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WE ARE HIRING!

Last update: 07/06/2022

We are currently looking for 3 PhD researchers and 3 postdoc researchers, within the framework of the EOS research project “**Construction History, Above and Beyond. What History Can Do for Construction History**”, directed by professors Michiel Dehaene (UGent), Dave De ruyscher (VUB, Tilburg University), Rika Devos (ULB), Johan Lagae (UGent), Stephanie Van de Voorde (VUB) and Ine Wouters (VUB). In total, 3 PhD positions and 4 postdoc positions are included in this project (the fourth postdoc mandate will be opened later in 2023).

Research project

The EOS research project will set up a dialogue (in terms of sources, methodologies, concepts and cognitive interests) between Construction History and three other fields of history, namely Colonial History, Legal History and Planning History. As such, the project sets out to strengthen the historical dimension of Construction History, while simultaneously demonstrating its relevance and potential to other fields and disciplines. The project overall concentrates on selected aspects in 19th and 20th -century building knowledge and building practice in Belgium and its former colony, with particular attention for tacit knowledge, in order to voice crucial yet underrated actors, sources and types of knowledge.

The individual trajectory of each researcher is embedded in this larger team, operating in the 3 universities (ULB, UGent and VUB). Intensive exchange and shared outcomes among team members are crucial for the success of the project. The positions are each situated in one of the 3 fields of dialogue: (1) colonial history – construction history; (2) legal history – construction history and (3) planning history – construction history. Each dialogue will be investigated by one PhD researcher and one postdoctoral researcher.

1. Construction History meets Colonial History. *Technologies, building materials and debris*

The dialogue between colonial history and construction history will evolve around the use of particular technologies, the ecologies of building materials and debris, and the division of labor at the construction site, in Congo as the former Belgian colony, in the 19th and 20th centuries. These topics gain particular significance in a colonial context, with metropolitan methods and guidelines most often being translated and reformulated to be applied 'overseas' because of differences in climate, of availability of skills, of knowledge and resources, and of different agendas and expectations linked to the unequal power relationships that characterize the colonial situation.

1a. The PhD research will focus on the role of a myriad of hitherto overlooked actors that helped shape the urban landscapes of emerging cities like Kinshasa, Lubumbashi or Matadi, starting from preliminary research done on the African activities of the Belgian firm Blaton-Aubert. The research looks in particular at the role of two large enterprises (the Kinshasa-based enterprise Safricas; the Italian-based company Astaldi), and some small contractors of non-Belgian origin which emerged in Congo from the interwar period onwards. Starting from the observation that Belgian colonial policies were often informed by a process of 'selective borrowing', the PhD student traces how these actors were involved in, or informed by, transcultural/ transimperial conversations on building in the tropics, in order to understand to what extent the practice of building was based on the explicit production of 'situated knowledge', and how it responded to more tacit forms of knowledge and implicit cognitive design principles as those at work in housing and hospital construction initiated by the colonial Service des Travaux Publics. Particular attention is given to the specificities of working with the broad range of sources present in colonial construction company archives, one particular outcome being an inventory of the Safricas archive, currently conserved by the still active company in Kinshasa.

This specific vacancy is issued by Ghent University (UGent) is co-supervised by profs. Johan Lagae (UGent) and Ine Wouters (VUB).

1b. The post-doc research project within this proposed dialogue between colonial history and construction history will investigate buildings, first through the assembly of their constituent materials, a perspective in line with a recent plea to consider new material histories of architecture and its related ecologies, and, second, through the division of labor involved. This implies particular attention to the way buildings are linked to their hinterlands, both close by and far away, which provided the resources necessary for their production. Fieldwork missions allow a concrete mapping of the material producers and material assembly of a select series of edifices and the key sites of their connected hinterlands (forests, quarries, mines, but also oil wells, laboratories, production plants, storage facilities) to trace to what extent building was informed either by proximity or by connections established during longue durée trade networks. Tracing the origin of such components and their resources, this research track also highlights the 'dark side' of the materials that made up colonial modernity: the extraction of resources fundamentally transformed certain sites with mines and quarries leaving scars in the Congolese landscapes that today form 'imperial debris'. Finally, the post-doc researcher engages in both archival and oral history work to gain a better understanding of the everyday realities of colonial building sites, and how the division of labor was organized in a context where syndicalist regimes were slow in the making.

This specific vacancy is issued by Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and is co-supervised by profs. Stephanie Van de Voorde (VUB) and Johan Lagae (UGent).

2. Construction History meets Legal History. *Settlement of conflicts, regulation and normativity*

The proposed dialogue between Legal History and Construction History will focus on the normativity of 'implicit' and 'practical' knowledge in building in Belgium, during the 19th and 20th centuries. This type of knowledge is often enforced through informal rules, in many segments of society. The field of Construction History holds promising opportunities to further disentangle normativity and informal rules, as they can be enforced in the case of harm or construction faults. The liability of architects, contractors and even workers was tested against 'rules of the trade', which were rules of implicit, practical knowledge. The sources that can be used range from instructional literature to case law, in which the liability of constructors is explored. These sources shed light not only on the appraisal of 'rules of the trade' but also on how legal practitioners categorized 'practical knowledge'.

2a. The PhD project in the dialogue between legal history and construction history will investigate cases of liability of architects, contractors and construction workers. The main research questions relate to the assessment of practical knowledge in cases of liability and negligence, and to the differences between the actors involved (i.e. construction professionals versus legal practitioners). The sources used will be instructional guidebooks, published case law, legislation, and archival sources (courts of appeal of Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels). Also less explored archives of associations dedicated to expertise and arbitration can play a crucial role, like the archives of the private organization Association Belge des Experts (holding reports on court and arbitration cases) or the Chambre d'Arbitrage et de Médiation (archival pieces on reports and sentences, with references to court cases as well, since the 1960s). One part of the research will cover 'expertise' in these cases, looking into who qualifies as an expert and why. In relation to this, expert reports are expected to reveal how the rules of the trade interacted with the legal rules, as the experience in drawing up reports for courts requires a minimal degree of acquaintance with legal categories and jargon.

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2b. The post-doc study in the dialogue between Legal History and Construction History explores the types of normativity as found in instructional literature for construction professionals. As such, this research will link up not only with recent developments in Legal History, but also engage with the larger knowledge gaps identified in this project by assessing not only the relation between different types of knowledge engaged in normativity, but also the relations between the actors involved – both professional builders and professional legal actors – and the untapped sources to assess this normativity, including their technical and legal challenges. Legal practitioners and construction practitioners produce very different types of documents, from different viewpoints, in different 'languages'. How do they interact and integrate the insights of the other field? How can they be understood by the other field and were these sources accessible and used? Do they reflect the standard of building? How and when does practical knowledge turn into a normative set of (implicit or explicit) rules or guidelines? These issues are tested through case studies in the archives of construction companies, such as the private archives of the Blaton archives and Entreprises Louis de Waele.

This specific vacancy is issued by Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and is co-supervised by profs. Rika Devos (ULB) and Dave De ruysscher (VUB, Tilburg University).

3. Construction History meets Planning History. *Development, maintenance and repair*

The dialogue between urban planning history and construction history will focus on the specific demands produced by the process of metropolitan transformation in the 20th century, both in the formation and expansion of the urban agglomerations of Brussels, Antwerp and Liège during the interbellum period and the *Trentes Glorieuses*. This sub-team studies the construction industry's response to the specific demands of remodeling the urban geography and its building stock and the ensuing relationships between contractors, architects and emerging developers. It analyses both the local interaction of these actors as well as their organization in professional networks.

3a. The PhD study focusses on the specific demands produced by the process of metropolitan transformation in the 20th century, both in the formation and expansion of the urban agglomerations of Brussels, Antwerp and Liège during the interwar period and the *Trentes Glorieuses*. The context of the study is shaped by the construction industry's response to the specific demands of remodelling the urban geography and its building stock and the ensuing relationships between contractors, architects and emerging developers. It analyses both the local interaction of these actors as well as their organization in professional networks.

More specifically, the study explores the relationship between pioneering activity in the fringe and the remodelling of the urban core. From previous research at UGent we know that the same actors engaged in the development of greenfield development were also active in projects aimed at densification and retrofitting of the existing city, bringing not only specific development models but also specific institutional and technical capabilities. The doctoral track looks at three configurations in particular: (1) The role of contractors in building large metropolitan programs, starting from the fringe (e.g. Van Riel & Van den Bergh in Antwerp); (2) The emergence of specific development groups in Brussels producing some typical components of the post-war city (supermarkets, petrol stations, large-scale apartments); (3) The public-private development coalitions that combined investment in infrastructure with the 'renewal' of the urban core in Liège.

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3b. The post-doc research project within this dialogue between planning and construction history will study the complex response to aspects of maintenance, repair and refurbishment of housing within already urbanized landscapes. The research retraces specific development-contracting firms as well as niche and secondary players delivering highly specific services. The track documents three areas of activity in particular: (1) the subdivision of the existing housing stock in smaller units; (2) the role of local contractors in small-scale redevelopment and densification projects within a fragmented property market; (3) the development of technical expertise addressing specific forms of building failure and upgrading in light of new technical standards and patterns of use. While these practices are hard to document systematically, the intersection of a planning historical and construction historical lens is particularly pertinent. Through the scanning of technical studies on specific building failures and material deterioration, but also research on, for instance, acoustic performance of partitioning walls, attic renovation, retrofitting of utilities, or upgrading indoor comfort, this track builds a preliminary archive of cases and practices. A selection of cases is subsequently studied through the concrete dossiers that can be found in municipal archives as part of the application for building permits (which most of the time include both original building applications and applications for refurbishment, redevelopment, demolition etc.)

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Profile

The requirements for each position (e.g. degrees and expertise) are specified in the online vacancies (see links below). The common requirements for all positions include:

- fluent passive knowledge of both Dutch and French. Attention: this is a binding requirement as it is necessary for archival research;
- a B2 level in English;
- a passion for research in these domains, including archival research;
- good editing skills, to be demonstrated by a sample of writing (e.g. a copy of the MA thesis, a research paper and/or a chapter from the PhD dissertation);
- good competences in teamwork and good social skills;
- an interest in participating in international congresses.

Specifically for the PhD positions: Also MA students graduating in the academical year 2021-2022 are welcomed. Researchers (assistants and other) holding a mandate over a total (cumulated) period of 12 months (365 days) cannot apply.

Positions

All positions are funded by a 4-year EOS research project and are offered as a bursary position (for the PhD research) or as a research contract (for the postdoc research), following the standards of the university that issued the specific vacancy. The project additionally covers expenses related to research visits, participation in conferences, publications, etc. as well as running costs. The researchers will benefit from the open academic environment uniting 3 leading Belgian universities. Each researcher will benefit from the guidance of two co-supervisors, the direct interaction with the PhD/postdoctoral researcher working on the same dialogue, and the interaction with the full team.

The researchers will engage in educational activities of the receiving departments. These activities can cover the guidance of students in exercises, following up MA thesis, etc. following the needs of the department and the skills of the researcher. The amount of hours will not exceed the limits set by FNRS (ULB) or FWO (UGent and VUB).

You'll be offered a full-time PhD-scholarship or research contract, for 12 months (extendable up to max. 48 months, on condition of the positive evaluation of the research activities), with planned starting date between 01/10/2022 and 31/12/2022.

Apply

Interested candidates can apply ONLINE. For each position, a different vacancy is issued (please note: you can only be hired for the position you have applied; it is possible to apply for more than one position).

Please follow these links:

- 1a) [PhD in colonial/construction history](#) (July 4 2022)
- 1b) [Postdoc in colonial/construction history](#) (June 30 2022)
- 2a) [PhD in legal/construction history](#) (July 4 2022)
- 2b) [Postdoc in legal/construction history](#) (June 30 2022)
- 3a) [PhD in planning/construction history](#) (July 4 2022)
- 3b) [Postdoc in planning/construction history](#) (June 30 2022)

For each position, the application file needs to contain the following documents:

- Motivation letter (in English, max. 500 words), mentioning also the contents of the application file;
- *Curriculum vitae* with list of publications if available;
- Copy of your MA diploma and PhD diploma (if already obtained)
- A sample of writing: a digital copy of your MA thesis, a research paper (preferably individual work) and/or a chapter from the PhD dissertation), in Dutch, French or English);
- Annexes when relevant (publications, award certificates, etc.)

Applications need to be submitted online no later than June 30 2022, (for postdoc positions) or July 4 2022, (for PhD bursaries). After pre-selection based on the application file (mid-July 2022), possible candidates will be invited for an interview. Interviews are planned from August 22 2022 onwards, on invitation, and the results will be communicated soon after.

Start of the mandate: between October 1 and December 31 2022.

Contact for more information:

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