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A forgotten anniversary: the first European hypermarkets open in Brussels in 1961

Un anniversaire oublié : les premiers hypermarchés européens ouvrent à Bruxelles en 1961

Een vergeten verjaardag: de eerste Europese hypermarkten openen in Brussel in 1961

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A forgotten anniversary: the first European hypermarkets open in Brussels in 1961

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Hypermarkets are self-service shops with a surface area of more than 2,500m², which sell food and non food products, are located on the outskirts of a city, are easily accessible and have a large car park. They are generally considered to have been invented in France in 1963 (Carrefour in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois, close to Paris, 2,500m²). But nearly two years earlier, in 1961, GB had opened three hypermarkets under the name of SuperBazar, in Bruges, Auderghem and Anderlecht, measuring between 3,300 and 9,100m². Through an examination of the literature, an exploration of GIB archives and the stories of stakeholders in the Belgian distribution sector, the article compares in detail the history of the first Belgian and French hypermarkets, which has never been done before. If we do not consider the Bruges location of only 3,300m², which was initially designed as a department store, the point of sale in Auderghem (9,100m² Boulevard du Souverain), based on the American model of the discount department store but associated with an integrated supermarket, must be considered as the first European hypermarket. Even if the association of food and non food products under the same roof was unusual in the United States, it nevertheless existed. Hypermarkets are therefore an American invention, GB opened the first European hypermarkets in Belgium and Carrefour spread the model of the hypermarket throughout the world, taking over most of the Belgian hypermarkets in 2000.

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Introduction

1. Hypermarkets are usually considered to be a French invention [for example Chatriot and Chessel, 2006, Daumas, 2006, Colla, 2001, p. 106, Dancette and Réthoré, 2000, p.110, Cliquet, 2000, p.184, Metton, 1995, p.63]. Lhermie [2003] in '*Carrefour ou l'invention de l'hypermarché*' also presents hypermarkets as a French invention and the first hypermarket as being in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois, which opened on 15 June 1963 near Paris, with 2,500m² of sales area and 450 parking spaces. It will soon celebrate its 50th anniversary. The 16th Etienne Thil International Conference (2-4 October 2013) will take place in Paris 'in honour of the 50th anniversary of the creation of the first hypermarket'.¹ The first French hypermarket with a surface area close to 10,000m² is the Vénissieux Carrefour, which opened in 1966.

2. However, in 1961, almost two years before Carrefour, GB opened the first European hypermarkets called SuperBazar in Bruges (Scheepsdielelaan, 3,300m² of sales area, 9 September, figure 1), Auderghem (Boulevard du Souverain, 9,100m², 15 September) and in Anderlecht (Avenue Marius Renard, 7,950m², 14 October, figure 2), the latter two being located in the Brussels-Capital Region. The 50th anniversary would therefore have been celebrated in 2011. The Bruges and Anderlecht locations were later reorganised as supermarkets. The Auderghem hypermarket – which is now a Carrefour – is therefore the only survivor among these three pioneers. It is still an excellent location, with the best turnover per m² of the current Carrefour hypermarkets in Belgium.

3. When GB and Carrefour opened their first shops, the term hypermarket did not exist yet. It was invented in 1968 by J. Pictet, founder of

Libre-Service Actualité (LSA), the main francophone trade magazine on the subject, and the *Institut français du libre service*. The four above-mentioned shops were characterised by a large surface area (over 2,500 m²) which was unheard of in Europe at the time, self-service, the combination of food and non food products and large car parks. These are the elements which define hypermarkets today.

4. This article compares the history of the first French and Belgian hypermarkets for the first time.²

1. Belgian precedence

5. There is, however, no doubt about Belgian precedence. Apart from the fact that it received newspaper coverage at the time (Le Soir, LSA, Le Commerce moderne, etc), the adventure has been told by those who participated [Cauwe, nd, pp. 242-248, Dopchie, 2004, pp. 50-60] and by a later director [Baisier, 1971], and was also confirmed by independent researchers [Burstin, 1975, pp. 103-133, Jaumain, 1996 and 1999, Michel and vander Eycken, 1974, p. 180, Coupain, 2005, p.147] and by reference websites ['hypermarket' entry on Wikipedia, 2013,³ Pederson, 1999]. The Carrefour website mentions the information correctly in its history section.

6. The creation of hypermarkets in Belgium was the work of Maurice Cauwe (1905-1985). This Solvay market development engineer (1926) began his career at Innovation, leaving in 1932 to work for the department store which became Le Grand Bazar d'Anvers, for which he took on the role of director in 1941. He ended his career as president of the group GB-Inno-BM (GIB) formed in 1974.

¹ Call for papers of the Etienne Thil International Conference, 2013

² The author would like to thank the ULB archives department, where GIB archives are deposited, which made this research possible, as well as the people interviewed: Jacques Dopchie (who began working with the Grand Bazar d'Anvers in 1953, became Sales Director for GB Supermarkets in 1959 and General Director of GB Enterprises in 1969; he ended his career as Vice President and Managing Director of GIB); Pierre Iserbyt (among others: Carrefour France Store Manager 1970-72, Sarma Real Estate Manager 1972-1990, GIB Real Estate Director and then GIB Immo CEO 1996-2001); and Pierre Massin (Real Estate Administrator at Redevco, which manages the real estate stock of the former GBs).

³ But this was not the case in the Wikipedia 'hypermarket' entry on 10/9/2009, which simply cited Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois as the first *French* hypermarket. The 'Carrefour (brand)' entry on Wikipedia still stated in 2013 that Carrefour invented the concept of hypermarket.

7. Fascinated by the United States, he started by reading everything he could find on commerce there, and then went there for the first time in 1948. The programme for the first trip was already established with the help of the National Cash Register Company (NCR) in Dayton [Cauwe, sd, p. 49], a company which produced cash registers and which played an essential role afterwards. 'This study trip of over a month was a revelation for me – a discovery. It provided me with an extraordinary wealth of ideas and facts. It allowed me to learn techniques, methods and new ways of thinking. It filled me with enthusiasm for the United States and Americans' [id. pp. 54-55]. He became especially aware of the population's increasing use of cars, the 'desertification' of city centres and the development of commerce on the outskirts of towns, in particular in the form of supermarkets. He went to the United States 33 times between 1948 and 1981 [Cauwe, 1981]. Each time, he wrote reports and made suggestions or directives. It was during his fourth trip in 1956 that he met Bernard Trujillo (1920-1971) from the NCR for the first time, who organised the Modern Merchandising Methods (MMM) seminars as of the following year, where modern sales methods rather than cash registers were the focus [e.a. Rivière, 1961, Thil, 1966, pp. 123-134]. This is when he heard of shopping centres and discount department stores for the first time. Trujillo, a defender of modern business, was a great teacher. A series of amazing formulas were invented by him, such as⁴: No parking, no business; Islands of loss, oceans of profit; Pile products up and sell down; Let the client do the work; Have a permanent circus; etc. Cauwe participated in the seminar for the first time in 1957. 'It was the beginning of seminars launched by the NCR delegate. There were 15 participants from France, Brazil, Germany, Australia and New Zealand. Later, there were more than 100 participants at each seminar' [Cauwe, sd, p. 178].

8. Since 1937, the development of big shops was hindered in Belgium by a law for the protection of small shops. It was abolished in January 1961 and replaced in 1975 by a new 'padlock law'. Most of the expansion of big business in Belgium took place in this window between 1961 and 1975 [Leunis & François, 1988, François & Leunis, 1991]; for example, the number of hypermarkets went from 0 at the beginning of 1961 to 70 in 1975 and reached its maximum of 92 in 1990 [Coupain, 2005, p.132], i.e. 5 more per year on average during the first period, compared with only 1.5 during the second. In the years leading up to 1961, the abolishment of the law of 1937 was being considered more seriously. Cauwe wanted to be prepared. In 1959,⁵ 12 sites were reserved in locations on the outskirts. Cauwe hesitated between the shopping centre formula and that of the 'self-service discount department store'. The decision was taken in 1960: 'it is not about creating big shopping centres, but rather about building the biggest possible shop. Consequently, it does not require a two-year waiting and study period, but six months at the most in order to be completed in 15 to 18 months' [Cauwe, sd, p. 226]. The two shops in Auderghem and Anderlecht were later built at the same time within six months [Cauwe, 1961]. 'For the choice of furniture, we were not concerned with beauty and quality, and designed furniture in simple softwood which could be made in the company's workshop at ridiculously low prices' [Baisier, 1971, p. 33] (figures 5 to 7).

9. In 1960, Le Grand Bazar d'Anvers – with the Jewel Tea Company of Chicago, which ran supermarkets – created SA Supermarché GB. In 1961, it created SA SuperBazar, with the added participation of Bon Marché (Brussels) and Le Grand Bazar de Liège.⁶ The two entities merged and became GB Enterprises in 1969.

⁴ Often cited but in slightly different forms, probably related to translation, note-taking or quoting from memory.

⁵ He therefore observed that the processes which existed in the United States also developed in Belgium as well: in 1956, the Brussels-Ostend motorway was inaugurated; it was part of an organised plan of motorways integrated at European level, which made known the brochure '*Bruxelles, carrefour de l'occident*' published in 1956 by the *Fonds des routes* of the Ministry of Public Works; Expo 58 was also the motivating factor for a whole series of investment works intended to favour traffic in Brussels [Hubert, 2009]. Detached houses, which had been reserved for the happy few before WWII, multiplied in the 1950s. The same was true for cars.

⁶ GB hypermarkets were therefore the result of department stores in Belgium, the grocery sector and supermarkets in France.

Figure 1. The first SuperBazar, on the outskirts of Bruges. This building with a 3,300m² sales area, was designed as a department store (Grand Bazar) on two floors. The number of parking spaces is limited (166). While the project was under way, it was converted into a hypermarket (SuperBazar) and later reconverted into a supermarket. Source: GIB archives, deposited at the Université libre de Bruxelles archives.

10. The shop in Bruges, which opened on 9 September 1961, two years after the first GB supermarkets, was intended to be a Grand Bazar, in line with the department store concept. The concept became a SuperBazar while the project was under way. The sales area (3,300m²) was spread out over two floors and the building was not adapted to the concept of hypermarket. There were only 166 parking spaces (figure 1).

11. The following week (inauguration on 15 September 1961, open to the public on 16 September), the shop in Auderghem was inaugurated, with a sales area measuring 9,100m² and 800 parking spaces⁷ (the biggest car park in Europe at the time [Baisier, 1971, p. 33]) and a resolutely American-style model. The complex combined the SuperBazar (non food self-service) and a GB supermarket (self-service food) in the same location, with one entrance and a shared checkout. The separate accounting for the two companies was done using different keys on the cash register. Under the same roof and sharing the same facade were a bank, a pharmacy, a Trois Suisses shop, a drycleaner and a florist [Burstin, 1975, p. 123] (figure 2).

12. LSA announced: 'Something new, original and grand has arrived (...) on the outskirts of Brussels: the first 'DISCOUNT DEPARTMENT STORE' (self-service discount department store) was inaugurated on Saturday 16 September 1961. At 5 km from the mediaeval Grand'Place, forward-looking men (...) have thus set up a distribution complex as never before seen on our continent. (...) Without a doubt, the era of the self-service discount department store has begun in Europe. (...) Without a doubt, our hexagon will soon have self-service discount department stores. (...) Isn't it best to see what is happening in Brussels in order to accomplish this?' The author was none other than J. Pictet, who, seven years later, coined the word 'hypermarket'. In *Le commerce moderne*, it was written: 'After many others, I have returned from Brussels, the first European temple of this new religion whose Mecca is in Dayton (USA). The first impression when one arrives on Boulevard du Souverain is that of a "déjà vu": the same dimensions, same type of construction, same spectacular effect of the flamboyant sign on the immense car park. The inside does not belie this impression. The Auderghem SuperBazar inevitably reminds me of one of the big discount stores which flourish in Ohio. It is a faithful as well as – if I may say so – servile reproduction. (...) Conclusions: it is likely that a discount department store of the Belgian type will be set up in France and probably in Paris someday soon' [Oubradous, 1962].

⁷ Cauwe (sd, p.243) is the only one to speak of 900.

Figure 2. The Anderlecht SuperBazar on the day it opened to the public. The GB Supermarket sign and the small complementary businesses can be seen on the facade. Note as well the queue of clients waiting to get into the shop. The Auderghem SuperBazar was very similar and slightly bigger. Source: GIB archives, deposited at the Université libre de Bruxelles archives.

13. At the time of these inaugurations, GB did not consider that they were inventing a new type of shop, but simply that for the first time they were importing into Europe a type of business which was widespread in the United States, namely the 'self-service discount department store'.

14. Scarcely one month later, the third shop was inaugurated in Anderlecht (figures 2 to 4). Ten years later, at the end of 1971, the 29th SuperBazar was inaugurated and other companies opened hypermarkets in Belgium. Among these, Carrefour opened three hypermarkets in Belgium in 1969 in collaboration with Delhaize-le-Lion; they were sold ten years later to Louis Delhaize who operated them under the name of Cora.

Figure 3. The Anderlecht SuperBazar on the day it opened to the public. Queue and entertainment. Source: GIB archives, deposited at the Université libre de Bruxelles archives.

Figure 4. Crowd in the Anderlecht hypermarket on the day of its inauguration. Source: GIB archives, deposited at the Université libre de Bruxelles archives.

Figure 5. Stockings shelves and washing machines/refrigerators at the Anderlecht hypermarket in 1961. Note the minimalist furniture in softwood containing the stockings. Source: GIB archives, deposited at the Université libre de Bruxelles archives.

2. Comparison of Belgian and French inventions

15. The first French hypermarkets were also inspired by the United States and in particular by Trujillo. The first journeys to the United States by the founders of Carrefour were in 1950 for Marcel Fournier and in 1957 for Denis Defforey [Lhermie, 2003, p. 16]. During a public meeting held on 10 December 1959 by Edouard Leclerc, the initiator of discount supermarkets in France, Fournier said to him: 'What you have done can be done better... by adding non food, general items and textile, which you are not close to being able to do' [Sordet, 1997, cited by Lhermie, 2003, p. 16]. The first Carrefour supermarket was being built at the time. Although he participated in Dayton's seminars, 'it would appear that Marcel Fournier was not a very regular student' [id. p. 24]. The Defforey brothers participated in Dayton's seminar in 1962, on Fournier's insistence. Before this journey, the Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois project involved a 1,500m² shop; the plans were later revised [id. p. 25]. It was the supermarket model which inspired Fournier and the idea was to introduce non food items. In this respect as well, there was not the impression that a new type of business was being invented. Advertising involved announcing the arrival of a giant supermarket [id. p. 28] and this expression was used by the press [id. p.27]. On the other hand, the surface area of Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois – 2,500m² – corresponded to the current limit between supermarkets and hypermarkets, and in Belgium there are currently self-service shops offering the same products as a supermarket, with a surface area of up to 3,500m² (sometimes referred to as megasupermarkets [Dancette and Réthoré, 2000, p.111]).

16. Lhermie made no reference to Belgian precedence. However, how can it be that the directors of Carrefour were not aware of the Super-Bazars of 1961? It received wide coverage by the general and specialised press. According to Dopchie [2004, p. 65]: 'Carrefour, whose directors are welcome in SuperBazar, watches with keen interest.' Other GB executives at the time confirmed this. On reading all of this documentation, the impression is that of extraordinary emulation: all of the directors of big companies knew each other, met each other and exchanged their ideas and information about their realisations willingly. However, LSA, which had a short-term memory, wrote, 'On 15 June

Figure 6. The kitchenware section in the Auderghem hypermarket in 1961. Source: GIB archives, deposited at the Université libre de Bruxelles archives.

Figure 7. The bucket section in the Auderghem hypermarket in 1961. Notice the shelves made of softwood. Source: GIB archives, deposited at the Université libre de Bruxelles archives.

1963, Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois entered history as the location of the first American-style big shop' [cited by Lhermie, 2004, p. 21]. And the April 1993 issue of LSA featured 'Carrefour, the 30th anniversary of the hypermarket'.

17. In conclusion, the journeys to the US and the contacts with Trujillo took place earlier for Cauwe than for the directors of Carrefour. Twelve sites were reserved by GB before Carrefour had an option on Sainte-Geneviève. And the Sainte-Geneviève project increased to 2,500m² only in 1962, whereas GB had already opened four sites⁸ measuring between 3,300m² and 9,100m². Neither GB nor Carrefour had the impression that they were creating a new type of business. GB was inspired by discount department stores and Carrefour by supermarkets. Carrefour now [2013] considers the three SuperBazars from 1961 as the first hypermarkets and no longer includes Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois on its timeline.

3. The first European or international hypermarkets?

18. Some authors consider hypermarkets to be a European invention [e.a. Cliquet, 2000, Dancette and Réthoré, 2000, Mérenne-Schoumaker, 1978, p. 122, Langeard and Peterson, 1975, p. 56], which is paradoxical considering the claimed American inspiration. The association of food and non food products in the same place justifies this conception. According to Lhermie [2004, p. 26], 'American consumers are not at all used to seeing food and non food products in the same shop. They probably would have found it out of place and even shocking (just like the French when they discovered pharmaceutical products in drugstores in North America which are not always well kept!). Furthermore, all of the existing supermarkets only sell food products.⁹ In addition, the systems for encoding food products and non food products used in North America are different, and it is not possible to encode the two types of product using the same cash reg-

⁸ The fourth in Herstal in 1962.

⁹ Whereas here they included beauty/health, cleaning and stationery products.

ister.' While Trujillo defended the notion of having 'everything under the same roof', he had reservations regarding the idea of combining these two categories. This reluctance was such that Jewel Tea – the American participant to the capital of SuperBazar – convinced GB to open a hypermarket (Schoten, 1966) where food and non food products were separated by an aisle and had separate cash registers. The experiment was abandoned, given the poorer results.

19. Cauwe [s.d., p. 203] nevertheless testified to the existence of this combination in the United States: 'I have taken advantage of my journey [in January 1959] to visit the GRANDWAY CENTERS which are an interesting realisation by the supermarket chain GRAND UNION. They have sometimes been called the SUPER SUPERMARKETS. They are one of the first experiments involving a supermarket chain offering aisles with non food products, often referred to as "aisle 5". It is a true department: textile, household items, toys, radio, television and "soda fountain". The shop is in Paramus (New-Jersey). Next to the 2,000 m² supermarket, the non food section occupies the same surface area and there is one row of 25 checkouts for the entire shop'. The American company Wal-Mart adopted the formula only in 1985 [Daumas, 2006, p. 62].

20. Let us therefore conclude that hypermarkets are an American invention, even if they are not common there, and that GB created the first European hypermarkets.

4. Why has Belgian precedence been forgotten?

21. In 2007, the 50th anniversary of the first autonomous Belgian supermarket – the Delhaize at Place Flagey – was marked by an exhibit held at La Cambre school of architecture, organised by the CIVA.¹⁰ Nothing similar happened for the hypermarket, which was however the first concept involving the outskirts of the city, surrounded from the very

beginning by a large car park, and located in places which were easily accessible by car, usually close to where a radial road met a ring road. From the start, supermarkets were included in the urban fabric between other buildings, with car parks being added later. The 50th anniversary of the hypermarket, which was not celebrated, is however much more important than the former, in as much as it involved the first European hypermarket rather than the first Belgian supermarket, whereas the concept of supermarket had existed in the United States since the 1930s and in Italy for a few months [Chatriot and Chessel, 2006, p. 76]. So why was the 50th anniversary of the first hypermarket not celebrated and why was Belgian precedence forgotten?

22. The main reason why the 2011 anniversary was not celebrated was that at the time the GIB group no longer existed: it had been dismantled (between 1989 and 2002) and its hypermarkets had been purchased by Carrefour (2000), which therefore would not have celebrated the 50th anniversary of a shop it had not founded, two years before the first one it had founded.¹¹ On the other hand, GB had never had the same historical attitude as Delhaize, which had existed as 'Grocers since 1867' [Collet, E., 2003]. This company had organised a first exhibit for its 125th anniversary and published a book for its 135th anniversary [id.], and had hired a historian, Emmanuel Collet, to manage archives and these different events, including the exhibit regarding the 50th anniversary of the supermarket.

23. Why was Belgian precedence forgotten? Once again, there are two reasons. The first is that Carrefour had built its image on the concept of the inventor of hypermarkets in France, which came to be referred to as French-style hypermarkets and then just as hypermarkets. The works of Cauwe and Dopchie on the history of GB have never mentioned the invention of the hypermarket in their title. The second is that Carrefour had opened hypermarkets everywhere, to the extent that the name Carrefour has become the symbol of the hypermarket.

¹⁰ Centre International pour la Ville, l'Architecture et le Paysage.

¹¹ The fact that this site was being transformed into a Carrefour Planet may appear to be an additional reason for not celebrating the anniversary. Nevertheless, if there had been a will, the works would either have been completed by the date in question or postponed.

Conclusions

24. Hypermarkets are generally considered to be a French invention by Carrefour in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois in 1963 with a sales area of 2,500m². However, in 1961, GB opened three SuperBazar hypermarkets in Bruges, Auderghem and Anderlecht measuring between 3,300 m² and 9,100m². GB's precedence over Carrefour exists as regards journeys to the United States, contacts with Trujillo, the purchase of sites and the project associating food and non food products over more than 2,500m² as well as its realisation. The term hypermarket was coined only in 1968, yet the four abovementioned shops fit the definition. If we set aside the site in Bruges measuring 3,300m² which was initially designed to be a department store, the shop in Auderghem – which was based on the American model of the discount department store but associated with an integrated supermarket, must be considered as the first European hypermarket. Even if the association of food and non food products under the same roof was unusual in the United States, it nevertheless existed. Hypermarkets are therefore an American invention, GB opened the first European hypermarkets and Carrefour spread the model of the hypermarket throughout the world.

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http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carrefour_%28enseigne%29

Illustrations

Despite all of the efforts made, the author of this article was not able to establish the origin of certain photographs. Those who are legally entitled to these photographs may contact the *Brussels Studies* editorial team.

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