XIV International Economic History Congress, Helsinki 2006, Session 23

The economic situation and its influence on building and re-building work in Bruges during the 16th-18th centuries

Heidi Deneweth, doctorandus, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

During the 14th and 15th centuries Bruges was one of the most important commercial and financial centres in Western Europe, as well as being a major producer of textiles and other luxury products. In 1477 there were an estimated 42,000 inhabitants, living in 8,600 houses. At the end of the 18th century, Bruges was still the fifth largest city in the Southern Netherlands, but in European terms it was now only ranked as a medium-sized settlement. By 1796 its population had fallen to 31,319 souls, making use of some 6,600 different buildings, of which 5,720 were houses. These statistics indicate that between 1500 and 1800 both the number of inhabitants and the number of buildings decreased by about 25%. This decrease was not linear, but was subject to peaks and troughs. Nor were the changing trends of habitation uniform in the different parts of the city. While the population fluctuated repeatedly between 38,000 and 28,000 inhabitants, the surface area devoted to residential property remained much the same. There was only a limited amount of geographical redistribution between existing residential zones and open land. Consequently, the residential quarters of the city must have experienced a certain degree of 'elasticity' in terms of available accommodation. In this discourse we will examine how the interaction between private housing, economic climate, socio-cultural developments and the changing urban landscape all influenced the building sector. This information is based upon current research into the living and ownership patterns exhibited by three blocks of buildings in Bruges, each with a different social composition. Exact figures are not as yet available for the whole of the city.

1. The demolition prohibition of 1499 encourages the building sector to invest in renovation instead of new building.

During the final decade of the 15th century Bruges was confronted in a relatively short period with the emigration of nearly 25% of its population. This resulted in a large number of unoccupied houses. These developments were a direct consequence of acute military and political problems, which in turn triggered economic decline and hardship. In 1492, the ecclesiastical domain of Proosse, which exercised seigniorial rights over minor judicial enclaves in urban Bruges, announced a ban on the demolition of houses in order to preserve (as far as possible) the value and integrity of its property. A similar measure was adopted by the city authorities in 1499 and new planning regulations were also introduced, designed to make Bruges more attractive to foreign traders. Demolition permits for the city centre were only granted if there was a definite promise to rebuild on the same site. A more flexible approach was adopted for properties in outlying districts or along minor streets. The ban on demolition, combined with the fact that the population never returned to its 15th century level until well into the 19th century, meant that the building industry in Bruges was forced to concentrate more on renovation than on construction.

2. Contrast between private houses and rented houses

Many property owners found ingenious ways to circumvent the ban on demolition. Richer citizens, such as senior city officials, leading merchants, guild masters, etc., took advantage of

this period of demographic decline – with its surplus of vacant premises and its stagnating property prices – to extend their own already lavish residences. The houses on either side could be 'absorbed', while buildings to the rear could be turned into stables, workshops, servant's quarters, etc. The plots of land involved in transactions of this kind were later maintained at their full size (irrespective of demographic fluctuations), since they were expected to reflect the affluence and social status of their new owners. This was not the case with rented houses for less wealthy craftsmen and day workers. These were frequently combined and then re-divided to reflect the changing rhythm of demographic trends. The necessary building works often involved little more than opening (or closing) a single door between the houses on each floor. This merging of two or more houses allowed owners to avoid the problems of dereliction associated with unoccupied property, yet at the same time made it easy for them to restore the old situation when the demand for accommodation increased.

3. Economic changes lead to shifts in the property market, with knock-on effects for the building sector.

The social composition of the population in Bruges underwent a major change in the 16th century. This was the result of economic change and fluctuating patterns of population movement.

1. Although Bruges remained for much of the 16th century a complementary trading and harbour city alongside Antwerp, most of the international traders and many of the city's leading merchant families moved to the new commercial metropolis on the Scheldt. They were followed by many of the master craftsmen from the luxury goods sector. The growing purchasing power of Antwerp during the second half of the century also acted as a pull-factor for craftsmen from many other trades. This exodus led to a falling demand for self-owned houses in Bruges, particularly in the middle and upper sections of the accommodation market.
2. At the same time, the rapid decline of purchasing power in Bruges during the final quarter of the 16th century led to the impoverishment of the city's middle class, as a result of which many families were forced to sell their homes to survive. This further depressed the market for self-owned houses, but increased demand for the better type of rented property.
3. During the 16th and 17th centuries Bruges acted as a magnet for a large group of less prosperous textile workers, who were fleeing from the almost continual violence of war in Southern Flanders.

These three trends continued to be felt far into the 17th century and explain why only 26% of the inhabitants of Bruges owned their own homes in 1667. In 1583 the level of home ownership had stood at 34%, and the figure was almost certainly higher during the early and middle decades of the 16th century. This concentration of ownership was harmful in the long run for the renovation sector of the building industry, since the owners tended to invest in renovations to their own homes, but not in the renovation of the more numerous properties which they rented out to others. Often renovation work on rent houses was only carried out as a last resort, usually under pressure from the owners of neighbouring houses. This situation changed slightly after 1634, when a system of grants was introduced to encourage the more rapid replacement of old wooden gables (the system was used mainly by owner-occupiers and by the owners of rent houses in the higher price class). Renovation work was an important barometer of the economic climate. If economic prospects were good, previously postponed

renovation schemes were quickly revived and new ones were developed. If the economic outlook was poor, planned renovation works were often amongst the first projects to be cancelled.

4. New construction in the 17th century

The second and third quarters of the 17th century saw a relatively large increase in the amount of new building. This was related to wider changes in the urban landscape. The construction of a defensive rampart system with bastions, the expansion of the Trade Basin and (above all) the development of the large abbey-held properties all provided additional employment for the building sector. These large-scale works necessitated the demolition of a few hundred cheap rent houses. Because the economic situation was improving and the population was once again growing, the owners of the houses were prepared to invest in new rent houses elsewhere in the city. Rising demand and rising rents guaranteed them a good rate of return.

5. A declining building sector in the 18th century

As a result of new patterns of trade caused by the transfer of the Low Countries from Spanish to Austrian rule, combined with a crisis in the textile sector and a general decline in population in the cities of the Southern Netherlands during the first half of the 18th century, the demand for residential houses decreased to such an extent that property prices fell by an average of between 30 and 50%. New building came to an almost complete standstill. Because there was no comparable fall in rents, most owners tried to hold on to their rented properties for as long as possible. When the economy temporarily improved during the third quarter of the century, a number of richer citizens in the city centre took advantage of the situation to reinvest in their own homes. In particular, they carried out renovation works using the latest – and most fashionable – architectural trends from France. Unfortunately, most of the city's other buildings were simply left to decay. When the German traveller, Georg Forster, visited Bruges in 1790, he commented ruefully that he had searched in vain for any trace of the great trading empire which had provided 14th century Europe with all its finest luxury products.