

“Brussels architecture in the last quarter of the 19th century – the search for national Identity linked to the desire of architectural innovation”

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Belgium was founded in 1830 and from the start very much occupied to legitimate its existence. In the first half of the nineteenth century architecture was still dominated by the neoclassical and French influence. It was the aim to prove that Belgium was capable of producing its own architectural expression and thus to manifest, (express) its independence to other nations.

Brussels architectural development during the nineteenth century reflects this evolution. In the 1870's Brussels took a large step forward in its ambition of becoming a modern City on a European level. The river the Senne was vaulted and large boulevards were created on top of it.

This urban project was inspired by the Haussmann policy in Paris; equivalent ideas of city development were at stake. The central part of the city was transformed into a bourgeois area where civil services, commerce and housing accommodation were assembled.

The Brussels transformation was much inspired on the Parisian model – even Parisian entrepreneurs were involved and some buildings could be defined as French “second empire” such as the stockage exchange or the central market ...

The private buildings that were created along these new boulevards are examples of the eclectic tendency that architecture had reached at that time.

Brussels did not want to get trapped in the Parisian system; Haussmanisation was becoming synonymous of banalized architecture. Therefore the city of Brussels organized an architecture contest; to improve the quality of the built environment. Thus architects and contractors were stimulated to create an innovative architecture along the Central Boulevards. Twenty facades were awarded.



Architect Henri Beyaert and his building for the national Bank office – the so called *Flemish house* - captured the first price.

Beyaert played an important part in the renewal of nineteenth century architecture. Although he started his career in a more classical and indisputably French related architecture he became one of the key figures in the development of a national style. The Flemish house was his first most explicit and successful attempt in this new approach.

What is so interesting and new about this architecture? The Flemish renaissance of the 16th century and more in particular the work of Hans Vredeman De Vries was the main source of inspiration. This successful renaissance artist was known for his publications on architecture in which he propagated a typical Flemish-renaissance vocabulary.

Brussels, Central Boulevards, “Flemish house”, Arch. Henri Beyaert, 1874

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Hans Vredeman de Vries was rediscovered in the second half of the nineteenth century and his albums were reedited in 1869-1870. Artisans and Architects of the nineteenth century found inspiration in particular in the elaborated ornamental vocabulary.

The gable of the Flemish house was directly referring to Vredeman De Vries.

The façade was framed by pilasters and perforated by large windows, loggia's and oriel. Some critics saw in this façade a reminiscence of the Baroque architecture in particular to the guild-houses on the nearby-situated Brussels Grand Place. Beyaert thus succeeded in combining the Flemish renaissance revival with a baroque inspiration. The sixteenth and seventeenth century being the most exemplary and artistically spoken valuable periods of Belgian national history.

Strangely this façade is not constructed in the expected brick-and stone combination that is most typical for the neo-Flemish renaissance, but in monochromatic French stone. Bricks in different colours were only used in the right side wall which at the time was visual.

This façade provoked a flood of response, most of them were very enthusiastic such as in the architectural magazine "L'Emulation" (L'Emulation was initiated by the Belgian Architects Association -the SCAB, Société Centrale des Architectes Belges- and therefore can be entitled as representative and of influence). L'Emulation played an important part in propagating this kind of architecture.

The eloquence though was not completely anonymous: the French architectural magazine "Revue Nouvelle de l'Industrie et des Travaux Publics" quoted this architecture to be bastard¹ and said it was not Flemish, not neo-renaissance, not classic, nor even neo-Flemish.² Beyaert probably must have smiled about these criticism. What he most defended in architecture was the liberty in art, for him there could be no art without freedom of choice on the part of the designer. This viewpoint Beyaert defended explicitly in 1877 on an artistic congress in Antwerp³ that questioned whether a "national art" was possible and meaningful. The American Art Historian Alfred Willis writes in his PHD on neo-Flemish renaissance:

*"Beyaert firmly refused to make a fetish of Flemish renaissance or indeed any other historical mode of building as his sole or even main source of formal inspiration. (...) Beyaert cultivated a self-reliance manifested in an unshakable confidence in the capacities of his own unique genius for synthesis and innovation in architectural design. Beyaert produced distinctive revivalist designs that hardly ever admit of facile classification into one of the stylistic categories established to accommodate the conceptions of his more pedestrian colleagues. Thus Beyaert's work could participate in historicism and meanwhile surpass it."*⁴

Whatever Beyaert's ambition was, the Flemish house was considered a manifest of neo-Flemish renaissance and at the same time an expression of a proper Belgian, thus national architecture.

The importance and influence of the Flemish house will appear once again in 1878 when Belgium participated at the world exhibition in Paris.

The organizing committee used its architecture as an argument for the stylistic development of the Belgian pavilion.

¹ "Batarde".

² L'Emulation 1877, kol. 27-29, 37-39.

³ L'Emulation 1877, kol 49-51.

⁴ A. Willis, *Flemish renaissance revival in Belgian Architecture (1830-1930)*, 1984, p. 136.

« Since the overwhelming succes of the Flemish house designed by M. Beyaert at the central Boulevards in Brussels the organizing committee and its architect where thus in the position to chose for our façade at the Champs the Mars the outspoken Flemish architecture of the sixteenth century”⁵

The architect that was in charge with the concept was Emile Janlet, a pupil of Henri Beyaert. He already proved to be an adept of the Flemish renaissance revival in several of his buildings he created at the time.

The Belgian Pavilion was one of the many ‘national’ pavilions along the “rue des nations” (the street of nations) on the Paris World exhibition of 1878. It was a tradition on World fairs that nations focused on their national characteristics in science, industry, art and culture. But for the first time they were invited to create a “national façade” and thus to present their national architecture in a spirit of international confrontation or even competition. The Belgian pavilion was confronted with its universal competitors; it was off course the ambition of being noticed (The Belgian pavilion was 60 m large and 20 meters high). In the catalogue that was edited at the occasion of the Belgian participation⁶, we notice in the comments the self-assurance and affirmation of our country:

« The Belgian facade was a revelation to the cosmopolitan public that visited the Champ de Mars during six months.”⁷

“There is in Belgium an historical architecture that is original and employing (using) construction materials of our own soil”⁸

“Our façade at the street of nations proves that Belgium can revendicate an authentic autochthon style.”⁹

“The principal merit of this Belgian Façade was to present a synthesis of the characteristics of the Antwerp school of the sixteenth century that was of influence all over Europe”.¹⁰

“the Belgian façade is in fact the resurrection of a lost art and we hope that in the future it will be an example for rational artistic conceptions.”¹¹

The author of this contribution was no less than architect-publicist Auguste Schoy (1838-1885)¹² one of the main (if not to say the only) architectural historians who studied and published on Belgian architecture from the mediaeval period until the present day. Schoy was very much involved in propagating the neo-Flemish renaissance as a national style, only a year earlier, in 1876; he published a monographic study on Hans Vredeman de Vries.

⁵ “depuis l'éclatant succès de la Maison flamande du Boulevard central à Bruxelles (...) élevés sur les plans de M. Beyaert ; la Commission organisatrice et son architecte se trouvaient en quelque sorte, mis en demeure de donner à notre façade du Champs-de-Mars le type franchement accusé de l'architecture flamande du XVIe siècle”. In : *La Belgique à l'Exposition Universelle de 1878*, Brussel, 1878, dl. 2, pp. 237-268.

⁶ *La Belgique à l'Exposition Universelle de 1878*, Brussel, 1878, dl. 2, pp. 237-268.

⁷ “La façade Belge fut une révalation pour le public cosmopolite qui à visité pendant six mois le Champs-de-Mars. »

⁸ « Il existe donc en Belgique un art architectural historique, original, employant des matériaux de construction tiré du sol belges ».

⁹ “Notre façade de la rue des Nations à démontré que la Belgique pouvait revendiquer un style autochtone »

¹⁰ « Le principal mérite de la façade Belge est donc de présenter la synthèse des motifs caractéristiques de l'école Anversoise du XVIIème siècle qui étendit ses ramifications dans l'Europe entière .»

¹¹ « L'aspect de la façade Belge donnait en somme la résurrection d'un art perdue qui servira nous l'espérons désormais de vêtements rationnel à nos conceptions plastiques futures. »

¹² Marcel Celis, *Schoy Auguste*, in : *Repertorium van de Architectuur in België*, Antwerpen, 2003, pp. 500-501.

Several of his ideas expressed in the above quotations are interesting:

- 1.The idea of an authentic Belgian architecture is very present;
- 2.The international emanation of the sixteenth century Flemish renaissance was taken as an example. The hope to reach with this architecture once again this international level was inherent;
- 3.Schoy insists on the employment of Belgian materials. The pavilion was indeed a display of homegrown products. We may not forget that this was the main aim of this kind of world-exhibitions. Schoy even seized the opportunity to comment on all the used materials and their qualities.
- 4.And last but not least Schoy insists on the rationality of the concept – it was not easy because these national façades were so called “façadist” architecture, there was nothing behind it – but he tried to prove that this architecture was adaptable tot modern and rational concepts and thus an example for future development in architecture.

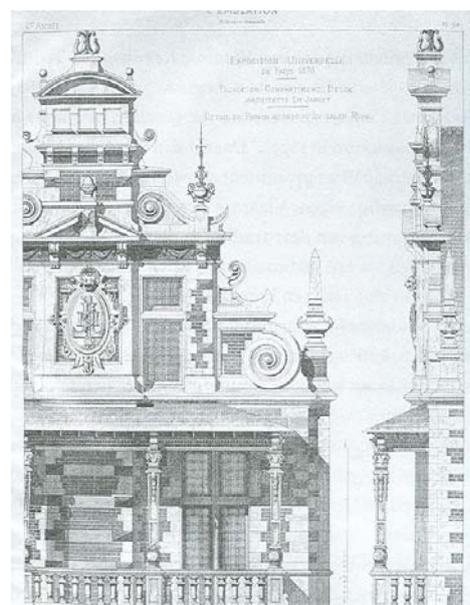
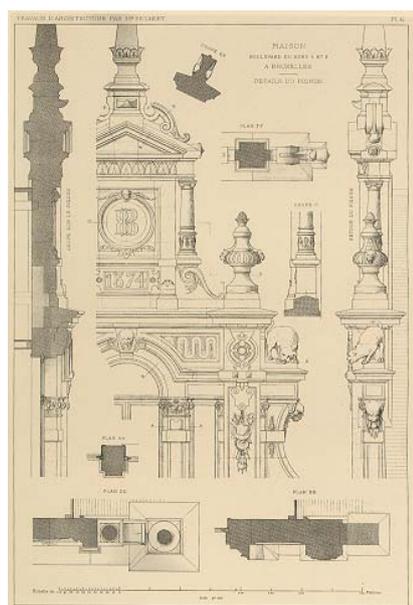
His judgment on the contemporary architecture was of great importance because he could, better than anyone else, certify on the credibility of the true and authentic character of this architecture pretending to be national and at the same time to be modern.

There is one other aspect I must insist on because being of great importance: it is the development of artistic skills. The Belgian façade did not only use Belgian materials but did also demonstrate the resurrection of traditional craftsmanship. The best – most reputed craftsmen – were involved. Industrialization had inevitably its part in this pavilion; the renowned “*Compagnie des Bronzes*” was also collaborating.

Thus this pavilion was an example of the idea of “*gesamtkunst*”, all artists and all technical means were contributing to the final and homogeneous artistic concept of the building.

Not all were equally convinced by the Belgian Façade. The French building magazine “*Le Moniteur des Architectes*” did not recognize the authentic character of the building and qualified the architecture as “*Spanich renaissance (style renaissance espagnole)*”¹³. This criticism was off course strongly rejected by those who defended the authenticity of the Belgian Pavilion.

Left :*Flemish house*”,
H .Beyaert, 1874
(*L’Emulation*)
Right : *Belgian Pavilion*
on the Paris World
exhibition 1878, E. Janlet
(*L’Emulation*)



¹³ *L’Emulation*, 1878.

In Brussels the public and the architects were convinced and a flood of Flemish renaissance went through the city. The style was applied to public and representative buildings such as Ministry buildings, post-offices, schools, marketplaces, town hall etc. and mostly linked to political-ideological liberalism. The 1878 pavilion directly inspired some buildings such as the townhouses of Schaarbeek or Anderlecht, both erected in the suburbs of the capital, and both designed by architect Jules Jacques Van Ysendyck.



*Townhall Schaarbeek (Brussels), arch.
J.J. Van Ysendyck, 1884-1887,
© Linda Van Santvoort*

I will not hold forth on this architect, just mention that he was contributing not only by his architecture but also by the publication of an impressive illustrated album that represented the top-class of our national heritage of the 16th and 17th century.

In the Schaarbeek town hall we recognize the same ornamental vocabulary as in Janlets 1878 pavilion; the same importance of the polychrome of materials. The same craftsmanship of the wrought-ironwork.

The elaborated ornamentation was subject of criticism; some saw signs of a decadent turn¹⁴, particularly in the central part of the building. On the other hand some parts show a rational architectural composition. The large windows illuminate the offices behind and the central part of the building is a sky-lighted and double-height space surrounded by counters.

The most emblematic building of this movement was the Flemish theater in Brussels designed by architect Jean Baes in 1884. The concept of the building was not primarily inspired by the idea of creating a decorative and festive architecture as one could expect. It was on the contrary dominated by the concern of fire protection. Recent incidents in Ring-theater in Vienna and the theater of Nice had turned into disaster. Baes' concern was to create a building that would offer a maximum of safety for its visitors and performers and that at the

¹⁴ L'Emulation,

same time would be an outstanding and modern performance-environment on an international level.

How did the architect cope with this challenge? In the monumental façade large arched windows lighten the foyer behind. The three arches serve as shrine for busts of the most important Flemish historic poets and play writers.



Brussels, Flemish Theater, 1884-1887, Arch. Jean Baes
© Linda Van Santvoort

The re-entrant step-gable corners were most original and *ingeniously treated* ¹⁵.

But the most particular aspect of the architecture was the corbelling terrace on three levels. Each terrace was connecting to the inside balcony and thus providing in normal conditions an open-air walkout during the interval of theater performance. In case of fire incident it was the ultimate escape. The terraces could harbor all the visitors and the fact that they are broadening on the lower floors was meant to evacuate all the visitors of the upper levels at the outside of the building and thus prevent suffocation.

These terraces were *treated as cantilevered galleries with highly schematized floral pattern that clearly did not belong to revivalist ornamental vocabulary.* ¹⁶ This, as well as the exposed ironwork, looked forward to art nouveau.

The concern for safety was also guiding the interior disposition. The scene could be separated from the public area by an iron curtain.

In the interior Baes deployed all possible decoration techniques that were in vogue at the time; sgraffiti, fresco-techniques, wrought-iron, cabinetwork, ceramic ... all colorfully treated in black, yellow and red, the national colours.... for this matter the architect was assisted by his brother and artisan Henri Baes. The wrought iron was fabric of the earlier mentioned Pierre de Smedt who seemed to be inevitable at the time. In the monumental staircase iron was visible in the sealing

The building was inaugurated in October 1887. In his inauguration speech mayor Charles Buls expressed his admiration and appreciation for the architect :

¹⁵ A. Willis, op cit. P. 216.

¹⁶ A. Willis, op. cit p. 217.

“Baes succeeded tot combine beauty and functional conditions”, “He adapted the elements of our national art to modern needs”.

The architectural magazine “L’Emulation” published an article on the newly opened theater and commissioned the young and inexperienced architect Victor Horta (I presume I do not have to present him) to comment on the architectural concept of his senior and renowned colleague.¹⁷

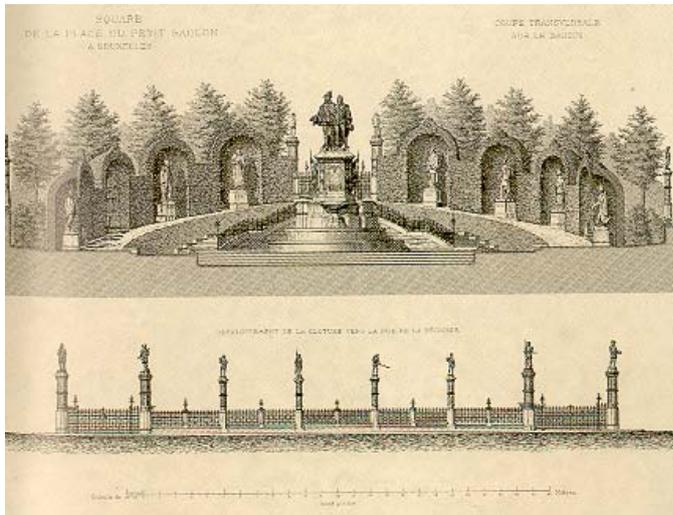
It is clear that Horta had much appreciation for the architecture of the Flemish theater. He recognized the innovative character of the concept.

The building was mostly criticized on the apparent use of iron in the exterior as well as in the interior. What for most architects of the time was still rejectable was for Horta one of its most valuable characteristics.

Off course Horta approved on the visible use of iron, structural honesty being one of the main efforts of innovation in architecture. But besides this mark of honor, Horta did not avoid critical evaluation. Horta points out that Baes was not logical in the application of this principle. Why did he expose the iron in the sealing of the staircase, why then was the iron disguised in other parts of the building.

Horta also considered that Baes anxious care on fire safety had lead him to solutions that were in some cases innovative (the terraces for example) but in some other cases Horta had its doubts on the efficiency of the proposed solutions!

Horta was most severe on the decorative part of the foyer and could not appreciate the complexity of the wrought Iron chandelier nor did he appreciate the mix of so many decoration techniques in this one area.



Brussels, “square du Petit Sablon”, 1879-1889, Arch. H. Beyaert, P. Hankar (wrought-iron) executed by P. Desmedt.

Left : L’Emulation / right : © Linda Van Santvoort

In the 1880’s the Flemish renaissance revival reached its peak. One other project must be mentioned.

Beyaert designed the square of the petit sablon, commanded by the liberal Brussels mayor Charles Buls. This small townscape stood symbol for the liberal and humanistic policy of

¹⁷ V. Horta, *Le Theatre Flamand de Bruxelles*, in *L’Emulation*, 1888, kol 155-156.

Charles Buls. It was not by coincidence positioned opposite to the gothic Church du Sablon. It is indeed relevant to mention that in spite of the flourishing neo-Flemish renaissance movement there was a strong oppositional movement by the catholic that claimed neogothic to be the national art. This neogothic movement was part of an international gothic revival, strongly developed in England and on the continent stimulated by Viollet-le-duc's rational approach.

In Brussels – the city was governed by liberal municipality throughout the 19th century- this neogothic movement did not come strongly on the foreground as it did in some other Belgian cities (Ghent, Leuven, Liège, and of course Bruges).

This small townscape is exemplary for the symbiosis of art and architecture. Beyaert pushed the artisans to the most extreme craftsmanship. This relatively small and discrete public area in the historic center of Brussels marks a turn in artistic and architectural development. Paul Hankar was at the time apprentice in Beyaert's studio and collaborating in conceiving the wrought iron. This experience would be of great influence in his independent career that he started immediately after leaving Beyaert's office in 1893 (he worked for Beyaert from 1879 until 1892)

This brings me to the final and conclusive part of my lecture: the relation between the national style (neo Flemish renaissance) and the art nouveau in the last decade of the nineteenth century.



Brussels, Rue Defacqz, Arch. Paul Hankar, 1893
© Linda van Santvoort

As we all know Hankar built his own house and office in 1893 in Brussels, the same year that Horta created his first explicit art nouveau architecture: the Tasselhouse. Both houses are published in the 1895 edition of *l'Emulation*. Hankar's house was praised for the colorful combination of brick, stone and fresco technique. Horta was qualified as a "searcher". The anonymous author of the comment on the Tassel House only disapproved on the use of imported French Euville stone.

Hankar's attention to the craftsmanship was still very much rooted in the neo-Flemish renaissance tradition. The wrought iron is comparable to the one he designed in Beyaert's office.

The rational composition of the oriel with its exposed iron structure was of course explicitly modern and innovative.

In his brief but productive career Hankar would continue to reconcile traditional neo-Flemish renaissance characteristics with contemporary and rational solutions.

Flemish renaissance expert Alfred Willis puts it in this way:

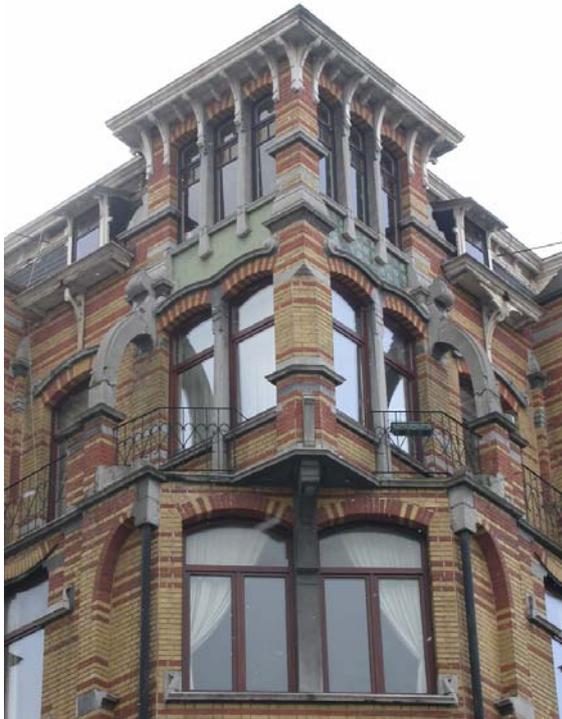
*“From Beyaert he inherited a firm distrust of facile revivalism- a veritable revulsion for antiquarian copyism- as a means for realizing an architectural image of some predetermined stylistic character”.*¹⁸

The example of Hankar was inspiring for many others.

One could even say that the right bay of the Hankar house and certainly the penthouse on top of the entrance door was plagiarized.

Several architects continued to stress on the combination of colorful brick-and stone and thus connect with neo-Flemish renaissance and with the attention for craftsmanship. It is clear that this kind of “art nouveau” (if we may call it so) was affordable for a large part of the bourgeois customers.

The moderate modernity was combined with a picturesque expression and thus acceptable.



Some art nouveau architects even succeeded to develop an original and innovative kind of Art nouveau such as Gustave Strauven in this apartment building with reminiscences to the neo gothic structuralism – as you can notice in the flying buttresses. The fact that Strauven was a pupil of the Saint-luke school in 1893-1894 – that school was the cradle of the neogothic movement in Belgium- and for a short time apprentice in Horta’s office is interesting to know when you look at his architecture. He indeed succeeded in combining the characteristics of the floral art nouveau (see the details in natural stone and the wrought Iron) and the traditionally inspired colorful masonry, the latter pushed to the extreme.

Brussels (Schaarbeek), Arch. G. Strauven, 1906
© linda Van Santvoort

At the turn of the century- when art nouveau already was getting over its peak – there was a strong tendency to minimize decorative aspects and to reject stylistic qualifications. This was an international phenomenon that was introduced by the pioneers of the modern movement.

Such as architect C.A. Voysey who rebelled against what he called “the tyranny of styles”. He declared in an interview in the studio (1893) :

“To be simple is the end, not the beginning, of design. (...) The highest effort is the selection of essential beauty from all possible ornament, reduced to its most direct expression”

¹⁸ A. Willis, op.cit. p. 324.

The Dutch architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage expressed a similar viewpoint in his manifesto “architecture and impressionism” (1894)

*“The secret of all artistic expression lies in the sparing use of decoration. The characteristic of eminent beauty was at all time austerity, the immortal classical quality, that remains indisputable through all artistic periods”.*¹⁹

When Henry van de Velde built his own house in Uccle (a suburb of the Brussels capital) he focused on simplicity. Van de Velde was at the time very much inspired by the English Arts and crafts. The fact that this cottage provoked so many reactions was explained by Henry van de Velde when he wrote his memoirs at the end of his life.

*“Today it is difficult to understand why this modest and rational construction provoked such agitation among architects. Its singularity lies in its simplicity on a moment that bourgeois architecture was the opposite: attract attention had become a standard of beauty. The lack of ornamentation was not the result of a forced economy or a lack of financial means but it was premeditated. Consequently this concept was considered revolutionary.”*²⁰



We recognize an analogue approach in this corner house built in 1899 by architect Georges Hobé in the Brussels Nord-East extension district. It strikes by its simplicity. Hobé was a self-made architect and his concept is characterised by plain expression of the used construction materials. Hobé is still using bricks and natural stone in contrast but in a more rational (you could say even economic) way. Hobé reinterpreted the traditional architectonic elements, such as the stone cross-windows that were so typical for the neo-Flemish renaissance. This simplicity was innovative at the time, if not to say provocative.

Brussels, Ambiorixsquare, arch. G. Hobé, 1899
© Linda Van Santvoort

¹⁹ “(...) het geheim van alle artistieke effect juist ligt in een spa La Belgique à l'Exposition Universelle de 1878, Brussel, 1878, dl. 2, pp. 237-268. arzaam gebruik van de middelen tot versiering.(...) Het kenmerk van voorname pracht was ten allen tijden, soberheid, de onsterfelijke klassieke eigenschap, door alle kunstperioden heen, als onbetwistbaar gebleken.”

H.P. Berlage *Bouwkunst en impressionisme* (1894) in :*De steen van Berlage. Theorie en praktijk van de architectuur rond 1895*, Nai, Rotterdam, 2003, p. 87.

²⁰« Aujourd'hui, il semble à peine croyable qu'une construction aussi sage, aussi modeste et rationnelle que cette maison de campagne ait pu provoquer une telle agitation parmi le public et les architectes. Mais sa singularité résidait précisément en sa simplicité à un moment où l'architecture bourgeoise et monumentale était tout à l'opposé: l'ostentation était devenue le critère de la beauté. (...) le manque d'ornementation, d'autant qu'il ne résultait ni d'une économie forcée, ni d'un manque d'argent. L'offense était non seulement manifeste, mais elle était aussi préméditée. Par conséquent, pareille conception était "révolutionnaire." » Henry VAN DE VELDE, *Récit de ma vie*, 1992, p. 285.

It must be clear that at the turn of the century nationalism is less an issue as it was in the decades before.

Internationally spoken there is an increasing interest in an authentic architecture, vernacular and rooted in tradition but at the same time rational and honest.
