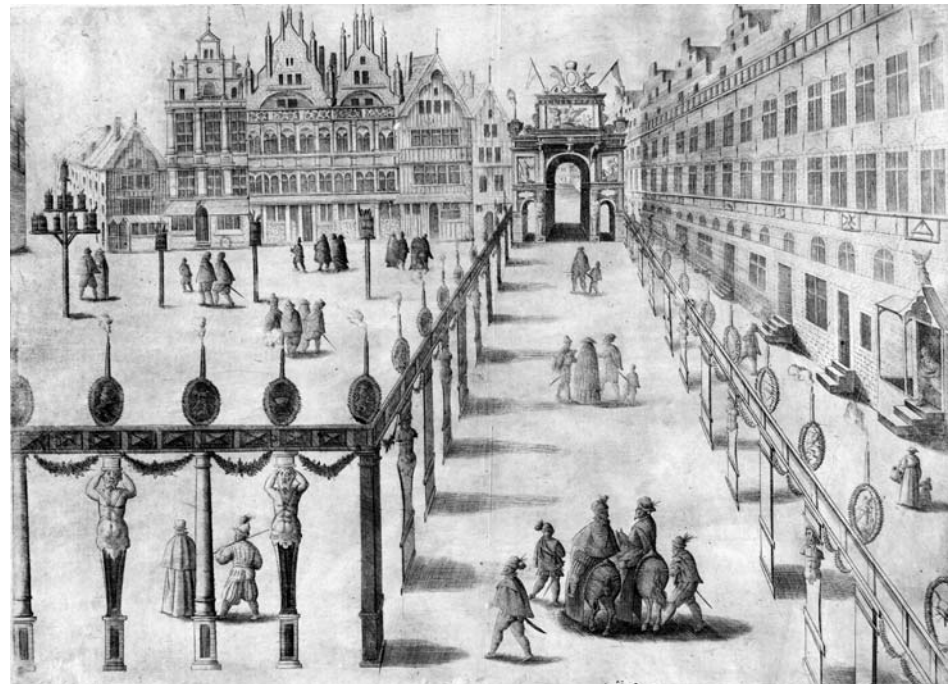


1

The Grand-Place decorated for the reception of the Archduke Ernest of Austria (1594)  
Archives of the City of Brussels



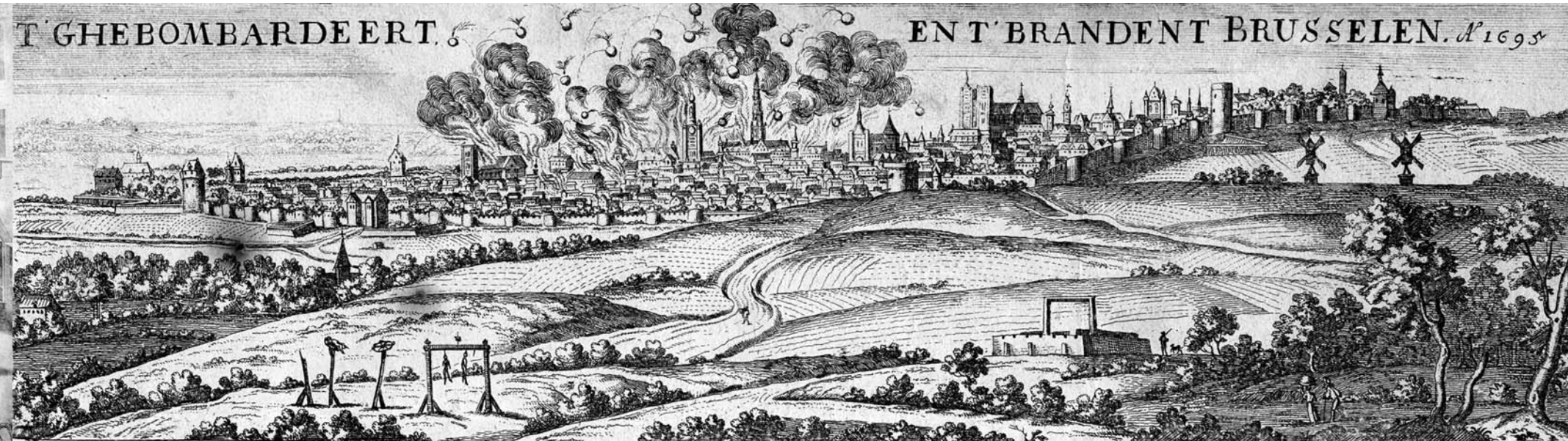
**From its origins until 1695**

The square occupies a former swamp that was drained to provide a trading area known as the lower market (*nedermerct*). In the 12<sup>th</sup> century it was paved for the first time around 1.2 metres (about 4 feet) below the current ground level. Houses gradually sprang up around the edge without any kind of apparent plan. Most houses were built of wood, although a few rich patrician families constructed their dwellings in stone; these were known as *steen*.

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Duke of Brabant had a series of covered markets including a bread hall (*broodhuis*) built on land belonging to him on the northern side of the square. The city authorities bought a *steen* on the opposite side in 1301 to house their administration. The market area thus became the centre of municipal political life, and more generally, of all events and festivities that marked bruxellois life. In the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the municipal *steen*, as well as several other houses bought by the city

authorities, were demolished to make room for an imposing town hall. The Duke of Brabant decided to assert his presence on the square opposite the town hall by replacing the bread hall with a building to accommodate part of his administration. Ever since, we have known this building – which was rebuilt in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – as the *Maison du Roi* (the King’s House).

As time went by, the municipal authorities – who since the late 14<sup>th</sup> century had been heavily involved in renovating the square – managed to clear a rectangular area around which the houses have been aligned ever since (**figure 1**). Due to concerns for safety and in accordance with municipal rulings, most of the wooden houses were gradually reconstructed in stone or brick. Furthermore, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the guilds – professional associations for craftsmen practising the same trade – started to occupy houses on the square, using them as meeting places. They gradually rebuilt them, thereby playing their part in enhancing the area.



2

Brussels bombarded and razed by fire (1695)  
Archives of the City of Brussels

**The bombardment of 1695 and the reconstruction of 1695-1710**

Brussels was heavily bombarded from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1695 by the troops of the King of France, Louis XIV, under the orders of Marshal Villeroi (**figure 2**). Entangled in a war against the League of Augsburg – a coalition of European powers including, among others, the Holy Roman Empire, England, the United Provinces and Spain – Louis XIV intended to show off his fire power to his enemies by means of a spectacular display. As the most important city in the Southern Netherlands under the rule of Charles II of Spain, Brussels was the obvious target. French cannons and mortars fired huge quantities of flaming bombs and cannonballs onto the lower town which was entirely razed by fire. Almost 4,000 houses were destroyed, representing around a quarter of the city’s urban area. On the Grand-Place, only the town hall tower and walls as well as the walls of the *Maison du Roi* remained standing. The interiors of both these buildings had to be entirely reconstructed. Some houses also retained parts

of their facades which were re-used. As a result of the temporary measures taken by the city authorities, such as inviting in workmen from outside the city, establishing a maximum price for building materials and allowing them in duty-free, Brussels, benefiting from loans awarded by other Brabant cities, rose again from its ashes in just a few short years.

The reconstruction of the Grand-Place – an eminently symbolic location – gave rise to two radically different approaches. On the one hand, the Governor General Maximilian-Emmanuel of Bavaria representing the King of Spain in the Southern Netherlands wanted an overall plan so that private houses on each side of the square would be grouped together behind a unified façade with decorations showcasing the emblems of central power. He based his ideas on the *place royale* concept with symmetrical buildings as seen in Paris and Madrid in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, both guilds and private owners intended to continue asserting

3

**Le Cornet (=The Horn) – Boatmen’s guild house (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century)**  
Brussels City Museum

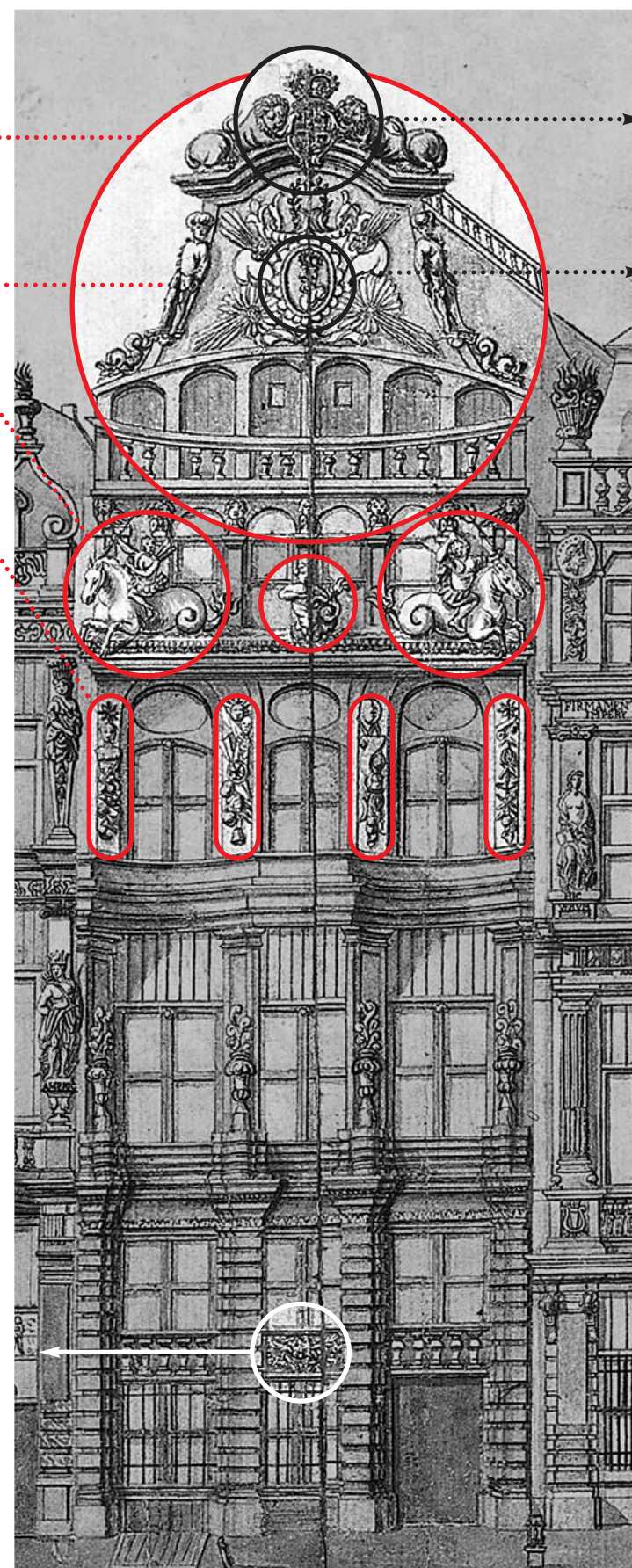
References to the boatmen’s guild

Pediment in the shape of the stern of a ship

Sailor

Sea horses and triton

Anchors, ropes...



Homage to central power

Royal escutcheon held by two lions

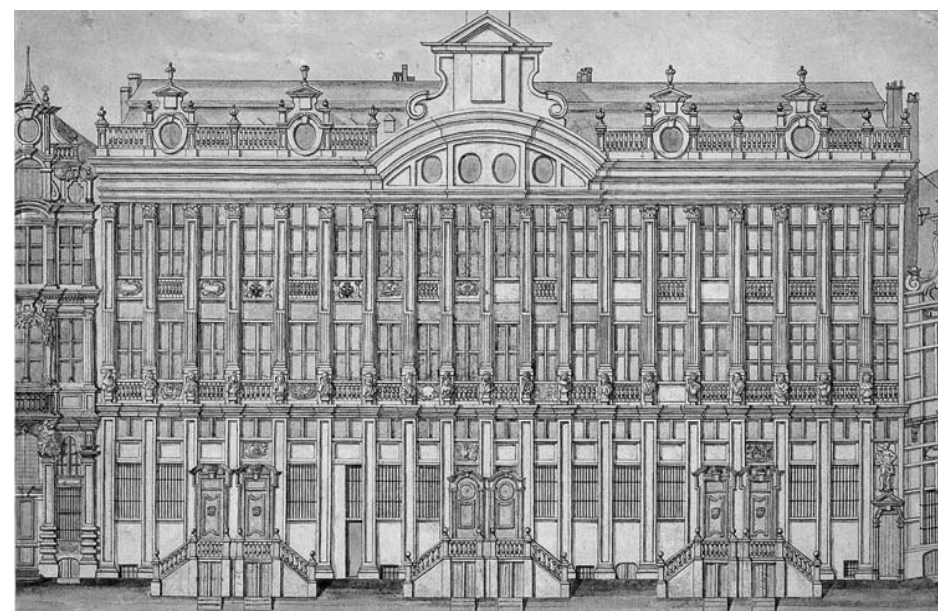
Medallion depicting the sovereign, Charles II of Spain

Name of the house

Bas relief depicting a horn

4

**House of the Dukes of Brabant (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century)**  
Brussels City Museum



their own identities by preserving their own architectural choices. As they were uncontestedly the owners of the properties and bore the costs of the reconstruction that had to be completed to a tight deadline, they managed to impose their own individual ideas. This was not the case for on the eastern side of the square (figure 4). As this side had been occupied since the 15<sup>th</sup> century by a collection of six identical houses, the owners did not succeed in opposing the central authorities, and a unified facade was therefore built in the style of a palace decorated with busts of the Dukes of Brabant. In the meantime, the municipal authorities sought to reduce the people’s desire to contest the move by decreeing in 1697 that any reconstruction plan for a house bordering the Grand-Place had to be submitted for its approval.

The other private houses were free to choose their own architectural styles and therefore present interesting variations. Most use the traditional structure that was prevalent in the Southern Netherlands –

a tall, narrow building with a pediment – but some of the more modern houses made a feature of their roof. Most of them have horizontal and vertical stripes dividing the façade wall into sections as a throw-back to the half-timbered wooden houses, except for the *Maison du Cygne* (the House of the Swan) which was designed in the classical style which would go on to become the norm in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Almost all the houses have a sign (either sculpted, painted or in metal) giving their name. Furthermore, houses belonging to the guilds also used symbolic decorations making reference to their activities or their patron saint, and some even bore witness to their loyalty to the powers that be (figure 3).

Despite all these differences, the houses in the Grand-Place present a genuinely harmonious ensemble due to their use of decorative elements in the Baroque style – extravagantly reinterpreting motifs from Antiquity such as pilasters, columns, pediments, friezes, balusters, putti and caryatid – and the use of gold embellishments.

5

**Morning market on the Grand-Place (1957)**  
Archives of the City of Brussels



**From the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day**  
Due to the emergence of a taste for neo-classicism in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some of the façades had their gables removed and were painted white. Due to the cost of maintaining the buildings, their decorations were simplified. Moreover, in 1793, following the invasion of Brussels by French Republican forces, some decorative elements reflecting princely power or the guilds (since dissolved) were destroyed. From 1820 onwards and heightened after the 1830 Belgian revolution, there was renewed interest in preserving the buildings of the Grand-Place as they bear witness to the former grandeur of Brussels and the young country of Belgium. The Town Hall underwent several restoration campaigns during the century and its façades were enhanced with an array of Neo-Gothic style statues. The *Maison du Roi* (King’s House) was also entirely rebuilt in this

style between 1873 and 1896 on the initiative of the municipal authorities. They also encouraged the renovation of the houses on the Grand-Place from 1850 onwards to enable them to regain their original appearance after their reconstruction post 1695. This major project, which was supported in particular by the Burgomaster Charles Buls, was not completed until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, the buildings have been maintained regularly. At the end of the 1950s, the Grand-Place ceased to be an important market place (figure 5). However, it has become a major tourist magnet and remains an important meeting point for Brussels residents.