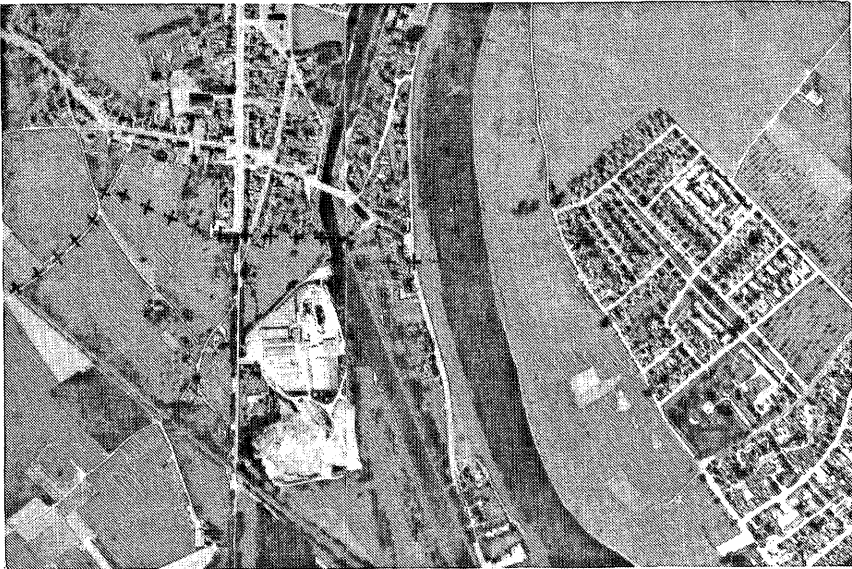


HOW BELGIUM GOT ITS PRESENT LOOK

A Short History of Belgian Town and Country Planning

Francis Strauven

It remains a source of astonishment to see how different Belgium and the Netherlands look. The contrast is overly apparent wherever you cross the border. The landscape, the pattern of building, the paving, the design of public space, the sort of houses and the style they are built in: it's all different, down to the window frames. Whereas in the Netherlands the landscape has largely been preserved, in Belgium it has been almost entirely overrun by building. Buildings spring up on just about every road, both the major and minor ones, including former country lanes, and it is not only housing of every type and size, but also, scattered amongst them, a variety of retail and catering businesses, offices and showrooms,



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small and medium companies - a varied mixture in which not a jot of planning is to be found. If the Netherlands looks like a model of environmental planning, in many ways Belgium seems to embody its opposite. And what is most striking in all this is the difference in forms of



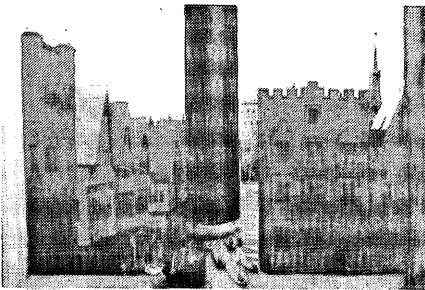
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dwelling. Whereas Dutch homes are frequently the anonymous components of homogeneous estates or building complexes, Belgian homes as a rule set themselves up as separate buildings, as an individual who emphatically professes to be different from his neighbours. The resulting variety of heterogeneous building types and styles has long caused amazement in visitors from abroad. The situation was tellingly characterised in the sixties by the British architectural critic Ian Nairn: 'Belgium, the joker in the European pack, has managed to create an architecture of such splendid and full-blooded chaos, that the visitor suspends all normal judgement.' However, it should be noted that, amidst all his astonishment, Nairn calls it a 'splendid and full-blooded chaos'. The urge for individual expression appears to be so strong, exceeding all boundaries of good taste and 'normal judgement', that it assumes intriguing forms.

It is no simple matter to explain this Belgian proliferation. In the past it was often conceived to be the inevitable consequence of a sort of natural phenomenon. The officials and politicians with responsibility in this area were among those who explained and justified it as a natural product of the Belgian national character, a character which was postulated for the occasion. Despite all their differences and distinctions,

the Flemish and the Walloons were supposed to have in common a bent for improvisation and an inborn urge to build - Belgians were 'born with a brick in their stomach'. If we disregard this populist explanation, it is nevertheless hard to ignore the fact that something like a Belgian mentality does exist, a *habitus* that has developed over the course of time, characterised by individualism, a distaste for any rules imposed from above, a not especially well-developed sense of community, and an obstinate scepticism with regard to the public interest. This mentality ensues from a tradition whose roots stretch far back in time and which, according to leading Belgian historians, originates in the centuries of passive resistance against the governorship of successive foreign regimes. By contrast with the Italian cities, those in Flanders never succeeded in gaining independence, so their wealth was constantly creamed off by external powers. And it appears that in this situation the notion of 'the common interest' gradually lost ground and Flemish taxpayers took up the habit of investing as much as possible in their own interests, specifically in their own house.

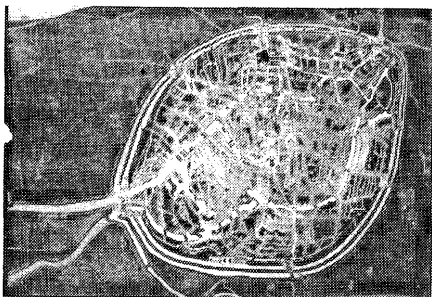


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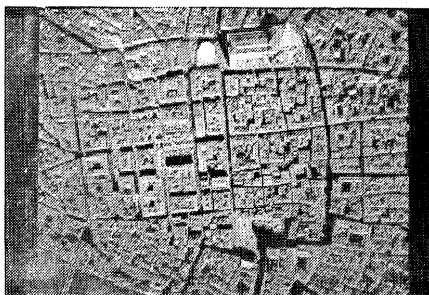


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The importance of the individual house in the tradition of Flemish building was already clear to see in mediaeval cities. For example, the view of a city in the *Annunciation scene* in Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* shows a street composed entirely of distinctly individual houses, each with its own ridge roof. This picture of the city is completely different from the Italian example, as is depicted in the *Carmines* in Florence by Van Eyck's contemporary Masolino: here is a city composed of collective housing blocks in the tradition of the Roman *insulae*. The elementary building block of the Flemish city was not the

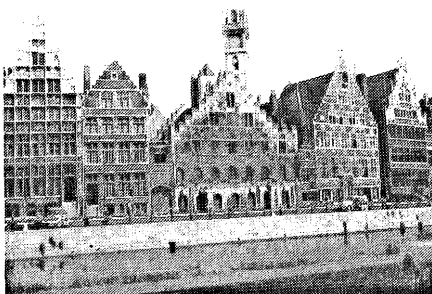


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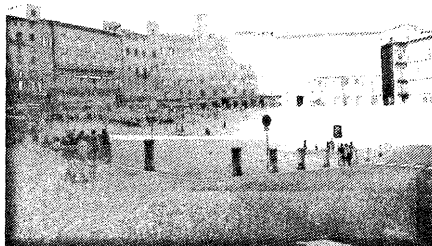


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street or the street block, but the individual house. It is exactly this that gives the Flemish city a special place in the history of the city. In his monumental history of the European city, Erwin Gutkind describes it as the paradigm of the organic city, as opposed to the planned city that

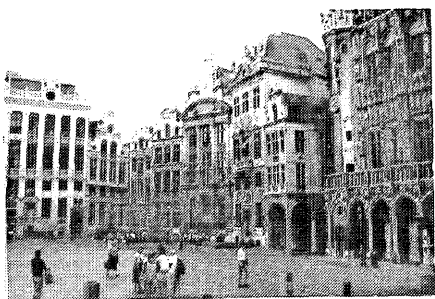


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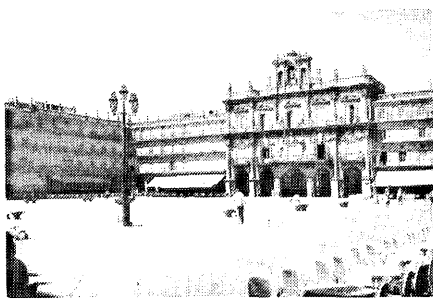


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appears frequently in the Mediterranean countries. Flemish cities did not arise out of prior street plans - their streets gradually grew out of a piecemeal succession of individual houses. This tradition has stood firm over the centuries. It reached its peak in the grand market squares of Antwerp and Brussels, came to a late flowering in numerous 19th-century urban districts, and still had an effect on the initial expressions of Belgian Modernism. What is so special about the first functionalist housing estates, designed by Bourgeois and Hoste, is that the individual dwellings were not absorbed into uniform bands of building as exemplified by Oud's *Kiefhoek*, but were articulated as distinct units. What is more, it is



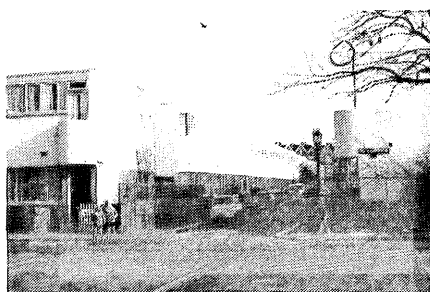
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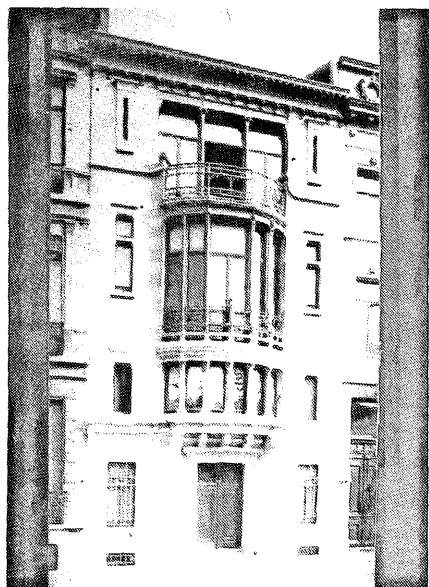
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also remarkable that the innovations on which Belgian Modernism can pride itself appeared mainly in individual homes, in Art Nouveau it was in the work of Horta, Hankar and Van de Velde, and in functionalism De Koninck, Hoste and Eysseleinck.

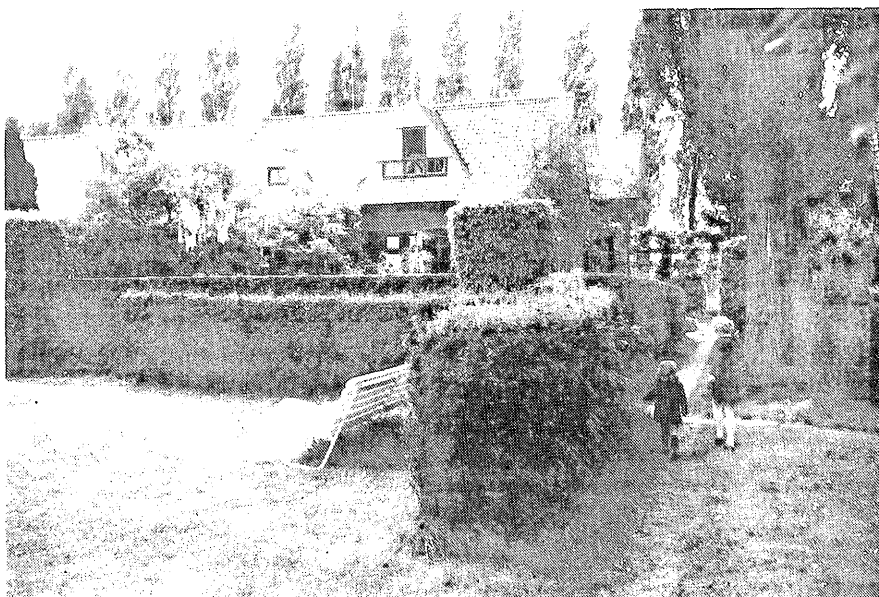


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Nebular city

But in the course of the 20th century, and especially after the Second World War, individual building freed itself from the urban context. It removed itself from the coordinating context of the city, in which it had functioned in unison, and rooted itself in the countryside where, driven by demographic expansion and increasing car ownership, it spread unbridled in every direction.

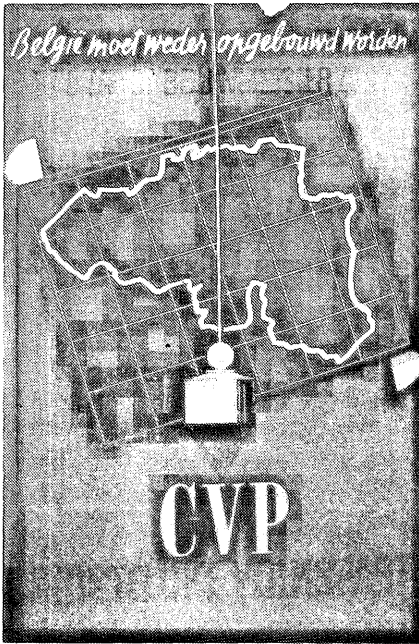
It would however be misleading to present this development as an unavoidable natural phenomenon. It was stimulated by a particular political policy and was able to occur because it was not hindered by any form of town and country planning policy. After the war, Belgian housing



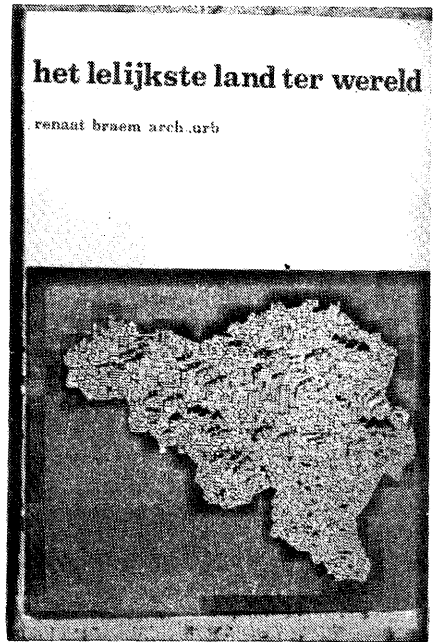
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policy was largely determined by the Christian Democratic party. In the party's 1945 manifesto, one of its aims was to 'de-proletarianise' the working class population - in other words to keep them away from socialism - and as an excellent way of achieving this, promoted the widespread ownership of private property. The Christian Democrats in the CVP wanted to prevent families from being accommodated in collective housing complexes, which they classified as morally repugnant, and pressed for the deconcentration of the population in the environment, scattering them in individual houses dispersed in rural estates. When this party came into power shortly afterwards, it promptly passed an act that promoted the construction of private houses by means of substantial building subsidies. All those with a desire to build, even the least well off, were stimulated to build their own house, wherever they liked, as long as it was accessible from the public road.

The private initiative let loose in this way was barely impeded by town and country planning rules. In contrast with the Netherlands, which had an age-old tradition of environmental planning dictated by the demands of water management, in Belgium there was a total vacuum in this



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respect. Whereas in the Netherlands environmental planning was self-evidently a question of common interest, in liberal Belgium it was seen as an attack on private ownership, and consequently town and country planning legislation proceeded at snail's pace. It was not until 1962 that Belgium introduced a law on urban development and environmental planning - and even this did not include any policy options, only instituted a planning and consultation procedure intended in the course of time to lead to environmental planning. It was only in 1980 that these options were first formulated, in the Flemish regional plans completed in that year, being 25 separate plans that were only coordinated 15 years later in the global outline of the Structural Plan for Flanders.

In the meantime the country was relentlessly filled up with buildings. Flanders coagulated into an all-embracing estate where not only homes but also every possible urban and suburban function jostled for a place, a 'nebular city' where there was no longer any sign of Gutkind's 'unfailing sense of cultural homogeneity' or 'unison of the general and individual will'. Because as a rule no one was keen to become part of any common

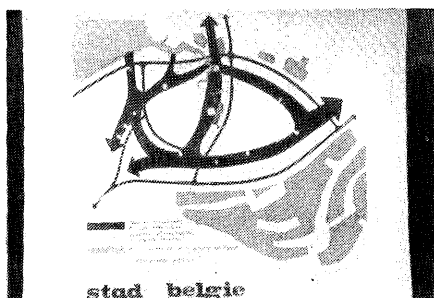
unity (which did not exist anyway), each individual builder entered into semantic rivalry with his neighbour. Both the middle classes and the working classes clung to models which they considered several rungs higher on the social ladder, thereby formally anticipating their rise to that level, however much a caricature it was. This rivalry left little opportunity for modern architecture, at least in the beginning. Private building initiative was of course entirely foreign to this sober architectural style, which had originally been intended as a prefiguration of an egalitarian society. Whereas in the fifties modern architecture in the Netherlands developed into a generally accepted idiom, used nationwide, in Belgium it was seen as an aberration, and until the early sixties remained restricted to modest constructions, mainly individual homes hidden like *Fremdkörper* in the margins of the built environment.

With few exceptions, Renaat Braem's large housing complexes being the most striking, modern architecture in Belgium led a marginal and

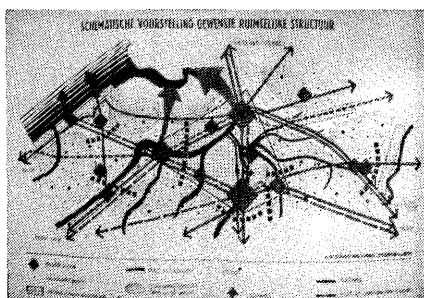


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discontinuous existence. The history of Modernism was hardly mentioned in architectural education. Each generation found itself once again obliged, under its own steam, to discover contemporary architecture, to define its own attitude and to forge an idiom of its own. And the



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surprising thing was that the new generation that appeared at the end of the sixties identified positive qualities in the Belgian proliferation. Inspired by the anti-authoritarian ideas of the time, it realised that in this chaos, which was abhorred by the old modernists, it was possible to find values which were being lost in the rational planning of modern housing complexes. As the critic Geert Bekaert put it: 'In Belgian building, the real values that true architecture relies on exist in a sort of almost hopelessly absurd travesty.' He was referring to values closely linked to the occupier's involvement in the creation of his dwelling: self-determination, identification and a personal relationship with the surroundings. The progressives, as whose spokesman he appointed himself, came to understand that behind the chaotic appearance of their own built environment there in fact lay a sort of spontaneous human ecology, a coherent set of relationships that must not be ignored or swept away, but with which a way must somehow or other be found to connect. This last was done in a highly original way by the then newly graduated Van Reeth. Although he had explored the history of modern architecture during his studies, and was keenly interested in Le Corbusier and Stirling, in practice he developed an entirely different idiom. Full as he was of American folk music, and especially the poetry of Bob Dylan, he concentrated on creating an architectural equivalent. He conceived an interest in anonymous architecture which the occupiers themselves had brought into being, first in Ticino in Switzerland, where he was a trainee, and then in his home country. Here he discovered a vernacular architecture where no one had previously looked for it: in Belgium's backyard, in the self-built constructions the Belgians put up at the back of their houses with no regard for official regulations. In these clandestine do-it-yourself efforts, he recognised an authentic 'architecture without

architects', a vigorous popular idiom with original expressions and neologisms. In the early seventies, inspired by this, he created an exceptionally expressive architecture. He build about twenty individual houses in which he developed a sort of folk idiom, a language of form in which he combined the spontaneous expression of the Flemish do-it-yourself builders with the structural legacies of Modernism, especially



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the spatial concepts of the Viennese-Californian architect Rudolph Schindler. In the course of the seventies this work by Van Reeth was highly influential. It was the origin of the informal building style comprising glazed wooden porches and bay windows that was catching on everywhere in Flanders at the time.

The last stone

At that time attention was also being drawn by a completely different character whose position with regard to the Belgian situation was both playful and radical. In 1979, on the eve of the 150th anniversary of Belgian independence, Luc Deleu laid 'the last stone of Belgium' in his small front garden in Antwerp. By so doing, he wished to proclaim his

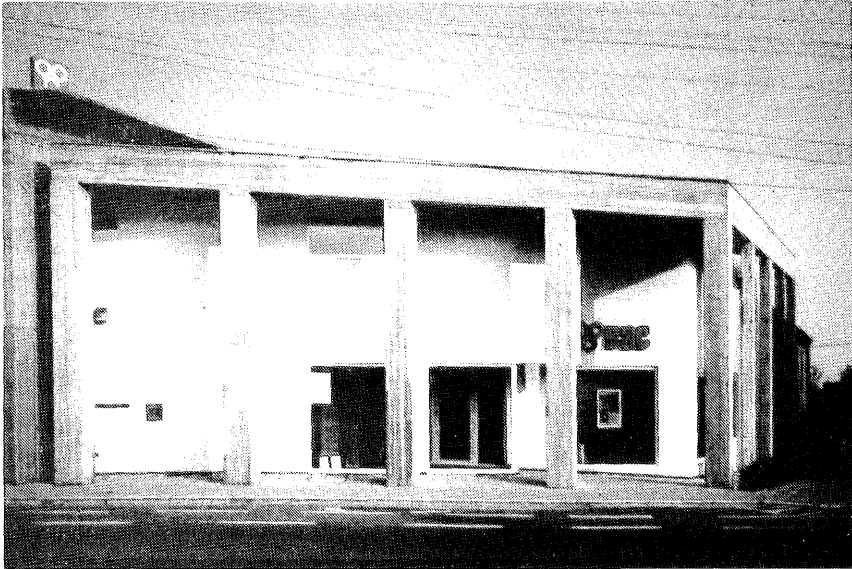


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opinion that the country was more than saturated with buildings, that it could be considered as a completed building complex where any further construction should be brought to a halt. In 1970, shortly after graduating, he had emphatically already taken leave of architecture, going on to assume the role of a conceptual artist-architect. In the course of the seventies he launched about 75 'proposals and recommendations' for the transformation of the environment, from the development of urban agriculture and horticulture, including public poultry and urban dungheaps, to the restoration of public transport, the conversion of monuments into social housing, and the installation of mobile marine cities using recycled passenger ships and supertankers. Deleu's anarchistic attitudes were based on a clear ecological awareness. In the 'Orbanistic Manifesto', which he published in 1980, he pointed to the problem of worldwide malnutrition and the limits of natural resources. He argued for the rational use of land, the preservation of natural biotopes, the expansion of the amount of land under agriculture, and more generally the organisation of the human environment analogous to natural ecosystems. The ecological awareness Deleu voiced helped determine the attitudes of the next generation of Flemish architects, which took its first steps in about 1980.

The new simplicity

In the course of the eighties, this generation, who made a quiet debut, unexpectedly initiated a new spring in Flemish architecture. Although it comprised people who developed independently of each other, they arrived at a similarly oriented approach and expressed themselves in a related idiom, characterised by a refreshing simplicity. They each in their own way tied in with the rational achievements of 20th-century

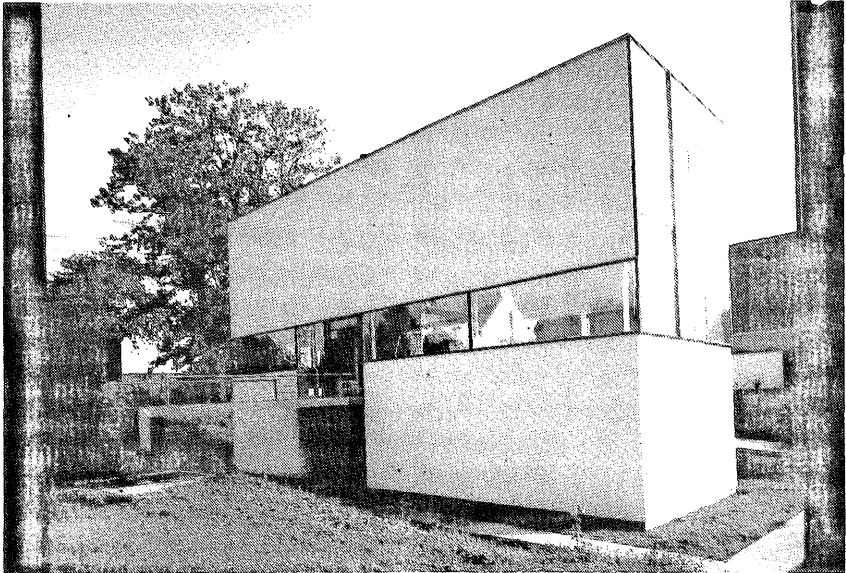


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architecture and this led to the birth of a movement that enabled Flemish architecture to assume a position on the international scene.

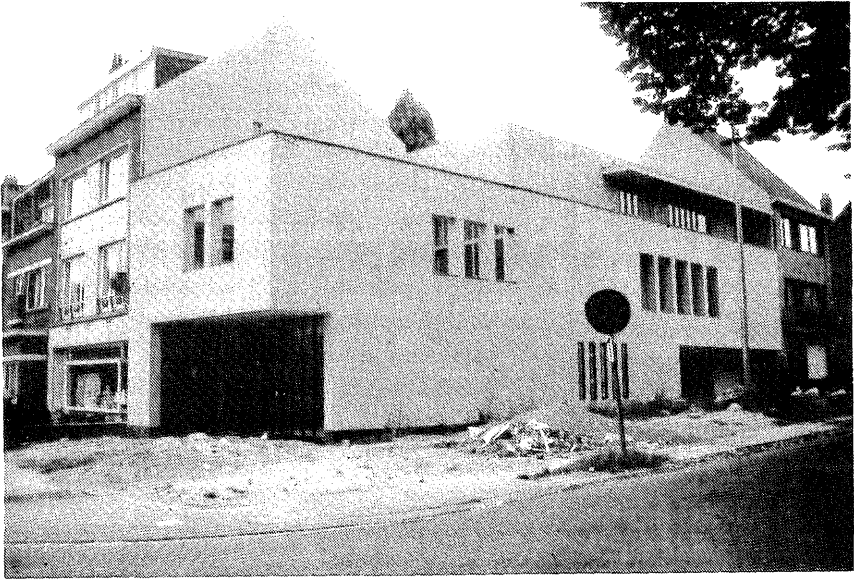
If one uses the word 'movement' here, it should not be taken that those involved started from a prior theory or declaration of intention. They never came together as a group to consult on the course to be taken. Their approaches grew out of individual design work, in modest projects for private briefs. This did not however prevent them from having a common background and being motivated by similar intentions, intentions at work in other European countries too. With hindsight, it can be seen that their work was part of a broader international movement that

emerged under various names: *die neue Einfachheit* in Germany, *Essentialisme* in Switzerland and *Minimalisme* in the Mediterranean countries. This new simplicity is not a simple phenomenon. It developed



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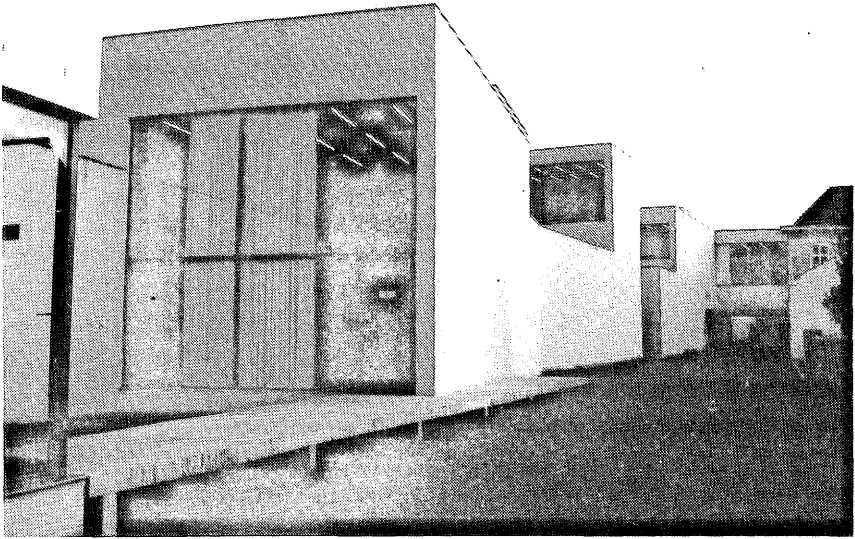
in the wake of the Italian rationalism which, in the course of the seventies, emphatically affirmed the independence of the architectural form, partly as a reaction against the loss of form through the experiments in user participation. The rationalists returned to the classic, basic components of architecture: the type, geometrical order, the relationship between building and site. They redefined elementary parts of the building, such as volume, floor, wall and column. The new simplicity, which first developed in Ticino, Portugal and Spain, linked up with this, rediscovered the classical tradition, and above all (and, in the course of time, mainly) drew inspiration from the achievements of the modern movement. But the choice of elementary simplicity was more than a purely formal position in the development of architecture - it was also based on ideological and economic motives. In contrast to the eclectic exuberance of Postmodernism it made manifest the need for an economically founded approach. And not only in the obvious sense that simple means cheap (normally speaking), but primarily in the sense that it



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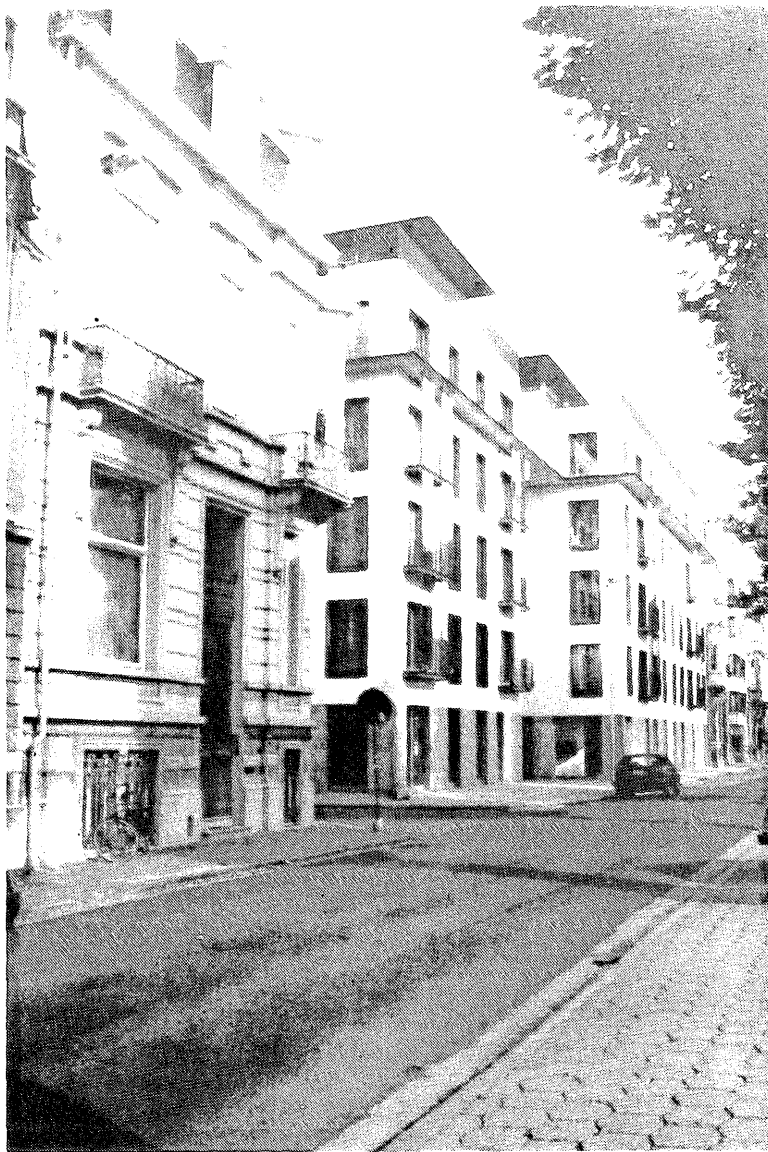
signifies a rejection of the consumer economy in favour of an economy of sustainability. These architects worked with simple, concise concepts of space and forms which one may expect will hold their own as constants throughout the fluctuations of successive form fashions. This economy was at the same time based on the ecological awareness that natural resources are not inexhaustible and have to be used sparingly. This explains the avoidance of waste and often a deliberate choice of a limited number of materials used as appropriately and efficiently as possible. Their natural qualities were made evident and their texture became a defining factor in the character of the form and space. However, the rejection of abundance did not mean the withdrawal into an *architettura povera*, and certainly not a decline into any form of simplism. The poetry of simplicity implies full awareness of the complexity to be found in the brief and aims for the integration of this complexity into a concise form, as well as aspiring to the maximum result using a minimum of means.

As part of this movement, the Flemish new simplicity takes its place as a component with an appearance of its own, a variant with its own features corresponding to the specific context in which it came into being.



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Among the young Flemish architects, the return to classical principles was from the beginning coupled to an open appropriation of miscellaneous components from the modern movement, from Loos to *De Stijl*, from Constructivism to Purism, so that their work was free of the rigidity of Italian precedents and is usually light and friendly. Nevertheless, precisely in the context of the Flemish proliferation, their clear prismatic volumes inevitably take on another, critical significance. Scattered in the proliferation of a country paved with compromises, they appear like points of integrity, and give material form to the desire to bring into being something without compromise, if only in their own field, that of architecture. And yet they do not set themselves up as entirely independent objects ignoring their surroundings. In all their geometric purity they are often meticulously attuned to their context. The generations of the eighties and nineties accept the fragmentation of their country as a fact with which one has to live. They are different from their functionalist predecessors of the twenties in that they deliberately involve the context in their design, that they actually make the most banal of elements on and around the site into a constituent part of their concept.



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If this new simplicity signifies a late breakthrough of Modernism in Flanders, it is nonetheless a Modernism that has distanced itself from the functionalist ideal of standardisation and industrial production. It is an



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architecture not intended to bring about uniformity, but to create specific situations in each particular case. It is precisely because of this, and because it continues to cultivate the private house, that it arouses interest abroad, and especially in the Netherlands, where, in a reverse movement and as a reaction against the prevailing uniformity of the big housing complexes, there appears to be a strong craving for deregulation and specific character. On its side, Flemish architecture for the time being avoids any form of central planning. The densification aimed at in the Flanders Environmental Structure Plan has up to now yielded little or no visible result. Nevertheless, this plan does present Flemish architecture with a new and fundamental challenge: to develop forms of urbanisation in which the qualities of traditional Flemish homes are maintained.

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