

HISTORICAL WAREHOUSES IN THE BRUSSELS CAPITAL REGION. Researching and preserving commercial and industrial buildings

Urban warehouses of the nineteenth-century are remarkable structures. As essential facilities in national and international trade and industry during that period, they were heralds of modernization: their presence signifying that a city was integrated into a commercial network made possible by evolving transportation technology. Today, these wonderful buildings are obsolete for their original purposes and therefore endangered. Preserving them has an important social value, in that it would maintain the distinctive look and ambience of former trading and manufacturing areas, and create a sense of continuity between the past and present. Brussels, as a commercial and manufacturing city, has a rich, diverse, and unique collection of old warehouses on its territory, which are worthy being preserved.

In the framework of the project 'Creating a typology of warehouses for Brussels and beyond', supervised by Ine Wouters and Inge Bertels, the American senior researcher Sara Wermiel was funded by Innoviris to study the Brussels warehouses during 5 months.

The main product of the research project is an overview of the typologies of the historic Brussels warehouses, which identifies the defining features of this type of building, both architectural and structural. The database of historic warehouses reveals that many historical industrial and warehouse properties have been renovated and re-purposed, however their preservation does not appear to be part of any systematic planning that incorporates historic preservation in redevelopment considerations. Indeed, the old industrial areas with the most historical industrial buildings – notably Sint-Jans-Molenbeek and Anderlecht – are districts where the Region's urban development pressures may be channelled. This could present opportunities for reusing old buildings. But it could also lead to the kind of general demolition and reconstruction, and insensitive alterations of existing buildings,

that have obliterated much of the urban fabric in the north section of the Pentagon and made the old port area unrecognizable for what it had been.

To present the research, to consider warehouses in various contexts and to discuss the results with professionals active in the field, an international study day on WAREHOUSES was organized in December 2012. Scholars Jens Aerts (BUUR and STeR*, BE), Sara Wermiel (USA) and Hans Bonke (NL) provided the theoretical background on harbour development and the position of the historical warehouses in Belgium and beyond. Maria Leus (PHL, NL), Nele Stragier (L'Escaut architects, BE) and Carl Verdickt (Verdickt & Verdickt architects, BE) discussed re-purposed warehouses in Flanders and Brussels.

Do you want to know more and detect which Brussels warehouses are on the list of protected monuments? Inge Bertels, Sara Wermiel and Ine Wouters published a full article 'Brusselse pakhuizen: een beladen toekomst' in the Brussels heritage journal Brussels Erfgoed (2013).

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FIG 1:
Urban warehouses in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek with characterising features: doors for loading goods, exterior pulley for raising and lowering goods, more wall to window area on the façade

FIG 2:
Study day BRUSSELS WAREHOUSES in December 2012

FIG 3:
Presentation Nele Stragiers from l'Escaut Architects at the study day

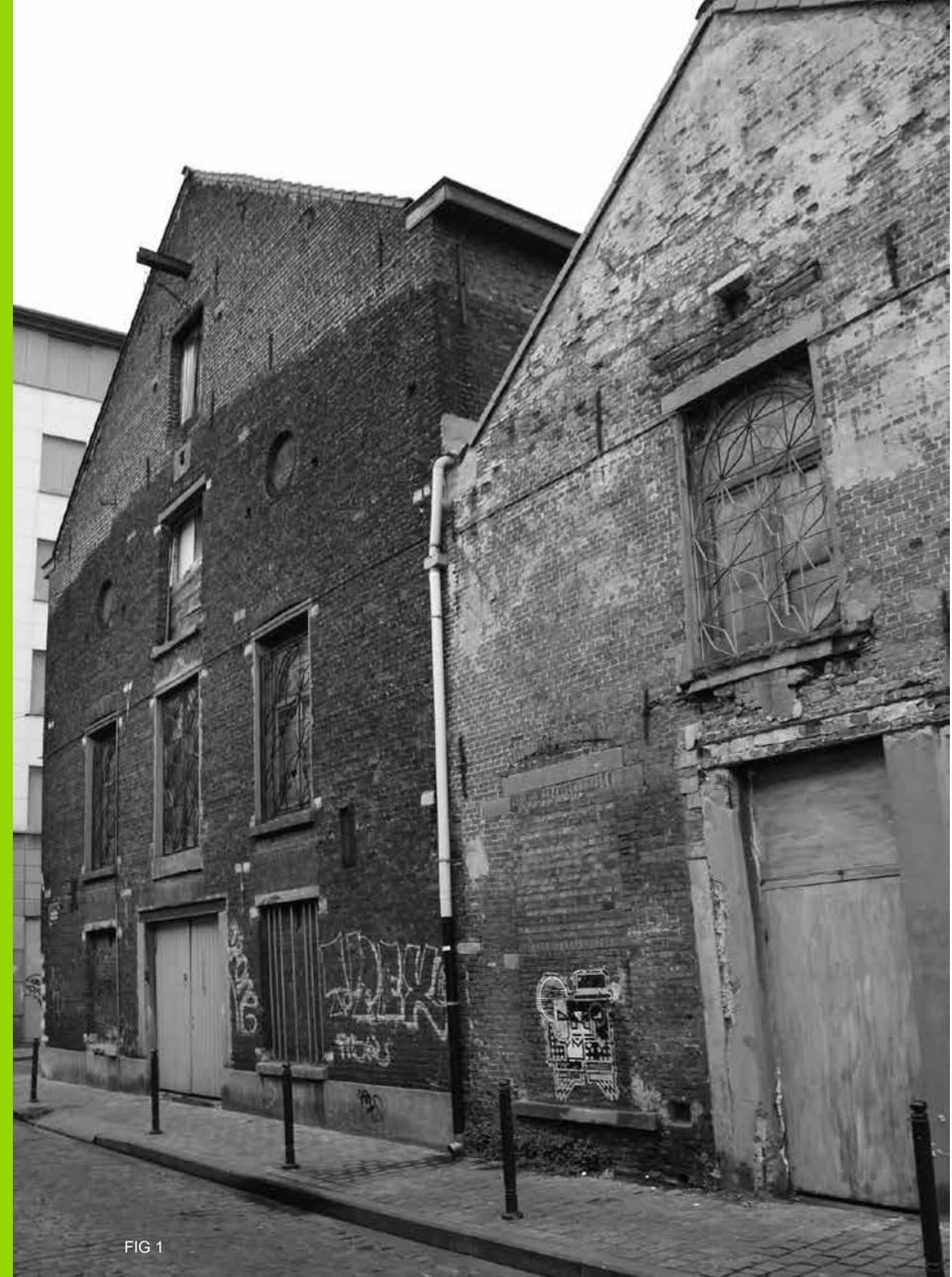


FIG 1



FIG 2



FIG 3