De Bruyn and cabinet maker Antoine Pastorana, both work for the governor, but that does not prevent them from expressing their totally opposite ideas.

De Bruyn best reflects the modern ideas of power.

The "House of the Dukes of Brabant" is his major achievement. The entire eastern part of the Grand Place is occupied by the facade of this building complex with a misleading name. Indeed, the only connection with the dukes are the busts that decorate the first floor. And it's not about one, but about 7 independent houses hidden behind a common facade. It is difficult to do more modern in 1700.



Antoine Pastorana is the best interpreter of corporate particularism.

His best achievement is "Cornet", the boatmen's house. He makes a magnificent synthesis between his experience as a cabinetmaker and his mission as prime contractor.

The plot is too narrow for the high facade he wants to build, but he uses concave curves to make it look wider. On the 2nd floor, the middle window is in a straight bay, but the side windows are embedded in concave bays.



Pastorana gives free rein to his fantasy in the gable\*: a stone print of the wooden stern castle of a large late 17th century boat.



With its neighbours, the "Cornet" facade is the antithesis of that of the "Dukes of Brabant". Here too, the governor dreams of a big ensemble. But in the West, the "Wheelbarrow", "Bag" and "Female wolf" facades, already made of stone, survived the bombing. Their owners argue for retention and the governor can not refuse. Pastorana crowns "the Bag" with a new gable \* and at the left of the "Female wolf", two new facades emerge: the boatmen's "Cornet" and the mercers' "Fox". This is the beginning of a game "one must not look like the other ones" to which most corporations will participate.

It is unfortunate that tourists are being told more about the architecture of the place than about the underlying political content. The eastern part of the square is an ode to central power. Its western part sings the glory of particularism, of diversity. By their exuberance, the West facades are diametrically opposed to those facing them.



Grand Place has not always had the luxury it shows us today. In the 18th century, statues and gilding had completely disappeared. The beautiful facades that we admire today are the result of a great restoration campaign of the late 19th century orchestrated by the liberal and secularist current, which like the Catholic and conservative current, also wanted to show its glorifying past.

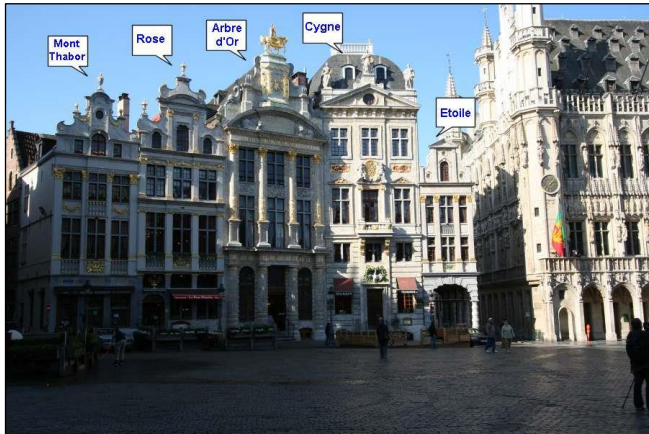




The facades of the current square are not always the exact reflection of the buildings after 1695. Sometimes, the restorers lacked information or the original house no longer corresponded to the ideas and needs of the 19th century.

The Grand Place that we can see today is only a hundred years old..

\* Gable: ornate or openwork decorative triangular pediment above a door, a bay or a building..



Erasmus+

[www.erasmus-isj-namur](http://www.erasmus-isj-namur)