In 2005, the former secretary for Culture in Flanders, Bert Anciaux, compared the cultural policy in the Flemish Community to that in the Netherlands. In Flanders, it was a home for culture, he said, whereas in the Netherlands, cultural policy was a mirror palace. The Dutch had built an impressive construction of high culture, which for outsiders appeared confusing and impenetrable. In Flanders, on the other hand, the standards were lower, whereas its doors were open and welcoming. Comparing the cultural policy in these neighbouring countries, who share more than just their language, helps understanding both sides. Comparative research in this field, however, remains scarce, with the exception of Quirine van der Hoeven’s doctoral thesis (2012) and her co-authored policy report De grens als spiegel (2005).

Research into the national cultural policies on both sides of the border also remains a small and fragmented field. The only overview of cultural policy in Flanders is offered by De Pauw (2007). In addition, a series of more theoretical studies have been written by Laermans and Gielen. Finally, several edited volumes and case studies have been commissioned by cultural institutions and local and national governments. In short, a study offering a long-term overview of Flemish cultural policy, such as stuk 1977-2015. Een geschiedenis, is more than welcome.

stuk started in the 1970s as studentencentrum Stuc in Leuven (the change of name will be discussed below) and has since grown into an internationally renowned interdisciplinary centre for the arts. Its history provides a unique insight in the development of Flemish cultural policy over the past forty years. In Flanders, an important role is reserved for the so-called kunstencentra (not to be confused with the Centra voor de kunsten in the Netherlands). In these nationally funded institutions, first defined in the Performing Arts Decree of 1993, the innovation of interdisciplinary forms of (performing) arts was supported. Stuc was among the first institutions to be funded as a kunstencentrum by the Flemish government. In this position, Stuc has been able to shape the development of both the performing arts in Flanders, and in setting the goals for cultural policy.

Brock offers a lively description of the first years of Stuc, when the stage-cum-pub for students went through the process of outgrowing student debates on board members, volunteering, programming, and budgets (or rather, the lack thereof) towards a more professionally managed performing arts centre. From the very beginning, the programmers staged ambitious
performances and managed to contract leading figures. This soon led to
questions of whether Stuc could remain part of the university’s Cultural
Council (Kultuurraad), or rather that Stuc should follow its own course. Already
in 1981 a separation between the Kultuurraad and Stuc was proposed, but the
two were to remain together until 1995, when the last of the influence of the
student-led Kultuurraad was abolished. The annual dance festival hosted by
Stuc, Klapstuk, gained formal independence from Stuc in 1986, mainly for
financial reasons. The two organisations would slowly drift apart, despite
maintaining personal and institutional ties.

With its recognition as kunstencentrum in 1993, Stuc became an
official part of the avant garde theatre in Belgium, together with renowned
institutions such as Kaaitheater in Brussels, Nieuwpoorttheater in Gent, and
Limelight in Kortrijk. The kunstencentra set out to be ‘laboratories of future
theatre’. In spite of Stuc’s new, national orientation, students from Leuven
University continued to constitute the majority of Stuc’s visitors. After 1993,
Stuc and Klapstuk professionalised their organisation and managed to gain
(international) recognition. This, in turn, led to a growing frustration among
the university population, for Stuc still was part of the Kultuurraad. This
provided the necessary support for the separation between the Kultuurraad and
Stuc, already proposed in 1981. In 1995 the partition was officially sanctioned.
In the same year, agreement was reached on the much desired relocation of
Stuc, which felt severely restrained by its accommodations on campus. After
a large scale renovation of a former university building in the city of Leuven,
stuk, under a new name, entered its new home in 2002.

Meanwhile, a new direction in Flemish cultural policy had made the
 distinction between kunstencentrum Stuc and dance festival Klapstuk redundant
and even counterproductive. Shortly before taking up residence in their new
building, the two institutions joined forces as Stuk, the name it has carried
since. The new accommodation, as well as the ability to concentrate all
activities in one place and in one organisation, boosted Stuk’s programme.
A spectacular growth in visitors in the first years of the new millennium
resulted. This confirmed Stuk’s position as one of the most important cultural
institutions in the performing arts in Belgium. The downside to the success
was that Stuk became part of the Flemish cultural establishment, thus
weakening the experimental and innovative character of the programming.
The connection to the university and its students, traditionally the core of the
audience, also watered down due to this development. The ensuing discussion
resulted in the choice for what Brock, referring to Blairite politics, aptly calls
Stuk’s ‘Third Way’, balancing artistic innovation and high visitors turnout.
As a new Performing Arts Decree was enacted in 2015, a new phase in the
fascinating history of Stuc/ Stuk has begun, which falls outside the scope of Brock’s
study.

Brock tells a lively story, taking the reader along through the history
of Stuc/ Stuk. Her beautifully illustrated book brings the atmosphere and
events to life. In the occasional references to other studies, it becomes clear that this popularizing history is based on Brock’s dissertation. Her study is based on thorough research in the stuk archives and manages to translate the overwhelming amount of facts into a coherent whole. Nevertheless, translating a thesis into a book for a wider audience always costs a pretty penny. It is a missed chance that Brock chose to restrict the book to the walls of the former studentencentrum. Her story mainly caters to the needs of those who were already interested in stuk. If one is looking for a case study of Flemish cultural policy, a thorough understanding of the context is necessary.

As it stands, Brock has missed the opportunity to make her book relevant for more than those who have, at one point or another, been involved with stuk. Placing the development of stuk in the context of Flemish cultural policy over four decades would have been a much desired contribution to a largely untilled field of study. Especially the debates underlying both cultural policy and the programming of a kunstencentrum like stuk would have deserved more attention, as well as a wider audience. A rich and detailed study of an avant garde arts institution such as stuk might have shed more light on the discussion on innovation as an aesthetic criterion in cultural policy, as advanced by De Pauw in his Absoluut modern, to name but one example. In brief, stuk 1977-2015. Een geschiedenis offers a rich display of compelling anecdotes of a fascinating case of an avant garde institution. It is a page turner, but for an audience smaller than stuk deserves.

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