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INFLUENCES OF PIONEERS IN ARCHITECTURE IN AND FROM BELGIUM(*)

The title I have chosen for this paper is probably confusing, hence "Influences of pioneers in architecture in and from Belgium" requires some restrictions. I shall confine myself to examples from a period situated somewhere between the turn of the 19th century and the thirties, i.e. the middle period of Belgium's existence. I shall also confine myself to six architects who either were Belgians with an international reputation, or foreign pioneers, who — at least once — were able to realize their architectonic ideas in Belgium. I am not an architect-historian, so I hope that any possible omissions will be forgiven.

To begin with the six personalities: three of them were working as architects exclusively, namely Victor Horta, the oldest, who was born in Ghent in 1861, mainly worked in Brussels till 1947 and who lived to be 86 years old; the second is Josef Hoffmann, born in 1870, who worked in Vienna till he died in 1956; and the third is Victor Bourgeois, who was active in Belgium from 1897 till 1962.

The other three are personalities whose working area largely exceeded the boundaries of architecture. They have simultaneously contributed a lot to the development of plastic arts and have also acquired a large reputation through their writings.

The first of these is Henry Van de Velde, born in Antwerp in 1863, two years after Victor Horta. Up to his thirties, he worked as a painter. His works of that period are now considered as of great value in museums, beside Seurat and Signac. He died in 1957 at the age of 94. The second is Le Corbusier who was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Next to his work as an architect, he produced a large and important number of paintings. He died in 1965. The third is Georges Vantongerloo, born in 1886 in Antwerp, who qualified himself as a sculptor. Between 1920 and 1931 he almost uniquely occupied himself with architectonic experiments, with problems concerning mathematic-tectonic sculpture, in which he was very interested, and with intensive research on the effect of colours. His paintings and

(*) Translated from the German manuscript.

sculptures, which are almost unknown in Belgium, are now on exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum; they have been exhibited in Washington and Dallas as a contribution to the 150th anniversary of Belgian independence. In January they will be on show in the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels. Vantongerloo was killed in an accident in Paris in 1965 at the age of 79.

Let us now take a closer look at the pioneers' proper achievements and the creators themselves. We begin with the oldest one and at the same time, with his most spectacular work.

In 1896, Victor Horta built the "Maison du Peuple" in Brussels. After he had built more similar buildings which introduced the period of the *Art Nouveau Architecture*, the "Maison du Peuple" was based on fundamentally new ideas: and that as the elaboration of the big steel constructions which Horta has seen in Paris some years before: the "Halle des Machines" and the Eiffel Tower.

Striking about the "Maison du Peuple" is that Horta used the material of iron in an entirely unexpected way, manipulating the technical form in such a way that it showed totally new esthetic expression. Although the "Maison du Peuple" was a typical example of the "Art Nouveau", its structure, especially that of the big hall and the outer walls, gave evidence of a big rationality and allowed of a free ground-plan to be designed. The expressiveness of the bannisters of stairs and balconies accompanied the imaginative constructions both inside and outside the building. Unfortunately, this unique monument was pulled down a few years ago.

On the other hand, Horta's own house, which he built a few years later in 1898, is a monument worth visiting and under the name "Musée Horta" it is open to the public. Especially the elegant staircase has excellently faced the change of times. I would like to draw your attention to one extremely remarkable detail, namely the heating radiator consists of numerous round lamellae, connected to a central tube. This radiator stands vertically and is framed with yellow copper bars creating a harmony between the technical object and the marble staircase of the entry.

In 1902 Horta erected a monument in Vienna for Johannes Brahms. In 1903 he built a department store in Frankfurt am Main, the latter as a result of the department store "Innovation" in Brussels, which he had built in 1901, but which was unfortunately destroyed by fire some years ago. Horta's creations of the last decade of the 19th century were so sensational that it was reported that architects from all over Europe came to Brussels to look at the "Art Nouveau".

For those interested it is not difficult to visit V. Horta's buildings in

Brussels. He constructed no less than twenty two buildings, among which the early important ones s.a. the "Maison Tassel" or the "Savoy Hotel". Those visitors arriving at the Central Station, find themselves already in one of the most recent Horta buildings.

Already in 1892 Horta was a university lecturer, later he was professor and finally he became honorary professor at the VUB (Free University Brussels) and member of the Royal Academy. In London in 1915 the war came as a surprise to him and till its end he remained in the USA as a professor.

At the time when V. Horta was building the "Maison du Peuple", Henry Van de Velde started to doubt his own painting. He had been studying the theories of W. Morris and Ruskin and he started to concentrate on the manufacture of useful objects and the construction of buildings.

In the same year in which the "Maison du Peuple" was built, Van de Velde risked the construction of his own house in Ukkel, called "Bloemenwerf". From then onward he soon became famous through the designing of furniture and the manufacturing of it in his own workshop.

Some of his writings, lectures and exhibitions procured him, even before the turn of the century, many assignments in Germany. In 1901 the Grand Duke of Weimar appointed him member of the Art Advisory Council for Industry and Applied Art. In 1902 the Seminary for Applied Art was founded, followed in 1906 by the erection of the School for Applied Art, which under Van de Velde's leadership soon was to become famous due to its entirely new methods and to the typical character of its achievements.

In those days, Van de Velde published several fundamental writings and his work as an architect expanded steadily till, in 1914, as one of the founder members of the German "Werkbund", he built the famous "Werkbundtheater" in Cologne.

In 1904 Van de Velde was appointed professor and he was granted the German nationality according to the regulation at that time. At the outbreak of war in 1914, when Belgium was invaded by German troops, he refused, being socialist and pacifist, to give effect to the German call. Later on he was dismissed at once and put under custody till 1917 when he left for Switzerland.

At the beginning of the Weimar Republic, Van de Velde was asked to nominate a successor for the Weimar Institute. His proposal to appoint Walter Gropius, was agreed to. Based on Van de Velde's concept and on his buildings, Walter Gropius stabilised the public "Bauhaus" in 1919-

1920; after a few years it was closed on political reasons in Weimar and it had to be moved to Dessau where Gropius had the opportunity to design the "Bauhaus" Building, which had become famous in the meantime.

The buildings which H. Van de Velde had built in Weimar for his institute, lodging later the Bauhaus, have been very carefully restored for the "Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen". On entering the beautiful staircase hall, one can see the bust of Henry Van de Velde opposite to that of Walter Gropius.

After his compulsory stay in Switzerland, during which he spent his time thinking and writing, Van de Velde came to Holland in 1921 to work out a project for a museum, which aimed at housing the famous art collection of the Kröller-Müller family. The project changed many times. Only in 1938 the museum was opened in Otterloo. Van de Velde added a sculpture hall in 1953 and an auditorium in 1954. It is one of Van de Velde's masterpieces and as a museum it remains very valuable, this also in connection with a recent extension.

In 1926 Van de Velde received an invitation to return to Belgium to be appointed professor in the history of architecture at the University of Ghent and to take over a new school, the "institut supérieur des arts décoratifs", in Brussels. A letter dating from March 23, 1926 to the Minister for Art, Camille Huysmans, expressed the interest which King Albert I showed for this plan:

Cher Ministre,

Je vous renvoie l'avant projet de l'institut supérieur des arts décoratifs dû à notre grand artiste Vandevelde.

J'en ai pris connaissance avec un vif intérêt et je vous remercie de m'avoir communiqué ce document.

Il est hautement souhaitable — et je vois que vous l'avez compris — que Vandevelde qui, dans le domaine artistique, a exercé une influence mondiale, soit appelé à en exercer une dans son propre pays.

Toujours, cher Ministre, votre affectionné

Albert.

This enabled Van de Velde to make up a new program. This new school could dispose of the premises of the old monastery 'La Cambre' in Brussels.

Among the young lecturers was also V. Bourgeois, who was born in 1897, two years after the "Maison du Peuple" and "Bloemenwerf" had been built.

Van de Velde had the direction of the "Cambre" till 1935 and applied for his superannuation in Ghent the year after. But he still built there the

library tower and the University Institute for the Art History, and he planned with his younger colleagues of the 'Cambre', Eggerix and Verwilghen, the Belgian pavilion at the Expo in Paris (1937); together with V. Bourgeois and his successor of the 'Cambre', Leon Stijnen, he designed the Belgian pavilion at the World Expo in New York.

In 1947 Van de Velde moved to Switzerland for reasons of health. There he became involved in the activities of the "Schweizerische Werkbund" and he supported the foundation of the "Hochschule für Gestaltung" in Ulm. Shortly before he died, he said with reference to the difficulties in Ulm: "My dear Bill, almost everything we have accomplished with lots of difficulties can now be bought in a supermarket, but we have always remained an underground movement".

In Switzerland, Van de Velde wrote his memories about his adventurous life. The publication was entrusted to Hans Curjel, who also belonged to the new friends of the ever young Van de Velde. Our colleague Alfred Roth, who writes about Van de Velde's ten year sojourn in Switzerland in his "Begegnungen mit Pionieren" deserves special mention.

With V. Bourgeois, a new generation became active in Belgium. Already from 1922-25 the construction of the "Cité Moderne" in Brussels was the evidence of a pioneering achievement concerning quarter planning and its architectonic expression.

This led to his invitation to participate in the "Weissenhof" settlement in Stuttgart, together with the other prominent modern architects in Europe.

Later he became a founder member of the "Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne" CIAM and for a long time, as Belgian representative and as vice-president he was co-responsible for the CIAM activities. In 1930 he organized the third congress in Brussels and, together with his colleagues Henvaux, Verwilghen and Mart Stam, he set up the exhibition on "Methods of Rational Building".

Due to the foundation of the CIAM, a first international cooperation of like-minded pioneers of modern architecture was realized, and when one considers today the list of its founder members, it shows that the intellectual and professional confrontations were guaranteed as never before and as it has never happened afterwards. To this goal, Victor Bourgeois, who also worked in Belgium as an architect-professor at the "Cambre", made a large contribution.

When he died in 1962 the CIAM had already dissolved itself, since a new generation had arisen with less socially moored conceptions. A similar organization with the same necessary goals was never founded.

Georges Vantongerloo took a start which was remarkably similar to the one of Van de Velde. He was also born in Antwerp, one generation later, 21 years to be exact, in 1886. He studied sculpture at the Academy. In 1914 he was called to the arms, was soon wounded, dismissed and sent to Holland for recovery, unfit for further service.

Some time later he had worked out a new concept for constructive painting and sculpturing. Consequently he met Theo van Doesburg, who was looking for collaborators to work on his new magazine "De Stijl". For this magazine, Vantongerloo handed him a text which would be published serially in the magazine during the following years.

After the war, Vantongerloo spent a short while in Brussels, where he made his first sculptures by means of purely horizontal-vertical cubic components, also a first piece of furniture, based on similar principles, painted in the basic colours as they were used by the artists of "De Stijl", such as Van der Leek, Mondrain, Huszar and Van Doesburg. After he had moved to Menton in 1920, he became active in projects and prototypes for functional ceramics, furniture and the planning of houses. Finally he planned airports of the most different kinds, since fascinated by flying as he was, he looked for possibilities to find a suitable corresponding architecture.

For a few years, painting and sculpture had become activities of secondary importance. The only things which remained were some mathematical research and the problem of the colours to which he had consecrated a series of accurate optical-physical experiments.

To everyone's surprise, Vantongerloo made in 1928 a plan for a bridge over the Scheldt in Antwerp. It was the denial of all conventional principles of that time and its actuality is only now becoming clear. This plan was made at the time when Henry Van de Velde drafted and proposed a plan for the redevelopment of the Scheldt's left bank by means of a very representative building.

Vantongerloo had designed a bridge under which an ocean liner had no difficulties to pass. On the left and on the right he had planned big buildings in which cars could be driven in by means of a loading-platform, in which they could take the road over the bridge or park. On the outer side of the building he had planned offices and dwellings. And airplanes should easily have managed to land on the 400 meter roof.

Even if Vantongerloo had been picked out to represent Belgium at the "Salon Aeronautic et Art" in Paris in 1930 with his projects, for the Antwerp authorities they were too utopian and they probably still would be today.

It was the same thing with his city of skyscrapers, in which he tried to design a condense conglomerate with many different functions. Also a problem that becomes more actual each day. It is quite certain that the interest in Vantongerloo's work, including his architectural plans, is growing, although in 1931 he gave up architectural planning and concentrated more on artistic creation. He spent a lot of time in presiding the new international artist association "Abstraction-cr ation" for some years as vice-president and director. The association had its seat in Paris, where he had been since 1928 and where, in 1965, he made a fatal fall down the stairs of his studio, five weeks before Le Corbusier drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

As fifth architect, I mention Joseph Hoffmann, born in 1870, who spent the greater part of his 86 years in Vienna till his death in 1956. His link with Belgium consists in his most spectacular building, which he began to build in 1905: the "Palais Stoclet". This building, which was very impressive as to concept and luxury, was protected as a monument in 1955. It is one of the most consequent buildings of the so-called "Wiener Sezession", with extremely carefully chosen materials, richly decorated with the cooperation of the group consisting the "Wiener Sezession". Although we now have different views on such palaces, it is still a merit to have brought such an extreme example of architecture to an equally financial height. The owner Stoclet probably never knew in which adventure he had plunged when charging the 30-year old Josef Hoffmann with the construction. It is said that, when asked for the expenses, he once answered: I have paid the expenses up to 1 million, then I have given up and haven't done anything else but pay.

Already the first million consisted of such golden francs of the Latin monetary union, as we can only comparatively calculate their value at the actual gold price, but also the value of the gold used for the gilding of the metal parts of the 'Palais Stoclet' has not stopped increasing. Josef Hoffmann, who planned social houses, exhibitions and who manufactured well designed utensils and furniture, had founded the Viennese workshops (Wiener Werkst tten) for teaching and manufacturing. As a professor he had acquired a worldwide fame and he left a lasting impression on a newly rising generation of architects.

With reference to the competition for a building for the League of Nations in Geneva Josef Hoffmann, as a member of the international jury, next to Berlage, Horta, Moser, has decidedly supported the project by Le Corbusier; this in contrast to Horta, who had only interest for traditionalist projects.

This brings us to the sixth and last pioneer, Le Corbusier, born in La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1887, drowned in the Mediterranean in 1965. He constructed two buildings in Belgium; in 1927 he built a very typical studio house for the painter René Guiette, which resembles quite well a villa that V. Bourgeois had built five years before. About the house of Guiette, professor R. Delevois writes in his very remarkable and clarifying report on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the "Cambre" of which he still was the director in 1978: "L'unique œuvre faite en Belgique par Le Corbusier a jusqu'à présent mieux résisté qu'Horta au vandalisme des perceurs auto-routiers et autres destructeurs des campagnes et ravauteurs des villes". Here Delevois makes a mistake. Not that I, with reference to the subject of my paper, want to depreciate the connections of the foreigner with Belgium: Delevois' mistake is not his remark about the fact of vandalism or his critical attitude towards the attempt to teaching restrictions leading to his suspension as director of the "Cambre"; his mistake had not to do with Le Corbusier himself: he has not mentioned that the latter, working on the World Expo of Brussels together with Xenakis, constructed a pavilion for electronic music, which, beside the atomium, was considered as one of the main attractions of the Expo 58. The house of Guiette was built in the same year when competition took place for the Palace of the League of Nations, when Le Corbusier and P. Jeanneret received a first prize. But after the project had been revised, vis-à-vis the traditional architectural conception, they had to be worsted. This was one of the reasons, together with the experiences of the "Weissenhof" settlement in Stuttgart 1928, for the foundation of the "Congrès International d'architecture Moderne" CIAM and consequently, for the close bond of the young progressive architects with their foreign colleagues. All the congress documents for the "Dwellings for the Existential Minimum", the "Rational Building Methods" and "The Functional City". In a natural way, this cooperation practically extended itself toward the European countries, in such a way that after the many years of Belgian delegates and vice-presidents in the CIRPAC (resulting from CIAM) Victor Bourgeois led the European cooperation between and with the Belgian colleagues, to an evidence.

That is the way in which the relation of the pioneers, through their individual activities in and outside Belgium, crossed the frontiers leading to common problems and research. It is not a coincidence that all the above-mentioned from time to time, or even their entire life were working as teachers, and as such they educated students and successors all over the world, especially in good old Europe.

Reprinted from
BELGIUM AND EUROPE
Proceedings of the International Francqui-Colloquium,
Brussels-Ghent, 12-14 November 1981
p. 229-236