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Gustave Andreas Royers (1848-1923), from Antwerp city engineer to Belgian politician

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ABSTRACT: In 1875 Gustave Royers, became appointed as Antwerp city engineer (1875-1907) and as such he was in charge of all major infrastructure works for the Antwerp harbour as well as urban public works. Besides his career at the public works department (1875-1907), he developed a political career as well and used his technical expertise to participate in political discussions related to economy and public works (including discussions on public tenders, building specifications,...) as well as legislation and public health. As liberal he was successively elected as provincial councillor (1889-1903), as a member of the Belgian Chamber of representatives (1910-21), as Antwerp city councillor (1912-21) and as Belgian senator (1921-23). Henceforth, this paper aims to broaden the traditional biographical perspective on engineers and integrates architectural, as well as cultural and political elements in order to colour the biography of Gustave Royers.

KEYWORDS: 19th-20th centuries, Belgium, Engineer, Culture and Politics, Biography

1 INTRODUCTION

Antwerp city engineer Gustave Andreas Royers (1848-1923) received local, national and international recognition with his planning and re-organization of the Antwerp harbor (Fig. 1). As many nineteenth-century architects and engineers, Gustave Royers grew up in the construction world. In 1865 he started his engineering studies at the Ghent École Spéciale du Génie Civil and later on became well known as Antwerp city engineer (1875-1907) and chief engineer of the Antwerp public works administration (1880/1888-1907). As such, Royers became the director of an extensive public works service and had final responsibility of all public construction and infrastructure works. Based on his engineering and management skills he was invited by his (international) colleagues as expert to publish in international journals and to participate as a jury member in various international competitions. Yet, what is often in the shadow is the fact that besides his career at the public works department (1875-1907), he developed a political career and used his technical expertise to participate in political discussions related to economy and public works as well as legislation and public health. As liberal he was successively elected as provincial councilor (1889-1903), as a member of the Belgian

Figure 1. Portrait of Gustave Royers ©AMVC, n° 99382.
Many historians see the monograph as “an ideal prism to elucidate historical events” (Bekaert 1979) or as an ideal perspective to introduce socio-cultural, economical and political discourses in an aesthetical or technical debate: “Ultimately history is made up of the lives of successive generations of people and their achievements. It is easy when studying the history of engineering to be seduced by the allure of technological advances and lose sight of the human aspect: the background and lives of the people who made these advances possible” (Crimes 2004, 91). Yet, as Andrew Leach pointed out “it is important to recognize that biography is inevitably, to a greater or lesser extent, a construction of its author (…) and raises a number of specific conceptual issues” (Leach 2010, 53 and 56). Indeed, as scholars in the field of architectural and construction history are strongly interested in the design and construction processes, these aspects of the architects, contractors or engineers were strongly highlighted in various monographies, biographical notes or œuvres complètes aiming as such to inscribe or position specific actors in the architectural or construction canon. Nevertheless, as Andrew Saint already stressed in Image of the Architect (1983) many publications in this genre obscure the reality of architectural practice and the architects’ position in the interaction process. Saint highlighted the continuous struggle of various actors in the building industry to combine or manage their design and construction practice with activities as businessman or entrepreneur within a highly competitive construction business. Gradually, also in the field of construction history, the impact of the so-called ‘socio-cultural turn’ became strongly visible and as in architectural history scholars “openly seek to strike a balance between intrinsic and external forces (…), even if this results in a more ‘realistic’ (or compromised) portrait” (Leach 2010, 57). As a result multiple researchers today stress the importance of the relationship between architects, engineers, entrepreneurs,… and their patrons (including religious, private and public patrons) and how this relationships influences the design and construction process. Moreover, the development and importance of professional organizations has been put to the front (references). Within the Belgian context, inspired by the archival wealth and scope of public works, scholars in construction history also more and more highlighted the position of architects and engineers as civil servants within public administrations. As such they counterbalanced the dominant twentieth-century perception of public service jobs who were generally stigmatized as non-creative, low paying, and pressure-less (Bertels 2008; Cornilly 2016; Vanderweghe 2013). These scholars also revealed the complex relations between construction and politics and how architects, engineers, entrepreneurs as well as politicians tried to realize their actual projects or utopian aspirations. Yet, within these studies, they are often presented as two separate groups that are debating, fighting and/or collaborating. Yet, practice was (and is) often far more complex, and architects, engineers or entrepreneurs did also actively enter the political scene (e.g. Basyn 2013; De Maeyer 1998; Witte 1996).

Via an analysis of the live and work of Royers, this papers aims to contribute to the broadening of the traditional biographical perspective on engineers, focusing mainly on their technical activities and achievements. The absence of his personal archive can be compensated by, historic and contemporary literature (Bertels 2008; De Backer 2008), as well as a broad variety of sources reflect on his activities and position, ranging from administrative staff files, project files, commission reports, minutes from various councils, ego documents to political pamphlets and newspapers. As a result, the paper integrates architectural, as well as cultural and political elements and questions how they interacted in order to fully color the biography of Gustave Royers.

2 GROWING UP IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BELGIAN CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

Gustave Royers acquired his interest in the art and science of building at the family hearth. He was born on 20 April 1848 in Ronse (or Renaix in the East-Flanders Province) as the son of Jean Baptiste Royers (1820-90) and Julia Portois (?-1850). His father Jean-Baptiste had studied architecture at the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine-Arts (1837-44). During this time father Royers worked as a draughtsman for city architect Pieter Bruno Bourla (1783-1866), and subsequently speedily rose in municipal ranks to supervisor and later inspector of public works. In 1845, however, he left Antwerp for Ronse, to take up the positions of city architect and director of the Ronsische Tekenacademie. There he married Julia Portois, and the couple had two sons: Gustave (°1848) and Arthur (°1849). With Julia’s death a year later, Jean Baptiste decided to return to Antwerp with his two sons, (re)married with Joanna Josepha Peeters (1819-?) and set up business as an independent builder-contractor. Moving to Antwerp was attractive, as at the time, a possible city extension was highly debated and appealed architects, contractors and investors. When in 1863 the municipal positions of city architect and city engineer were publicly declared vacant, father Royers applied for these posts. They were respectively attributed to the architect Pieter Dens (1819-1901) and military-engineer Theodoor van Bever (1821-75). But Jean-Baptiste Royers’ construction firm was successful in attaining
commissions for multiple public buildings in Antwerp and Brussels. Gustave Royers thus grew up within the new family group that his father formed with his second wife.

In contrast to his father, the seventeen-year old Gustave Royers did not opt for training at the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine-Arts, but rather enrolled in the civil-engineering course at Ghent's Ecole spéciale du Génie Civil in 1865. There, Adolphe Pauli (1820-95) was part of the entrance panel. During his training (1865-70) Royers also worked as an intern in Namur, probably in the department of public works. Among his fellow-students was the future Christian-Democrat politician Arthur Théodore Verhaegen (1847-1917). As a student, Gustave Royers was also active in the Vlaamsch studentenkorps (vice-president in 1869-1870) and the Cercle Musical des Etudiants (secretary in 1869-70) (Bertels 2008 and 2011).

3 ENGINEERING CAREER

Gustave Royers began his professional career as civil engineer for the central authorities in Ostend, but when Antwerp's acting city engineer Theodoor van Bever unexpectedly died on 29 March 1875, Royers saw the chance of making good on his father's erstwhile ambitions. His unsolicited application for the Antwerp city council was received positively, and on 7 June 1875 he was appointed to the post of Ingénieur de la ville d'Anvers surprisingly without any prior public procedure, to serve as counterpart to the Architect de la ville d'Anvers, Pieter Dens. This situation whereby these two related municipal departments worked in parallel with each other had been in place since 1863, and was unique in Belgium (Bertels 2008). Most cities opted to have their city architects gradually replaced by engineers. The city of Antwerp obliged its civil servants to work exclusively for the city government, meaning they could not carry out assignments for private or other public clients, with the exception of a teaching position at the Antwerp academy or industrial school. The city administration placed commissions for all its public works in the hands of its own civil servants. This policy option caused much bad blood vis-à-vis private architects and engineers, but made the positions of city architect and/or engineer, already top positions within the city administration, particularly attractive. Even before the retirement of city architect Dens in 1884, the commissions of the Service de l'architecte de la ville had gradually shifted to the Service de l'ingénieur de la ville – a development that had already been institutionalised in 1880 when the municipal architecture department was incorporated as a separate entity within the city's department of engineering. As a consequence Royers, in 1888, was given the title of Chief Engineer in-charge of Municipal Works, and whose substantial remit included port infrastructure, municipal public works, greenery and architecture.

Royers' technical expertise also gained him recognition beyond Antwerp. In 1883 he was asked to be a member of the Jury de l'exposition d'Amsterdam and contributed technical advice regarding the construction of the Royal Observatory in Uccle (1883-90). In 1891 he was invited to Sweden to be part of the judging panel of a competition for the port of Malmö. Additionally, he also taught at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, and this from 1886 to 1919. But after 32 years of activity as a civil servant, on 1 October 1907 he definitely submitted his resignation, and jumped into politics with both feet. For his services as civil-engineer, Royers was elevated to Officer in the Order of Leopold in 1906.

In Antwerp, his name was given to a bridge and a sea lock (the Royersbrug and Royerssluis, Figs 4-6), and upon his resignation he was awarded the honorary title of his post as City Engineer, along with a commemorative medal bearing the inscription From the City of Antwerp to Gustaaf Royers, Honorary Chief-Engineer and Director of Public Works 1875-1907 (Maclot 2003).
Royers' complex and varied activities yielded a particularly diverse body of work. One of his first works was the municipal shooting range (Tir) in 1875-83. He went on to design numerous city schools in an eclectic style (Figs 2-3), including the plan of their outside surroundings and the buildings' interior furnishings, including among others a boys' school in the Albertstraat, the school group in the Boerhaavestraat, the technical schools on the St. Bernardsesteenweg, the St.-Elisabethstraat and the Offerandestraat. But he also designed other building types as kinder gardens and various administrative buildings. Within these projects, Royers was in search of technological and material innovations in order to accelerate the building process and improve the user quality, hand in hand with a strong budget control. Furthermore, he was also member of the organizing committee for the Antwerp World Exhibition of 1894, and designed the memorial monument for the victims of the explosion at the Corvilain munitions factory in Oosterweel (1899).

In the domain of urban planning, Royers was co-responsible for the rectification of the docks on the river Scheldt (1877-84), an operation that involved much demolition work in some of the city's oldest quarters. Royers was not only in charge of the infrastructure works, but also sat on La commission archéologique instituée pour suivre les travaux de démolition aux quais d'Anvers (1882-85), together with among others General Henri Wauwermans (1825-1902), city-archivist Pieter Génard (1830-99) and architect Joseph Schadde (1818-94). This commission investigated the sites destined for demolition, and reported to the Antwerp administration as to which architecturally valuable ensembles or components could be re-built elsewhere, while also assuring that important fragments and art objects were moved to the newly established Museum for Antiquities. Together with Joseph Schadde and Ferdinand Truymans (1875-1939) he restored the Steen and the Koninklijke Poort (Royal Gateway), now known as Waterpoort (Dobbels 2011). Royers was particularly called upon for this sort of technical matter. He had the gateway carefully dismantled and then reconstructed on the St.-Jansvliet. Royers, however, became best known for his leading role in the major architecture and infrastructure projects destined for the city and its port. He designed the hydraulic power station Noorderpershuis (1877-78), and together with Paul de Wit (1846-88) and Ernest Dieltiens (1848-1920) built the Zuiderpershuis (1879-83). For the harbour services he designed both the pilot building (1890, residence for the pilot-in-chief, offices and archives) and the later warehouses (1899). Together with port engineer Frans De Winter (1859-1922) he also constructed the Africa- and America docks (1883-87) and the Albert dock (1903-07), followed by the development of the docks and the sea lock, the so-called Royers lock (1893-1908).

From 1880 up until the end of his career as city engineer, he published nationally and internationally with regards to the port of Antwerp and its ingenious infrastructure.

4 POLITICAL CAREER

After thirteen years as Antwerp city engineer, and probably stimulated by the major urban transformation debates, Royers felt the need to enter the political scene. At the age of 40, on 27 May 1888, Royers for the first time stood for election on the Liberal
Party section of the river Scheldt by a single, at the national level to replace the irregular bends in the national debate. Already in 1863 the idea had been launched for the introduction and application of multiple technological innovations, going from the application of new heating systems or the application of ‘macadam’ as a replacement of the traditional cobble stones taking into account both qualitative and budget reasons. Royers pronounced his parliamentary oath in Dutch on 10 November 1910 (Parlementaire handelingen Kamer, 10 November 1910, 28). At the time both Dutch and French were official public languages, but in later discussions Royers would more and more use French, which was often used when non-Dutch speaking politicians were participating in the debate. Only Flemish radicals were continuously speaking Dutch (Beyen and Röttger, 364). The parliamentary debates illustrate that Royers showed interest in identical topics as before: mainly finances and public works. Yet, he would also actively participate in discussions about the national defense system, as there was a threat of war. Several times, Royers interrogated the Minister about the construction process of the defense systems around Antwerp, the reduit national (Parlementaire Handelingen Kamer, 17 March 1914, 183 and 29 April 1914, 231).
From 1912, Royers was also part of the Antwerp City Council, where he mainly demonstrated on education and commerce, the concerns of his VDV-fraction. His political allies also put him forward in debates where his expertise as city engineer could make an impact, particularly on commissions to do with industry and the port organization, public works and building specifications, fine arts, public health, urban planning and legislation. He occupied both of these positions, parliamentarian and city councillor, up until 1921. In that year he was directly elected as Senator. These were the first elections since implementation of universal suffrage. What should have been his crowning achievement was, however, cut short by serious and persistent problems of health. Gustave Royers died on 30 March 1923 at the age of 75.

5 CONCLUSION

This biographical article reconstructed the career of Gustaaf Royers. Within the historic and contemporary literature, this career was strongly colored in with his achievements as city engineer. Indeed, Royers gained a lot of prestige through his engineering work, but the research clearly demonstrated that he also felt the need to enter the political scene at local, provincial and national level. The fact that many of his engineering assignments were fiercely politically discussed, undoubtedly played an important role for taking up a political mandate. However, the combination engineer - politician was not so evident as it may seem at first sight. As city engineer he had to work exclusively for the Antwerp city and he was not allowed to take up private assignments as an independent engineer. Although the Antwerp government did not prohibit the combination of politician and civil servant, it may have been a fundamental element in the broader dispute with Antwerp’s mayor Alfons Hertogs. As a politician, Gustave Royers was strongly interested in public works and the port infrastructure and related economy, but also balanced budgets and the party points of the VVD (including education and related economy, but also balanced budgets and the party points of the VVD (including education and related economy, but also balanced budgets and the party points of the VVD) he discussed with verve. The integrated biographical perspective places Gustave Royers’ engineering career in a broader social and political context and shows clearly how complex and layered the relationship between the construction sector, the public administrations and the urban, provincial and national political scene at the end of the nineteenth century in Antwerp and Belgium was.

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