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Belgium's Choice Squares

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As a meeting place of streets, people, and ideas, the city square is an artistic expression of its time, changing over the centuries in accordance with available skills and aesthetic needs.

By dint of scale, decoration, and wholeness, Belgium's city squares are among Europe's finest. In its various incarnations, Belgium reinterpreted Italian, French, and German influences to create a quiet, refined architecture of its own. These structures inform its plazas.

And what about the people that history's centripetal force brought together in Belgium's squares? It was here that church and town officials met to plan celebrations. Here Guild members schemed against feudal authority and the Counts of Flanders. It was here that one of history's boldest scams took place: in Ghent's Friday Market, Jacob Van Artevelde declared the English king Edward III king of France, thereby permitting wool to be imported from England to feed his looms. And it is here that politicians tack up their posters for coming elections.

As a resolute searcher for the perfect square, I cite those in Belgium that, for me, most nearly approach the ideal.

Bruges

When the Zwin River silted up in the fifteenth century, the prosperous port of Bruges became inaccessible and fell on hard times. Hanseatic members met in Bruges's squares to discuss ways to keep merchant

I Friday Square at Ghent
Drawings by Patricia M. Browne

traders from abandoning their economically crippled town. As a result of their failure, the industrial revolution passed it by, and its ancient face was preserved. Thus, a medieval square, indeed a whole city, has come down to us virtually intact. It has joined towns such as Avila in Spain, Abidos in Portugal, and Sienna in Italy, which still recall the narrow, curving medieval townscape.

Bruges's cobbled square (also referred to as Grand' Place and *grote markt*) has a surfeit of Flemish heraldry: epic statues of past heroes, banners of the nine Belgian provinces waving in the North Sea breeze, people moving about day and night. After dusk, buildings are spotlighted, yellow beams melding into red-brown brick to create a soft, golden fairyland.

The dominating presence in this square is the Gothic belfry, a high edifice that all self-respecting Belgian towns built to symbolize their medieval power. The eight-sided tower rises twenty-eight stories and looks like no other in Europe. The belfry can be climbed for the view and to witness the clanking of the carillon machinery as its forty-seven bells toll the quarter-hour. Like a music box, a six-foot cleated drum activates each bell.

Opposite the belfry are guild houses with stepped gables. A dozen restaurants, their umbrella'd tables creeping onto the square, occupy the ground floors and provide a touch of modern Europe. In the last ten years, Bruges has



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2 Provincial banners and stepped gables on the *grote markt* in Bruges



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been discovered and exploited by the tourist industry. Accordingly, the *grote markt* is peopled by groups from all over the world lining up at the tourist office (centrally placed in the halles) and studying maps. Palaces, tanneries, and combined homes have been creatively redone to serve as hostleries.

If a European square had a Roman beginning, its present day shape (though not its architecture) would be based on the early forum. If it came from the Middle Ages, its contour would result from pragmatic need (the widening of a street for a market). If it originated in the Renaissance, it would be designed in an orderly and symmetrical way. Bruges's is one of the few authentically medieval squares in Belgium. Though others came earlier, their additions and "improvements" place them in the later Renaissance.

Veurne

Southwest of Bruges near the North Sea coast lies Veurne, the smallest town on my favored list. Its plaza is unified by its consistent Renaissance structures and their yellow, tan, and brown brick. The total use of this smallest of building materials provides a tactile sense not seen in other squares. Yes, bricks are laid in Flemish bond (alternating headers and stretchers in each course).

Guilds were the all-powerful craft associations that dominated Europe's economic life in the late Middle Ages. As they prospered, they raised imposing buildings for headquarters, display rooms, and warehouses. The guild houses on the square at Veurne were built later than those in Bruges. Their scrolled, Baroque gables toward the square indicate they are from the seventeenth century (for example, the Butchers' House).

3 Town hall (far left), nearby church, and parked cars on Veurne's cobbled plaza

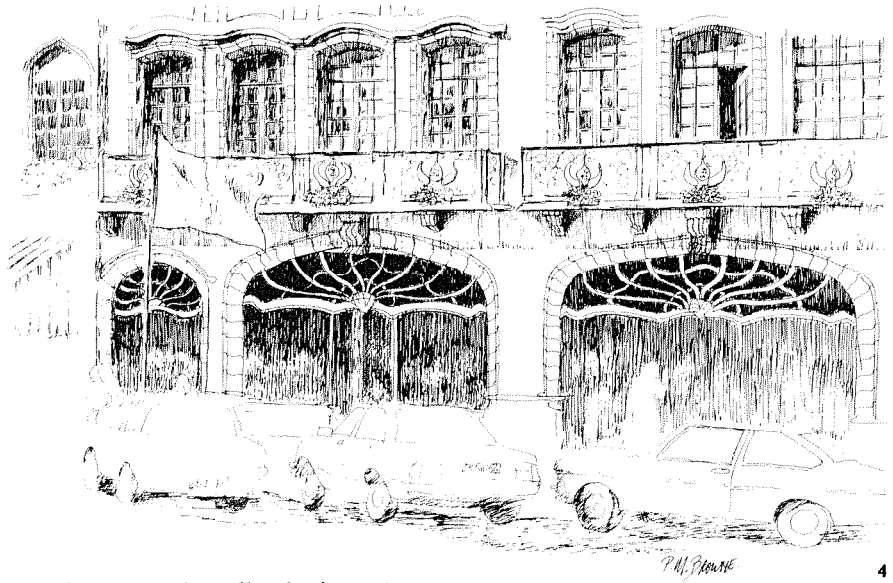
The Veurne town hall on the northwest corner is the square's architecturally most active building; its brick portico has perforated stone with arches, columns, and finials. Town halls and guild houses represent the best of Flemish architecture. Churches, on the other hand, employed less original building forms (German-influenced Romanesque, French-influenced Gothic). They were not constructed on the main squares but were placed nearby on their own small plazas.

Every year since the twelfth century, on the last Sunday of July, the busy commerce of Veurne's main square has been interrupted by the famous Procession of Penitents during which scenes from the Passion of Christ are performed.

Ypres

The quality of architecture surrounding a square is a determinant of its distinction. This is demonstrated in the market square at Ypres, a short distance southeast of Veurne. Every building, without exception, has a special character, from the Romanesque Butcher's (Guild) House to the immense Gothic Cloth Hall, from the wavy, wrought iron balconies festooned with flowers to the sensuous art nouveau store front in the turn-of-the-century style introduced by Belgian architect Victor Horta.

The thirteenth-century Cloth Hall is one of the largest buildings in the world, the equivalent of two complete New York City blocks. Occupying one corner of the square, its pointed and hooded



windows march endlessly down its facade. Small spires mark the four corners, and its massive central tower emphasizes its symmetry. Although it resembles a church, the Cloth Hall was designed to provide a market for the important cloth industry. This made Ypres rich and one of Flanders's important fourteenth-century towns. Destroyed during World War I, the hall, unbelievably, was rebuilt just like the original. Reconstruction is a skill with which the Belgians have had plenty of practice over the centuries.

Tournai

Most squares in Europe, and subsequently in Latin America, were used as markets. (This was never true in the United States). A typical European market square is the triangular one at Tournai in the southern, French-speaking section of Belgium. On holidays, colorful banners project from its second-

4 Store fronts on the grote markt in Ypres



5 Holiday guild banners and circus trucks in Tournai's town square

story windows. They represent the local guilds and display appropriate symbols: scissors for the tailors, cattle for the slaughteres, waves for the fishermen, jugs for the potters.

The second oldest city in Belgium (after Tongeren), Tournai reached its peak in the twelfth century, 200 years before Bruges. (In 100 B.C., it was a Roman settlement). The belfry standing in antique splendor on the south side of Tournai's fine square is the oldest in Belgium. Its medieval decorations include stone-carved quatrefoils, finials, crockets, towers, and turrets.

The five pyramidal spires of the twelfth-century Cathedral of Notre Dame a block away brood over the main square as if the church was directly on the square. Its front half, the nave, is massive, low, plain, and rounded Romanesque; its back, the chancel, is high, decorated, and pointed Gothic with stained glass and flying buttresses. The chancel, originally in the earlier Romanesque style, was replaced 50 years after it was built to keep up with the times. Apparently, money ran out before reconstruction could be completed.

Jugglers entertained in Tournai's square in the Middle Ages. Not much has changed: in September 1985, circus wagons took over the square in preparation for a show.

Antwerp

A city square results from the careful placement of structures and represents the most attractive urban ambience a society can create. This is illustrated in the prosperous,

cosmopolitan city of Antwerp in northern Belgium. As the fourth largest port (after Amsterdam, Hamburg, and New York) and the most important diamond center in the world, its main square is appropriately shaped like a diamond.

Like all of Belgium's squares, people made history here. It was in the *grote markt* of Antwerp that thousands of burghers planned their escape from the city during the Duke of Alba's trials of the heretics.

Antwerp's Renaissance-Baroque quality is due to its relatively late construction in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This produced less stepped gables (a medieval form) and more straight and scrolled rooftops. (It is a relief to enjoy a square without the cluttering of parked cars).

For two reasons, fifteenth-century Antwerp became the commercial leader of Europe. Not only was it the main beneficiary of Bruges's decline; it broke the power of the inhibiting guilds. Antwerp's success is reflected in its elegant Renaissance town hall, which occupies the entire west side of the square. Classical orders are properly scaled as they articulate the long range of windows, and the fine northern Renaissance tower could only have been built by a people secure in their world position.

In the plaza's center stands a fountain with the dynamic figure of the centurion Brabo. He is hurling the

dismembered hand of the giant, Druon, into Antwerp's River Scheldt as retribution for Druon's doing the same to boatmen who could not pay his tolls. As a piece of sculpture, it is riveting; as a component of the whole plaza, it relates to nothing else and is irrelevant.

Antwerp's square has something unique for a vintage European city: a low-cost housing project, which appears on the northwest corner and trails off into the old city. A contemporary version of medieval forms, these most "civilized" of social housing units are beautifully planned, the materials are effectively used (orange brick alternating with tan brick), and the detailing is creative (pediments fitted with trapezoidal windows). The design blends well into the rest of the square.

Brussels

As headquarters for the Common Market, NATO, and other international agencies, Brussels, with one million people, is the acknowledged capital of Europe. Its heady continental flavor is everywhere, in its museums, its restaurants, its theaters, its broad boulevards and, yes, its squares.

Almost lost among the many plazas is a small stunning one with more than the usual furnishings (monuments, fountains, fences). It is a few blocks south of Brussels's center and is called Place du Petit Sablon. It honors the sixteenth-century Dukes of Hoorn and Egmont, properly depicted in Spanish costume.



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(Flanders was ruled by Spain in the sixteenth century). This jaunty pair comprises the main segment of a wonderful sculptural assembly, which includes marble busts in green ivy niches. Below are carefully tended flower gardens with wide walkways around a pool. Defining the whole plaza is a beautiful cast iron railing interrupted by forty-eight bronze statuettes representing (by their clothes and tools) the various guilds of Brussels. Enclosing this garden square are pricey stone residences unified by their neoclassic restraint with only an occasional outbreak of Baroque flamboyance.

Because of its available seating, there is less movement and more tranquillity in Place du Petit Sablon

than in most Belgium squares. On Yom Kippur in 1985, for example, devout Jews wearing yarmulkes were somberly chatting on the benches.

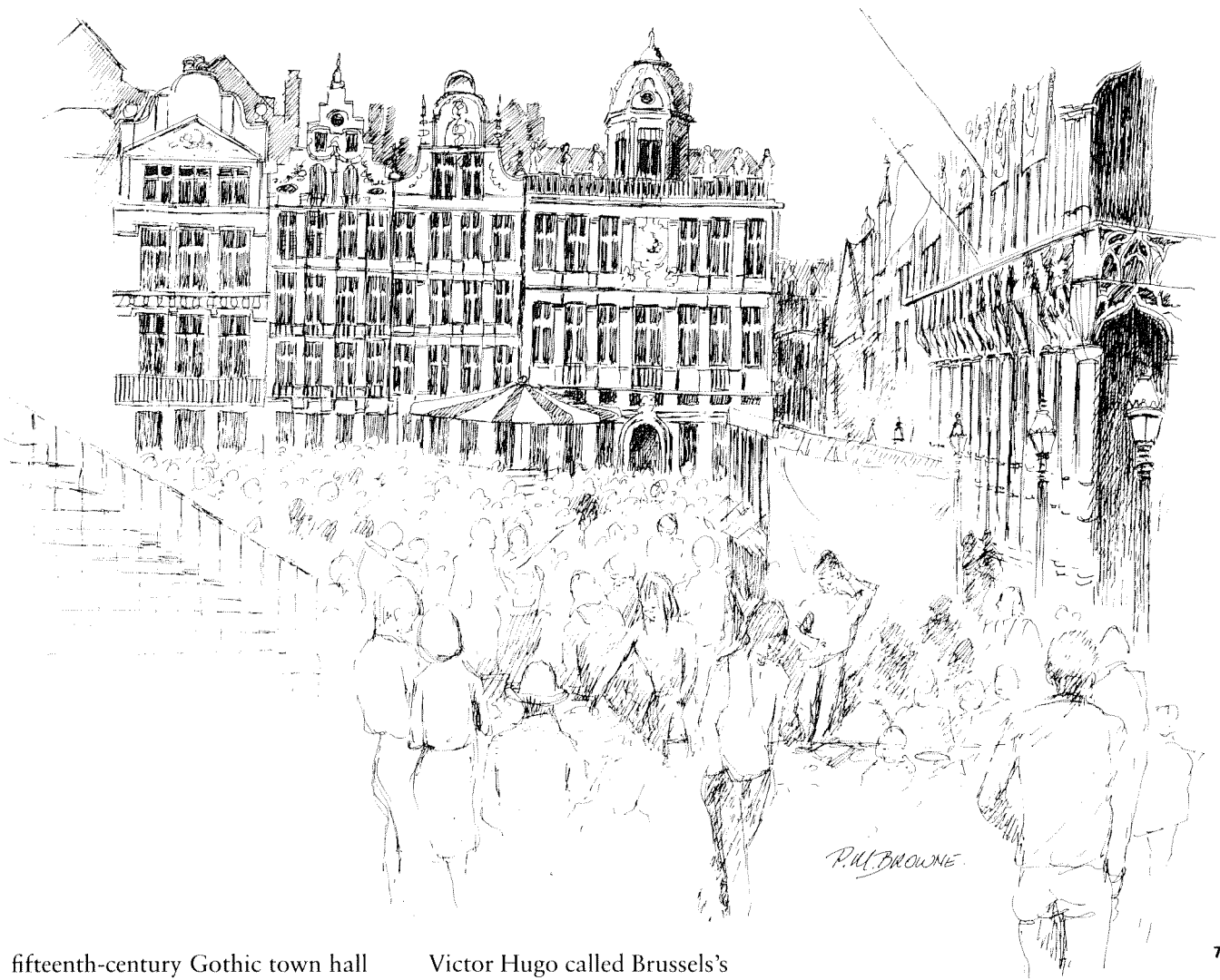
Brussels's Grand Place

The early main square did not always maintain its position as the focus of activity. Antwerp's commercial center moved down the Meir Boulevard away from its old market square. In Brussels, however, The Grand' Place continues to be the whirling center for all the city's happenings. On a bright sunny day in September 1985, for instance, bleachers were quickly assembled and the square was closed off so ticket holders could enjoy a lively renaissance show.

Aside from special events that crowd the Grand' Place calendar, there is a daily flower market and a Sunday bird market. Night lighting contributes to the Grand' Place's fantasy atmosphere, but city officials have been chary with power recently and the square is lit each night for only one hour.

Almost completely enclosed, Brussels's Grand' Place is approached down narrow streets that suddenly emerge into an urban space with the richest facades in Europe. Congruity is provided by the relentless decoration of these Gothic and Baroque buildings.

Peopled with sculptures of emperors, princes, dukes, counts, and mayors plus their relatives, the early



fifteenth-century Gothic town hall is the star of the square. Guild halls with their allegorical and representational figures are the supporting players. They were rebuilt in Baroque style.

Rebuilt? Yes, once again a Belgian town was wiped out, this time in 1695 by Louis XIV. With the exception of the town hall, all the buildings on the square were leveled. Miraculously, they were reproduced in just four years in their original shape, but this time in the later Flemish style. And what fun they had. The House of Boatmen, Number 6, has a gable that looks like the stern of a ship; the Brewers House, Number 10, has gilded beer hops climbing its columns.

Victor Hugo called Brussels's Grand' Place the most beautiful square in the world. Jean Cocteau said it was the richest theater on earth. In the face of these endorsements, dare I find fault with this most famous of European squares? In my opinion, its scale is flawed by too much mass and detail for the available open area. Its spatial impact is thus skewed by the two-dimensional quality.

While these seven plazas are my favorites, there are other excellent ones in Belgium: Brussels's Place Royale and its perfect symmetry, Kortrijk's fine World War I monument, Mechelen's with its traceried town hall, and the agreeable squares of Louvain and Liege.

6 The Dukes of Hoorn and Egmont in Brussels's Place du Petit Sablon

7 Saturday morning activity in Brussels's Grand' Place

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