The institutional organisation of Belgium’s cellular prison building campaign (1830-WWI)

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ABSTRACT: In the nineteenth century, Belgium attained a solid penitentiary reputation due to the rigorous implementation of the cellular regime and the deployment of a corresponding new infrastructure. Prison historiography generally focuses on the efforts of Édouard Ducpétiaux, General Inspector of Prisons from 1830 to 1861, who introduced in Belgium the new concept of the solitary regime. In order to facilitate the solitary system, Ducpétiaux advocated the construction of a specific cellular prison typology. His ideas on prison architecture, which were strongly inspired by Anglo-Saxon models, proved to be determinative for Belgian prison design; between 1850 and 1919 nearly thirty star-shaped ‘Ducpétiaux-prisons’ were built. However, the unilateral focus on Ducpétiaux has disregarded other actors in the realization of this internationally renowned cellular prison network. This paper reconstructs the institutional context of prison construction between 1830 and WWI, which I consider crucial in the realization of Ducpétiaux’ ambitions.

Keywords: Long 19th century, Belgium, Cellular Prison, Government, Ducpétiaux

1 INTRODUCTION

Following the early nineteenth-century international penal reform movement that had propagated new concepts of the prison sentence, about thirty cellular prisons were constructed in Belgium from the middle of the nineteenth century until the First World War (Table 1).

Although not the first, no other country in the world implemented the innovatory cellular regime in such a rigorous way. The establishment of a dense network of prisons, specifically designed to facilitate the prisoners’ strict solitary confinement, received international appreciation (Maes 2009, 203–204).

Despite its innovative status, Belgian prison architecture has received little academic attention. Literature on the country’s prison system has mainly studied the subject from a penological and legal-historical point of view (e.g. Delherneux & Crawford 1931; Dupont-Bouchat 1988; Dupont-Bouchat 1990; Neys et al. 1994; Maes 2009; Vanhulle 2010; Fijnaut 2014; Vanhulle 2015), moreover largely focusing on its protagonist, Édouard Ducpétiaux (1804–68). As first General Inspector of Prisons, he had urged the implementation of the cellular regime in Belgium’s penitentiary practice and criminal code. Although Ducpétiaux was no architect himself, his writings in which he advocated the star shaped plan with open galleried cell wings concentrating a surveillance point (Ducpétiaux 1837–38; Ducpétiaux 1845; Ducpétiaux 1858; Ducpétiaux 1863), were determinative for the prison system’s infrastructural concretization as well. This Anglo-Saxon inspired model became the Belgian prison standard in the nineteenth century and is often referred to as ‘the Ducpétiaux prison’ (Fig. 1).

Nevertheless, this unilateral perspective on Ducpétiaux’ merit has disregarded and undervalued other actors’ contribution to the successful realization of this penitentiary patrimony. For instance the role of the architects, commissioned by the government to design each of these prison buildings, has not yet been studied. Their role however, can only be fully understood within the context of the institutional and administrative organisation of prison construction. This paper aims to reconstruct the institutional framework of the nineteenth-century Belgian prison building campaign. What departments were involved with prison design and construction, and how was prison construction organised? How did jurisdiction evolve over the course of the century, and what were the implications for the prison building campaign? Tracing these attributions within the ever-transforming institutional organisation of the newborn Belgian state is a complex matter. As Velle stated, “the content of the power evolves […] by changes in the economic, social and political context. Powers come and go, and shift to other administrations because of—at first sight—incomprehensible reasons” (Velle 1993, 569 – translation J.F.). In the evolution of jurisdiction over and administrative organisation of prison
2.1 1830–47: engineers constructing the newborn Belgian state

The new independent Belgian state constituted of five Ministries: Justice, War, Finance, External and Internal Affairs (Coppieers and Vanthemsche 2017, 299). The latter engaged with very differing policy issues, including education, religion, trade, industry, agriculture and public health, public works and prison services (Van den Eeckhout, Maréchal and Soyez 2017, 352). In 1832 prison services (including the power to establish, abolish and manage the penitentiary facilities) was transferred to the Ministry of Justice (Velle and Devolder 2017, 331). Prison construction itself would be entrusted to several departments including Internal Affairs, Justice and Public Works, in different periods of time over the course of the nineteenth century (Velle 1993, 746–747; Velle and Devolder 2017, 331; Jacquemin s.d., 75–76).

Initially, the design and construction of the penitentiary infrastructure was attributed to the administration of Bridges and Roads (Ponts et Chaussées), established in 1831 within the Internal Affairs department. The administration's corps of engineers was charged with the study and design of bridges, roads, canals and ports as well as civil buildings—in essence, with the infrastructural design of the new nation state (Verpoest 1990, 119; Royal Decree of 29–08–1831). A Royal Decree in 1833 specifically regulated the attributions and procedures for prison construction works, and the collaboration between the two departments involved. In consultation with the Ministry of Justice’s officials (like Ducpétiaux), provincial chief engineers of Bridges and Roads (ingénieur-en-chef des Ponts et Chaussées) were charged to draft the project plans (Velle 1993, 746–747; Velle and Devolder 2017, 331; Jacquemin s.d., 75–76).

At that time, these works mainly involved maintenance, reparations and minor renovation works of existing prison buildings. The newborn Belgian state had inherited a network of central and secondary prisons dating from the French and Dutch Reign: four central penitentiaries for long-term convicts, and prisons for suspects and accused detainees in every court district. Except for the Ghent central Maison de Force, these prison facilities were all set up in buildings, such as confiscated monasteries, that weren’t initially designed to house prisoners. Keeping abreast with international penal reform developments, Inspector of Prisons Ducpétiaux considered the prevalent community regime outdated. He advocated a radical revision of the—both material and penological—obsolete prison system. Ducpétiaux favored the implementation of a cellular prison construction in Belgium, we can nonetheless distinguish three phases that are discussed in the following chapter.

### Table 1. Prison building campaign 1830-WWI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prison</th>
<th>Architect</th>
<th>Building campaign</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Tongeren)</td>
<td>N. Roget</td>
<td>1840–44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liège</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1847–50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brussels</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1847–50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bruges—cellular annex</td>
<td>N. Roget?</td>
<td>1847–51?</td>
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<td>Dinant</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1849–51</td>
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<td>Marche-en-Famennne</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1850</td>
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<td>Verviers</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1850–52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charleroi</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1851–53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Courtrai*</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1853–56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antwerp*</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1853–56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hasselt</td>
<td>F. Derre</td>
<td>1855–57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leuven (central prison)</td>
<td>J.J. Dumont</td>
<td>1856–59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gent Nieuwewandeleng</td>
<td>F. Derre</td>
<td>1858–61</td>
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<td>Dendermonde*</td>
<td>F. Derre</td>
<td>1860–63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mons</td>
<td>F. Derre</td>
<td>1864–67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leuven (secondary prison)*</td>
<td>F. Derre</td>
<td>1866–69</td>
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<td>Arlon</td>
<td>Ch. Demaeght</td>
<td>1867–69</td>
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<td>Tournai</td>
<td>F. Derre</td>
<td>1868–71</td>
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<td>Huy</td>
<td>Vierset-Godin</td>
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<td>Mechelen</td>
<td>D. Dekeyser</td>
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<td>Neufchâteau</td>
<td>D. Dekeyser</td>
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<td>Veurne</td>
<td>Th. Bureau</td>
<td>1873–75</td>
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<td>Ypres</td>
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<td>Namur</td>
<td>Ch. Demaeght</td>
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<td>St-Gilles</td>
<td>F. Derre</td>
<td>1878–85</td>
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<td>Verviers*</td>
<td>H. Vanderhegen</td>
<td>1890–93</td>
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<td>Nivelles</td>
<td>L. Bouckaert</td>
<td>1899–1903</td>
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<td>Forest</td>
<td>L. Bouckaert</td>
<td>1903–10</td>
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<td>Turnhout</td>
<td>L. Bouckaert</td>
<td>1904</td>
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<td>Oudenaarde</td>
<td>L. Bouckaert</td>
<td>1904–08</td>
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*extensive renovation instead of new development
*architect appointed by concours
of the strict cellular regime, that kept prisoners in constant isolation during day and night in order to bring moral recovery. Prisoners' health, religion and instruction, and a classification of detainees by age, gender and morality were other important concerns in the cellular system. The implementation of the new reformative regime clearly required a fundamentally reformed infrastructure as well (Ducpétiaux 1837–38 vol. 2, 206–267).

Because of the high costs and uncertain results of cellular reform, Ducpétiaux supported an initial adaptation of the existing prisons to the new regime. From 1830 on, several secondary prisons had been materially improved with regard to prisoners’ classification, health and religious instruction. Yet solitary confinement, the quintessence of cellular reform, had not yet been put into practice. In 1836, the Liège prison commission decided to build a new—cellular—prison, which would be the first prison specifically designed for the solitary regime in Belgium (Ducpétiaux 1837–38 vol. 2, 206–267). Venturing into unknown territory, the Minister of Justice suggested to commission an engineer with a special expertise in penal principles to draft the plan (Ernst 11–03–1837) – an idea also propagated by Ducpétiaux in 'Des progrès et de l'état actuel de la réforme pénitentiaire et des institutions préventives, aux États-Unis, en France, en Suisse, en Angleterre et en Belgique'.

This 1837–38 voluminous publication presented not only an overview of the state of penal reform in the Western world; it also provided practical guidance to the architectural design of a modern Belgian penitentiary system, in the form of concrete instructions and type plans copied from English directions and models (Ducpétiaux 1837–38 vol. 3, 358–388; Second Report 1837).

Around the time Des Progrès et de l'état actuel de la réforme pénitentiaire was published, a sixth department was created, absorbing the administration of Bridges and Roads. Primarily intended to facilitate the construction and exploitation of a railway network ( Coppiers and Vanthemsche 2017, 299; Velle 1993, 134), the establishment of a separate Ministry of Public Works in 1837 enhanced the material creation of the country ( Watelet 1987, 23–24). Indeed, the ‘upgrade’ of the Belgian prison infrastructure to a modern penal standard as well gained momentum with a surge of new initiatives to erect cellular constructions. The departments of Justice and Public Works finally agreed upon appointing a specialized engineer in order to rationalize their collaboration. The specificity of the prison typology required expertise on both the constructional and penological plane, and the complicated cooperation had been hindering the creation of qualitative designs. From 1839 on, Nicolas Roget (1790–1865) ( Van de Vijver 2003, 484) was directed to draft the plans and estimates for all construction works resorting under the Ministry of Justice. He would consult with the provincial engineers who were, at their turn, assigned with the tendering and execution of the works (s.n. 1852 Recueil, 275). Roget, chief engineer for the administration of Bridges and Roads, already had some experience in the field of prison construction. Since 1834, he had been occasionally consulting for the department of Justice to correct and modify plans drafted by provincial engineers ( Ernst and de Theux de Meylandt 23–08–1834 and 30–08–1834). Moreover, the well-respected former municipal architect of Brussels and Mons had also been appointed chief engineer of the railway buildings construction service in 1838 ( Royal Decree of 31–01–1838). In his function as chief engineer of prison construction works, Roget converted the old prison of Tongeren into Belgium's first cellular prison, which was taken into use in 1844. He also drew preliminary designs for the new cellular prisons of Liège, Verviers, Antwerp and Leuven, and for the cellular annex of the old Bruges prison ‘t Pandreijte (see: Fund BE-A0510.202 inv. n° 281, 306–307, 312, 341; Fund BE-A0510.253 inv. n° 522).

However, criticism on Roget's performance grew in the mid-1840s. Most of his designs were rejected, and his professional competence was increasingly questioned. The Justice department denounced his ‘indifference’ and ‘excessive inertia’ ( d’Anethan 18–12–1845), even calling his involvement ‘a permanent obstruction’ (s.n. 19–12–1845).

Ducpétiaux was equally convinced that the 1833 Royale Decree and the 1839 arrangement no longer suited the contemporary conditions. Although well fit to conduct regular maintenance and minor renovation works, engineers—in his opinion—were not competent to design a radical new prison typology. This was better left to “a specialized architect, who would have thoroughly studied the architecture of prisons.” Any other country that was serious about penal reform, entrusted the infrastructural deployment of a new prison system to architects—except for Belgium. After all, civil engineers were no architects, Ducpétiaux argued (Ducpétiaux 11–05–1845) - an opinion shared by other judicial officials as well (s.n. 12-08-1845).

2.2 1847–88: professionalization and private architects

These considerations were symptomatic of the professionalization of prison construction in the 1840s, when the government became fully aware of the complexity of prison architecture. In 1844 and 1846, delegations of Belgian officials including Ducpétiaux and Roget travelled to England to study Europe's earliest cellular institutions—in particular the prison of Pentonville near London.
Built in 1840–42, Pentonville was Europe’s first fully developed radial penitentiary. Projected by the Inspectors of Prisons of England and Wales as a model prison for the country’s penitentiary reform (Evans 1982, 346), it would thoroughly influence prison design in the rest of continental Europe as well—especially in Belgium. Ducpétaux had been following the English prison initiatives closely, as already became apparent in his 1837 publication. Not only did Des Progrès reproduce architectural instructions and designs to be applied in Belgium; Ducpétaux suggested the erection of a Belgian model prison as well (Ducpétaux 1837–38 vol. 2, 247–248). Ultimately in 1846, the Belgian government decided on the construction of a very own ‘model prison’ in Leuven. This building had to be designed by a specialized architect, and had to meet the requirements of the cellular regime down to its smallest details. The ambition was to equal and even surpass the standard set by Pentonville (Journal de l’architecture Belge 1848, n° 14, 2).

The need for specialist ‘prison architects’ with the right expertise in this area had now really gained ground—and not just for the model prison. In 1847, a Royal Decree stipulated that the Ministry of Justice could commission private architects to draw up plans, measuring states and specifications for the construction of new prisons, as well as for the expansion or renovation of existing prison buildings. Because the engineering corps could no longer dedicate itself with due urgency to these projects, the execution of the works would also be entrusted to the designing architects—thus falling outside the responsibilities of the Bridges and Roads administration (Royal Decree of 12–06–1847).

That same year, an international conference on penal reform was organised in Brussels. Along with the conference hosted in Frankfurt a year before, it is considered the officious precursor of a series of twelve official International Penitentiary Congresses between 1872 and 1950 (Maes 2009, 688; Fijnaut 2014, 519–523). Although prison architecture was barely discussed in the subsequent official Congresses, the Brussels 1847 conference, with Ducpétaux represented in the organizing committee, substantially revolved around the question of cellular prison design (s.n. 1847 Débats). The congress had ‘defined a program for the cellular regime, which provided a broad framework for the imagination of prison architects’ (Journal de l’architecture Belge 1848, n° 14, 2).

Meanwhile, the architect Joseph Jonas Dumont (1811–59) (Mihail 2003, 289–290) had entered the limelight of Belgian prison construction. As draftsman for the Royal Commission for Monuments, he had revised Roget’s design for the Liège prison in 1845, as well as the draft for the new prison of Verviers. Dumont’s name increasingly recurred in prison construction projects (Fund BE-A0510.202 inv. n° 270–347; Fund BE-A0510.253). He joined the Belgian delegation on its study mission to England in 1846 (Fund BE-A0510.202 inv. n° 258, folder 13) and attended the penitentiary conference in Brussels in 1847 (s.n. 1847 Débats, 8), gradually becoming incontournable as Belgium’s pre-eminent prison expert. The 1847 Royal Decree on appointing private architects kicked off Dumont’s career as prison architect. On the Brussels salon in 1848 he presented de-signs for the prisons of Liège, Brussels, Dinant, Ypres and the model central prison of Leuven (s.n. 1848 Exposition, 41–42). In the following years, Dumont also engaged in the construction of the prison of Marche-en-Famenne, Charleroi, Verviers and Antwerp (Fund BE-A0510.202 inv. n° 270, 288, 318, 341), hence monopolizing prison design in Belgium in the 1840s.

Near the end of the decade the first of five design contests was organised in order to select the designing architects for the prisons of Courtrai, Antwerp, Dendermonde, Leuven secondary prison and Verviers (Royal Decrees of 29–04–1849, 01–01–1853, 05–08–1859, 21–08–1864; Fund BE-A0510.202 inv. n° 343). These concours were considered ‘an opportunity for Belgian architects to practice oneself in this particular field of the art of building’ (Tesch 27–07–1859). To ensure that all requirements of the cellular regime were met, the concours provided for a detailed program, for which we may assume Ducpétaux, who resided in the contest juries, was a major determinant. It was only in the Verviers concours in 1888, with Adolphe Prins in the function of General Inspector of Prisons and an important opponent of the cellular regime (Maes 2009, 155), that the strictly cellular program was partially abandoned (Fund BE-A0510.202 inv. n° 343).

Despite Dumont winning all of the contests he participated in, the Courtrai concours had brought forward a new, promising prison architect. Even though François Derre (1826–88) (Becker, Thieme and Vollmer 1999 vol. 9, 100; Mihail 2003, 290) who was an employee in Dumont’s architectural office (Mihail 2003, 290) came in second place, he must have certainly made an impression on the department of Justice. In the following decade, he was commissioned to design the prisons of Hasselt and Ghent. Especially after Dumont’s death in 1859, Derre became his successor as pre-eminent prison architect in Belgium, designing the prisons of Dendermonde, Mons, Leuven auxiliary prison, Tourai and St-Gilles (Fund BE-A0510.202 n° 315, 320, 329, 335, 337). Gradually, other private architects such as Vierset-Godin, Demaeght, De Keyser and Théophile Bureau as well engaged in the prison building campaign (Fund BE-A0510.202 n° 275, 301, 305, 316, 321).
2.3 1888-WWI: after the heyday of Belgian cellular architecture

In 1888, prison construction was re-attributed once again from the Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of (Agriculture, Industry and) Public Works, in order to concentrate all construction and maintenance of state buildings under the Public Buildings Administration (Direction des Bâtiments Civils) (s.n. 1889 Recueil, 474; Royal Decree of 26-08-1888). The Justice department nonetheless remained responsible for the prison program (s.n. 1889 Recueil, 514–515) – as demonstrated in the concours program for the new prison of Verviers, clearly bearing Prins’ stamp.

The fact that this concours would remain the only prison construction achievement under the new arrangement, demonstrated its practical ineffectiveness. An 1899 Royal Decree revoked this setup, entrusting prison construction once more to the authority of the Ministry of Justice (Royal Decree of 23–02–1899). The last four prisons of the cellular building campaign were designed by Louis Bouckaert, Inspector of Penitentiary Constructions (Contrôleur des Constructions Pénitentiaires) (Fund BE-A0510.202; Fund BE-A0510.253). Built by an official within the Justice department itself, they were a little original or ambitious continuation of the now outdated Ducpétiaux ideal, concretized for the last time in the prison of Oudenarde just before the First World War.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This paper, mainly relying on legislation and State Archive’s documents, reconstructs the ever-evolving administrative framework of prison construction over the course of the nineteenth century. In the first decades after Belgian independence, the state engineers were charged with prison construction works which mainly involved maintenance and minor renovation works of existing prison buildings. As the ambition grew to construct a network of new purpose-built cellular prisons, architects with a special expertise in this new typology were attracted: between 1847 and 1888 private architects built no less than 24 new prisons at the Ministry of Justice’s request. Near the end of the century until the First World War, after the heyday of the cellular regime, prisons were designed by the Ministry of Justice’s Inspector of Penitentiary Constructions.

The legislative and other initiatives presented in this paper, have been key in the successful deployment of the Ducpétiaux prison patrimony. They illustrate a continuous pursuit for an efficient modus operandi to manage the complex collaboration between both judicial and architectural experts, required to materially translate the penological concept of cellular confinement. Although Ducpétiaux is legitimately recognized as the driving force behind Belgium’s penitentiary reform and its corresponding unique infrastructure, the Belgian government provided the essential administrative framework to facilitate an innovative, efficient and qualitative prison building campaign. Especially in the 1840s, prison construction was prioritized and several initiatives were taken to enhance qualitative prison design.

The reconstruction of the jurisdictional organisation of prison construction between 1830 and WWI will enable a better understanding of the role of Belgium’s prison architects in the country’s unparalleled prison building campaign in future research.

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