

BELGIQUE NOUVELLES ARCHITECTURES  
BELGIË NIEUWE BOUWKUNST

**BELGIUM  
NEW ARCHITECTURE**



## ARCHITECTURE, AN EXPRESSION OF HUMAN LIFE AND LIBERTY

As this book sees the light of day, bringing together the works of architects from all parts of the country, we would like to declare our optimism: architecture is an expression of human life and liberty. Beyond people's immediate needs, it signifies the ideals that pervade their lives, expressing their quest for beauty, harmony and perfection, reflecting the energy, inspiration, invention and creativity that enliven a country. What a joy for architects to be able to compile so many pages of captivating interest that form a focus for their attention.

If we overlook for a moment the numerous sordid constructions, with no intellectual basis, lacking spirit or beauty, purely material and even materialist, that mobilise the energy and resources of people who build anything, anyhow, there is in our country architecture worthy of the name, respectful of people and capable of integrating itself into the historical context.

But beyond such merit, we also need to ask questions about the growing scale of this construction devoid of all quality, not only in its form but also from a technical standpoint, created by some of our colleagues and financial players, guided solely by considerations of profit.

### Quality relegated to the bottom rung by profitability

The vast majority of the buildings erected in the three regions of the country are not the fruit of a human-scale enterprise by a family, a company or a group of people, who therefore hold dear their project, but the sad result of a primary mercantile response to people's immediate needs. This results in the appearance of buildings put up with no concern for the sustainability of the environment, using out-of-date techniques, based on short-term ideas with an eye to a quick return, ruled by a market that makes thoughtful or forward-looking architecture undesirable.

The fact that construction, which by definition creates durable objects that resist time, carrying with them the values of a society, should be caught up in the vortex of the immediate and designed with the same consumer mindset as items of food, is a matter of concern. After having been consumed, food leaves no further trace, whilst construction treated in the same way leaves a heavy baggage of poorly designed buildings that age prematurely and are difficult to re-use.

We would like to believe, we would like to hope, we dare to wish that the public authorities have the ability, like in Flandre, to create the conditions that would make practising the profession in such a summary and servile form more difficult and less attractive.

On the contrary, currently everything tends to lead to architects being thwarted by naïve people, wholly ignorant of the fundamentals of the trade, who have never practised it seriously, trying to intervene with arguments of a bewildering simplicity. Imagine singing "Frère Jacques" to a composer to teach him how to compose, or a scientific researcher over whom we allow the opinions of a half-wit to prevail.

This is the permanent fate of architects to whom we repeat Clémenceau's words, adapted to their sad situation: "architecture is too serious to be left to architects". This quotation, which may well be true of politics, transcribed to the professions cited above, reveals its inherent absurdity, especially for architects, as their daily efforts ceaselessly illustrate.

### Running the gauntlet

As they leave their offices, in quest of vital administrative permissions, they are confronted with pedants with naïve convictions, riddled with obsessions raised to the rank of dogma, sometimes displaying a surreal authoritarianism, imagining the future of architecture from the world of outmoded forms, struggling to see the space in two dimensions, reducing what is to what seems, the building to its façades, cravenly attached to supposedly noble materials, believing that they can weigh economic considerations by perpetually applying formal schemes and templates.

This means that an architect who submits a request for building permission, passing through a series of bodies, enters into the turbulence of a debate that he is convinced is wholly unrelated to the realities of the profession, leading him astray from the real aesthetic, technical, ethical, social and urban development issues. He is ground down by the discussions based on falsehoods, pretexts and illusions seized upon in political negotiation and horse-trading. He has to run the gauntlet of all of the control and consultation bodies, to-ing and fro-ing, backtracking and manoeuvring until finally, little by little, from correction to amputation, from naiveté to absurdity, from administrative sloth to blockage, from conviction to bad faith, from ideals to compromise, from combat to capitulation, he is gradually reduced to the norm.

The hideous and banal norm of insignificance, the hateful norm of life devoid of meaning, the norm of obedience, governed by the thirst for power of those who wish to give it the trappings of democracy according to their whim of the moment. And this norm is quite simply that of constructions that lack conviction or architectural grace, moulded by the rules of the market.

We would like to be able to expect more from those whose task it is (lest they forget) to contribute to the conservation of the heritage. Have they never studied history? Do they not understand its origins? Have they no concern for its continuity and perpetuation. One might expect them to be capable of suggesting new approaches that simultaneously preserve the existing cultural heritage and create significant works that complement them.

Alas, the main element of their opinions, their directives and their blocking behaviour is the imposition of mimicry, disappearance or fakery, procedures for classifying façades, or even identical reconstruction, strategies where history is an alibi, a pretext for visions, for ideological reconstructions of history leading to a travesty of fossilised images.

### **An audit of absurdity**

Over several decades all of the procedures for controlling building have been set up, amplified, structured and regulated, so it is perhaps time to draw up an audit of almost a quarter of a century of influences: these are unfortunately littered with complete failures, constructions of arcades without depth that pretend to enliven a street, windows supposed to express urban activity; these are just heaps of noble materials sheathing insignificant forms and insipid patterns or inappropriate functions that could have been rejected; they use architecture as a crutch to express their essential vacuity; shimmering palaces faded by dust topping buildings designed to conceal forms or floors, with false roofs tacked onto several levels. What a sad anthology of errors and ugliness that have dragged many architects in their wake, absurd creations to which they had to attach their names and for which they carry heavy decades of responsibility.

Without the power to vigorously tackle the root of the problem, the organisation of functions in the city and the suburbs, lacking the power and the intellectual capacity to grasp the realities of property and finance, failing to deal with the real issues of urban development, without the ability to imagine the means of rigorous action, this control activity has been exercised subjectively, by amateurs lacking rigour, taken in by appearances that mask the content, engendering a sham architecture.

It is a triumph of "how it looks": it looks old, it looks urban, it looks lively, it looks solid, it looks pretty; an ongoing festival of prejudice and piecemeal reasoning. And this little world that fiddles around trying to concoct a landscape that it has still not yet mastered, despite the number of persons in its ranks, all professionals (in no small numbers) living and prospering from this activity, in the end only hinder those who, despite this disastrous scenario, are still trying to think in terms of architecture.

However, they in no way hinder those who, reduced to silence and conformity, have finally capitulated without regret. Indeed, what could be easier than to bow down soullessly and without conviction to absurd desires, to execute them in a servile fashion, or even invent them, provided that the imperatives of floor space, profitability, price and deadlines are satisfied, provided that the profit targets are met?

This situation, which has become institutionalised, therefore plays into the hands of architects who have completely capitulated or have always lacked conviction, those who have renounced architecture, or at least thinking in terms of architecture, content to produce buildings solely for the profit of financiers and themselves.

### **Perseverance and tenacity**

No profession can go on bowing to the naïveté, cheek or impudence of a few supposedly untouchable manipulators. Nor is it obliged to distort all of its output in the direction of nonsense, on which it will later be judged. This situation is unique, and particularly worrying.

The merit of architects and engineers is best measured against those who have intractably followed their vocation, aware of their responsibilities, obstinately finding a way through the maze, those who were able to convince, overcome difficulties, argue, persuade, disarm, never standing down, taking risks, restarting projects and then starting over again, never losing heart, displaying determination, shaking the tree, kicking over the traces, raging until they finally obtain the right to express themselves, with all the risks that this entails.

## JOEL CLAISSE

Renovation of a warehouse into offices

Place des Bienfaiteurs 7  
1030 Bruxelles

1998

### JOEL CLAISSE ET ASSOCIES scrl

#### JOEL CLAISSE

Architect/Architecte/Architect

**B. Stevens, T. Baneton,**

**M. Van Schuylenbergh**

Collaborators/Collaborateurs/

Medewerkers

#### TEIN Telecom sa

Client/Maitre d'Ouvrage/Oprichtgever

#### GROUP SOLID

Structural Engineers/Ingénieurs

Stabiliteit/Ingenieurs Stabiliteit

#### J. DELENS/E. RUTTIENS

General Contractors/Entreprises

Générales/Algemene Aannemers

#### SERGE BRISON

Photographer/Photographe/Fotograaf

#### TRENDS TENDANCE 1997

Prize/Prix/Prijs



The renovation operation aims to improve the company's premises, as well as harmoniously evolving its pre-existent construction at the heart of a vast Schaerbeek island. By re-centring the high-tech activities at the centre of the island, TEIN freed the buildings fronting the road and gave them their residential characteristics. The renovation was undertaken with the two-fold concern of, on the one hand, rediscovering the building's original exterior and therefore the traces of the past that it represents at the interior of the island and, on the other hand, conceiving an interior development with a contemporary approach.





