



# **THE CUESTA ('kwɛstə) OF THE RUPEL REGION**

**NEW CHALLENGES FOR ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE**

**VOL. I**

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### **Book edited by**

Gisèle Gantois

### **Co-editors**

Kris Scheerlinck, Yves Schoonjans

### **Authors:**

Floor Clinckemalie, Stefanie Gruyaert, Matthijs Sioen, May Lynn Doll, Felix Schiettecatte, Lisa Lu, Sam Verschoren, Riccardo Buratti

### **Contributions from:**

Gisèle Gantois, Kris Scheerlinck, Yves Schoonjans, Harry van Royen

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**The Cuesta ('kwɛstə) of the Rupel Region.**  
New Challenges for its Cultural Heritage



**cuesta**

*n*

1. (Physical Geography) a long low ridge with a steep scarp slope and a gentle back slope, formed by the differential erosion of strata of differing hardness

[Spanish: shoulder, from Latin *costa* side, rib]

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# Preface

In this publication we want to present the design research projects of eight students of the International Master of Architecture – Resilient and Sustainable Strategies KU Leuven through which they envisaged new challenges for the cultural heritage of the Rupel region situated in the Province of Antwerp, Flanders Belgium along the river Rupel and covering the municipalities of Hemiksem, Schelle, Niel, Boom and Rumst.

What we particularly want to point at is how we had to get immersed into the region to be able to transcend an object-focused approach and how we detected the formal and informal use of the place. The objective was to take these experiences within the design process of either new projects or projects of adaptive re-use and restoration to come to more nuanced and socially better accepted architectural projects.

When looking over the Rupel region today we see a world carved and sliced for so long that it is hard to imagine it even having been otherwise. The whole region is marked by centuries of clay extraction and brick manufacturing industry with many former clay quarries determining the landscape. Many of the pits have become overgrown and seem unused at first sight. The industrial and urban decline lead to exten-

sive disused sites.

Only a few fragments of the built heritage directly related to the former activity are conserved in an attempt to install the remembrance of the place. It's clear that these relicts can never recall the heydays of the industrial era of this region and although they are iconic they became isolated artefacts as they lack the relation with the landscape. In current times of migration and mobility of both humans and non-humans new significance of the meaning of this place is likely to be enacted, created, shaped, and negotiated.

This new significance of meaning arises from a multi faced never ending interaction in which people are engaged with the landscapes and structures in which they live.

These places have meaning for the natives, former brick-workers and their families through the events in their lives, which have taken place in this specific landscape or buildings in which they live and worked. The entanglement of timeless immaterial attachments with the historical and material layering of the place, acts like chemistry. Generations passed knowledge down to each other by leaving visual marks or traces. And even if the events have left no mark, people seem to remember, as they became part of their collective memory.

The other side of the interaction is the triggering of newcomers' memories and feelings by the simple sight of this place<sup>1</sup>. Here enters their value for the existing buildings and landscapes in our intercultural society as they attribute new significance to their new environment affected by what they already know, believe or remember from other places.

From this perspective there is an interesting parallel in the working methodology of an architect and the strategy of the storyteller the way Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup> states it: "The figure of the storyteller gets its full cor-

<sup>1</sup> Jason Ardler, director Cultural Heritage in *Social Significance*, a discussion paper. Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw, Tracy Ireland, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Research Unit, Cultural Heritage Division, June 2001, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, W., *The Storyteller, Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*.

[http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF\\_1331-Benjamin.pdf](http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> 'sloepke': a name given by the locals many decades ago, probably from the Dutch word 'slop', diminutive 'sloepke' which means poor very small alley or corridor between two houses.

<sup>4</sup> Provincie Antwerpen (2014), Kaderplan 'Kleinstedelijk gebied en ontginningsgebied Boom-Rumst'. Eindrapport. Pdf-file. [http://www.provincie.antwerpen.be/content/dam/provant/drom/dienst-gebiedsgericht-beleid/20141211\\_eindrapport\\_totaal\\_def\\_tg.pdf](http://www.provincie.antwerpen.be/content/dam/provant/drom/dienst-gebiedsgericht-beleid/20141211_eindrapport_totaal_def_tg.pdf)



poreality only for the one who can picture both the man who has stayed at home who knows the local tales and tradition and the one who comes from a far.' An advantage of being an outsider in the landscape we have to study and to adopt the attitude of the storyteller lies precisely in the fact that one might (re)-discover intrinsic qualities of the usual things that regular visitors or natives risk to overlook and that historical studies might neglect.

Take the case of the so-called 'sloepkes'<sup>3</sup>. Between most of the brick-workers' houses constructed around the clay-pits a small pathway or 'sloepke' was foreseen. It provided a direct access from the house to the clay-pit.

The only entrance to the houses was at the back of the house through this 'sloepke' via a collective inner street. The main street façade lacked a front door. Historically and materially seen they are proof of the often very poor working and living conditions of the brick-workers and their families who were completely dependent of the factory owners who lived in beautiful master houses along the Rupel River.

We could never have understood their world of meaning today by just observing the place from outside and doing historical and material survey only. Written history in archives and museums, touristic info and the final report for the region of the Province of Antwerp<sup>4</sup> certainly gave us very valuable information about how the region historically evolved and what the function of these 'sloepkes' was but didn't give us convincing insight on the deeper actual value of this human-made landscape, a wonderful hidden social, cultural and ecological meshwork of which 'sloepkes' are a fundamental part. There was need for another strategy to meet this fragile protagonist.

As we were strangers in the landscape we had to study a crucial objective was to find a different way of

observing to come to an actual reading of the site far beyond historical evidences. In terms of methodology we thought about how to discover the nameless protagonists and to unveil and to register the off-the-record information they provided us to include more of the voices of perspectives of people in the area where we worked. This was developed in a 'protocol for walking' in which we defined what to do, but not how to do it. Our main tools were walking, drawing and modelling. 'Mapping' values could have been one approach, but we also felt the need for a processual or narrative element – a story of how values happen, and change.

To gain insight into the people's and other living creatures' why and how and their and our relation to the place we expressed perceptions through mapping from the ground. This implied that to be able to understand the processes of appropriation, memories and traces and to express our own understandings we not only used cartographical techniques but also we stepped across the roads, visited the places of which the inhabitants told us<sup>5</sup>. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests we joined with those among whom we worked<sup>6</sup>. We had to take time to listen to and to observe both locals and newcomers from inside by doing informal interviews and re-walk peoples' lines of perambulation. The investigation turned into a travel story, storytelling into a spatial practice<sup>7</sup>. As Michel de Certeau puts it in 'L'Invention du quotidien'.

The act of drawing our interactive journeys in little jot-books<sup>8</sup> was a way of observing and therefore a way of reflecting. The drawing became a tool for the eye and all other senses. The act of watching closely lead to real closeness and retracing the existing made us experience things differently.

A subtle social, cultural and ecological meshwork of informal and formal collective spaces was visualized

<sup>5</sup> Lee, J. and Ingold, T. (2008) *Introduction in Ways of walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, (Anthropological studies of creativity and perception) England, Ashgate, 2008. p.1-19.

<sup>6</sup> Ingold, T., (2007), *Up, Across and Along in Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge pp. 72-103

<sup>7</sup> Certeau, M. De, (1984), *The practice of everyday life*, Berkeley, CA : University of California Press..

<sup>8</sup> The little jotbook is folded out of a A4 piece of paper into a A7 pocket format, easy to take with you on a journey.

<sup>9</sup> Ingold, T., (2007), *Up, Across and Along in Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge pp. 72-103

<sup>10</sup> Emma Waterton & Laurajane Smith (2010) *The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage*, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 16:1-2, 4-15, DOI: 10.1080/13527250903441671

step by step. It was composed of small trails and pathways through the former clay-pits. As today some of these pits are reclaimed by nature, habitats that are exceptional for biodiversity arise and new relations between the pits and the houses are created. 'Sloepkes' originally made to easily reach the clay-pit from the brick workers houses give now access to huge natural internal areas.

Furthermore there were and still are small alleys between the front houses along the streets and the back-houses on the edge of the pits, tunnels under the street parallel to the Rupel, dugged to connect the first and second row of pits, and community streets in small settlements at the borders of the pits, where people live their lives.

With the decline of the brick manufacturing industry this subtle permeate tissue was obstructed here and there as some of these 'sloepkes' and tunnels were privatised.

In mapping them we discovered that there was no clear boundary between the public and the private, which enhanced unprompted encounters between locals and newcomers. At the same time their hierarchy in scale guaranteed a gradient of intimacy. This turns this fragile meshwork into a place of attachment appropriated in many different ways, attributing the human scale to this industrial landscape.

It made us change our focus from the unique industrial historical relicts towards a heritage, which is organically integrated into the life of the community and by this territorialized and anchored.

This implied a radical shift from heritage as an object to heritage as relationship.

Heritage was then not longer composed of isolated iconic artefacts but became closely linked with the entire cultural landscape of past and present in which the pathways and trails of natives and newcomers both human and non-human, and the tangible

and intangible are thoroughly entangled.

Community has to be considered here as a social creation and experience that is continuously in motion, rather than a fixed entity and description, a 'seemingly homogenous collective' defined by geography, religion, age, education, class, gender, ethnicity etc.

In the different proposals we suggested new structures, restoration projects and projects of adaptive reuse of the industrial sites closely entangled with the landscape, a revitalisation of the social, cultural and ecological meshwork by reopening carefully some of the privatised 'sloepkes', alleys and tunnels not as a plea to conserve all the historical material out of a romantic or nostalgic idea of keeping the houses in their poor materiality or idealising the lack of comfort for the inhabitants but out of the conviction that the intrinsic qualities of this fragile tissue embrace flexibility and can be the primary generator for this area including new housing and new services. The typology of a hierarchical build up mesh of collective spaces could serve as an archetypical form for the region to come to more nuanced and socially better accepted projects in contrast with the construction of high-rise buildings along the Rupel river, completely denying the subtle characteristics of the place, disneyfying the material remains of its industrial past by putting the accent on the attractiveness of historical artefacts that finally become empty shells ones restored and reused.

The danger with the current developments is that the cultural landscape of the Rupel region becomes highly urbanised, exclusively promoted as a touristic destination, overlooking the nameless protagonists.

Our viewpoint on heritage did not depend anymore on the different meanings of the individual historical relicts alone but rather on the intrinsic qualities

of this valuable human made cultural landscape in which the fabric of buildings and the landscape are closely entwined by a fragile social, cultural and ecological meshwork creating and enforcing the identity, quality and social cohesion of this place and region. Referring to daily life – enclosed by redundancy – we did not focus on the unique but on the recurrent.

To adopt this attitude we needed to widen our field of interest towards a broader context of human experiences and to develop methods beyond the narrow focus on the artefacts in which time and slowness were essential features.

With this publication we hope to inspire everyone who deals with this place, inhabitants, newcomers, leisure seeking tourists, policy makers, planners and building constructors.

### **Acknowledgments**

Special thanks go to my students Stefanie Gruyaert, May Lynn Doll, Floor Clinckemalie, Lisa Lu, Felix Schiettecatte, Sam Verschoren, Riccardo Buratti and Matthijs Sioen for their perseverance, their unflagging efforts to settle in into this fascinating region to try to discover the hidden meaning of its cultural heritage and finally for their inspiring projects.

### **Gisèle Gantois**

Academic Promoter and Book Editor

Architect MSc in Conservation

Lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture, International Master of Architecture, KU Leuven, campus Ghent, Belgium

PhD Candidate in Architecture

<sup>11</sup> She's doing research on what methods and tools can be found to explore, to detect, to unveil and to map the intangible of the tangible to develop cultural heritage and its context differently by understanding the actual cultural, social and ecological significance for the individual or the community today.

She is author (with Yves Schoonjans as co-author) of *The architect as mediator between the built heritage and the social construct*. (2014), *The Nameless Local*. (2015) and *Storytelling as strategy to envision the changing meaning of heritage from an object-focused approach towards an intertwined contextual one*. (2015)

PhD research project: *The Architect – Heritage Practitioner as Storyteller. Tracing the Ecological and Cultural Significance of rural built heritage of local importance in the framework of adaptive (re-)use*. Promoters Prof. Yves Schoonjans and Prof. Krista De Jonge.

# Changing responses to a challenged landscape

Flanders is undergoing complex economic, societal and spatial developments. Many local and global alterations have taken place such as new emerging economic activity, increased specialization and segregation of space, an aging population society, flows of migration, (super)diversity and the transformative digital revolution... imposing new expectations and demands on the built environment. Larger areas are transforming into post-industrial landscapes. All these phenomena present acute challenges for architects, planners and those professionals who are continuously dared with the redevelopment, regeneration, and renewal of the existing urban and landscape fabric. It presses them to update their intervention strategies and tactics.

A new generation of professionals is therefore needed where not only critical thinking, but also creative design competencies, sustainable articulation and trans-disciplinary communication as well as research skills are essential. The skills and competences taught in the education of architects, designers and urban planners, need to be more responsive to the changing societal and professional needs and have specific complexity because unlike the hard sciences, architecture and urbanism shape and reflect very specific characteristics of the regions in which they are practiced. The education of these professionals must therefore include knowledge of specific and necessary subject-related skills, but also, common and regional specific competences that will allow professionals to respond to society's changing needs within the built environment.

This book and exhibition show the interesting and intriguing results of a master dissertation design studio at the International Master of Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture, campus Sint-Lucas Ghent of the KU Leuven and lead by Gisèle Gantois as academic promoter. This studio is embedded in the two-year full English spoken programme Resilient and Sustainable Strategies that is concerned with the current theory and practice of architecture and sustainability.

The Brundtland report (United Nations, 1987) defines sustainable development as 'development, which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. The United Nations in 2005 referred to the 'interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars' of sustainable development as economic development, social development and environmental protection.

Translating these three pillars for sustainable architecture, they would entail: providing access to high quality and healthy living and working environments for all, finding ways to create socially sustainable environments at different scales and a wise use of natural resources. Technical considerations, together with more conceptual or strategic issues, are dealt with in this two-year program about architecture and sustainability.

Central in the program of the International Master of Science in Architecture is a critical reflection about architecture and its social, cultural or environmental role for society.

Based on a highly interdisciplinary learning process of integrated research and 'research by design', students are expected to determine a theoretical stance on current issues with particular emphasis on how aspects of sustainability, universal design, modest heritage, urban ecology and energy-efficient technologies may contribute to the development of more sustainable human settlements.

The Faculty of Architecture firmly believes that its programmes should take into account an internati-

onal reality. The aim is to proactively foster international awareness in all the participants through a wide range of initiatives. Participants shall learn to interpret and appreciate the local context from a wider multicultural perspective. Extending one's horizon means developing a more open perspective and a critical attitude, which in turn encourages participants to explore the boundaries of their discipline. Moreover it prepares students to act more responsibly in a globalised society and labour market.

The master dissertation design studio by Gisèle Gantois tackled an important region in Flanders, the Rupel Region exploring concrete societal issues. The group of students were highly international and by this at the start totally unknown of the local context of the project area. Coming from different origins they all looked at it in very different ways. The fact that they realised that the meaning of this complex area was not univocal was very important. Slowly they unravelled, layer after layer, its complex meanings and multi-layered realities. Multiplicity, simultaneity and creative adjacencies could be the words to describe best the characteristics of this changing environment. Different to past planning and design models, alternative approaches had to emerge. Many of the challenges in design cannot be met in a predestined way. Stereotyped interventions based on problem solving and blueprint thinking were avoided, without losing the grip on reality. On the contrary, in this studio new ways of analysing the existing, appropriating space, designing objects, defining spaces and restructuring urban areas seemed to look for alternative and creative solutions, based on what was already there. Those projects generate interesting and unique mappings and visions, possibilities and constructive solutions challenging future possibilities. The illustrated projects embody a high sensitivity and critical attitude towards the given context the students fully embraced.

Such live projects, often built on local stakeholders, embody a complexity and multi-layeredness. Grown out of daily life they are not protected by well-defined boundaries but make connections to a mul-

tiplicity of design problems in a collaborative and interdisciplinary way. They possess, at the same time, a determinate and indeterminate framework pushing the students, but also the teachers, out of their comfort zone. This contextual framework encourages the teasing-out of unforeseen skills and competences beyond the fixed expectations. This elicits both inspiration and commitment. Live projects address issues such as the future self of the student who is stimulated because he/she can make personal choices and decisions. This means that students become themselves a sort of critical agency not only in their own education but also in the future development of the discipline and society itself. Architectural schools therefore have a huge responsibility to encourage and nurture that potential.

*Kris Scheerlinck & Yves Schoonjans*

Yves Schoonjans is a Professor in architectural history and – theory at the University of Leuven (Department of Architecture), Belgium. He received a master of science in architectural engineering at the University Ghent (1984). From 1985 till 1995 he had a private architectural practice with Gilles Van Bogaert. In his PhD-study (An 19th century eclectic discourse – social and architectural strategies to cope with abundance and diversity – University Ghent, Belgium) he tackles the way how the theoretical discourse on eclecticism is constructed. The main focus of the research lies on the appropriation of theoretical notions and the recalibrations of the relation between form and meaning by different actors in the field of architecture in the recent and present period (19th to 21st century). He was involved as partner and lead-coordinator in different international programs (Erasmus, Mundus and ALFA) and participated in different projects, especially in Latin America. Within the academic management he was Head of the education-section ‘History and Theory’ from 2002 to 2008, program director of the International Master of Architecture (2008-2010), Vice Dean International Affairs (2013-2015). From October 2013 he became vice-chair of the Research Department and Campus Director.

Kris Scheerlinck studied Architecture (MSc., School of Architecture, Sint-Lucas, Ghent), Spatial Planning (PG., University of Ghent/KU Leuven), Urban Culture (PG., UPC Barcelona) and Urban Design (MSc., UPC Barcelona) and obtained his Ph.D. in Architecture and Urban Projects with Prof. de Solà-Morales and Prof. Ferrer as thesis directors (UPC/URL, Barcelona, Spain). For more than 15 years, he ran his own research and design practices in Ghent, Barcelona and New York, working on urban and architecture projects, interior, retail and exhibition design and ephemeral installations. He coordinated and ran design studios, workshops and taught theoretical courses in Architecture and Urban Design Programs at various institutions and universities in New York, Barcelona, Bratislava, Melbourne, Valparaiso,

Cordoba, Guayaquil, Cuenca, Havana, Addis Abeba, Ghent and Brussels. For the last 5 years he directed the International Master of Science in Architecture. He is currently Vice-Dean for Internationalisation and member of the Faculty Doctoral Commission at the Faculty of Architecture. He is Head of the Research Group “Urban Projects, Collective Spaces and Local Identities” at the Department of Architecture. He directs an international research project on depth configurations in urban projects, called Streetscape Territories and promotes related PhD projects. His expertise is on the analysis of public-private gradients in urban projects and their related models of accessibility, permeability and proximity and pronounces a critical discourse on territorial boundary delimitation in real life projects.



# A Region once Determined by Brickworks: the Cuesta Front along the River Rupel

The Scheldt estuary was during Roman times already a region where clay was processed for the production of roof tiles and thin bricks for a variety of building purposes. Whether the production of these tiles continued is hard to tell due to a lack of written sources and the difficulty of determining fired clay products. The real start of the brick production emerged in the 13th century thanks to a continued quarrel between the counties of Flanders and Hainaut. During the struggle for supremacy the count of Hainaut forbade the export of stone from the Tournai region via the river Scheldt to Flanders. Building projects not only in the county of Flanders, but also in the duchy of Brabant came to a halt. Amongst them was the erection of the Cistercian abbey of Saint Bernard nearby Hemiksem. As the Cistercian monks, with their continental network, gained mastery of using the best available technology for the management of their domains, brickworks were set up. The production of bricks and large floor tiles was at the time of the building of the monastery well established in the Cistercian abbeys of Boudelo and Dunes, both in Flanders. Bricks were made and the building could continue, cheaper than anticipated. To get the “proper” look of the Burgundian abbeys like Cîteaux and Clairvaux, the brick walls were plastered, stone lining was painted upon them and the whole was limewashed as to get a proper and divine white stone look. The scene was set for a steady growth. Especially the city regulations stipulating the use of roof tiles and the use of bricks for new buildings proved positive for the continued production of bricks along the

rivers Scheldt and Rupel. The monks rented their brickworks out. A great amount of bricks was ordered in the 16th century in the rebuilding process of Antwerp. Bold development schemes by Gilbert Van Schoonbeke needed a massive amount of bricks. Brickworks in Hemiksem, once deserted in the turmoil of the Eighty Years War, were reopened. Not only old brick works required much needed orders, a lot of new brickworks were opened as well, also in other villages.

A new boost to the steady growing brickworks came in the second half of the 19th century, when the Belgian government decided to strengthen Antwerp as their principal military fortification. Millions of bricks were needed to build a chain of forts around Antwerp. As a result new brick works were started. A continued need of bricks for engineering works (like bridges, stations), building of factories (with foundations of brick), a general boom in the building of dwellings for labourers, and a growing awareness campaign of farmers to invest in clean stables made sure that the production capacity could be sold. Cheap labour provided by women and children and a good transport network via rivers and canals held the overall production cost low and the profit margins high. To make sure that profits could even made higher, some brickyard owners started secondary business. Shipyards, mechanical engineering workshops, diamond cutting shops, slipper production, both at home and in shops, provided extra work, also in winter months when the brickworks hardly worked. This was a great management asset: it gave work and less poor relief benefits were asked. But the not so generous working conditions nevertheless caused unrest and trade unions and political parties as the Daensists and Socialists came to the region and caused unrest and Catholic reactionary movements.

Albeit World War One was an overall catastrophe, also for those who hadn't fled to Holland, the reconstruction effort from 1919 onwards caused a massive boom in the brickworks. Stricter school laws led to the general introduction of machines. Mechanization was introduced to speed up production and



to minimize costs. Other labour intensive activities were executed by women. Some brickworks, till then almost all family businesses, were converted into stock companies. But most remained old fashioned, so the crisis of the 1930's caused major difficulties, especially for the working force. Luckily, the aftermath of World War Two, again stimulated brick consumption. The global boost in buying power saw a massive demand of new housing throughout Belgium. Did the first crisis hit the workforce, the second crisis in the 1970's targeted also the yard owners. A lot of them hadn't invested properly and thoughtful in new technology, nor in cooperation between smaller brickworks. The old brickworks system along the river Rupel bore the brunt of the crisis and one after another had to stop production and close operations entirely.

The old and the new way of producing bricks continued for some time, the first at Noeveren (Boom), the second at the new plant of Wienerberger in Rumst. Only the latter remains, with a renewed use of the waterway to transport bricks. A very tiny production crew of only a few machine operators is needed, most others are used for warehousing duties. Robots and an almost entirely closed production cycle form, burn, dry and pile bricks up, ready for transport. The once omnipresent brickworks, transport lines, drying sheds have been demolished. Some clay pits, cut out of the cuesta from the river front onwards, have been refilled, often with noxious refuse of the (also) once thriving industry on the other side of the river Rupel.

On the sites of cleaned up kiln and drying areas new urbanization has found its way, new business and living development has already changed the scenery. Together with the reclamation of some ground by nature, the overall outlook of the former industrial landscape has altered enormously. Change and progress are a common factor in every corner of human activity. Unfortunately, change and progress in a former industrial landscape could erase all possible clues which give future generations a stepstone in reading and understanding the manmade landscape in which they live, work and relax. The variation of

heritage remains, scars in the landscape and overall development of those sites shouldn't result in a total erasing of all buildings and other related structures. It presents an opportunity to make an inclusive project in which heritage assets work together with local communities to foster education, sustainable tourism and living quality. To build this structure, one needs... bricks.

Harry van Royen  
Coordinator Heritage Rupel

