

THE NATIONAL GIRO BANK BUILDING OF VICTOR BOURGEOIS

INTRODUCTION

“Victor Bourgeois? You better say: Eastern bloc architecture!” titled a short article – one of the very few – published on the occasion of the reopening in July 2002 of the renovated National Giro Bank building in Brussels.¹ Victor Bourgeois designed the office block in 1937 and finished it in 1949. Unoccupied since 1990, the Flemish parliament bought it and organized an international competition to transform it into an office building for its deputies. The official press release emphasizes how Bourgeois was one of the most important architects of the modern movement in Belgium. But the quoted parliamentarian bluntly expressed his doubts on, not to say his dislike of the building’s architectural quality.

The small column was found on the inner pages of the paper and would have passed unnoticed together with the day’s other *fait-divers*, if it didn’t surpass the simple taste of a parliamentarian. As a matter of fact, though, the negative critical judgement on Bourgeois’ later buildings has been, and still is widespread and often repeated in the field of theory and history of Belgian architecture. In an international context, a comparable negative judgment was assigned to the more mature work of architects such as J.J.P. Oud or André Lurçat, to name only two avant-gardists who seem to have

given up modernism at a higher age. What distinguishes the Belgian architect from his colleagues however is that this critical reception is part of a larger picture, which assigns a rather ambivalent place to Victor Bourgeois in the history of modern architecture in Belgium. Although Bourgeois generally is considered the most important spokesman and pioneer of his country's modern movement, his architectural work hasn't received the same critical attention as that of contemporary Belgian modernists like Huib Hoste, Louis-Herman De Koninck or Gaston Eysselinck, all of them figures of a much more limited international importance.

It is our conviction – and the argument of this paper – that the National Giro Bank building should be considered as one of the key projects of Bourgeois' career as an architect. More than well known masterpieces as the Cité Moderne in Sint-Agatha-Berchem or the Jespers house in Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe, this later work provides an interpretative tool that allows to go beyond the evident stylistic shifts in his oeuvre. It opens the way to a richer reading of his architectural approach, as it is exemplified in his often dispraised post-war realizations, in his more appreciated avant-garde work of the twenties and in his numerous theoretical writings.

In order to question and, in the end, un-sharpen the historical periodization of his architectural production, we will retrace the history of its critical reception and draw attention to the position of the National Giro Bank building in Bourgeois's oeuvre as a whole. A close-reading of some of Bourgeois' contemporary texts allows us to understand the fundamentals of Bourgeois's architectural approach and in conclusion we will try to indicate that what submerges is in some way related to Bourgeois' explicit social engagement, and this not only in the definition of the role of the architect but also in the aesthetics of his architecture.

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BOURGEOIS' OEUVRE

In the historiography of 20th century architecture in Belgium, the figure of Victor Bourgeois is portrayed in an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, he's generally considered to be the most important Belgian exponent of the international Modern Movement of the 1920. In this context, authors refer to his role as the founder of the avant-garde weekly *7 Arts*, to his masterwork, the garden neighbourhood La Cité Moderne – in an international context without any doubt the most important Belgian realization of the interwar period – and to his role in the making of the modern movement in the 1920's. Bourgeois was the only Belgian that would design a house in the historical Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart. Moreover, he played a decisive role

in the first CIAM, presiding the first meeting in La Sarraz and organizing the third congress in Brussels in 1930.

But despite this reputation, Bourgeois' oeuvre didn't receive the same historical attention as the work of contemporary Belgian architects like Louis-Herman De Koninck, Huib Hoste or Gaston Eysselinck. Only two little monographs were published during the last ten years of his life. Afterwards, only limited scientific attention dealt with his work.² In 1971 the *Archives d'Architecture Moderne* (AAM) organized a retrospective exhibition and edited a catalogue. Even if this publication with additions of Robert L. Delevoy, of Maurice Culot and of the architect's brother, the poet and literate Pierre Bourgeois, constitutes without any doubt the best introduction on the figure, it doesn't really go beyond the idea of 'a tribute to'.³ This can also be said about the former two publications and in a more explicit manner about a recent edition of the Brussels *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, which collects, as an homage on the occasion of his 100th birthday, a series of testimonies of his students.⁴

This lack of attention seems not to be a coincidence if retrace the image of Bourgeois in recent historiography. Only one year after Bourgeois's death in 1962 Bontridder would write in his overview *Hedendaagse architectuur in België. Dialoog tussen licht en stilte* (*Contemporary Architecture in Belgium. Dialogue between Light and Silence*): "The built oeuvre of Bourgeois often deceives. We don't always retrieve in it the lucid, noble, self-conscious and liberated spirit of its maker."⁵ Bontridder finds only a few works of Bourgeois worth remembering. "A part from the master piece of the Cité Moderne in Berchem-Saint-Agath, we count amongst the most valuable of his buildings, the little house he created for Oscar Jespers and the countryhouse 'La Jeannerie'".⁶ Opposed to these "tough, sturdy and completely honest building masses of the early years" Bontridder judges the National Giro Bank Building in Brussels, the cultural centre François Bovesse in Namur and the City Hall of Ostend, "the most well known realizations of Bourgeois" with an architecture that "in an attempt to be charming, makes an appeal to more fashionable elements like window frames and curtain walls [...] and loses a large part of its original force."⁷

Bontridder's division of Bourgeois' oeuvre into the interesting early years and the less exciting later ones gets a silent but firm confirmation in two reference books on 20th century architecture in Belgium: the 1969 *Antoine Pompe et l'effort moderne en Belgique, 1890-1940* and its counterpart about the post war period published two years later *Bouwen in Belgium, 1945-1970*.⁸ In the file that Maurice Culot and François Terlinden dedicated to Bourgeois, Bontridder is quoted in extenso and the picture is

completed by testimonies of Walter Gropius and Jean Seaux – the first one about his role in CIAM, the second about his friendship with the painter Fernand Léger.⁹ Most remarkably the selected works list only covers the period 1922-1936. The last work is the villa La Jeannerie in Sint-Genesius-Rhode built in 1936, while the National Giro Bank building designed a year later isn't even mentioned. With this selection and with the quotations of Gropius and Seaux a very specific image of Bourgeois is constructed: a legendary modernist, avant-gardist and iconoclast. A figure that will be diametrically opposed to the Bourgeois that is presented in *Bouwen in België*.

Despite Bekaerts recognition that of all the interwar architects “only Victor Bourgeois created a voluminous oeuvre after 1945”, the architect is brightly absent in this reference work.¹⁰ He is not represented in the gallery of post war architects, whose oeuvre is illustrated with heavily documented files and even in the central photographic overview not even one of his realizations is shown. About the reasons for this absence – all the more remarkable if we consider that *Bouwen in Belgium*, presents itself partly as a bibliographical instrument – there should not be any doubt. Bourgeois' postwar work may be voluminous, “all breath and inspiration have disappeared from it, and even on a pure formal level it is below par. This is obvious if we consider his project for the extension of the Cité Moderne.”¹¹ Further on Bekaert will nuance his judgement by comparing Bourgeois to other figures, concluding : “the gap between the theory professed at the La Cambre institute and his work continued to grow, without that he or his fellow modernists seemed to be conscious of the tragic of this evolution.”¹²

The same year Maurice Culot, one of Bourgeois' old students, reacted against this last statement. In the AAM catalogue he underlines: “il est difficile de soutenir avec Geert Bekaert que Bourgeois était inconscient du fossé qui séparait ses idées de ses solutions constructives. Comment aurait-il pu le rester devant la révélation quotidienne née de son enseignement vivant aux étudiants de l'Institut de la Cambre”.¹³ But this exchange of words represents no more than a rearguard action. About one thing no doubt existed. The voluminous post war oeuvre of Bourgeois is “below par” and stands in no relation to his early realizations. In *Bouwen in België* not even one illustration was included, and in the AAM catalogue all together only three.

By 1970 the view on Bourgeois' oeuvre was frozen and since then it has changed little. Puttemans would radicalize the critical judgement by introducing terms as “anonymous”, “current”, “plastic poorness” and “academism”¹⁴ and Bekaert would repeat in his 1995 overview *Contemporary Architecture* that Bourgeois' post war production “lacks the suppleness and intensity” of his pre war work.¹⁵ At the same time, however,

this publication would bring the first hint of a correction. In his annotations on “the numerous, almost anonymous works” that Bourgeois produced after the war Bekaert concludes: “It looks as if he had given up all the formal ambitions of modernism to let only the substance of the work speak for itself.”¹⁶ And in a subtitle of an illustration he explains the orientation in which words as “anonymous” and “substance” could be comprehended:

“Bourgeois, who in the 1920s started out with outspoken avant-garde architecture, moved away from the refinement of the ‘International Style’ in his substantial post war oeuvre. His later works give direct, even brutal expression to the elementary forces inherent in construction.”¹⁷

Parallel to this periodization (and denigration) of Bourgeois’s architectural oeuvre, we distinguish a second recurrent theme in the reception of Bourgeois’ work. Most authors consider Bourgeois more interesting as a writer than as a builder. In opposition to figures as De Koninck and Hoste, who realized a refined avant-garde oeuvre, Bourgeois is considered in the first place as the spokesman of the modern movement in Belgium, the theoretician or even the philosopher of Belgian functionalism.

Once again, Bontridder sets the tone. In 1963, his *Dialogue Between Light and Silence* describes Bourgeois as a “subtle erudite and a brilliant speaker” to which he added that he was “a man who questioned with passion the heritage of former civilizations in order to use the experience of old masters as a fence and a steppingstone for his own most audacious realizations. His polemics of the early years would grow out to an underestimated pedagogical labour, that he wouldn’t restrict to his activity as a professor at the La Cambre institute, where one hundred and twenty pupils are devoted to him with heart and soul. But he would also pronounce him as the master builder and urban planner in the littlest Walloon village, in the most insignificant socialist cell.”¹⁸

The importance of Bourgeois’ post war thinking is also stressed in *Bouwen in België*. It is implicit in Bekaert’s quoted affirmation about the growing gap between Bourgeois’ theory and his built work; and it gets confirmed by the yearly bibliographical surveys in the middle of the book, in which repeatedly is referred to his theoretical writings; post war publications that, contrary to his later realizations, do get mentioned in the “bibliographical orientation” of Bourgeois’ file in *Antoine Pompe et l’effort moderne en Belgique*.

The real consecration however of Bourgeois’ theoretical legacy is found in the AAM catalogue of 1971. The texts of Culot, Delevoy and Pierre Bourgeois focus on his

pedagogical mission at Henry van de Velde's Institut Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs and his reflection as an urban planner. And while large quotes are included out of two post war booklets¹⁹, one of his last writings "le programme de la ville", in which he formulated an overt critique of the Athens Charter, is posthumously published. It seems that the suppleness and the intensity that lack in his post war work, are to be found in his post war theoretical writings.

The image of Bourgeois as a 'thinker' rather than a 'builder' would be confirmed by Puttemans affirmation that "Bourgeois after 1932 only remains interesting as a theoretician."²⁰ This judgment is echoed by Victor G. Martiny's remark (at the end of a short biographical note on Bourgeois) that rather his writings than his buildings deserve a profound study.²¹ The image becomes sharper if we compare Bourgeois to Louis-Herman De Koninck, as did Willy Van Der Meeren, who had both of them as professors: "How to build, the métier I learned from De Koninck; the philosophy of the building from Bourgeois."²² In the above mentioned tribute to Bourgeois of 1998 this picture gets completed by a series of testimonies of old-students that talk about his "humanism", his "cartesian spirit" and his "grande culture". And though only sporadically his actual theoretical writings get referred to, and while especially his undogmatic way of thinking is stressed, the evoked image is the one of a theoretical guide or a "maitre à penser".²³

Contrary to all this appraisal, it is difficult to sustain that Bourgeois is an architectural theoretician of first order; even if he is the author of one-liners, such as "le salut de l'architecture c'est la dèche" that would acquire the status of an icon in modernist theory in a Belgian context. The importance accorded to Bourgeois can only be explained by the absence on the Belgian architectural scene of a personage that played as crucial a role in the development of the Belgian avant-garde as did Adolf Behne in Germany, Karel Teige in Czechoslovakia and Sigfried Giedion in the intellectual development of the Swiss and the European modern movement in general. In Belgium Bourgeois was the only figure who enjoyed for some years a comparable status, being as the Italian architect and theoretician Alberto Sartoris expressed it "le symbol de la seconde vague de l'insurrection moderniste."²⁴

If nuances are easily added to the reception of his written oeuvre, it is difficult to argue that the critical reception of Bourgeois' own buildings is without foundation. An attempt to inverse the sense of this negative interpretation and to construct a glorious image of the architect would be rather audacious, not to say foolhardy. Nevertheless the

above-sketched ambivalent portrait has to be considered to some extent an all too easy caricature. Aware of this tendency, his brother Pierre Bourgeois would underline yet in 1971 the fundamental unity in approach between the pre and post war Bourgeois: “Certains entendent opposer le Bourgeois de la jeunesse à la personnalité mûrie ou vieillissante. Pour l’essentiel, le même combat de 1919 à 1962.”²⁵ And Maurice Culot would join (in a negative sense) this affirmation by underlining the mediocrity of Bourgeois’ oeuvre “dans son ensemble”, *as a whole*, which would make according to his argument, the presenting of it in a traditional architect’s catalogue an “injustice” rather than a “consecration”.²⁶

An attempt to save Bourgeois from the mediocrity of his own work is behind the effort to split up the figure into two or even four parts (the pre and the post war architect versus the thinker and the builder). The irony however is that in its attempt to create a glorious image of the architect this all to esthetical view obstructs a multilayered reading of his work, or at least passes over what is really at stake in his built and maybe even his written oeuvre.

THE NATIONAL GIRO BANK BUILDING

The National Giro Bank Building occupies in an odd way, a central place in the ambivalent picture of Victor Bourgeois. Because it was designed in 1937 and only finished in 1949, it fills, as it were, literally the gap between the early work of the twenties and his post war oeuvre. And yet historians never have paid much attention to the building. Bekaert didn’t mention it in *Bouwen in België*, and more surprisingly it didn’t figure in the ‘selected works’ list of the Bourgeois’ file in *Antoine Pompe et l’Effort Moderne en Belgique*. And this remarkable absence gets confirmed by repetition: neither in the monograph of 1971 nor in a series of recent publication on modern architecture in Belgium any words are dedicated to the building and it is only due to the recent renovation of the building by the Flemish parliament that some attention has been drawn to it.²⁷

This silence stands in diametrical opposition to the importance Bourgeois accorded himself to this work. It was his first public commission for an important building and contrary to other realizations he had it published on various occasions. Moreover it was built on a most prestigious spot in the centre of Brussels, in the vicinity of the royal Palace. As he stated himself on various occasions, this was one of Bourgeois’ favourite places in Brussels.

We can only speculate how Bourgeois obtained the commission. From the late 1920s onward and especially on the occasion of the third and the fourth CIAM-congress, he attempted to carve out an image of himself as an urban planner. This professional reorientation becomes evident not only in a series of articles he writes in *7 Arts* but also in projects he designed on various occasions, like the 1929 plan for 'Le Grand Bruxelles', the 1930 project for 'Le Nouveau Bruxelles' and the urbanistic schemes he drew in 1931 for Paul Otlet's 'Cité Mondiale'. Bourgeois was aware of the need of a political support to back up his critique and town planning schemes, and he sought this support via his membership of the socialist party and presumably even via the freemasons lodge.

In the 1932 Labour Plan of Henri De Man (an answer in terms of great infrastructural works to the economical crisis and the high unemployment rates) created great expectations among modernist circles. Victor's brother Pierre Bourgeois published from March 1934 a series of articles in the Brussels weekly *Vers le Vrai* in favour of the Plan.²⁸ In one of these texts he explicitly addressed its architectural implications and symbolic possibilities: "Rien de grand ne se fait sans une expression architecturale. [...] Le communisme et le fascisme ont fait naître des villes. Il faut que le Plan du Travail s'incarne dans des créations du même ordre." ²⁹

In 1935 the Liège based modernist group *l'Equerre*, to whom Bourgeois had handed over the secretary of the Belgian CIAM section addressed an open letter to Henri De Man who had measured, as *l'Equerre* stated, better than any one else "l'importance qu'aura dans les temps prochains 'la nouvelle architecture sociale'."³⁰ Their appeal joined with a certain success and resulted in a new rapprochement between leftist politics and modernist architects. De Man would respond not without pathos to the letter of the young Liège architects, and took up in May 1936 the patronage as minister of Public Works of the exhibition "La ville nouvelle. Le logement nouveau", organized by the same group in the Palais des fêtes of Liège.³¹

The Bourgeois brothers were from the very beginning well introduced in Socialist circles. From 1923 they were active in the refounded artistic section of the Belgian socialist party and they personally knew important politicians such as Paul-Henri Spaak or Louis Pierard. Spaak joined in 1933 the right wing socialists group headed by Henri De Man and played an important propagandistic role in the defence of the Plan. During the second half of the 1930s when the new fraction gained political power and even entered the government, a series of modernist architects and Victor Bourgeois in particular obtained for the first time important public commissions. In 1937 Bourgeois was appointed technical advisor of the newly founded Ministry of Public Health, a

position which allowed him to draw up the master plan of recreation area Hofstade and a series of sport and public health buildings in the Borinage region.³²

In 1937 he also obtained the commission to design the new building of the National Giro Bank. The institution was created in 1909 following the example of other European countries like Germany, Switzerland and Luxemburg. As a public service it gained increasing importance during the interwar period. It grew out to one of the biggest administrative services and its ancient building (on the triangular site between Rue ducale de Rue de la presse and the Rue de Louvain) became both spatially as symbolically obsolete. The political dimension of the service should not be underestimated, because its growing success the National Giro Bank could become a government instrument in the regulation of the national financial market, one of the main ambitions of the Labour Plan. And we can easily imagine the idea behind the construction campaign: a new, bright and modern building had to represent the importance of this dynamic, public administration.

In his explanatory note on the project –used as the basis for a series of articles – Bourgeois illustrated the different steps in the design process.³³ A first draft consisted of a 70 meters high skyscraper [fig.1.]. The tower had to accommodate the office space, while a large prismatic volume beside it, had to harbour the counter hall. Right from the first sketch, this was envisioned as an impressive place. But the skyscraper option soon was put aside because of the building height limitation of the Guimard plan for the surrounding neighbourhood. Consequently Bourgeois tried to modify the building in a U form. This in turn caused great problems of internal organization. Because of the difficulty of finding an apt emplacement for the vertical circulation, a considerable amount of usable square meters was lost on each floor. For that reason Bourgeois finally opted for an H-form with, as it were, two externalized courtyards and a concentration of the circulation (both vertically as horizontally) in the central area. The office space was distributed over both parts of the building: occupying all the floors of building that flanked the Rue de Louvain and the floors above the counter hall at the Rue de la Croix de Fer.

Bourgeois compared this final solution, “the open disposition” as he called it, with the different types of construction in the immediate vicinity of the building.³⁴ The former building of the National Giro Bank (the actual assembly building of the Flemish Parliament) was “le dispositif le plus ancien”, an implantation that occupied the whole block of houses with buildings around a central courtyard [fig.2.]. A more “evolved” type of building was the one of the National Railroad Company, which in a form of

a comb presented a solution for the bad exposure to daylight and the bad aeration of the former one. Bourgeois saw his own H-scheme in the continuation of this tradition, maximizing the exposure and the aeration.

The most symbolic place of Bourgeois's new design was the counter hall, the place where the administration entered in contact with the public. It had, as the architectural critic and engineer Novgorodsky stated in *La Technique des Travaux* "le symbol de la puissance des Chèques postaux".³⁵ With its impressive volume (78 m long, 22 m large and 8 m. high), the hall introduced the dimensions of the street and the city inside the building – an attempt to bring public space inside that Bourgeois deliberately pursued and even pushed to extremes by finishing the interior walls as if they were outside façades, with the very similar materials: marbled Bourgogne stone, artificial white stone resembling 'pierre de France', bronze and glass.

The impressive dimensions of the counter hall caused a construction problem. Contrary to the first sketch, in the final design the counter hall was topped by seven floors of offices. Because Bourgeois wanted the space to be free of any central columns, the beams had to support the weight of these floors which had two centrally placed columns, (a design that caused an impressive bending moment). The structural engineer M. Chapeau designed gigantic T-beams (of 1 m 85 high with a compression table of 2m 50 large and 65 cm high) with a Freyssinet articulation at both end sides [fig.8.].

It's typical of Bourgeois' open-minded approach that he considered this technical complication, an opportunity rather than a shortcoming. If there weren't those restrictions, he stated "notre collaborateur et ami, l'ingénieur Chapeaux n'aurait pas été content. Il n'aurait pas eu de belles complications constructives à résoudre."³⁶ At the same time he used the gigantic beams, which were covered with a perforated artificial white stone and accentuated by a bronze finishing in the corners to give a rhythm to the counter hall. He also used the columns – which were according to his feeling a bit too small on itself – to conceal the different conduct systems of the building.

THE BEAUX-ARTS TRADITION

Bourgeois' explanation of the different steps in the design process is most interesting, because it exemplifies his design methodology. The starting point was the projection on the building site of what he considered to be the ideal or at least contemporary type of an office building for a public administration: a high-rise office block combined with a second element, a large prismatic volume harbouring the immense counter hall.

Once implanted, these volumes had to be adapted both to the context of the urban environment with its existing building rules, and to the internal demands of organization and stability. Finally the two initial volumes merge into an homogeneous building form with an H shaped ground plan.

Thanks to his teaching at the La Cambre Institute in Brussels, Bourgeois made explicit his design approach in his theoretical writings.³⁷ In an unpublished text dating from during the war and which served as an introduction for the new architectural students,³⁸ he illustrated – not really surprisingly – his way of working by making a critic of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. His main argument against the *Beaux-Arts* was the absence of simultaneity in the design process: “la façade, la coupe et le plan ne sont pas trois expressions, dès le début solidaires et interchangeables, d’une même pensée. Sa méthode est basée sur la succession des opérations, manifestation d’une hiérarchie : d’abord, l’esthétique ; ensuite, la technique ; enfin, l’usage.”³⁹

The text recycles some ideas Bourgeois wrote down in his 1928 essay “la rationalisation de l’architecture” a key text which echoed for the first time his moderate allegiance to the Marxist critique of Hannes Meyer, with whom he exchanged since 1924 an intense correspondence.⁴⁰ According to Bourgeois the academic method could best be compared with a synthetical, axiomatic science like mathematics. The whole system was constructed on the basis of a few postulates – the Vitruvian orders. Opposed to this, he made a plea to use in architecture the analytic, empirical method. “Nous, nous poussons l’architecture dans le secteur des sciences d’observation”.⁴¹ And in a 1931 text on the minimal dwelling he would extend his critique of academic teaching to modernist aesthetics itself, joining the moralistic position of Meyer: “Au lieu de le baser, cet enseignement sur l’esthétique (classique ou “cubiste”) nourrissions-le des principes variables de la vie sociale et économique de l’hygiène, de la construction, etc.”⁴²

Like Meyer, Bourgeois would define the role of the architect as one of an “organisateur de toutes les valeurs utiles” and in the national Giro Bank Building this organisatory role becomes explicitly apparent. Because of the complexity of the symbolical, technical, constructive and functional aspects of the building he was pushed, as it were, to interpret and let converge all the elements, instead of limiting his role to the one of “un esthète qui trace savamment des plans plus ou moins commandés par des modules.”⁴³ In the same text “Architecture 1919-1934” Bourgeois continues: “Aujourd’hui, l’architecte a une existence plus importante [...] parce qu’il est devenu le coordinateur d’une équipe de techniciens (ingénieurs, entrepreneurs, hygiénistes, jardinistes, ensembliers, etc.)”⁴⁴

Bourgeois' general critique of the Beaux-Arts however (which argued in fact against any kind of a priori system of aesthetics) is part of an ambiguous position towards the academic tradition. While at the one hand he rejected the system as a whole, he didn't hesitate to quote in extensively authors like Guadet, Choisy and de l'Orme. This last architect had the merit, according to Bourgeois to have introduced the study of domestic architecture as the first task in architectural studies. What was at stake was to make the student conscious of the fact that the architecture of the house had always been the resultant of a combination of forces as divergent as social or moral evolutions, technological possibilities, available materials, transport and labour forces. "La fonction, les moyens et le site s'influencent réciproquement et la forme naît."⁴⁵ These analyses had gradually to be extended to all kind of building types in which the student at each time had to experience "le drame de la conception première."⁴⁶ In Bourgeois' vision these analyses had to be carried to extremes because the first task of the architect or as he called it himself, "la loi éternelle de l'architecture" was to "d'organiser, en profondeur, les véritables besoins humains".⁴⁷

Bourgeois didn't reject the examples from the past. To the contrary, in the quoted introduction text of 1941 he showed a very humble attitude towards tradition by introducing the expression 'inventer la différence', to push the knowledge in a given field only a little bit further, which was in his eyes the big challenge of any kind of science or art. Paraphrasing Rodin, Bourgeois concludes "Ce qui est le plus difficile n'est pas de penser avec la primitive ingéniosité de l'enfance, c'est de penser avec la tradition, avec la force acquise, avec tous les résultats thésaurisés de la pensée."⁴⁸

By this reasoning, Bourgeois took from the back door what he had kicked out before at the front door: the academic tradition. After all Bourgeois's reasoning in functional categories of buildings – with their own historical examples – shows him to be very much indebted to the Beaux-Arts tradition. In his text he made reference to Julien Guadets *Eléments et théorie de l'architecture*, remarking that these four volumes are "hélas" too old – "depuis l'évolution de l'architecture s'est accélérée et aucun manuel méthodique n'a été publié à ma connaissance." – and immediately announcing the ambitious project he started together with Jean Deligne and Charles Van Nueten to write in collaboration with a series of other specialists, a comparable, comprehensive *Théorie de l'architecture*, as a reference work adapted to the present day situation.⁴⁹

THE SHIFTING MEANING OF THE CLASSICAL IN BOURGEOIS'S THINKING

In the National Giro Bank Building Bourgeois adopted for the first time a monumental and overtly classicizing architecture. This 'retour à l'ordre' is why architectural historians never commented the building and why modernist architects judged it in an explicit negative manner. They saw it as a form of betrayal to Bourgeois's own earlier positions and to the modernist cause in general.⁵⁰ The Giro Bank Building might not have aroused reactions as strong as these against J.J.P. Oud's Shell building in Rotterdam, but in principle the purport was the same. It could be compared to the comments of some critics against what they have called with very slippery terms the 'fascist architecture' or 'totalitarian architecture' of projects such as the Royal Library in centre of Brussels.

In Bourgeois' view however the National Giro Bank Building was a natural outcome of an evolution that was already present in his work. This included a manifest renunciation of the more transitory elements in his own avant garde work of the early twenties. "Lorsqu'on sortit [de la guerre 14-18] on voulut repenser toute l'architecture, reformer un vocabulaire et retrouver la vie à ses sources sauvages et vives. [...C]ette agitation était le fait d'une petite minorité héroïque et peut-être égoïste. Elle se trouvait dans un laboratoire."⁵¹ For Bourgeois, this didn't mean he betrayed in what way ever the causes of modernism itself. To the contrary, he considered the turn his oeuvre took with this building as explicitly positive and progressive; the first building to really embody what he called in 1934 a "humanist architecture".

As a consequence, the classicizing architecture of the National Giro Bank should not only be considered as a symbolic answer to the representational demands of the 1930 politics of the masses, but also and maybe in the first place an outcome of an evolution that was inherent in Bourgeois' approach. By re-anchoring his architecture in the humanist tradition, he was offering an ultimate answer to a question that had been central to his approach from the beginning. During the 1920's his initial conception was nourished by the pre war discussions on *l'art social*, which was gradually defined at the beginning of the 20th century by theoreticians as Picard⁵² as an "art pour tous", an art that, contrary to the bourgeois *l'art pour l'art* addressed itself to everybody and constituted thus a truly democratized art. This vision was cross-fertilized in Bourgeois' early conception with the architectural theories of Berlage and a neoplatistical vocabulary inspired on F.L. Wright. It is in this semantic context that we should interpret his masterwork La Cité Moderne, which as Auke van der Woud has argued, shows to be a more genuine architectural translation of the *De Stijl* ideas then the well known examples in the Netherlands.

During the second half of the 1920s, Bourgeois would come under the explicit influence of both Hannes Meyers' theoretical viewpoints and Le Corbusier's architectural idiom. If around 1926 he criticized the early modernist work in Belgium to be "too decorative" and indicates future evolution in the direction of "une sobriété absolue des masses, exactes, émouvantes par pureté",⁵³ only two years later he would hold a plea for "une rationalisation de l'architecture".⁵⁴ Around 1932 and culminating with the economic crisis of the 1930, this anti-esthethic attitude triumphed. Bourgeois: "Débarrassés de l'académisme et des soucis purement esthétiques, l'architecture sera réintégrée sur son véritable plan à la fois technique, économique et, social."⁵⁵ The stylistic counterpart of this changing position was a further denudation of Bourgeois' architecture. After the stripping of the decorative, neoplastic or Wrightian elements and of the all too radical Corbusian purism, all esthetical intentions and even the whiteness of modern architecture are given up, and in this process Bourgeois was probably more radical than his friend Hannes Meyer ever was. It is as if Bourgeois was truly peeling off in different layers what he considered to be the false scents of the modern project.

This process results in a series of buildings that in some cases display a disconcerting banality, and in others seem to embody the very substratum of architecture itself; the substance Geert Bekaert has touched upon in *Contemporary Architecture in Belgium*. And it is very tempting to see in this forceful, stripped and almost generic architecture the embodiment of the classical, Bourgeois was already writing about in the manifest number of 7 *Arts* in 1922. The evolution towards a kind of substantial architecture approaches Bourgeois position to the French constructive tradition that connects Viollet-le-Duc, Choisy and Perret.⁵⁶ French rationalism took, as it were, the place of the earlier neoplastic essentialist approach as the embodiment of the 'classical' and filled up the void in his design process that was created by his functionalist faith in the analytical and inductive method.

At the same time Bourgeois' interpretation of the classical – his 'humanisme architectural' – joined the efforts for the creation of a national style that surpassed the traditional ideological oppositions. The most well known defender of a modern national style in the interwar period in Belgium was Marcel Schmitz, a catholic royalist, architectural critic and a personal friend of the Bourgeois brothers, with whom he founded in 1933 the urban magazine *Bruxelles*. In his 1936 book *L'architecture moderne en Belgique*, Schmitz sharply analysed the Belgian architectural production of the interwar period and concluded that the quality of Belgian contemporary architecture was to be found in the richness and the concreteness of its materiality. In his analysis he employed a very broad definition of 'modern architecture', ranging from what he

called the extremist position of the early Bourgeois to very traditional examples of both academic and rural architecture.⁵⁷ The common factor being the absence of a forceful theory, and the priority of the concreteness of building, Schmitz held a plea to continue this sensual approach in a new Belgian national style that coupled a modern classicism to a delightful robustness: “Architecture bien plantée, nous dirions: bien assise, elle est à l’image d’un peuple actif, réaliste, vigoureux, peu enclin à la fantaisie ou à l’élégance, mais sachant découvrir dans le jeu des valeurs plastiques un plaisir de qualité.”⁵⁸

URBANITY AND NEUTRALITY

If the National Giro Bank building took to a certain extent Schmitz’ contemporary text as an iconographic program, Bourgeois would surely not have approved his recommendations regarding the exuberant use of a multitude of materials. To the contrary, Bourgeois had a very specific opinion in this matter. Repeatedly he stated that the architect should be the “le serviteur d’un ordre urbain qui limite les droit de son imagination”.⁵⁹ Consequently, the main challenge of the design of the National Giro Bank building was, according to Bourgeois, the reconciliation of the ‘esprit moderne’ and the ‘continuité urbaine’. This preoccupation expressed itself in the choice of materials for the facades: Belgian bluestone and white Euville and Savonnières stone, traditional materials that had also been used for the eighteenth century constructions in the Park neighbourhood.

The urban order had played from the very beginning of his career a decisive role in Bourgeois’ conception of architecture. In his famous text in the manifest number of *7 Arts* Bourgeois held a plea against fantasy and originality in architecture, stating that a modern architect almost committed an insolence regarding his art if he realised an interesting building in the city of Brussels. The architectural objective Bourgeois had in mind was the creation of a new aesthetics that had to introduce a new harmony into the city and stood in opposition to the individualistic 19th century historic styles; a new style that in its leitmotiv – ‘l’unité dans la variété’ – has often been interpreted as the expression of the egalitarian, post World War I society. But vigilant as always to install an operative critique, Bourgeois concluded in his *7 Arts* manifest: “Etant donné que transformer radicalement l’architecture urbaine est utopique, essayons de la NEUTRALISER”.⁶⁰

While the typographic strategy of capitalizing words or phrases in order to stress them was borrowed from Van de Velde – whose *Formules de la beauté architecturale*

were edited and published in French by the Bourgeois' brothers in 1923⁶¹ – the concept of neutrality itself was most probably a transcription of the 'rest' ('le repos' which could also be translated as 'the peace' or 'the calm') Berlage talked about in his 1913 Brussels lectures: the rest that would be according to the Dutch master, the main characteristic of the new great style of the future and that would mark the origin of the "first real period of culture of humanity." And it is in this sense the phrase "le salut de l'architecture c'est la dèche", the famous local and more prosaic alternative of Mies' *Less is more* has to be interpreted. The economic argument was invoked because of its uniformizing force on the scale of the city. By applying meticulously a standardized and industrialized way of building the result would be in any case a restful homogeneous image that contributed to the advent of the great style of the future.

In spite of the distance between the Cité Moderne and the National Giro Bank Building we can retrieve the same preoccupation in both works with the urban neutrality. The Cité Moderne was realized in the outskirts of Brussels on a virgin building spot. Even so, Bourgeois would foresee constructions with a saddle roof at the extremes of the garden neighbourhood to make a smooth and gradual transition possible between the 'cubic' architecture in the centre and the more rural constructions that could be expected in the adjacent building lots.

In the case of the National Giro Bank building, the same urban continuity is pursued not only by the choice of building material, but also by the rhythm of the facades themselves. In order to counterbalance the 'natural' evolution towards an articulation of the horizontality (as a consequence of the maximization of the windows), Bourgeois decided to show the columns in the facades. In this way he continued the already present 'urban rhythm' of the Park neighbourhood.

Bourgeois had always considered the 18th century Park neighbourhood as one of the only historic parts of Brussels, where the neutrality he aspired was actually concretised. In 1934 he wrote, commenting his own attitude towards tradition: "Nous respectons les formes du passé. Nous les aimons même. Je plains ceux qui ne sont pas sensibles à la distinction aristocratique de notre quartier du Parc de Bruxelles."⁶² And elsewhere : "les maisons bruxelloises de la fin du 18^{me} siècle et du 19^{me} siècle semblent participer d'une même vie civique. La discipline de l'architecture classique et un petit choix de matériaux (pierre blanche, pierre bleue et peinture à huile) assurent le minimum d'unité ou de neutralité indispensable à tout architecture urbaine."⁶³

CONCLUSION

Unity and neutrality were key words in Bourgeois discourse. After World War II, they would be expressed by the very slippery term ‘civism’; an evolution in his vocabulary that reveals a moralistic discourse about architecture. In an esthetical perspective, the first preoccupation of the architecture had to be the urban order, or as Bourgeois called it “la socialisation apparante”. In this context the giving up of formal ambitions in his more mature work, or the anonymous aspect of his post World War II production have to be considered as a deliberate choice. He turned away from formal virtuosity to concentrate on buildings that combine a good organization, a rational construction and a restrained formal vocabulary.

It is this obsession with urban order and continuity that constitutes the main characteristic of Bourgeois’ entire work. It links early experiments like the Cité Moderne to post World War II works like the City Hall of Ostend or the Centre Culturel Bovesse in Namur. This sense of order culminates in his design for the National Giro Bank Building in Brussels, an example of the well constructed and robust architecture of the 1930s in Belgium, the modern classical Marcel Schmitz wrote about, but that has never been taken seriously in the history of modern architecture in Belgium.

(ENDNOTES)

¹ “Victor Bourgeois? Oostblokarchitectuur, ja!”, in *De Morgen*, 12 juli 2002, p. 5.

² Pierre-Louis FLOUQUET (intr.), *Victor Bourgeois. Architectures 1922-1952*, Art et Technique, Brussels, 1952 ; Georges LINZE, *Victor Bourgeois*, Monographies de l’art belge, Elsevier, Brussels, 1960.

³ Robert L. DELEVOY, Maurice CULOT, Pierre BOURGEOIS, *Victor Bourgeois*, AAM, Brussels, 1971, 62 p.

⁴ AA.VV., *Hommage à Victor Bourgeois*, Classe des Beaux-Arts, Académie Royale de Belgique, Brussels, 1998.

⁵ Albert BONTRIDDER, *Hedendaagse bouwkunst in België. Dialoog tussen licht en stilte*, Helios, Antwerp, 1963.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Maurice CULOT, François TERLINDEN, *Antoine Pompe et l’effort moderne en Belgique 1890-1940*, Editions du musée d’Ixelles, Brussels, 1969; Geert BEKAERT, Francis STRAUVEN, *Bouwen in België, 1945-1970*, Nationale Confederatie van het Bouwbedrijf, Brussels, 1971. Despite the gap of five years between the two mentioned periods, the second work positions itself explicitly as a continuation of the first one. (*op. cit.*, p. 92).

⁹ Maurice CULOT, François TERLINDEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-108. Jean Seaux’ text is a quote from the introduction he wrote for Bourgeois’ 1955 booklet *L’architecte et son espace* (Collection Sept Arts, Brussels,

1955). Gropius' contribution was taken from the Belgian architectural review *La Maison* that dedicated in 1967 a tribute to Bourgeois at the occasion of the fifth anniversary of his death ; A part from Gropius, the issue contains testimonies of J.P. Bakema, Alfred Roth, Alberto Sartoris as well as a series of projects that were initiated by Bourgeois and terminated by Thierry Hoet. See *Victor Bourgeois 5 ans après*, Special issue of *La Maison*, nr. 12, dec. 1967.

¹⁰ Geert BEKAERT, Francis STRAUVEN, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ Maurice CULOT "Urbanisme: Victor Bourgeois après Victor Bourgeois", in : Robert L. DELEVOY, Maurice CULOT, Pierre BOURGEOIS, *Victor Bourgeois*, AAM, Brussel, 1971, p. 11.

¹⁴ Pierre PUTTEMANS, *Moderne bouwkunst in België*, Marc Vokaer, Brussel, 1975, p. 139.

¹⁵ Geert BEKAERT, *Contemporary architecture in Belgium*, Lannoo, Tielt, 1995, p. 35

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ *Ibidem.* The original Dutch version is sensitively different: "Gestart in de jaren twintig met een uitgesproken avantgardistische architectuur die het idioom van de 'Internationale Stijl' aanwendde, laat Bourgeois deze geraffineerde stijl varen om op een directe en zelfs brutale wijze uitdrukking te geven aan de elementaire kracht van het bouwen." A better translation of the Dutch worden 'bouwen' would be 'building' instead of 'construction'.

¹⁸ Albert BONTRIDDER, *op. cit.*, p. 32

¹⁹ Victor BOURGEOIS, *De l'architecture au temps d'Erasmus à l'humanisme social de notre architecture*, Collection Sept Arts, A l'enseigne du chat qui pêche, Brussel, 1949; Victor BOURGEOIS, *L'architecte et son espace*, Collection Sept Arts, Brussel, 1955, 124 p.

²⁰ Pierre PUTTEMANS, *Moderne bouwkunst in België*, Marc Vokaer, Brussel, 1975, p. 139.

²¹ Victor G. MARTINY, "Notice sur Victor Bourgeois", in *L'Annuaire de l'Académie Royale de Belgique*, Brussel, 1983, pp. 205-218, tevens in : AA.VV., *Hommage à Victor Bourgeois*, Classe des Beaux-Arts, Académie Royale de Belgique, Brussel, 1998, pp. 51-58.

²² Mil DE KOONING, *Willy Van Der Meeren*, Laat-XXe-eeuws genootschap, s.l., 1993, p. 14.

²³ AA.VV., *Hommage à Victor Bourgeois*, Classe des Beaux-Arts, Académie Royale de Belgique, Brussel, 1998 ; with testimonies of Monique Wiesen de Koninck, Charles Voituren, Willy Vanequaire, Paul Emile Vincent, René Meyer, Willy Van Der Meeren, Jacques Dolphyn, Henry Boghemans, Thierry Hoet, Charles Vandenhove, Francis Kempes, Geert Léonard, Jacques De Hoe, José Vandevoorde, Jacques Baudon, Bing Lefèvre-Feragen, Léon Ploegaerts and Pierre Farla.

²⁴ SARTORIS Alberto, *Encyclopédie de l'Architecture Nouvelle. Ordre et Climat Nordiques*, Ulrico Hoepli, Milan, 1957, pp. 83-84, p. 86, pp. 88-90, p. 102 en pp. 680-682.

²⁵ Pierre BOURGEOIS, "Coupes et perspectives" in : Robert L. DELEVOY, Maurice CULOT, Pierre BOURGEOIS, *Victor Bourgeois*, AAM, Brussels, 1971, p. 38.

²⁶ “Une rétrospective intégrale de l’oeuvre construite de Victor Bourgeois, dévoilerait une architecture dans l’ensemble plutôt médiocre. Une telle exposition constituerait une injustice plutôt qu’une consécration. Tout catalogue, toute exposition consacrés à l’oeuvre de Bourgeois et entrepris dans l’optique traditionnelle des monographies d’architectes ne peut que consigner le résultat d’une sélection impitoyable.” See Maurice CULOT, “Je suis volontairement sauvage”, in *Bulletin d’information des Archives de l’Architecture Moderne*, n. 7, April 1976, pp. 1-2.

²⁷ On the occasion of the opening a little brochure was published. See Jos VANDENBREEDEN and Jan BRUGGEMANS, *Het huis van de Vlaamse volksvertegenwoordigers*, Sint-Lukasarchief, Brussel, 2002.

²⁸ See BOURGEOIS Pierre, “La Misère des Intellectuels. Appliquez un plan, sinon fermez les écoles”, in *Vers le Vrai*, 11 April 1934, p. 1.

²⁹ BOURGEOIS Pierre, “Extension ou élévation des villes? Un plan, cela n’est pas nécessairement contrainte et monopole; cela peut-être l’équilibre par la diversité.”, in *Vers le vrai*, 16 May 1934, p. 3.

³⁰ See “Réproduction de la lettre envoyée par la revue L’Equerre à Monsieur le Ministre des Travaux Publics H. de Man”, in L’Equerre, jg. 7, n. 4, april 1935, cover.

³¹ In his reaction to this appeal, De Man states: “Votre programme est le mien. [...] Je suis devenu Ministre parce que le plan ne m’intéresse qu’en fonction de la bâtisse – et je voudrais bâtir. Nous allons, si vous le voulez, bâtir ensemble.” See Henry DE MAN, “Réproduction de la réponse envoyée par le Ministre des Travaux Publics” *l’Equerre*, jg. 7, n. 5, mei 1935, cover.

³² Other public commissions that were given to modernist or progressive architects include ‘Sanatorium Lemaire’ (1937, Gaston Brunfaut) ‘La maternité Reine Astrid’ (1937, Marcel Leborgne) ‘La Cité de l’Enfance’ (1938, Marcel Leborgne), the Alost Swimmingpool (1937, Willy Valcke), the Promenade at the beach in Hofstade (1938, Maxime Wijnants); the Hofstade Openair Swimmingpool (1938, Charles Van Nueten). In the same period Henry van de Velde himself become the advisory architect of the Office de Redressement Economique (OREC). In this context see also Pieter UYTENHOVE, “Architectuur, Stedenbouw en Planologie tijdens de Duitse bezetting: de moderne beweging en het commissariaat-generaal voor’s Lands Wederopbouw (1940-1944)”, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, jg. 20, n. 3-4, 1989, pp. 465-510.

³³ L. Novgorodsky quotes extensively Bourgeois’ explanatory note, which is not to be found back in the Bourgeois’ archive in the AAM. See L. NOVGORODSKY, “Le nouvel immeuble des chèques postaux à Bruxelles”, in *La Technique des Travaux*, May, June 1950, pp. 131-146.

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 133

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

³⁶ As quoted in L. NOVGORODSKY, *op.cit.*, p. 133.

³⁷ Bourgeois was appointed as a professor from the very foundation of the school. From 1927 to 1938 he would be responsible for the ‘cours de la forme pure’ and from 1938 onwards responsible for his own architectural workshop.

³⁸ In 1941 Bourgeois became ‘Dean of the Institute of Architecture’ and as an introduction to the new students he gave four lectures, in which he set the architectural education at the La Cambre school in a broad historical

perspective. See Victor BOURGEOIS, *Cours de théorie d'architecture, année académique 1941-1942 (non published manuscript)*, 78 p. (AAM, VB, dossier ISAD, a few pages of the manuscript were found back in the Pierre Bourgeois archive in the 'Musée de la Littérature', Brussels ; two pages are still missing)

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁴⁰ See Victor BOURGEOIS, "La rationalisation de l'architecture", in *Les Dernières Nouvelles*, jg. 3, n. 118, 27 april 1928, pp. 3-4; later also in *L'Emulation*, jg. 48, n. 11, nov. 1928, pp. 69-75. For an account of the friendship between Victor Bourgeois and Hannes Meyer, see : Jacques Grégoire WATELET, Annick DE VILLE, «La première rencontre de Hannes Meyer et de Victor Bourgeois», in *Cahiers de l'ICSAC*, n. 6-7, Brussel 1987.

⁴¹ See Victor BOURGEOIS *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴² See Victor BOURGEOIS, «Habitation à bon marché et Habitation minimum», in *L'Habitation à Bon Marché*, jg. 11, n. 9, sept. 1931, pp. 149-166; later also as «Habitations minima», in *L'Emulation*, jg. 51, n. 11, nov. 1931, pp. 391-414.

⁴³ Victor BOURGEOIS, «Architecture 1919-1934», in *L'Habitation à Bon Marché*, jg. 15, n. 2, feb. 1935, pp. 25-35; ook als «L'architecture moderne en Belgique depuis l'Armistice», in *L'Equerre*, jg. 10, n. 12, dec. 1934, pp. 12 – 13; en *op. cit.*, jg. 11, n. 1, jan. 1935, pp. 2-4.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Victor BOURGEOIS, *Cours de théorie d'architecture. ... op.cit.*, p. 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ BOURGEOIS Victor, "Architecture 1919-1934", *op. cit.*.

⁴⁸ Victor BOURGEOIS, *Cours de théorie d'architecture. ... op.cit.*, p. 60.

⁴⁹ In the margin we should add that it is not really remarkable that Bourgeois was basing his own methodology on the academic tradition – Banham has theorized the indebtedness of modernism on the academic tradition. What is surprising is that he didn't hesitate to admit it. This indebtedness to the academic teaching system and design methodology became also obvious in the nomenclature of the teaching cycli at La Cambre. After the preparatory year(s) in Louis-Herman De Konincks workshop, the pupils had to chose between Bourgeois, Van Nueten or De Ligne to fulfill what was commonly know as "les années de composition".

⁵⁰ Willy Van Der Meeren would state polemically that it was extremely hard to find back the "dèche" out of Bourgeois' famous formula "Le salut de l'architecture c'est la déche" in this particular building.

⁵¹ Victor BOURGEOIS, *Cours de théorie d'architecture. ... op.cit.*, p. 59.

⁵² Edmond Picard and Georges Eeckhout were two prominent editorialists of the artistic weekly *Art Moderne* and both personal friends of Pierre Bourgeois. Elsewhere we have argued that there is a strong parallelism between the winter weekly *7 Arts* (1922-29) of the Bourgeois brothers and Edmond Picard's very influential artistic weekly *Art Moderne* (1881-...).

⁵³ BOURGEOIS Victor, "Bilan. Echecs et promesses. L'architecture belge de 1918-1926", in *7 Arts*, s. V, n. 1, 14 nov. 1926.

⁵⁴ See Victor BOURGEOIS, "La rationalisation de l'architecture", in *Les Dernières Nouvelles*, jg. 3, n. 118, 27

april 1928.

⁵⁵ Victor BOURGEOIS, “La vie moderne”, in *L’Habitation à Bon Marché*, jg. 12, n. 12, dec. 1932, pp. 221-224; later also as “L’époque moderne”, in *L’Equerre*, jg. 4, n. 12, dec. 1932, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁶ In the antagonism between August Perret and Le Corbusier, Bourgeois had an outspoken preference for the first one: In 1945 he wrote in a text about the reconstruction effort in France: “Sur le plan de l’architecture pure, on assiste à l’accroissement du prestige d’Auguste Perret, l’un des initiateurs de l’architecture rationnelle. Auguste Perret n’est pas seulement un penseur ou un esthète, c’est un constructeur au sens parfait du mot”, while he continued further on with some rather moralistic and ironic comments on the French Swiss master: “Le Corbusier est très écouté. Espérons qu’il s’adaptera aux nouvelles circonstances, car l’époque qui vient, dit-on, en contraste avec celle de l’avant-guerre, où se formait une pensée architecturale nouvelle, sera une époque de réalisation. Le constructeur prendrait donc le pas sur le doctrinaire, dans l’intérêt spirituel et social des collectivités.

Avec joie les amis et admirateurs de l’architecte-poète de la “Ville-Radiée” apprendront que Le Corbusier sera officiellement chargé du plan d’urbanisation d’une importante ville française.” See Victor BOURGEOIS, “Aspect de la reconstruction en France”, in *La Maison*, jg. 1, n. 2, april 1945, pp. 43-46. Though it rarely becomes as clear as in this passage, this is certainly not the only text in which Bourgeois expressed in guarded terms his critic against the French-Swiss master.

⁵⁷ See Marcel SCHMITZ, *L’architecture moderne en Belgique*, Editions de la connaissance, Brussels, 1937.

⁵⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁵⁹ Victor BOURGEOIS, “Architecture 1919-1934”, in *L’Habitation à Bon Marché*, jg. 15, n. 2, feb. 1935, p. 34

⁶⁰ See [Victor BOURGEOIS], “Architecture.”, in *7 Arts*, s. I, n. 1, mei 1922 ook als «Architecture», in *La Cité*, vol. III, n. 7, juli 1922, pp. 149-151. The manifest text was published twice anonymously, but was most probably written by Victor Bourgeois.

⁶¹ See Victor BOURGEOIS, “Introduction”, in Henri VAN DE VELDE, *Les formules d’une esthétique moderne*, L’équerre, Brussels, 1923; also as “Quelques notes d’introduction aux formules d’une esthétique moderne d’Henri Van de Velde”, in *La Cité*, vol. III, n. 10, feb. 1923, pp. 209-212.

⁶² Victor BOURGEOIS, “Architecture 1919-1934”, in *L’Habitation à Bon Marché*, jg. 15, n. 2, feb. 1935, p. 28.

⁶³ Victor BOURGEOIS “Architecture d’avenue” in *Bruxelles*, n. 8, maart 1934, p. 18.

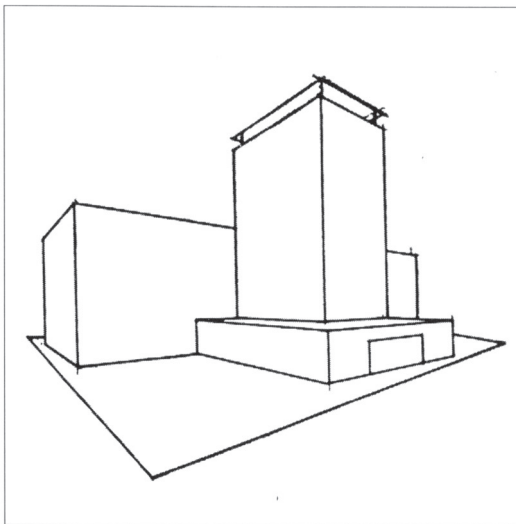


Fig. 1.: First sketch for the National Giro Bank building

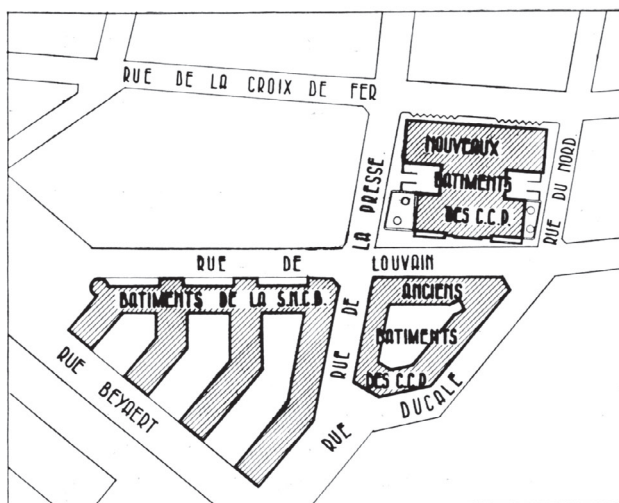


Fig. 2.: Implantation scheme

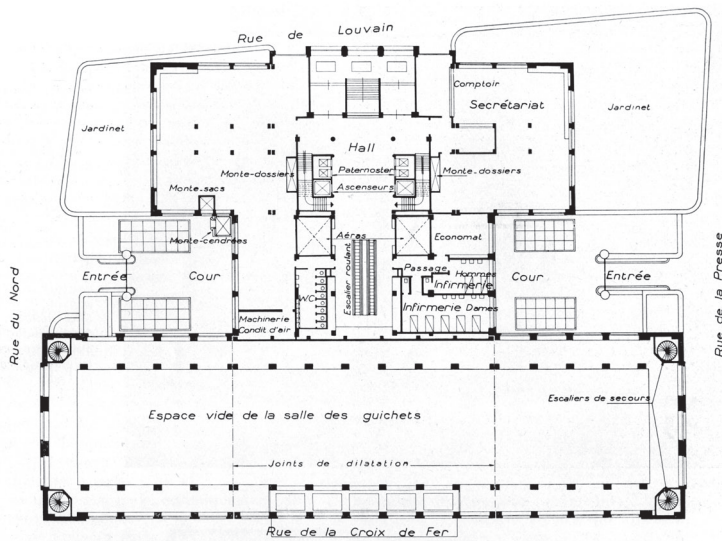


Fig. 3.: Ground floor of the National Giro Bank building

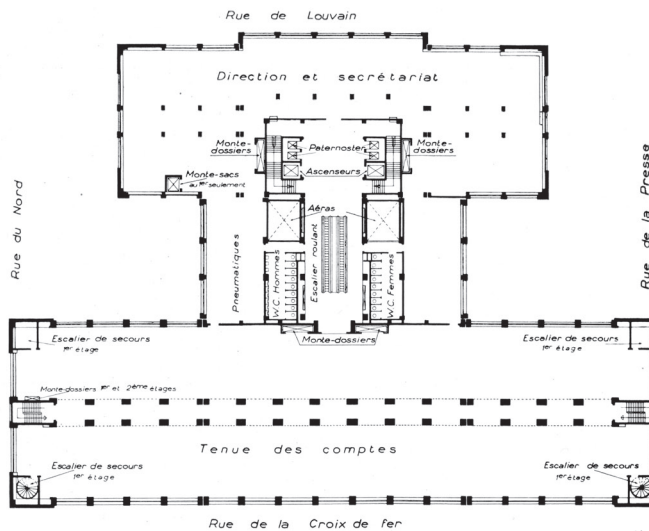


Fig. 4.: Upper floors

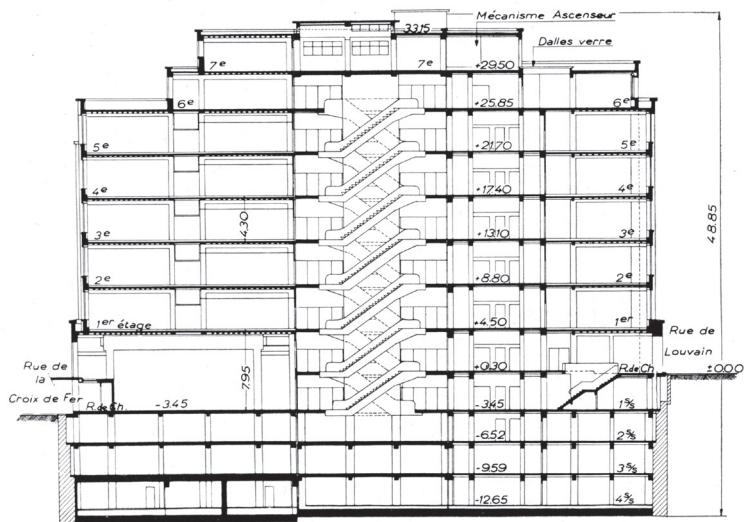


Fig. 5.: Section



Fig. 7.: View from the Rue de Louvain

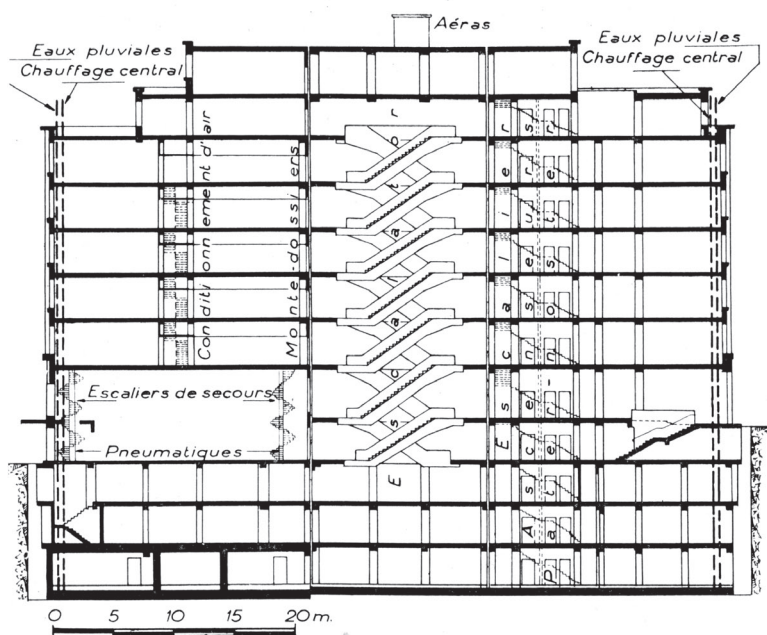


FIG. 12. — COUPE VERTICALE SCHÉMATIQUE montrant les différentes circulations : ascenseurs, escalators, paternosters, escaliers; monte-dossiers; tubes pneumatiques; conditionnement d'air, etc.

Fig. 6.: A bright new modern building.

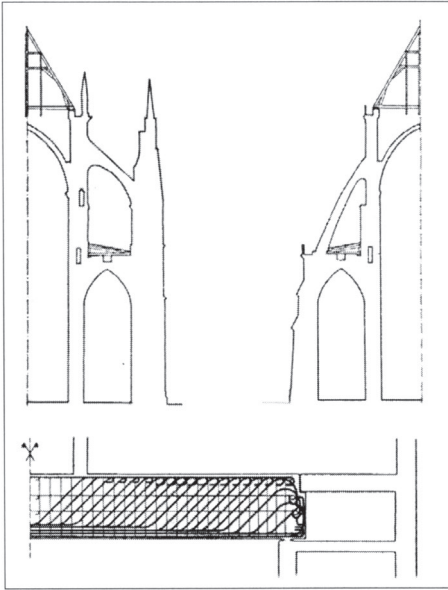


Fig. 8.: Confrontation of a drawing of J. Guadet (a non calculated vs. a calculated gothic church) with the Freyssinet articulation of the beams in the National Giro Bank building. (published by Bourgeois in his 1947 essay *De l'architecture au temps d'Erasmus à l'humanisme social de notre architecture*)

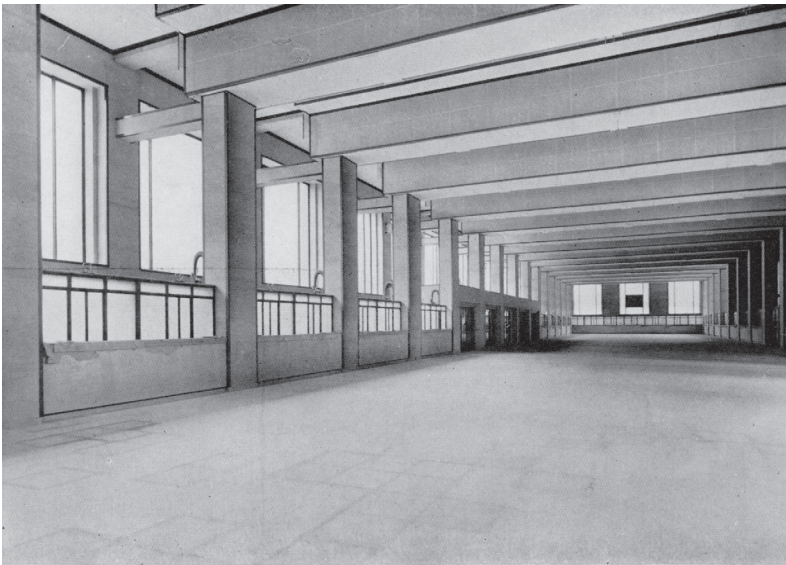


Fig. 9. : The counterhall of the National Giro Bank Building.