

LAUDATIO FRANCIS STRAUVEN

Emiel De Kooning

Dear Francis,

It is my great pleasure to be able to address words of tribute to one of the professors of Ghent University's Faculty of Applied Sciences, a faculty that has a long and honourable history.

This pleasure is at the very least twofold: Professor Francis Strauven is not only a full-time member of the academic staff of our own Department, that of Architecture and Urban Planning, but in his person we also pay tribute to a career that has, like few others, made its mark on the chronicling of modern architecture in Belgium and the Netherlands.

In the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Francis Strauven has done regular pioneering work. Since he graduated as an architect from St Luke's school in Schaarbeek in 1966, he has had several monographs and numerous other works published at home and abroad, many of which are considered standard works and virtually all of which are essential reading for anyone researching into modern architecture in Belgium.

In 1971, after a short career as an architect in various joint ventures, including one with the present Flemish Architect-General Van Reeth, he assisted Geert Bekaert with his exhibition and book *Bouwen in België 1945-1970*, a publication whose authority, depth and exhaustiveness makes it still an absolute standard work on postwar building in Belgium.

"*Bouwen in België*" took Francis Strauven onto the national stage. From that time on he published studies of such Belgian modernists as Horta, Braem and De Koninck, to mention only those that have been published in several languages and have been a major stimulus to international appreciation of Belgium's modern architecture.

The inspiration in Francis Strauven's writings is not that of a dry academic. His works display erudition and familiarity with the numerous

histories of architecture but they depend equally on his broad interest in the many and varied manifestations of cultural history. Words such as 'poetry', 'musicality', 'visceral' and 'love' recur frequently in both his writing and his speech. Like architecture, architectural criticism comes from the heart as well as the mind. And by the way, it is said that Francis Strauven is an accomplished pianist and a passionate adherent of the culinary persuasion.

His doctoral study of the life and work of Aldo Van Eyck - the pioneering Dutch modernist - is also characterised by thoroughness and broadness, situating and interpreting the complexity of Van Eyck's thinking in terms of both philosophy and architectural criticism and history. It is intriguing to see the doggedness with which the author sticks to, and almost wallows in, his subject. Reading this doorstep of a volume is truly an overwhelming, even shaking, experience. The Dutch-language edition was immediately followed by a hefty English edition which was received with broad international acclaim.

In addition to his industriousness as a writer and researcher, Francis Strauven has frequently worked for the preservation and protection of the endangered heritage. Shortly after graduation he joined the first group of historians and critics to engage in the revaluation of the then much maligned Art Nouveau buildings by Victor Horta and others. In 1969 he co-founded the Archives d'Architecture Moderne and a few years later he became connected with the Atelier de Recherche et d'Actions Urbaines (ARAU) in Brussels, an action group that succeeded in safeguarding various endangered sites in the centre of Brussels from demolition, including the Marolles district, Wolstraat and Koningstraat.

Francis Strauven still shoulders his social responsibilities today, as a member, among other things, of the Flemish Minister of Culture's Advisory Committee on Architecture and Design, in which, with independence and sometimes the necessary contrariness, he works to create opportunities for a 'culture of architecture in Flanders', as well as opportunities for young architects and young researchers.

It is impossible to summarise Francis Strauven's entire list of achievements, but we must certainly mention his teaching activities, which extend back to the early seventies. He has since then continued to teach architectural history at the Provincial Higher Architectural Institute

in Hasselt and at St Luke's College of Science and Art in Schaarbeek. He gradually evolved into a dedicated teacher, not only because he is able to draw on a fertile background as a researcher and traveller, but also because he is able to communicate his passion for architecture to his listeners with great feeling. Since 1999, our own engineer-architect students have been able to reap the benefits of this.

Dear Francis,

The Department of Architecture and Urban Planning is delighted that our university environment has turned out to provide you with the necessary scope to carry out or complete a number of your projects and dreams. It was not so long ago that your book on Eugene Liebaux was published, as one of a series of architectural monographs, coordinated by Geert Bekaert, which are unique in Flanders.

Studies and books on Victor Horta and Julien Schillemaers are in the pipeline. It is encouraging to see that our students lend their assistance and display great enthusiasm.

The award of the Sartorius Medal is a crowning of your commitment and your dedication, and at the same time is a stimulus to the research which you have initiated and whose results will, we hope, be of benefit to our entire department.