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Dobbels, Jelena; Bertels, Inge; Espion, Bernard; Wouters, Ine

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A business-historical analysis of Entreprises générales Henri Ruttiens (1878-2000)

Jelena Dobbels, Inge Bertels & Ine Wouters
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

Bernard Espion
Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

ABSTRACT: In the past years, the emergence and development of the profession of Belgian general contractors has been researched increasingly. Although international research already indicated the relevance of additional case studies, this could hardly be realized for Belgian general contracting companies due to the limited availability of archival material. This was recently countered by the discovery of several (partly preserved) contractors’ archives in Flanders and the Brussels-Capital-Region. This paper therefore analyzes the Brussels-based general contracting company Entreprises Générales Henri Ruttiens et fils (1878-2000) from a broad business-historical perspective. By embedding this case in existing literature on the longitudinal professionalization of Belgian general contractors, the paper not only gives insight into the history of this specific company but also in general trends in the Belgian general contractors’ profession.

KEYWORDS: 19th-20th centuries, Belgium, General Contractors, Business History, Contractors’ Archives

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, general contractors have increasingly come to the foreground in historical research on the construction sector. International research captured the rise of these general contractors in different countries (Ferguson and Chrimes 2013, Wermiel 2006) and furthermore focused on specific cases of general contracting firms to draw up biographies (Ferguson and Chrimes 2013, Wermiel 2006), discuss specific projects (Piaton et al. 2012), focus on the innovative application of materials and techniques (Barjot 2006), etc.

In Belgium, research mainly focused on the rise and development of general contractors, as construction actors that gradually became responsible for the organization and execution of construction projects. In the Belgian context, they emerged in the nineteenth century and started a professionalization trajectory from the 1870s onwards (Dobbels, Bertels and Wouters 2016). Due to the limited availability of archival material from general contractors’ companies, this research was only to a very limited extent supplemented with specific case studies (e.g. Dumoulin 1992, Verwee 2009). However, the discovery of the company archives of Blaton - a Brussels’ contractor originating in the nineteenth century and still existing today – initiated research on specific construction projects executed by Blaton (Devos 2017) and on the company’s period of establishment (Espion 2017).

Recently, the existence of many other (partly preserved) contractors’ archives in Flanders and the Brussels-Capital region was revealed (Dobbels 2017), enabling more case study research. This cannot only offer more insight into the history of specific contractors’ firms, but furthermore can provide relevant information about the overall general contractors’ profession, when placed in a broad business-historical context.

This paper therefore approaches one of these contracting companies, the Brussels-based Entreprises Générales Henri Ruttiens et fils (1878-2000), from such a wider perspective by analyzing the company archives. These were donated to the Belgian State Archives in 2000, are exceptional in size (290 meters) and contain archival material from the entire life span of the company including the (financial) functioning, equipment, executed projects, correspondence with other construction actors and clients, the staff, publicity, etc. The analysis focusses on the establishment as a (general) contractor, the relation between contracting and general contracting projects (including the coordination of the entire project as well) and the interaction with other building actors, and is embedded in literature on the longitudinal professionalization of Belgian general contractors (1870-1970). Therefore,
this case not only sketches the development of the studied general contracting company but also offers insight into the broader tendencies in the history of Belgian general contractors.

2 ESTABLISHMENT AS A ‘GENERAL’ CONTRACTOR (1878-1900)

When researching the emergence of general contractors, it becomes clear that many general contractors started as contractors, specialized in a specific building trade, and gradually expanded their activities. It is often stated that mainly masons, carpenters and stone-masons made this transition to general contracting, because of their training, technical insight and important role in the construction process (Carvais 2012, 478. Cooney 1956, 168. Wals 2001, 63). Masons and carpenters could indeed carry out a large part of construction themselves, and through experience they often had the insight and contacts to outsource and coordinate the other building tasks. But the current analysis indicates that contractors from other building branches also took the step towards general contracting. In 1878, the tiler Henri Ruttiens established his own contracting company in Rue de la Poste in Schaerbeek, Brussels. Like many other contractors’ companies, Henri Ruttiens established himself as a sole proprietor. Because there were different regulations for sole proprietors and trading companies (such as registration requirements on tax documents), periods of sole proprietorship are often only scarcely documented in terms of archival material (Vancoppenolle 2013, 37). In addition, company archives are often not fully preserved. Therefore, the preserved nineteenth-century archival material on Henri Ruttiens’ period of establishment is quite exceptional and valuable. An analysis of these archival sources shows how Henri Ruttiens evolved from tiling to general contracting. In the early years, Henri Ruttiens combined tiling with small contracting projects such as building porches as annexes to existing houses, demolishing greenhouses, building ice cells, repairing and installing toilets, cesspools and sewers, etc. (SAB, Company Archives Henri Ruttiens, RDC 1899-1905, 12-13, 24-25, 26-27). Such sanitary-related construction projects were characteristic of the time. Like many other European cities, from the 1850 onwards Brussels underwent transformation plans that included sanitation projects such as the construction and adjustment of sewer systems. This involved both large infrastructure works as well as smaller modifications and connections to existing buildings (Joyce 2003).

Over the first ten years, Ruttiens mainly gained experience with such small projects. From the 1890s onwards, he acted as a general contractor, taking on the construction of complete houses. These building projects are richly documented in the firm’s invoices and correspondence and included all steps of the construction process such as constructing the building shell, installing utilities (electricity, gas, water), plumbing, constructing floors, ceilings and chimneys, joinery (such as stairs, interior doors, shutters, timber paneling), including finishes such as locks and a doorbell. For such large projects, it was important to make clear agreements with the clients about what was (not) included. Therefore, in 1930 Ruttiens for instance mentioned in an offer that “ce travail comprend l’entreprise générale, sauf la peinture, l’électricité, l’agencement de l’étalage et la modification au chauffage” (SAB, Company archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres 1930-1931, 233). If these construction projects included demolition - for instance of an annex or of the existing building - it was stipulated that the demolition materials became the contractor’s property.

When placed within existing literature on the professionalization of general contractors, this case shows how general contractors operated at the end of the nineteenth century. These construction actors combined smaller and larger construction works. The execution of these projects was not always based on detailed design plans, definitely not for the smaller projects, that were often carried out based on the contractor’s own sketches and experience. Indeed, a lot of Ruttiens’ offers dating from this early period do not refer to designs but contain small sketches, that seem to be made by Ruttiens himself. (Fig. 1)

For larger building projects, there often was a design provided. In this period, the tasks of architects and general contractors were not yet legally demarcated, so there were many architect-entrepreneurs who combined both professions and were thus responsible for the design as well as for the execution of construction projects. Ruttiens sometimes made the designs, but sometimes also cooperated with architects. The company archives do not provide any indications for possible interactions with engineers for this period. It
seems that Ruttiens himself was then responsible for the technical calculations. For instance, Ruttiens’ orders to material suppliers include drawings that mention the dimensions and proportions of materials such as iron beams. (Fig. 2)

Since the company only employed a number of workers and did not have an in-house engineer – in contrast to other, larger contractors’ firms such as Blaton (Devos 2017, 396) or Société Belge des Bétons for instance (Verwee 2009, 34) - it can be concluded that Ruttiens made these calculations himself.

As a general contractor, Henri Ruttiens’s firm was mainly concerned with the complete execution and coordination of construction projects, either by doing it entirely on their own or by cooperating with subcontractors. Indeed, Ruttiens often did the structural work himself and, depending on the project, worked with subcontractors as Vandergeeten (slater or couvreur), Van Haaren et Fils (asphalt works), Van Beneden (smithing), Verheyden (plumbing), Louis De Waele S.A. (parquet flooring), etc. (SAB, Company Archives Henri Ruttiens, RDC 1899-1905, Lettres 1929-1930). There was a longstanding cooperation with these contractors, for which Ruttiens also regularly acted as a subcontractor for mainly masonry and tiling works. It would be an inaccurate simplification to state that Henri Ruttiens worked with a lot of subcontractors, solely because he had a limited workforce at that time. The analysis rather shows there was longitudinal interaction among a large number of contractors from the same region - in this case Brussels - who acted as general contractors and executed as many construction tasks as possible themselves, and in addition appealed to subcontractors whenever necessary, due to a lack of expertise, time or workforce in their own contracting firm. When cooperating with subcontractors, the general contractor was responsible for the coordination and follow-up of the project. Ruttiens for instance reprimanded subcontractors when their work was not completed in time or when it was of insufficient quality, because he had the final responsibility for the project towards the client. (SAB, Company Archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres, 1930-1931, 8)

3 EVOLVING JOB RESPONSIBILITIES OF GENERAL CONTRACTORS

In 1900 a generational change occurred when Henri Ruttiens’ son Jean, trained as a technical draftsman, took over the company. At that moment, the link with the original tiling activity disappeared and the (general) contracting business became the main activity of “Jean Ruttiens, entrepreneur de maçonnies et entreprises générales”. (Fig. 3) In 1929 he purchased a building plot in Avenue Max Roos 40-42 in Schaerbeek, where a house and office building were constructed according to his design plans. From 1930 onwards, the contracting company was located here (Jacquemin, Six and Vancoppenolle 2001, 450).

As in the early years, Jean Ruttiens still regularly combined the design and execution of construction projects. Although general contractors, architects and - to a lesser extent - engineers already attempted to redefine their (relative) position in the construction industry from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, this only resulted in a modified legal
framework in the 1930s, listing their ‘new’ responsibilities. Architects became solely responsible for the design aspect, when in 1936 and 1939 respectively the degree, and the title and profession of architects were legally defined. These laws prohibited the combination of design and construction projects in one person or office (Verpoest 1984, 46). As a result, contractors could no longer take on design tasks. Nevertheless, invoices show that Jean Ruttiens' contracting firm was still regularly paid for designing various construction projects and for applying for the necessary building permits. But accounting records indicate that the company - taken over in 1935 by Jean Ruttiens' son Henri - did not draft (all) the plans itself and often called on Henri's father-in-law, architect Léon Smets, for these designs. Ruttiens' contracting company was not equipped with an in-house architect. As an accomplished general contractor, Ruttiens 'outsourced' the design, not to a subcontractor but to a 'sub-architect', and made profit on these services. For instance, a client paid Ruttiens 800 francs for designing plans, while Ruttiens outsourced this to Smets for only 300 francs (SAB, Company archives Henri Ruttiens, Factures 1936-1938, 300). Although Ruttiens also cooperated with other architects such as Josse Franssen, André and Jean Polak, there was a lot of cooperation with Léon Smets, probably because of the family ties. The correspondence also shows that both building actors kept each other informed of potentially interesting projects. Smets for instance informed Ruttiens that Mr. Van Bellinghen had bought a house that had to be converted, according to plans made by Smets. Ruttiens wrote to Van Bellinghen in order to introduce himself as a suitable contractor and to offer some references. Later correspondence shows that Ruttiens was assigned the project (SAB, Company archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres, 1931-1933, 390).

Based on the legal framework that was updated in the 1930s, architects became responsible for the design and general contractors for the execution of projects. The architect was compensated by the client for making a design, and he defended the interests of his client towards the contractor. This included the supervision and inspection of the construction project. An analysis of Ruttiens' company archives indeed clarifies that the architect did the follow-up of the construction project and the construction site. Ruttiens regularly corresponded with architects on (adjustments for) offers for construction projects, the follow-up of the construction sites, scheduling appointments to monitor the progress of these projects, taking decisions regarding the proposed building materials, the subsequent payment, etc. (SAB, Company Archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres, 1928-1929, 93, 1929-1930, 15)

Indeed, part of the architect’s supervision was the follow-up of the client’s payments to the contractor. The contractor’s offer for a construction project mentioned the payment arrangement. Smaller (repair) projects were paid at the end, when the works were executed. Also for projects executed on time and materials basis (“en régie”), payment was made when the work was done, according to the hours worked and the materials used.

However, for larger (general) contracting projects - that took longer to execute - usually interim payments were made when certain construction phases were completed. Ruttiens often mentioned the following moments for interim payments in his offers: after building the first floor, finishing the roof, plastering, placing the doors and upon completion. The last payment had to be made at “la réception définitive” which took place no more than a year after the completion (provisional acceptance). But several of Ruttiens’ projects indicate that this final acceptance could also occur sooner, for instance one month after the completion of the works (SAB, Company archives Henri Ruttiens, RDC 1899-1905, 106-107). The architect followed up on the good execution of the different construction phases before the client made the payments. The contractor was thus paid “suivant l’avancement des travaux et l’avis de l’architecte” (SAB, Company archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres, 1931-1933, 397) This sometimes caused tensions between the contractor and the architect, when the latter was dissatisfied with the execution and withheld his approval, or when he did not assess the works on time and this caused delays in the client’s payments to the contractor.

The general contractor's main tasks consisted of the execution and coordination of construction projects. While in the early years Ruttiens mainly focused on smaller (repair) works in combination with larger (new) projects in residential construction, this expanded from 1900 onwards with among others industrial-related projects. Entreprises Henri Ruttiens was for instance involved in the construction of a cabine de transformation statique souterraine (SAB, Company archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres, 1926-1928, 232). The projects had a higher level of technical complexity, for which the company was probably too inexperienced before. As larger and more technically difficult projects were carried out, the cooperation with engineers increased. For example, Ruttiens asked engineer Paul Bracke to provide the placement et fourniture d’un monorail avec charriot de roulement for the Institut Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs (SAB, Company archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres, 1926-1928, 250). Furthermore, from then on the contractor’s company gradually carried out more projects for public clients as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Chemins de fer, postes et télégraphes, service des voies et travaux. Also for these public projects, the same reasoning can be extended: since Ruttiens gained more and more experience, the contractor’s company could offer more references and a better financial guarantee to public authorities. Until the first
half of the twentieth century, the government indeed tried to ensure the contractor’s ability through such references and financial guarantees. This changed with the Licensing of contractors, introduced in 1941 and confirmed in 1947, that divided contractors in (sub)categories, based on their activities and specialties, and in classes, based on their financial scope. Public projects were linked to a certain (sub)category and if they amounted a certain budget only pre-licensed contractors could carry them out. From then on, Ruttiens pre-licensed in order to be able to execute public construction projects (Nationale Confederatie Bouw 1953, 113).

Ruttiens’ combination of public and private projects links up with the ‘mixed profile’ that many Belgian contractors had at the end of the nineteenth and in the course of the twentieth century. For instance, also the Société Belge des Bétons (SBB, °1909) worked for public and private clients, realizing among others town halls, schools, postal offices, houses and hotels in the 1910s (Verwee 2009, 35).

This was also visible at the level of the Belgian professional associations of general contractors. At its foundation in 1880, the national contractors’ association Fédération des Entrepreneurs - of which Ruttiens was a member - for instance explicitly welcomed contractors of both public and private works. The association wanted to unite the whole profession by not only focussing on aspects of public tenders, but also on private construction-related aspects (Dobbels, Bertels and Wouters 2016). The Belgian context strongly differed from other countries such as France where there was a strict separation between (small) contracting companies focused on the private building sector and (larger) public works companies (Barjot 2006, 21).

Due to the Belgian contractors’ mixed profile, it is a general tendency that public works regulations were also adopted for private works, albeit with a certain time lag. Tender procedures increasingly became the norm for public works during the nineteenth century, including the use of building specifications (cahier des charges, algemene voorwaarden) that contained information on the tender procedure, contract, responsibility and safety issues as well as more technical specifications on building materials and techniques (Bertels 2011). An analysis of Ruttiens’ company archives proves that such building specifications were also increasingly used for private projects. An offer for a private project in 1925 for instance mentioned that “The works (will be) executed in accordance with the plans and conditions of the current building specifications, drawn up for these works by architect Jacques Abrinski, examined and accepted by Jean Ruttiens”. Also in another offer for the construction of private housing in December 1931, Ruttiens mentioned he would follow the clauses and conditions of the Cahier Général des Charges (SAB, Company archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres, 1931-1933, 131-135).

The increased use of building specifications resulted among others in a more accurate implementation of the mentioned deadlines for both public and private works. When such deadlines were exceeded, contractors had to pay a fine. Of course, contractors could always negotiate on these terms of execution before they accepted a certain project. For instance, Ruttiens only accepted a smaller work for the renewal of the porch pavement for the Ministry of Internal Affairs after the deadline was postponed with 15 days, because he needed that period for the ordering and delivery of the materials as blue stone (SAB, Company Archives Henri Ruttiens, Lettres, 1928-1929, 52).

4 REAL ESTATE ACTIVITIES

The Belgian general contractors’ mixed profile not only refers to their combination of public and private projects, but also to their real estate activities. This ‘building for the market’ comprised purchasing a building (plot), executing the construction project and subsequently renting or selling it. Contractors were ideally placed to develop such real estate activities because they possessed construction know-how and had a network of potential buyers. From the end of the nineteenth century, Ruttiens was involved in such (small-scale) real estate practices. In 1901 Jean Ruttiens for instance bought a building plot in Rue Mignon 52, constructed a house and sold it afterwards. Another example from 1914 shows that Ruttiens bought a house in Rue Lambotte 56 for which he was doing the construction works that had stopped due to the drafting into the army of his client. After the First World War, the contractor’s firm completed the building and wrote to several clients regarding the sale of this property. Other larger Belgian and foreign general contractors were on a much larger scale active in real estate development. The English Cubbitt brothers are a well-known example of nineteenth-century general contractors that specialized in the development of completely new neighbourhoods such as Belgravia (Bowley, 355).

The real estate activities of Entreprises Henri Ruttiens increased as the company grew, resulting in a subsidiary company Immobilière Ruttiens (°1946) which was responsible for the purchase, sale, construction, conversion and rental of buildings (Jacquemin, Six and Vancoppenolle 2001, 451). Also other Belgian general contractors such as Entreprises Louis De Waele and Société Belge des Bétons (SBB) developed real estate activities, first on a small scale and afterwards via a separate real estate company. SBB for instance established the Société Immobilière Immosol (°1960) together with the Compagnie d’Outremer pour l’Industrie et la Finance with the specific purpose of developing the building plot of the...
former Hôtel Royal Palace in Oostende into an industrial complex. And together with the group Empain, the SBB later on also established the Société de Réalisations Immobilières (Auxari) for other real estate activities (Verwee 2009, 128). The research by Dominique Barjot showed this was not a unique Belgian phenomenon. Also in France, contractor’s companies became increasingly involved in real estate activities after the Second World War. As a result of the many mergers and take-overs, larger (inter)national construction groups were formed, which not only focussed on the execution of construction projects but were equally engaged in real estate development (Barjot 2006).

5 ENTREPRISES HENRI RUTTIENS ET FILS, FROM HOLISTIC APPROACH TOWARDS MORE SPECIALIZATION?

The growth of the Ruttiens contracting company is apparent from the move to Rue Frédéric Pelletier in Schaerbeek in 1951, where two expansions took place in the 1960s. (Fig. 4) Although there is no concrete information available on the company size, the company appears to have grown considerably. The image below also reflects the transition the company experienced over a period of ninety years. In the 1960s the company mainly specialized in the purchase of land, the construction and sale of apartment buildings, commercial properties, and also in the renovation of existing buildings. Although the contracting company still had a mixed profile – combining real estate activities, both renovation projects and new constructions – a certain level of specialization is recognizable. Indeed, the company mainly focused on the private construction market - carrying out much less public construction projects than before - and was actively focused on one specific building type, namely apartment buildings. (Figs 5-6)

As in other sectors, a transition can be observed in the construction industry from the 'mixed' profile - a holistic approach in which the company carries out varied and diversified activities (Moreau 1992, 67) - towards more specialization around one specific type of activity. The same trend towards more specialization is noticeable in other general contractor’s companies. For instance, Entreprises Louis De Waele (°1867) - which originally had a similar broad profile - still exists today and now rather focuses on large (new) construction projects and leaves the smaller (renovation) projects to a sister company, Entreprises Simonis.
The contracting firm changed its name to Entreprises Henri Ruttiens et fils in 1966, when Henri's sons Jean and Marc Ruttiens joined the company. In 1985, the legal status of the contracting company was adapted from a SPRL (Société privée à responsabilité limitée), a partnership based on personal trust between the partners, to an SA (Société anonyme) that was more focused on raising financial resources. This was a first shift for the family company. Due to a lack of interest from the younger generation, the company was dissolved on 11 May 2000.

6 CONCLUSION

The analysis of the company archives of Entreprises Henri Ruttiens et fils shows how Henri Ruttiens established his general contracting company and which projects and activities were carried out. Ruttiens appears to be a typical example of a Belgian general contracting firm that carried out smaller projects as well as larger buildings, had both private and public clients and also developed real estate activities. During its long period of existence, different tendencies are noticeable, ranging from a more holistic approach to increasing specialization.

By embedding this case in literature on the Belgian general contractors' professionalization, the changing division of tasks between architects, general contractors and (to a lesser extent) engineers could be analyzed. Although the legal framework stipulated that from the 1930s onwards design and execution could no longer be carried out by the same person or firm, the current research reveals this was sometimes circumvented in practice by cooperation between architects and general contractors, as was the case between Henri Ruttiens and his father-in-law Léon Smets.

Hopefully, this case study is an incentive to place other recently disclosed general contractors' archives in Flanders and the Brussels-Capital Region in a business-historical perspective, in order to complement the existing research on Belgian general contractors and to gain more insight into the cooperation with other building actors.

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