

# Victor Horta and the Grammar of Art Nouveau

18 Oct.'23 »→ 14 Jan.'24  
at Bozar

Visitors Guide





## Introduction

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Setting aside the seductive ornamental aspect of his formal language, what does the Art Nouveau of Victor Horta represent? What is the deeper structure of his architectural approach, once we look beyond his distinctive vocabulary?

This exhibition examines the Art Nouveau grammar of Horta in nine consecutive rooms. Each investigates recurring themes or aspects of his design method through the study of particular buildings.

The first three rooms look into the intellectual and social world in which Horta moved: the architectural references he assembled into his own version of Art Nouveau (Maison Tassel), his three successive studios as places of creation (Horta house and studio) and the network of clients for whom he designed houses (Maison Vinck).

The next three rooms examine fundamental architectural themes that are present both in his Art Nouveau work and in his later creations: the dynamic structuring around sources of natural light (Maison Aubecq), the ambiguity between indoors and outdoors (Waucquez department store) and the rhetorical use of structure (La Maison du Peuple). The last rooms explore the link to the wider era in which Horta's work was created: the Hôtel Solvay addresses the exceptional wealth of Belgium's young industrial capitalism, while the link between Horta's Art Nouveau and the Congo Free State is discussed through the Hôtel Van Eetvelde and the unrealized project for a pavilion for the Congo Free State at the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris.

*Victor Horta and the grammar of Art Nouveau* is conceived as a research exhibition: we give the floor to local and international Horta experts who explain the themes and the objects on display.

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### Video

**Watch the videos of these experts on the flat screens in the exhibition or on your mobile phone by scanning the QR-code in each section of this guide.**





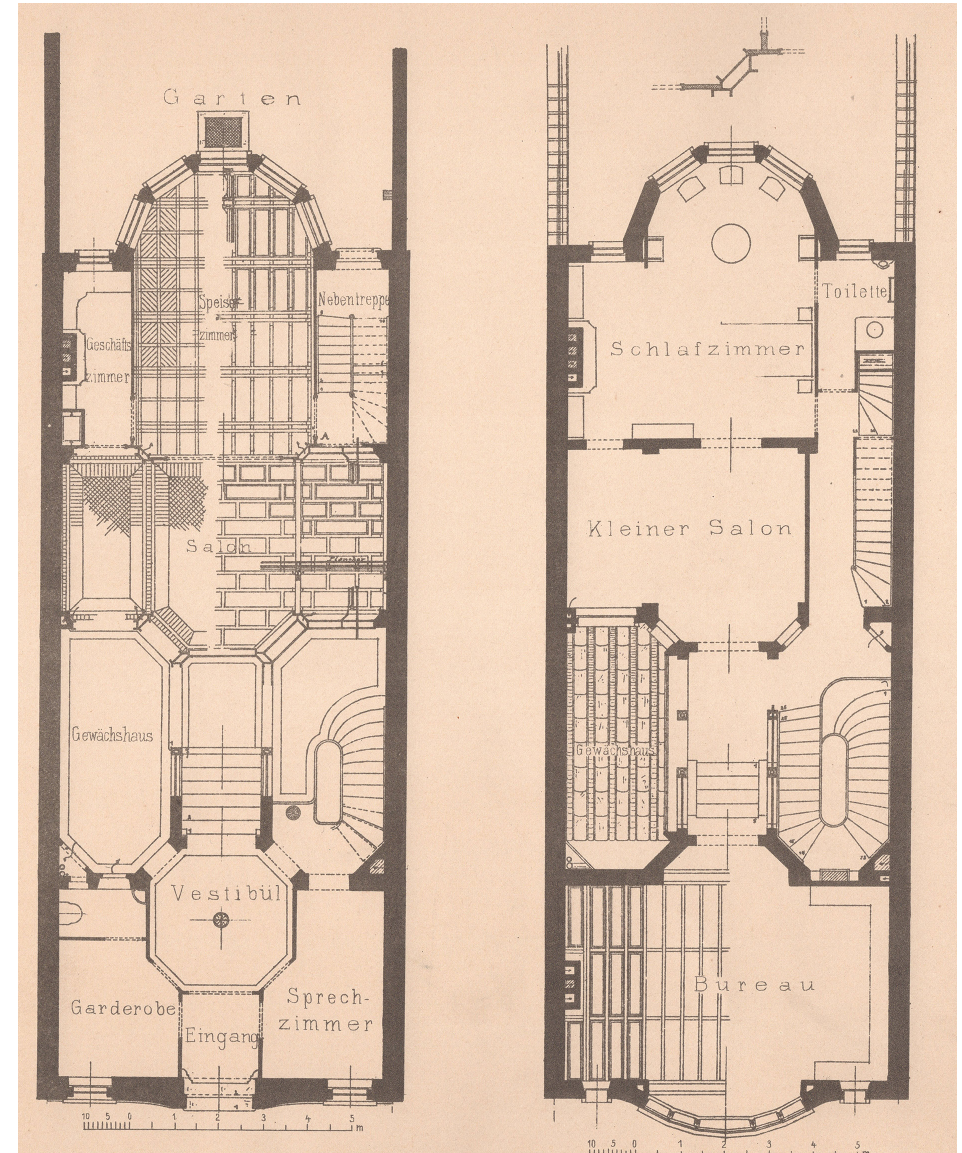
Hôtel Tassel, 1893 - analog colour photography  
© Maxime Delvaux / Bozar, 2023

## The invention of Art Nouveau: the Hôtel Tassel

Victor Horta designed and built the Hôtel Tassel in 1893 for Emile Tassel, a professor of geometry at the Université libre de Bruxelles. Horta designed a house in which Tassel, whom he got to know in the masonic lodge “Les Amis philanthropes”, could receive his circle of friends, exhibit his collection and continue his own scientific activities. The house is generally considered one of the earliest manifestations of Art Nouveau, both in Brussels and internationally. It brings together the major themes and references with which Horta worked in his invention of Art Nouveau:

- the rationalism of French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, expressed in leaving load-bearing iron structures visible or integrating ornamentation into structural elements.
- the new formal language, inspired by Japanese prints, a fascination that Horta shared with Tassel.
- the typology for and integration of winter gardens into the heart of a house. Horta worked for Alphonse Balat on the Royal greenhouses in Laeken.
- the classical tradition and the Brussels 19<sup>th</sup>-century mannerism that remains present in the façade and general layout.

In the façade, the lateral bays retain a classical language of white stone, tinged with Egyptian influences. They are interrupted in the middle by a wide curved metal bay window. This is why Brussels residents nicknamed the mansion “the pregnant woman”, very appropriately as it was about the birth of a new architecture.



VH, plan of the Hôtel Tassel © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles





## Glass negative of the Palais de Justice (law courts) by Joseph Poelaert

Horta was himself an active photographer. Witness to this are not only the dark room in his own home, but also photographs that have been preserved: family photos, images for use in his teaching and sometimes also photographs of his own work. The authorship of these photographs is, however, difficult to determine with certainty. The photographic prints and glass negatives included in this exhibition are most likely the work of Horta himself.

This photo of the law courts in Brussels illustrates Horta's fascination with Joseph Poelaert's mannerism and his most important achievement. In an early piece of writing, Horta described Poelaert's Palais de Justice as one of the most significant monuments of his time. This explains that in the Hôtel Tassel, in which Horta developed his new architectural language, the academic tradition is also still clearly visible, especially in the structuring of the façade.



Palais de Justice (law courts) of J. Poelaert, glass plate, 1905. Coll. of Victor Horta © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles



## Video

Aniel Guxholli, lecturer in architectural history and urban heritage conservation, McGill University (CA)



## Conceiving

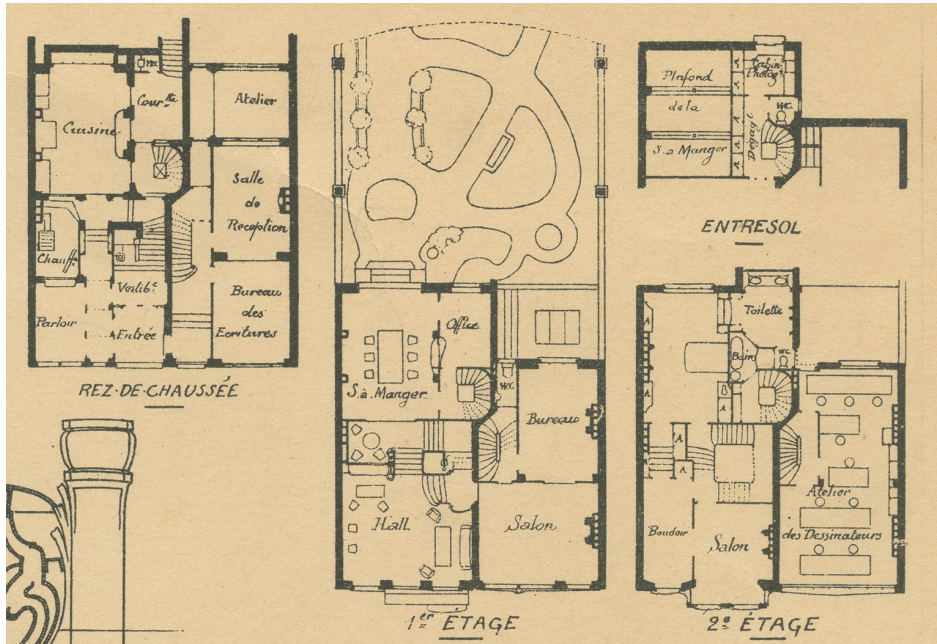


## The studio-house on the Rue Américaine

The studio-house of Victor Horta, 1898-1901 - analog colour photography © Maxime Delvaux / Bozar, 2023

Between 1898 and 1901, Victor Horta built his own home and architecture studio on two adjoining plots on the Rue Américaine in Saint-Gilles. It is one of Horta's four Art Nouveau houses that are today UNESCO World Heritage sites. Paradoxically, by the time Horta moved in, his Art Nouveau period was actually past its heyday. His most famous and ground-breaking work was created in his office on Chaussée de Charleroi, of which little is known, other than a number of photos. The spatial structure of his Rue Américaine studio bears witness to how Horta worked throughout his career: on the first floor facing the street, Horta received his clients in a smoking room filled with framed photos of recent work and with samples of marbles and other types of stone. His personal office was on the garden side, where he made sketches that were then scaled up by fifteen draughtsmen on the second floor, while the crucial details of his architecture were developed into life-size models by four sculptors working in the basement. Only after a final check was the model (in plaster or wood) sent to the craftsmen or contractors, who had to follow it closely. In 1919 the house and the studio were sold. Horta converted a neoclassical mansion on the Avenue Louise, which housed part of his offices and studios, with the rest on Place Stéphanie. It is here that the final design for the Palais des Beaux-Arts (today's Centre for Fine Arts) was created after the First World War.





VH, plans of his studio-house, ca. 1898 © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

## 🔍 The plaster models and their role in the design process

The Horta Museum is home to some 550 plaster and wood models that correspond 1:1 to architectural fragments of buildings from throughout his career. Horta was certainly not the only architect who used plaster models to work out his architectural details. Previously, ornamentalists like Georges Houtsont had often been brought in for this, working for well-known Brussels architects like Balat and Poelaert. Horta too undoubtedly used Houtsont for his own early work, because his first studio on the Chaussée de Charleroi (1894 – 1901) was owned by Houtsont and was located next to the latter’s own studio. Model-making was an expensive affair. Some works called for a large number of models, which were invoiced individually to the client.



Model for a column base (unidentified building), 1893-1915 – © Coll. Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles (deposit from the RMAH)

## 📺 Video

Françoise Aubry,  
honorary director  
of the Horta Museum



## Meeting



Maison Vinck, 1903-1906 – analog colour photography © Maxime Delvaux / Bozar, 2023

## Victor Horta’s network and the Maison Vinck

Horta designed and built the house for Emile Vinck at 85 Rue Washington in Ixelles between 1903 and 1906, at a time when the heyday of his Art Nouveau period was over. In its original version, the house only had two floors, to which Adrien Blomme added an additional floor in 1927. This modesty makes the house exceptional in Horta’s portfolio of assignments. Horta’s formal language also goes silent during this period. Nevertheless, behind the rather austere façade, a formally refined and spatially dynamic interior unfolds with a central, zenithally-lit reception area giving onto offices on the street side and a living area on the garden side. A modest yet refined house that functions as a portrait of his client.

Vinck was a socialist politician, who played an influential, behind-the-scenes role in Belgian urban planning and social housing policy. He had studied law at the Université libre de Bruxelles. He was, like Horta, a member of the Masonic Lodge “Les Amis Philanthropes”, and the son-in-law of Jules Hiclet, another Horta fanatic. In 1893, Vinck joined the Belgian Labour Party at the request of Emile Vandervelde. From 1903, Vinck was a municipal counsellor in Ixelles and in 1912 he was elected a senator. The following year he founded the Union of Belgian Cities and Municipalities, of which he remained director until his death in 1950.

## 📺 Videos

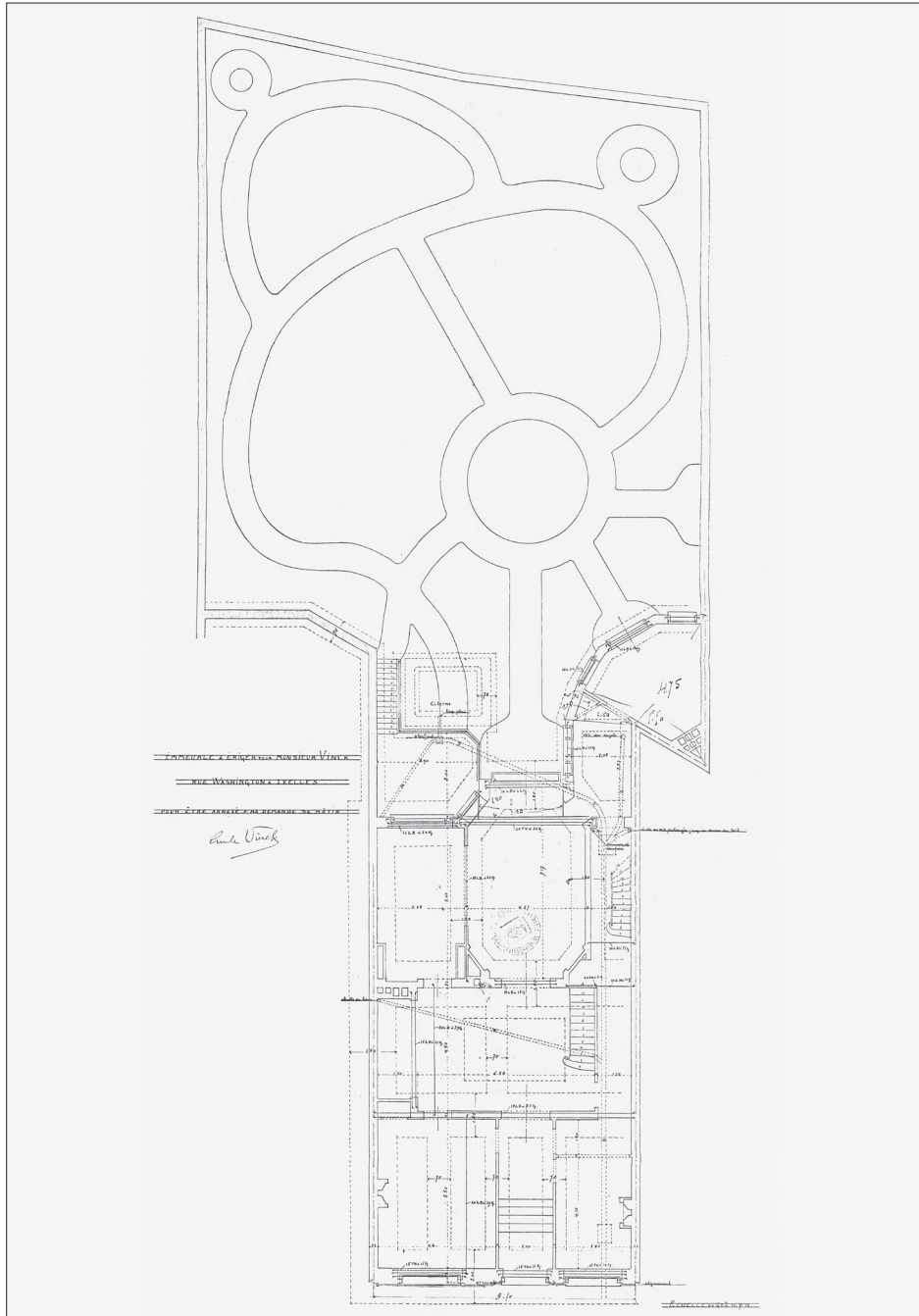
Werner Adriaenssens,  
curator Collections  
20th c., Royal Museums  
of Art and History,  
Brussels



Debora Silverman,  
professor of history  
and art history at  
UCLA (USA)







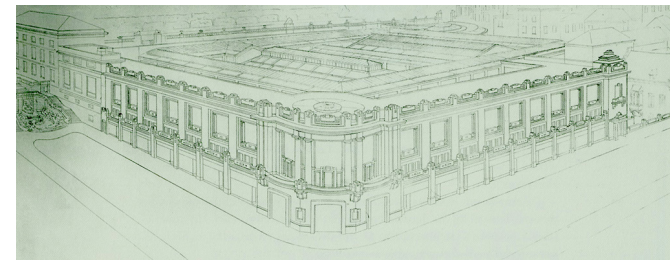
VH, plan of the Maison Vinck, ca. 1906. © Municipal Archives, Ixelles – Courtesy of Mercatorfonds

## 🔍 Print of a drawing in perspective of the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

Although his name is less associated with the Palais des Beaux-Arts than Henry Le Boeuf's, on two occasions Vinck played a crucial role as a politician in its establishment. The first time, in 1919, he chaired, on behalf of Minister of Public Works Edward Anseele, the committee that awarded the commission for the design to Horta. The second time, in 1922, he initiated and founded the non-profit organization that, despite the Senate's refusal to provide financing, went ahead with building this cultural infrastructure.

During the construction of the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Vinck was chairman of the National Society for Affordable Housing, founded in 1919. In this capacity, he was undoubtedly one of the prime movers of the organization of the 3rd CIAM Congress (of the organization International Congresses of Modern Architecture) at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in November 1930.

This print of a drawing in perspective of the Palais des Beaux-Arts was recently found in the Palais' archives.



VH, drawing in perspective of the Palais des Beaux-Arts, brussels – print © Bozar

## 🔍 *Vivre la Maison Horta*, film of Marie-Ange Guilleminot

In 2019, Marie-Ange Guilleminot was invited to the Horta Museum in partnership with the Fondation Thalie. Rapidly and intuitively, the idea came into being of bringing the house to life by creating links with Horta's works around a video creation by Armande Chollat-Namy. In this way, through mysterious appearances of actors and museum visitors,

the whole atmosphere of the house takes on a new aura. It is a felicitous meeting of two mutually echoing worlds: plays of light, gestures, textures, sounds, matter, contemplation...

*Vivre la Maison Horta* is presented for the first time in its complete version.



Marie-Ange Guilleminot, *Vivre la Maison Horta*, artist film, 2023 – Film still : Toiles / salle des plâtres, Horta Museum, Brussels © Photo : Armande Chollat-Namy





Hôtel Aubecq © Intérieurs d'Architecture Moderne, Ch. Schmid

## The dynamic plan of the Hôtel Aubecq

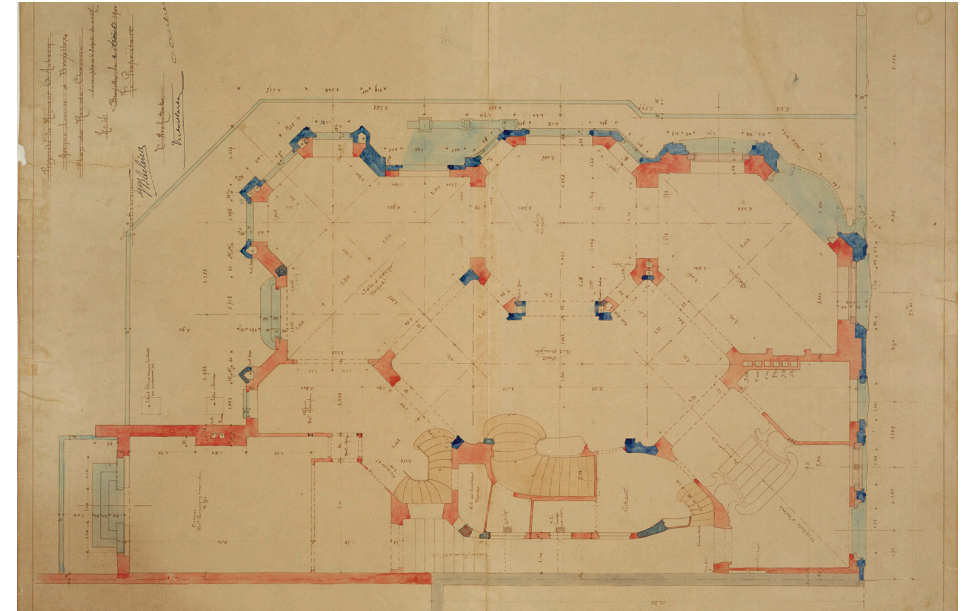
Horta built the Hôtel Aubecq between 1899 and 1902 for Octave Aubecq, director of the Émailleries et Tôleries Réunies in Gosselies, on an irregularly-shaped plot on Avenue Louise. For Horta, the design represented a synthesis of ten years of Art Nouveau work. At the same time, it marks a turning point in his oeuvre. The floor plan is based on a double triangle and the ground floor rooms are all hexagonal or octagonal. The various rooms fan out from a skylit central hall, giving visitors a panoramic overview as they ascend the stairs.

In contrast to Horta's previous houses, the façade here was no longer partly in metal, but entirely in bluestone and granite. The resulting sculptural façade reflects the dynamics of the floor plan, giving it an almost baroque appearance.



Video

Jos Vandenbreenen, architect and professor emeritus of Sint-Lucas, Brussels / Ghent



VH, Plan of the Hôtel Aubecq, 1899 © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

## Stones from the Aubecq façade

André Dautzenberg, one of Horta's draughtsmen, who continued to work for him for more than ten years, has left us an account of the design of the façade. After a titanic drawing effort, the entire order was rejected by the quarry and each stone had to be drawn to size again: one drawing per side. In 1949, the house fell victim to the profiteering of property developers and was demolished to make way for an apartment building.

Furniture and woodwork were sold at auction and are now on display in various museums. Thanks to the persistence of Jean Delhay, a student of Horta and a staunch defender of his work, the façade was dismantled and preserved for a hypothetical reconstruction. After 74 years and a number of proposals, the stones are still awaiting a new destination.



Façade of the Hôtel Aubecq (detail), 1899 © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles



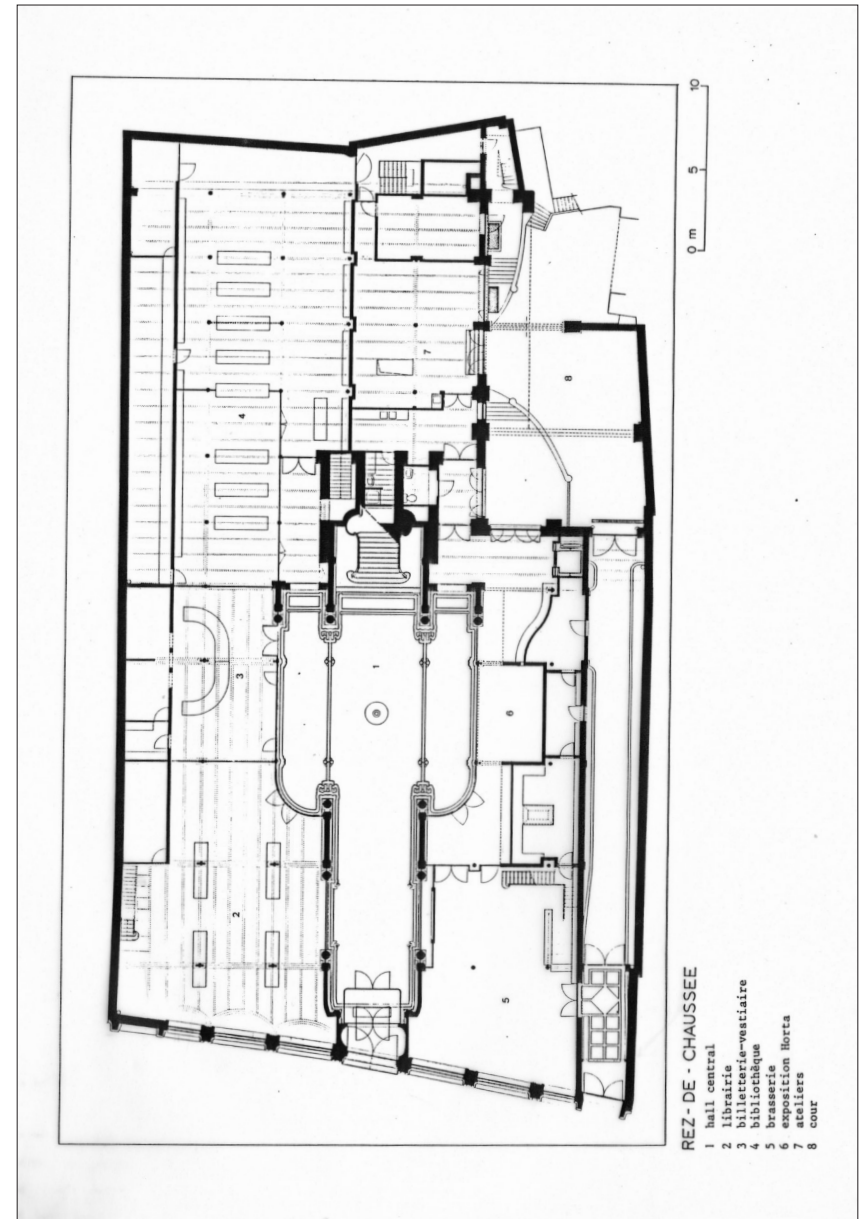


Waucquez department store, 1903 - analog colour photography  
© Maxime Delvaux / Bozar, 2023

## The indoor/ outdoor ambiguity of the Waucquez department store

Horta stands at the crossroads between two traditions. The first is a typically eclectic tradition: playing with the ambiguity between indoor and outdoor spaces. This was a common feature of 19th-century public buildings, including Joseph Poelaert's Palais de Justice. The second legacy is a national tradition in which well-known neoclassical architects were involved in building greenhouses (Balat in Laeken and Suys in the Botanical Garden).

In his early years, most of Horta's commissions were for private homes, the "menu fretin" (small fry) as he scornfully called them. In these houses he gave shape to the encounter between these two worlds: the indoor/outdoor ambiguity and the experience of an artificial plant world in a warm greenhouse. This grew into a recurring element in almost all work from his Art Nouveau period. After 1902, he retained this eclectic approach to porosity for other buildings, like the Waucquez department store and the Palais des Beaux-Arts, but without adding the element of artificial nature.



VH, Plan of the Waucquez department store, ca. 1903 © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles



Video

Benjamin Zurstrassen,  
director of the Horta Museum, Brussels







## The Sculpture Hall of the Palais des Beaux-Arts

The sculpture hall, which can be seen here in full size, is the design par excellence with which Horta introduces the scale of an urban outdoor space inside a building, and in so doing plays with the ambiguity between indoor and outdoor spaces.

The public character of this hall is further emphasized by the natural light flooding in from the skylight and by the monumentality of the stairs flanked with Doric columns. In Horta's first designs for the Palais des Beaux-Arts, we find this monumentality in the entrance areas along the Rue Royale and the Rue Ravenstein. These were scrapped in the final design, the first because of the protected view from the Royal Palace over the lower city and the second because of a need to provide commercial spaces along the Rue

Ravenstein. In this way, Horta interiorized the monumentality of the façades in one of the two focal points of the Palais des Beaux-Arts, the other being the Henry Le Boeuf concert hall.

Maxime Delvaux is an architectural photographer who, with a particular eye, photographs buildings by international contemporary architects along with iconic buildings from the broader history of architecture. For this series of photographs of a selection of Victor Horta buildings, he worked with a technical analogue camera, using only natural light. This had the effect of limiting both the image width and the colour palette. The series seeks to display Horta's spatial dynamics as much as possible.



View of the Sculpture Hall of the Palais des Beaux-Arts of Brussels, 1928 © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

## Articulating



Maison du Peuple, ca. 1950 - glass plate © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

## The Maison du Peuple and the rhetoric of structure

Horta produced the Maison du Peuple in Brussels for the Belgian Labour Party (POB/BWP) between 1895 and 1898. The building was to house cooperative stores, offices and meeting rooms of the Socialist Party, as well as a large banqueting hall (Salle des Fêtes) and a café. It had to be built on a steep, irregular plot on what is now the Place Joseph Stevens in the Marolles. Horta successfully took maximum advantage of the sloping terrain, counter-intuitively locating the Salle des Fêtes on the upper floors and the café on the ground floor.

The building was constructed with an exposed iron structure. In doing so, Horta applied the principle of honesty in architecture which he had learned from French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Honesty meant that the iron and rivets had to remain visible, that the ornamentation had to follow the structural logic of the building and that the façades had to reflect the underlying functions. That this honesty was mainly reflected in the expression of the architecture is evident in the extent to which Horta used structure as a rhetorical element. Although the ornamentation often suggests that it plays a structural role, this is in fact not the case at all: neither the steel beams from which the balconies in the large banqueting hall seem to hang, nor the ribbed structure of the café ceiling make any structural contribution to the building's stability.

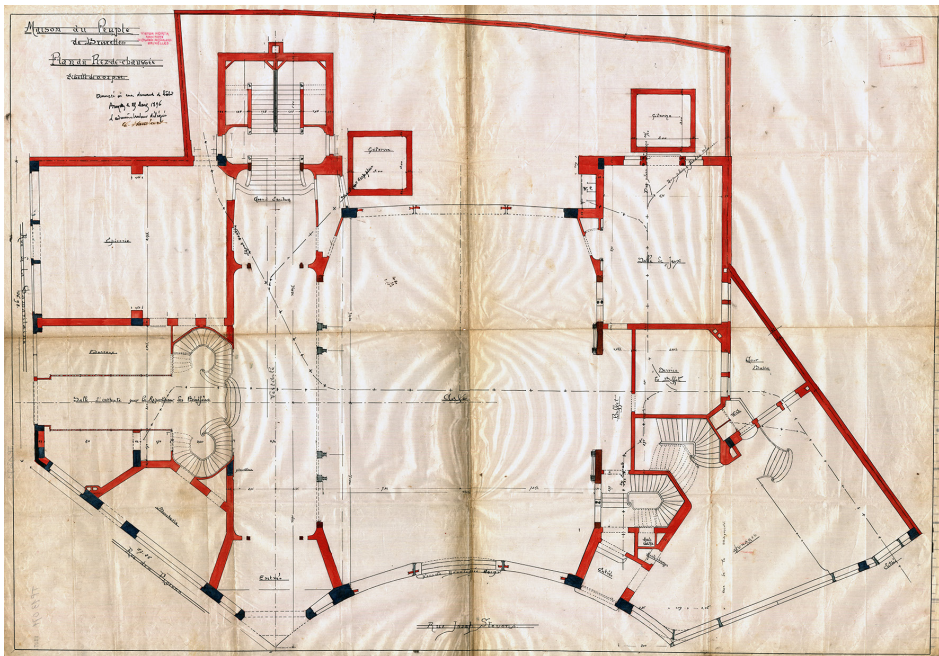
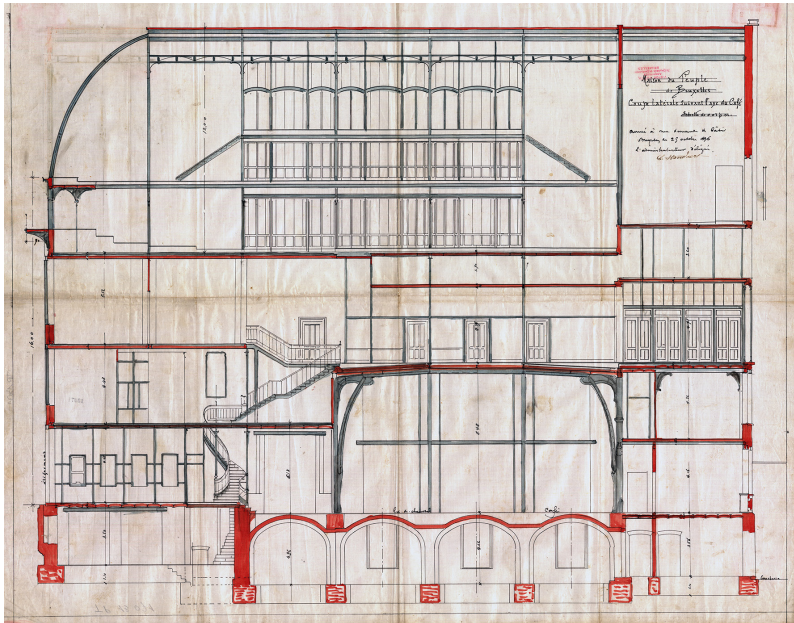


Video

Michel Provost, civil engineer,  
visiting professor at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)







VH, plan and section of the Maison du Peuple © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

## 🔍 Jean Delhaye's photo series

In 1963, Jean Delhaye, a former collaborator and tireless defender of Horta's work, together with local architecture associations, launched an international protest against the demolition of the Brussels Maison du Peuple. Despite the 700 signatures against the demolition, Camille Huysmans' Socialist Party went ahead with its plans to replace the building with a modern complex with a 90m office tower, to house the General Cooperative Association, the Co-op warehouses and a cooperative department store.

To enable a future reconstruction, Jean Delhaye undertook two initiatives. First, he ensured that the building components of the Maison du Peuple were not lost, but kept in a warehouse in Tervuren. After decades of deterioration and thefts, we can find today a number of these fragments in an Antwerp café, in a Brussels metro station, and in various museum collections. Secondly, he meticulously documented every detail of the Maison du Peuple in a series of 750 photos. These photographs have enabled the ULB's Alice laboratory to produce a 3D visualization of the building.



Jean Delhaye, Salle des fêtes of the Maison du Peuple during the demolition, 1965 © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

## 🔍 3D modelling of the Maison du Peuple

Discover what the Maison du Peuple, built between 1895 and 1899 and demolished in 1965, would have looked like from this virtual tour of the building, more specifically the offices, the Salle des Fêtes and café. It was only through the activism of Jean Delhaye that the Maison du Peuple was dismantled with a view to a reconstruction one day. That dream never came true. The Alice laboratory (La

Cambre Horta faculty of architecture, ULB) and the Horta Museum set to work on the material preserved with the aim of a potential restoration. The result you can see in this room. For more info on the research and an interactive version of the 3D virtual tour: [www.hortamuseum.be/en/discover/maison-du-peuple](http://www.hortamuseum.be/en/discover/maison-du-peuple)





Hôtel Solvay, 1894-98 - analog colour photography  
© Maxime Delvaux / Bozar, 2023

## The Solvay empire and its multiple commissions

Horta built the Hôtel Solvay between 1894 and 1898 for Armand Solvay, son of industrialist Ernest Solvay, and his wife Fanny Hunter. Sensitive to the latest artistic developments, it is Fanny in particular who is reputed to have convinced the family to work with Horta. He was given carte blanche to develop the house, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000 and is today a museum open to the public. The house also served for receptions where the Solvay family sought to convince its customers to invest in their business empire. Horta was not the only architect with whom the Solvay family and the Solvay group worked, but he received no fewer than seven commissions, among them a funerary monument, interior furnishings for the Château de La Hulpe, the Solvay laboratories in Ixelles and the Solvay pavilion at the 1905 Universal Exposition in Liège.

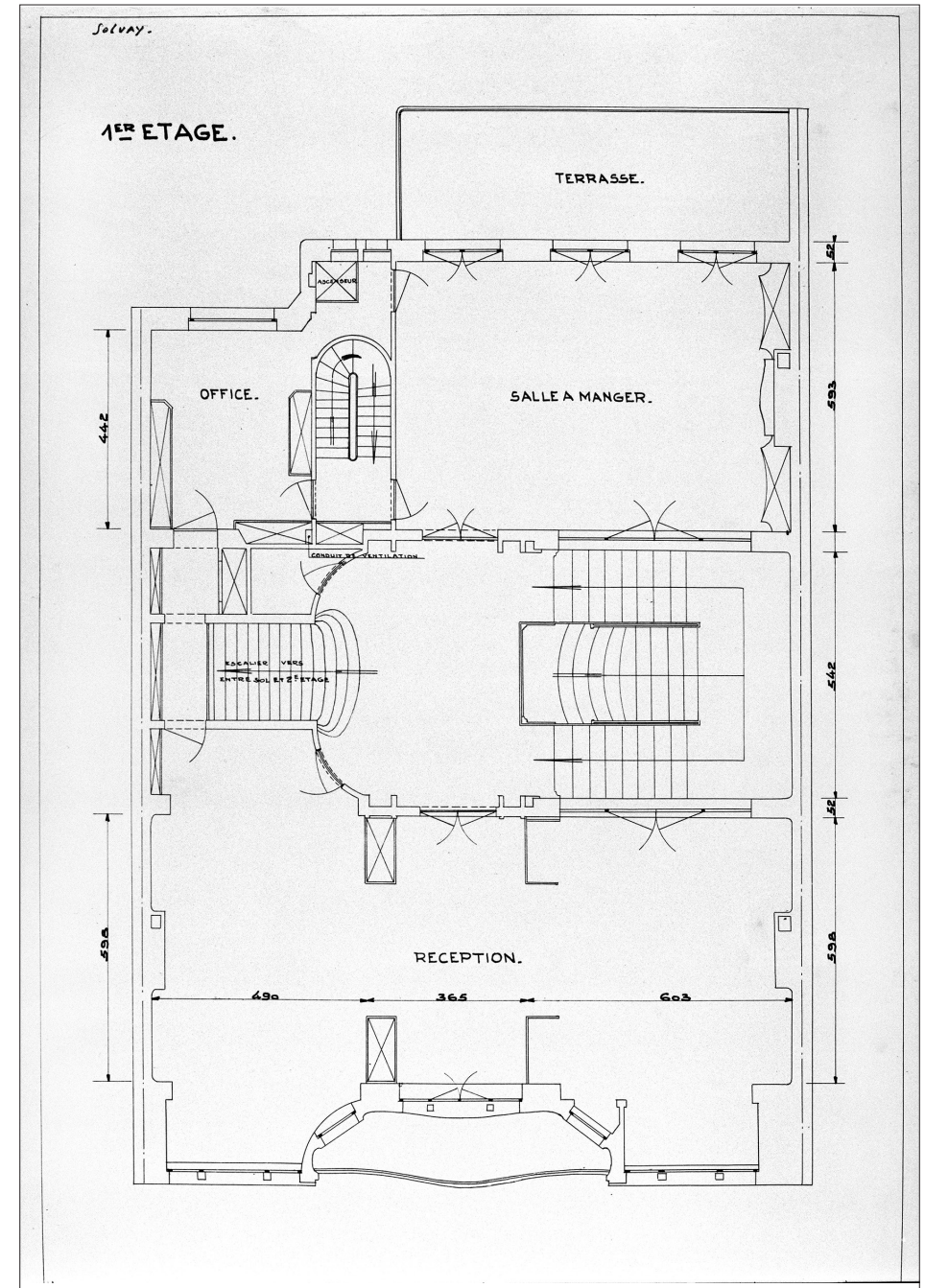
Ernest Solvay, who laid the foundations of the Solvay empire by inventing a process for the artificial production of soda (sodium carbonate), was philanthropically-minded, organized scientific conferences and supported education and research.

### Video:

Valérie Montens,  
curator European Ceramics  
& Glass Collections,  
Royal Museums of Art  
and History, Brussels



Kenneth Bertrams,  
professor in contemporary  
history at the Université  
libre de Bruxelles (ULB)



VH. Plan of the Hôtel Solvay © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

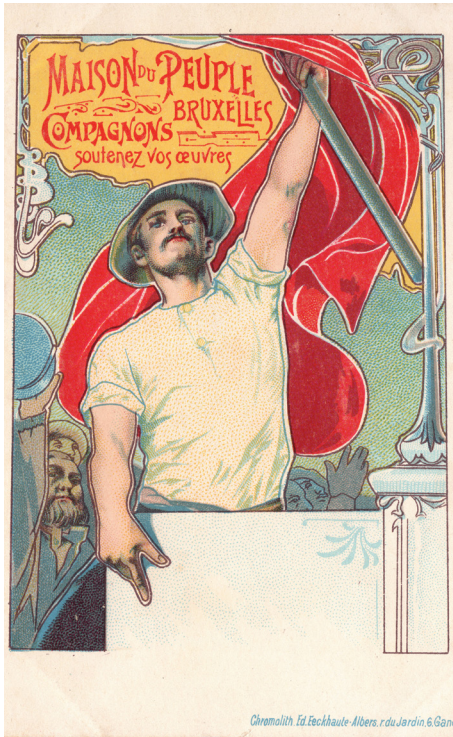




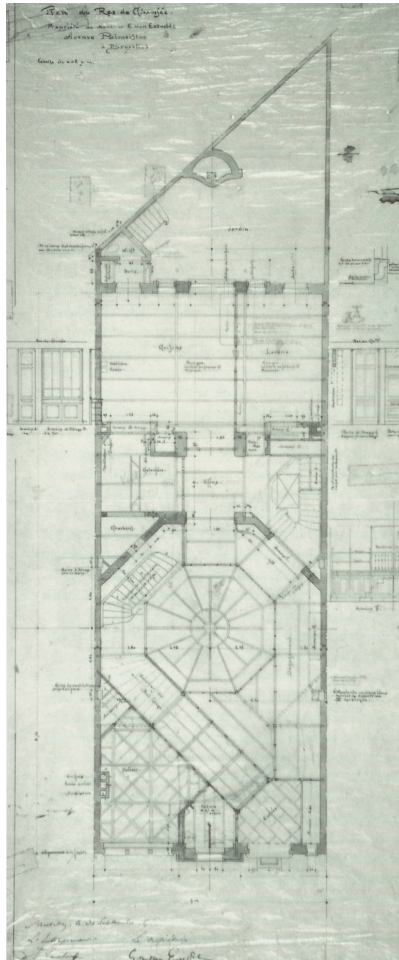
## Postcard showing the poster for the inauguration of the Maison du Peuple

The Solvay family network played a crucial role in Horta's career. Both Emile Tassel and Charles Lefébure worked closely with Ernest Solvay. Less well-known, Lefébure was nevertheless a key figure in Horta's work. Without having commissioned himself any work from the architect, he convinced Armand Solvay, Camille Winssinger and even Emile Tassel to appoint Horta as their architect. Tassel and Lefébure also used their influence with Ernest Solvay to

have him provide financial guarantees for the construction of the Brussels Maison du Peuple, a project in which another Horta client, Max Hallet, was involved. The progressive bourgeoisie of that time, both liberal and socialist, was imbued with reformist ideals and was sincerely committed to a fairer, more egalitarian society. In a certain sense, Horta gave shape to their ambitions through his architecture.



Postcard showing the poster for the inauguration of the Maison du Peuple by I.J. van Biesbroeck — Chromolithography on paper © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles



VH, Plan of the Hôtel Van Eetvelde, 1895 © Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

## Representing

# The Hôtel Van Eetvelde



Hôtel Van Eetvelde, 1895 - analog colour photograph © Maxime Delvaux / Bozar, 2023

Recent publications and research have highlighted the links between the origins of Belgian Art Nouveau and the country's colonial past. In terms of materials (ivory, copper, rubber), design language (evocations of Congolese fauna and flora) and financing, the new style is associated with the lucrative enterprise of the Congo Free State under Leopold II. Alongside Henry van de Velde, Victor Horta too played an important role in the link between the Congo and Art Nouveau.

With the Hôtel Van Eetvelde, Horta for the first time designed a home for a client who was closely involved in the organization of Leopold II's Congo Free State. Edmond van Eetvelde, the Secretary of State, or CEO – as we would say today – of the Congo Free State, commissioned Horta in 1895 to build this 3D business card, evoking Congolese flora and fauna in the structure and decoration of the building. The mansion was also intended as a reception area for convincing potential investors of the boundless potential of the Congo Free State through the lavish decoration and the rich use of materials. However, the decorative choices were not well received by his wife, who found the use of metal in a dining room “too common”. Horta also had to make other changes, replacing the glass floor in the conservatory with slabs of green onyx. In 1899, Horta built an extension to the mansion in white stone, contrasting sharply with the curtain wall of the initial project. At the same time, this extension brought the building to be included in the series of enviroing eclectic façades.



Debora Silverman



Aniel Guxholli

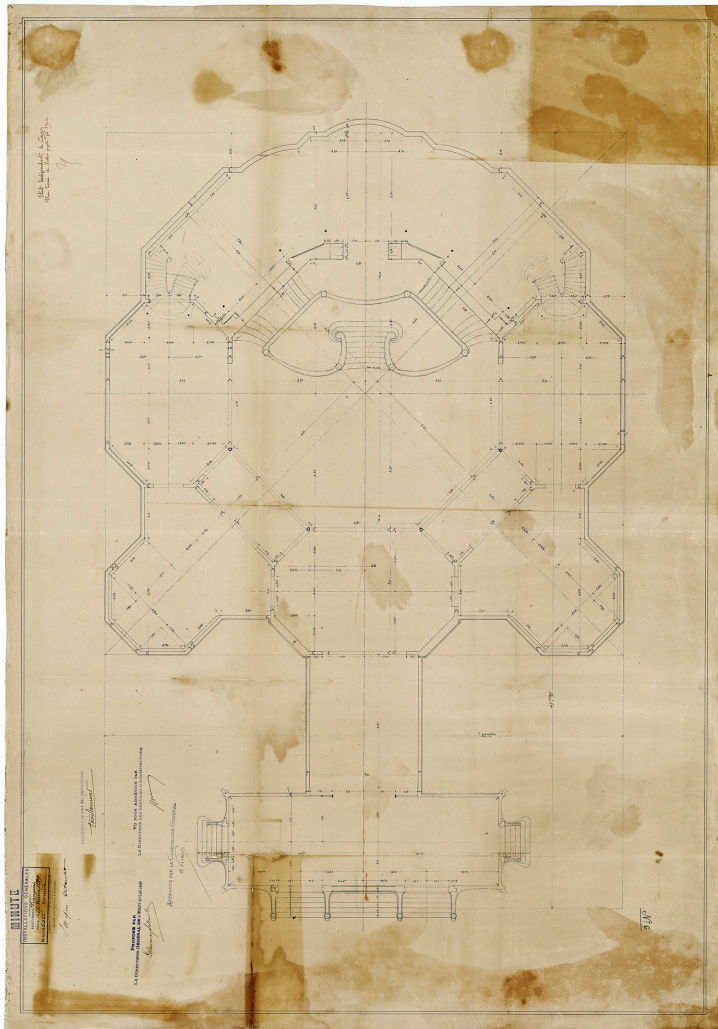


## The Congo Free State pavilion at the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris

In 1897, the colonial section of the Brussels International Exposition was held in Tervuren. There, Leopold II presented the Congo Free State, commissioning Belgian sculptors to produce work from ivory provided free of charge and having the Tervuren exhibition halls decorated by the best architects of the day: Paul Hankar, Henry van de Velde, Gustave Serrurier-Bovy and Georges Hobé. Having just started Edmond van Eetvelde's private mansion, Horta was very disappointed not to be involved in this important event, which was the first large-scale public endorsement of Art Nouveau. His proposal to build a real Congo pavilion came with too high a price tag, while the idea of shipping it to the colony afterwards as an administrative building was also met with little enthusiasm.

Although Leopold II personally preferred other architectural styles, after the Congo exhibition in Tervuren, Art Nouveau would be known to the general public as the "Congo style". Art Nouveau was at that time avant-garde and ultra-modern and, as well as expressing the limitless possibilities of the colonial enterprise in terms of both economic wealth and the spread of Western civilization, also integrated a phantasmagoric evocation of the Congolese flora and fauna in its visual language.

Shortly after Tervuren, Horta got his chance for revenge. King Leopold II and his Secretary of State Edmond van Eetvelde, commissioned him to design the Congo Pavilion at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900. For Horta this was the opportunity to synthesize seven years of ground-breaking architectural research and present it on the most prestigious international stage. A plot of land was allotted, Horta made a sketch design and an execution file, the foundations were laid, but in the course of 1899 Leopold II decided not to build the pavilion after all. The reasons for the cancellation are still the subject of debate. Had it really become impossible to complete it on time? Did Leopold II think it too expensive? Was the international criticism of the Congo Free State becoming increasingly loud and did Leopold II therefore change direction at the last moment?



VH, Plan of the Congo pavillon for the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900, 1899 © Archives nationales de France, Paris

### Geographical maps of the Congo Free State

Just like Leopold II, Edmond van Eetvelde and most key players in the Congo Free State enterprise, cartographer and art historian Alphonse-Jules Wauters never set foot on the African continent. From his Brussels office, he produced a cartographic synthesis from the evolving knowledge of the territory produced by the various exploratory expeditions into

Central Africa. These two maps compare the territory of Belgium with that of the Congo Free State. Particular attention is given to the watercourses cut off by national borders in Belgium and the endlessness of the Congo River and its tributaries in Central Africa, before and after the exploration and conquest.

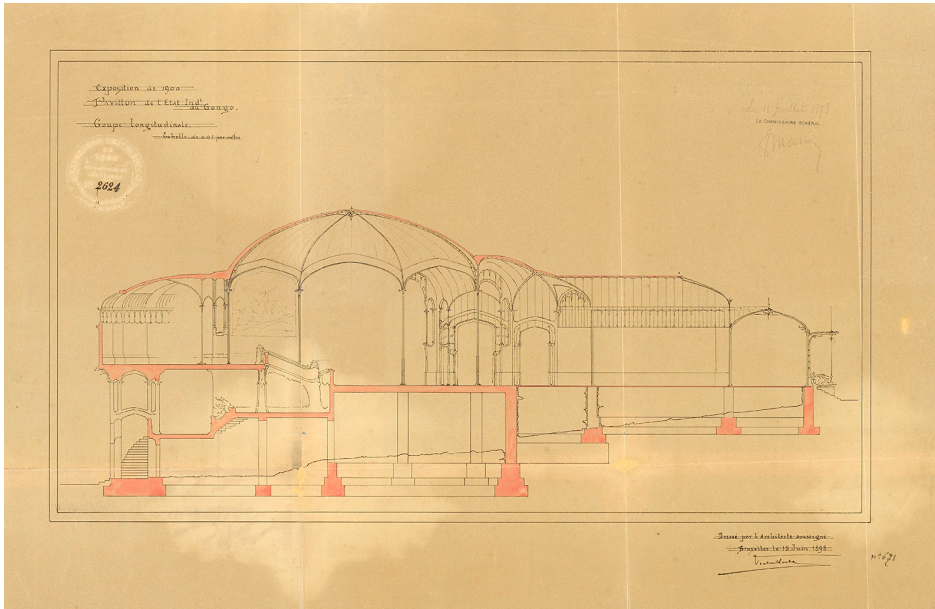


## Victor Horta's critical fortunes

With the projects he undertook between 1893 and 1903, Victor Horta succeeded in giving Art Nouveau an underlying grammar. This is expressed not just in the references he mobilized, the way he designed, or in his clients, but also in the fundamental themes he explored, like the dynamic plan, the ambiguity between inside and outside, and the rhetorical use of structure in his architecture. The unrealized project for the Congo Pavilion in Paris was a synthesis of these different elements, and is therefore considered by some as Horta's Art Nouveau work par excellence.

The question of whether the grammar of Horta's work also encouraged other Art Nouveau architects to adopt a similar approach has to be answered in the negative. Many Belgian architects, who did or did not work as draughtsmen in his office, easily imitated his vocabulary, but without penetrating the underlying grammar of his work. To them we should also add French architect Hector Guimard, who mainly adopted Horta's vegetation-based formal language. Without even aspiring to do so, Horta served as an example to a series of architects who adopted his style.

This is echoed in the way in which historians of architecture gave him a place in architectural history. The first overview of modern architecture in which he was accorded an important place was published before his death in 1947. In his 1936 book *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, Nikolaus Pevsner focuses mainly on Horta's new vocabulary. For Pevsner, Horta's architecture represented a radical break with the historicizing styles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its vegetation-based formal language. Sigfried Giedion, in his 1941 book *Space, Time, Architecture*, paid more attention to the spatial aspect of Horta's work. By building with steel skeleton structures, he was able to design the different floors independently of each other, thereby announcing, for Giedion, Le Corbusier's "Plan libre". Italian architectural historian Bruno Zevi was the first to assess Horta on his real merits in his *Storia dell'architettura moderna* published in 1950, underlining the organic power and vitalism of Horta's architecture and concluding that Horta was, as it were, the Mies van der Rohe of Art Nouveau.



VH, Section of the Congo pavillon for the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900, 1898 © Archives nationales de France, Paris

### Model of the Congo Free State pavilion

Victor Horta himself destroyed most of his archives. This was not out of frustration at feeling misunderstood, as is sometimes claimed, but rather in the first place because for him plans, façade drawings and cross-sections were tools to create the real work of art, the building itself. For this reason, Horta mostly kept only the drawings of projects that were not implemented. To this day, the Horta Museum preserves 12 large façade drawings

of the would-be Congo Free State pavilion for the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris. Plans and sections were only recently rediscovered in the Archives nationales de France. A 1:50 scale model was produced from a complete set of plans. Clearly demonstrating the spatial dynamics of Horta's pavilion, it will serve as study material for further research on this project.

### Video's

Camille Paget,  
scientific assistant  
of the Horta Museum



Debora Silverman,  
professor of history  
and art history at UCLA  
(USA)



### Video

Dirk Van de Vijver  
Associate Professor of architectural history 1750-1950,  
Utrecht University





## Drawing for the façade of the Magasin Bing in Paris

The debacle of the Congo Pavilion was not the first time Horta missed his appointment with history: it was also the case for his design for the Magasin Bing in Paris, which gave the terms Art Nouveau its first public recognition. Siegfried Bing was a dealer in Japanese prints and publisher of *Artistic Japan*. In 1894, deciding to devote himself to the modern arts, he embarked on a major tour of the most progressive creative centres of the time, namely Brussels and New York. On that occasion he visited the only just finished Hôtel Tassel. He asked Horta to

redecorate his shop on Rue Chauchat in Paris for the opening of his new store, aptly named “Maison de l’Art Nouveau”. Horta was probably too busy with his other projects and only presented a few drawings. Ultimately, Bing chose a different architect. The store opened on 26 December 1895 with works by many Belgians, including Henry Van de Velde and Théo Van Rysselberghe. Criticism of this unprecedented style was intense: for Edmond de Goncourt it was a “yacht style” and Auguste Rodin decried Van de Velde as “barbaric”.



VH, draft for the façade of the Magasin Bing, 1895  
© Archives of the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles



## Video :

Benjamin Zurstrassen,  
director of the Horta Museum



## Practical information

**Victor Horta and the Grammar of Art Nouveau**  
**Bozar – Centre for Fine Arts Brussels**  
**18.10.2023 – 14.01.2024**

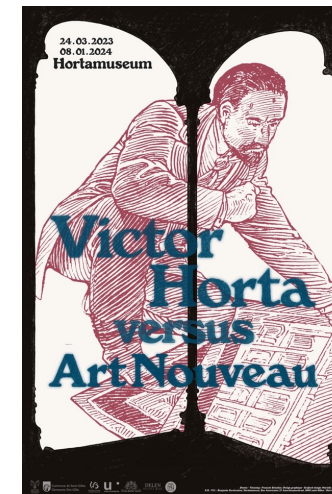
- Lunch & weekend tours for individual visitors, guided tours for groups
- Walk with me tour with François Makanga on 03.12.2023
- More info : [www.bozar.be](http://www.bozar.be)
- **A Family Guide** intended for children and accompanying adults is also available (French and Dutch); Illustrations, graphic design and original idea: Jonathan Mangelinckx  
Text : Borys Delobbe  
[www.banb-collection.com](http://www.banb-collection.com)
- **Catalogue:**  
Co-edition Bozar Books / Mercatorfonds, 1 version EN (+FR/NL translations)  
For sale at the Bozar Bookshop

### More to see at Bozar in de context of Art Nouveau Brussels 2023 :

**10 Nov.'23 »→ 10 Mar.'24**

#### **Kapwani Kiwanga. Rootwork**

In parallel with the exhibition Victor Horta and the Grammar of Art Nouveau, the French and Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwanga is invited to create new work with, as its central piece, a rug with an ornamental floral pattern. The decorative allure of this floor covering is inspired by Art Nouveau and alludes to shared histories between territories that were home to botanical species that were imported to Belgium.



#### **Parallel to the exhibition at Bozar, the Horta Museum presents :**

Victor Horta versus Art Nouveau  
Horta's vocabulary  
»→ 08.01.2024  
Free access

Hortamuseum  
Rue Américaine 27  
B-1060 Brussels  
[www.hortamuseum.be](http://www.hortamuseum.be)



# Colophon

## Exhibition *Victor Horta and the Grammar of Art Nouveau*

An initiative of the Brussels–Capital Region, in the framework of Art Nouveau Brussels 2023  
Organized by Bozar – Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels  
in co-production with the Horta Museum, Saint-Gilles

### Curators

Iwan Strauven and Benjamin Zurstrassen

### Curatorial Project Coordinator

Maïté Smeyers

## Bozar – Centre For Fine Arts, Brussels

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*With the dedicated support of*  
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### Experts

Françoise Aubry  
Werner Adriaenssens  
Kenneth Bertrams  
Aniel Guxholli  
Valérie Montens  
Camille Paget  
Michel Provost and Ine Wouters  
Debora Silverman  
Jos Vandenbreenen  
Dirk Van de Vijver

### Scenography

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*Model production:*  
Hadrien Chevalier, Hugo D'Oliveira Cardo,  
Tim Pierson

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Benjamin Zurstrassen

*Deputy curator*  
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*Scientific Assistant*  
Camille Paget

*Collections manager*  
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## Visitors guide

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**Final editing:** Judith Hoorens (FR), Lotte Poté (NL), Maïté Smeyers

**Graphic Design:** Olivier Rouxhet, Alexandre Zaldua

## Acknowledgements

Bozar warmly thanks the curators and experts, the collaborators of the Horta Museum, the lenders, the scenographers, the subsidising authorities, Denys, the sponsor of this exhibition, Mercatorfonds, and the numerous people who helped us in the realisation of this project and whom we cannot mention here by name.

## Videos Experts

*Production:* LeGrow.Studio  
*Executive Producer:* Max Meunier  
*Director:* Antoine Sottiaux

Co-production



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www.diplomatie.belgium.be

Cover: The studio-house of Victor Horta, 1898-1901 – analog colour photography  
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art is  
whether  
the  
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is