

Brussels,
City of Art
and History

63

The Centre for Fine Arts



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ACB Archives of the City of Brussels

Amsab ISG Institute for Social History

Bozar Archives, Archives of the Centre for Fine Arts of Brussels

CIVA Centre International pour la Ville, l'Architecture et le Paysage

KBR Royal Library of Belgium

HM Horta museum

RMFAB Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium

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View of the main entrance, Rue Ravenstein,23. (Maxime Delvaux, 2023 © Bozar)

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The Centre for Fine Arts

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Centre for Fine Arts logo, 1922.
(© Bozar Archives)

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The Horta hall (sculpture hall), 2023. (Maxime Delvaux, 2023 © Bozar)

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A city for the arts within the city

As soon as it opened in 1928, the Palais des Beaux-Arts (known in English as the “Centre for Fine Arts”) became a major cultural venue in Brussels. Designed to accommodate a wide variety of artistic activities, it quickly extended its influence beyond the local level and managed to attain a global reputation for high-quality events, thanks to its dynamic and ambitious programming.

The original idea of building a “temple of the arts” in Brussels became a reality in the years following the First World War. The renowned architect Victor Horta was tasked with bringing this ambitious concept to life by developing an architecture programme that was both spatially and technically complex. A veritable city within the city, the design and construction of the Centre for Fine Arts had to contend with the multiple constraints posed by the construction site.

Though conceived 100 years ago, the building’s ingenuity is still much admired today. Listed since 1977, it recently underwent a painstaking restoration and modernisation to enable it to meet contemporary challenges, such that it now once again superbly encapsulates the vision of its brilliant designer: a harmonious blend of architecture, technical infrastructure and cultural programming.

“As an artistic and intellectual hub, a capital city such as Brussels owes it to itself and to others to have a venue that constitutes, as it were, a heart of beauty. The City and Government are in agreement; the last traces of hostility will fall away, for there are some currents that nothing can withstand. Artists and art lovers will have their palace. In any case, it will be a structure that marks a watershed in the history of architecture.”

Sander Pierron, “Le Palais des Fêtes à Bruxelles. Les Plans de Victor Horta”, *Le Home*, January 1921, p. 46.

A PLAN THAT CAME TO NOTHING

The idea of creating a Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels dates back to the middle of the 19th century. In 1856, the government appointed a commission to explore the possibility of developing a venue capable of accommodating a concert hall and major exhibitions. However, it was not until June 1866 that an agreement was reached between the City of Brussels and the government, which was formally enshrined in a law allocating the city authorities the sum of one million francs to erect “a hall for fine arts exhibitions as well as public celebrations and ceremonies”. During engineering work on the river Senne, the city council envisaged a dual use for the future Bourse buildings, as both a stock exchange and an exhibition space for the fine arts. However, these plans did not come to fruition. Several alternative locations were proposed, including the military training ground on what is now Parc du Cinquantenaire, the botanical garden and the Avenue Louise, but these were also unsuccessful.

A CENTRE FOR FINE ARTS CONVERTED INTO A MUSEUM

In 1871, at the instigation of the Royal Academy of Belgium, a new commission was set up to study the possibility of a building “to be used for fine arts exhibitions and public ceremonies”. From the outset, King Leopold II’s architect Alphonse Balat, a member of the commission, emphasised the need for a programme (1 June 1871 session of the Fine Arts Class of the Royal Academy). In 1872, Balat presented plans for a “Palais des Beaux-Arts” on land facing onto Rue de la Régence. These were approved by the government and construction work began in 1874. On 1 August 1880, the building was inaugurated with a major historical exhibition of Belgian art (1830-1880), in the presence of Leopold II. It went on to host numerous artistic

events – exhibitions, concerts, lectures – until 1887, when the transfer of the Museum of Ancient Art’s collections kept at the Old Court (formerly the Palace of Charles of Lorraine) significantly reduced the space available for temporary exhibitions and other events. The lack of an exhibition space for contemporary artists and an international concert hall was soon being felt once again.

A NEW PLAN THAT CAME TO A HALT

The impetus for a new plan came from the King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth, who were heavily involved in Belgian cultural life. A musician herself, Queen Elisabeth took a keen interest in the visual arts and music. In 1913, they duly summoned the Mayor of Brussels, Adolphe Max, to the castle in Laeken and expressed their wish that Brussels should have a “temple dedicated to music and the

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Queen Elisabeth of Belgium and the Duke d'Ursel, 15 May 1953 at the occasion of 25th anniversary of the Centre for Fine Arts.

(© Bozar Archives)

visual arts, where the various aesthetic manifestations of our national life can flourish in a setting worthy of them". Thrilled at this prospect, Max left the audience "full of enthusiasm and firm resolve" (Adolphe Max, speech at the opening of the Centre for Fine Arts, 4 May 1928).

In July 1914, the city architect, François Malfait (1872-1955), produced an initial design for a plot of land below Rue Royale, on the newly-created Rue Ravenstein. It featured a complex of concert halls and exhibition spaces capable of accommodating different forms of artistic expression that would be built in the same 18th-century style as the buildings of the Royal Quarter. However, the outbreak of the First World War brought Malfait's plans to a halt.

ÉMILE VINCK, A KEY PLAYER

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In 1919, the idea was brought back onto the table by the Minister of Public Works, Édouard Anseele, as part of a commission chaired by senator Émile Vinck. The construction of a new Centre for Fine Arts would foster the cultural renaissance of a nation deeply scarred by years of war, while promoting Belgian art and raising its international profile. This time, it was Victor Horta, called in by Vinck as an expert, who was entrusted with the

design of the future "house of art", winning out over the design by civic buildings architect Georges Hano. In November 1919, the City of Brussels ceded to the State, free of charge, a plot of land located between Rue Royale, Rue Ravenstein, Rue Terarken and Rue de la Bibliothèque (now Rue Baron Horta). In June 1920, the government applied to Parliament for a loan of 9 million francs (equivalent to around €13 million today) for the structural work. Around the same time, Horta's initial plans were presented to the city council. The Senate refused to grant the full amount of the loan requested, reducing it to 100,000 francs. While the project was theoretically approved, the expense was considered excessive in the context of post-war reconstruction. After being rejected by the Senate, the project was once again put on hold for several months. In the end, the solution came from senator Émile Vinck, who suggested setting up a private company to build and operate the venue, based on a model already used in France. The company would borrow the capital necessary to erect and fit out the building, while the interest and amortisation of the loan would be guaranteed by the state. On 4 April 1922, the non-profit organisation Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles was formed and work could finally begin.



Émile Vinck, n.d.
(Studio Stone © Amsab-ISC)

ÉMILE VINCK 1870-1950

Émile Vinck studied law at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). After graduating, he joined the Belgian Labour Party (POB) in 1893, at the request of Émile Vandervelde. Vinck was a municipal councillor in Ixelles from 1903 and was elected senator in 1912. As a politician, Vinck twice played a crucial role in the creation of the Centre for Fine Arts: firstly as chairman of the commission that appointed Horta as architect, and secondly as the initiator and director of the non-profit organisation which, despite the Senate's refusal to approve the full funding, went ahead with the construction of this cultural facility using the public funds available. It should be noted that Vinck knew Horta well. The POB, of which he was a member, had commissioned Horta to design the Maison du Peuple (House of the People) in 1895, and between 1903 and 1906, Vinck had his own house built by the architect in Rue Washington, Ixelles. They were both also members of the Masonic lodge Les Amis Philanthropes (The Philanthropic Friends). At the time the Centre for Fine Arts was being built, Vinck was president of the Société Nationale des Habitations à Bon Marché (National Society for Affordable Housing), founded in 1919. In that capacity, he was doubtless responsible for organising the 3rd International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) at the Centre for Fine Arts in November 1930.

PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BRUXELLES ASBL

Initially conceived as a cooperative, the private company set up to build and manage the Brussels Centre for Fine Arts was eventually incorporated as a non-profit organisation (*association sans but lucratif*, or asbl).

Émile Vinck was supported in this process by the jurist and senator Alexandre Braun. To set up the company, the two men turned to the liberal mayor of Brussels, Adolphe Max, and Henry Le Bœuf, a music lover whose experience in organising concerts, including the “Concerts populaires de musique classique”, was recognised and appreciated. They were joined by the Belgian State in the person of Paul Rigaux, Director General at the Ministry of Finance, and the Province of Brabant represented by Ernest Richard, a lawyer and permanent member of parliament. The remaining board members were Henri Wauters, appointed by Science and Arts Minister Jules Destrée to represent the Department of Fine Arts, and three

political figures involved in cultural life: Duke Robert d’Ursel, Paul Hymans and Max Hallet.

The incorporation of the non-profit organisation, followed by the first meeting of the Board of Directors and a general meeting, took place on 4 April 1922 at Brussels Town Hall, in the office of Adolphe Max. At that meeting, the decision was taken to form a standing committee consisting of Max (chairman), Braun (deputy chairman), Le Bœuf and Vinck.

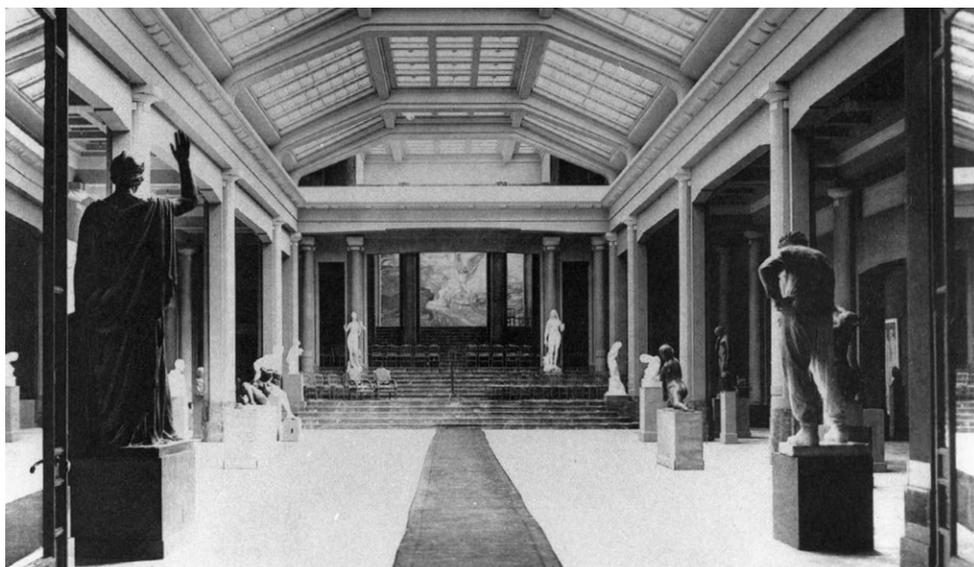
FINANCING THE BUILD

Between 1923 and 1933, four tranches of a loan guaranteed by the state were issued for a total of 43,830,000 francs, in order to finance the work. Every six months, the state, as guarantor, paid the non-profit organisation the amount needed to meet the interest on the loan. The following day, the organisation itself returned this sum to the state as bondholder. It was therefore the state that actually financed the construction.

What is more, on several occasions Henry Le Bœuf advanced funds to the organisation to prevent work coming to a halt and was reimbursed using money from the loans.

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The sculpture hall in 1928 (© Bozar Archives)



VICTOR HORTA 1861-1947



Victor Horta, 1928.
(© HM)

A fervent disciple of Viollet-le-Duc and leading figure in European Art Nouveau, Victor Horta opened up new avenues in 20th-century architecture: on the one hand, by breaking with the traditional plan of the private home; on the other hand, by giving architectural expression to new requirements prompted by social and cultural changes; and finally, by using iron and glass to create subtle design formulas.

Three elements are fundamental to Horta's architecture: honesty in the use of materials, conceptual innovation expressed in the invention of open plan designs, and a break with the academic tradition and neo-styles of the 19th century.

Four houses designed by him in the Art Nouveau style are now on UNESCO's World Heritage List (Hôtel Tassel, Hôtel Solvay, Hôtel van Eetvelde and Horta's own house and studio).

After a period spent in the United States (1916-1919), his architecture became more austere and classical, returning to a formal style characterised by columns, entablatures and symmetrical composition. The principal works from this final period were the Belgian Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris in 1925 and the Brussels Centre for Fine Arts (1922-1928). The latter, which is remarkably well laid out, heralded the cultural centre format that was to become widespread after the Second World War.

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HENRY LE BŒUF 1874-1935



Theo Van Rysselberghe,
portrait of Henry Le Bœuf,
1923. (© Bozar coll.)

Henry Le Bœuf studied law at Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and enrolled at the bar, while also working as a secretary for the Empain group, where he learned about the business world. While a student, he penned several literary and theatrical reviews for publications such as the socialist magazine *Revue Rouge* and the academic journal *Revue Universitaire*.

He married Louise Thys in 1900 and soon became involved in the business activities of his father-in-law, Albert Thys, the founder of a major financial and industrial group who took part in the development of the Congo Basin alongside King Leopold II. Le Bœuf joined Banque d'Outremer, a bank founded by his father-in-law, in 1911, and became a director in several colonial companies including Compagnie Belge Maritime du Congo. In 1928, when Banque d'Outremer was taken over by Société Générale de Belgique, he was appointed director of the latter.

But Le Bœuf's main passion was music. He played the piano, was a regular concert-goer and, under the pseudonym Henry Lesbroussart, published musical reviews in magazines including *L'Art Moderne*, *L'Indépendance belge* and *Le Flambeau*.

In 1919, he took over as organiser of the «Concerts populaires de Bruxelles», which had been suspended during World War One. Founded in 1865, they were part of the musical life of the capital and, since 1871, had been held at the Théâtre de la Monnaie, usually on Sunday afternoons. He helped devise the programmes, placing an emphasis on French and contemporary music. At the same time, Le Bœuf established the «Concerts Régence» for a small orchestra at the Conservatoire, set up a choir called the «Chorale César Franck» and put on reduced-price concerts for schools. When the need for a large concert hall and exhibition space began to be discussed again, Le Bœuf was the obvious person to turn to in connection with the project. A founding member of the non-profit organisation, he became its managing director in 1924 and retained that role until his death in 1935.

SITE-RELATED CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

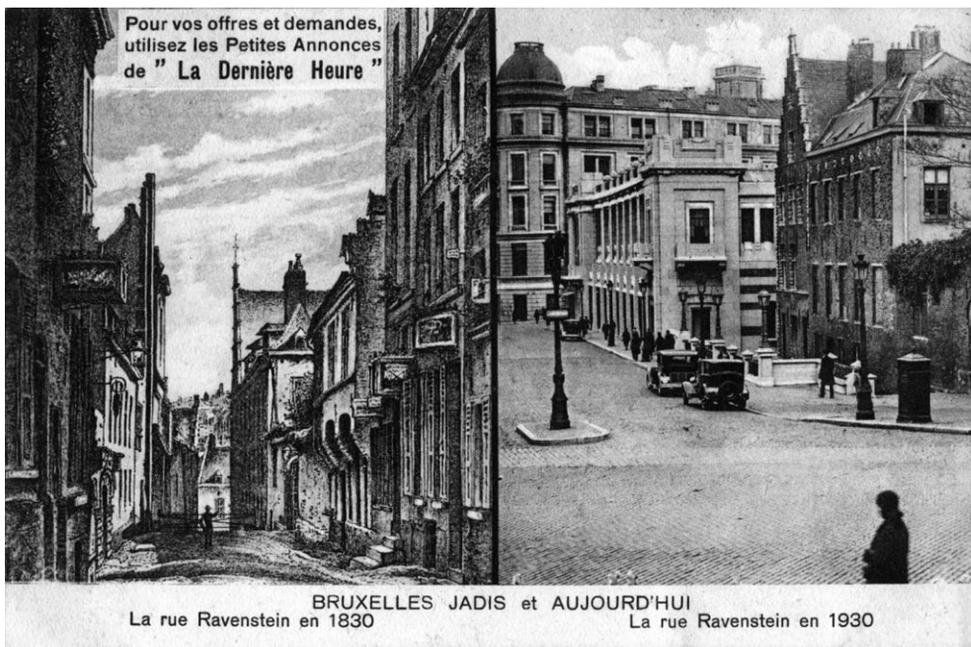
Victor Horta produced some five versions of the design between October 1919 and August 1922, when the planning application was submitted. The 8,000-m² plot was irregularly shaped but its most striking characteristic was the steep incline between Rue Royale and the much lower Rue Terarken. The new building was intended to face onto Rue Ravenstein. The alignment of this street had been altered between 1911 and 1913 and it had been built on a concrete structure, meaning that the construction site was situated below the new, elevated Rue Ravenstein.

But it was not only the height difference that was problematic: the planning rules applicable on the site and the specific requirements of the city

council placed major constraints on the project and its architectural development. On the one hand, an easement ensuring a view from the Royal Palace to the spire of the Town Hall in the Lower Town ruled out any construction beyond the 18th-century garden wall of the Hôtel Errera in Rue Royale. On the other hand, the City of Brussels had required the presence of shops along Rue Ravenstein. The aim of this stipulation was to revitalise a somewhat deserted area and to provide the council with rental income as financial compensation for making this prestigious site available.

The plot as it was before 1922. Visible to the right of the Hôtel Ravenstein is are the public steps linking the level of Rue Ravenstein to Rue des Sols below. (© Bozar Archives)





Rue Ravenstein in 1830 and 1930. Postcard. (private coll.)

A COMPLEX PROGRAMME

The first preserved plans dating from 1 December 1919 were drawn up for the official project owner, the Ministry of Public Works, with which Horta had signed a contract on 20 November 1919.

The programme for the Centre for Fine Arts was not detailed in this contract. It was proposed by Horta himself on 26 October 1919 and included a concert hall (1,200 m²) and rooms for sculptures (1,900 m²), painting exhibitions (1,892 m²) and decorative arts (2,000 m²). Making maximum use of the height differences between the surrounding streets, the design featured no fewer than six entrances: in Rue Terarken, Rue de la Bibliothèque (later renamed after the architect), on the square containing the statue of General Belliard, Rue Villa Hermosa, Rue Ravenstein and Rue Royale. From the outset, the idea was to bring together multiple

organisations within the building, each of which would have its own entrance and be responsible for programming events in its respective discipline.

The main entrances were located in Rue Ravenstein and Rue Royale and were both to feature a monumental doorway with four Doric columns. Inside the building, they were connected by a passage through the exhibition circuits and along the concert hall. Interestingly, Horta's initial plans also included a circuit route for architectural exhibitions. The monumental entrance on the Rue Ravenstein side took up around one third of the total width of the façade, which conflicted with the city council's requirement to provide as many commercial premises as possible along this street. No doubt because the council rejected

these plans, Horta's February 1920 design featured two separate, smaller entrances, one in Rue de la Bibliothèque for the other exhibition circuits, and the other in Rue Ravenstein for the concert hall.

This third version was also the first one to include the bipolar structure of the building as actually built. Whereas in the initial sets of plans, the concert hall was located in the centre of the plot and flanked on either side by two large exhibition rooms for the decorative arts and sculpture, the concert hall and sculpture hall were now separated by a large entrance hall or foyer. In the first two designs, the concert hall had a rectangular shape and was flanked by monumental columns.

From the third design onwards, these columns were transferred to a cross-shaped sculpture hall, with a music room and a conference room underneath. As in the previous plans, the majority of exhibition spaces were located on the west side of the plot, where they were built against the remains of the 12th-century city rampart. The latter coincides with the boundary of the plot and forms the dividing wall with the Hôtel Errera.

While he did away with the monumental entrance in Rue Ravenstein, Horta was determined to retain the one on Place des Palais, even though the City of Brussels had formally notified him in February 1920 that the view from the Royal Palace over the Lower Town had been protected since 1903.

COMMERCIAL PREMISES

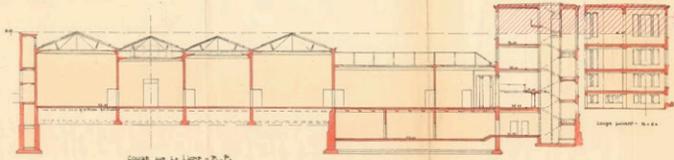
Initially, the different commercial premises were not clearly demarcated, but the city council soon wrote to Henry Le Bœuf, managing director of the non-profit organisation, asking for work to be carried out to «separate the individual premises by means of partitions», as the shops could only be rented separately.

The prospective tenants ranged from a luxury stove dealer and a stockbroker to a seller of art medals and a florist. The Centre for Fine Arts kept two spaces for itself, either side of the main entrance, to serve as additional entrances.

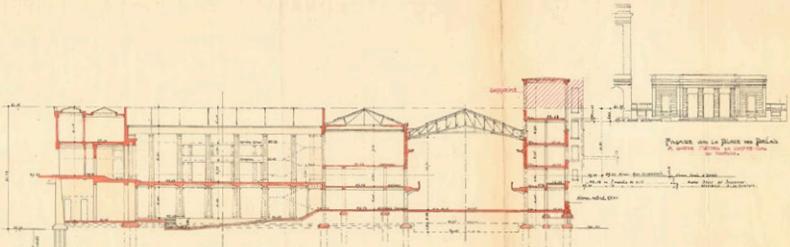


Shops, rue Ravenstein.
(© Bozar Archives)

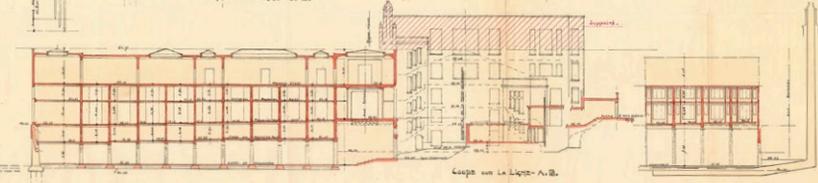
PALAIS - DES - BEAUX-ARTS -



Étage supérieur à la suite de la ligne de l'escalier en construction, l'escalier est en construction.



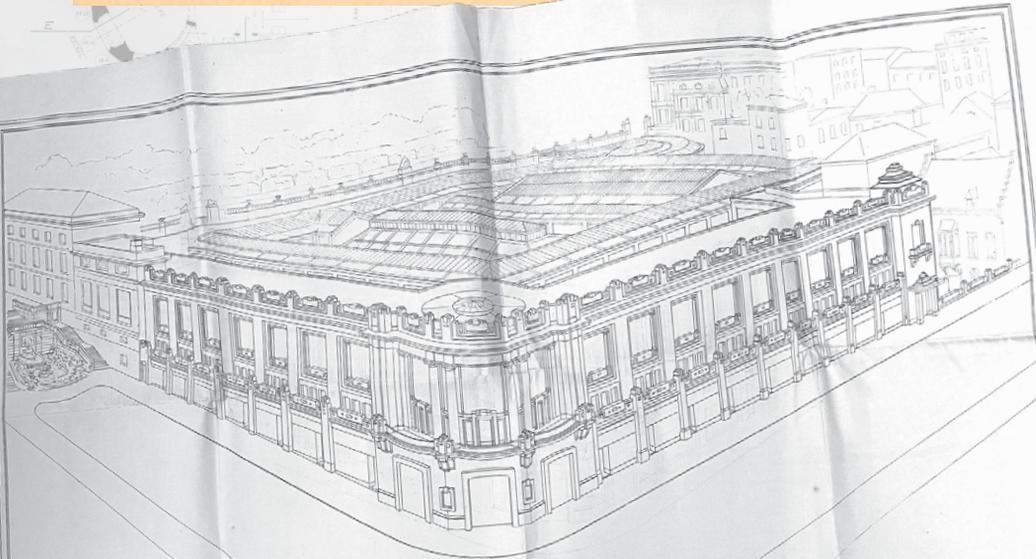
Projet sur la ligne du Palais A. B. C. D. E. F. G. H. I. J. K. L. M. N. O. P. Q. R. S. T. U. V. W. X. Y. Z.



Cour Impériale et Escalier



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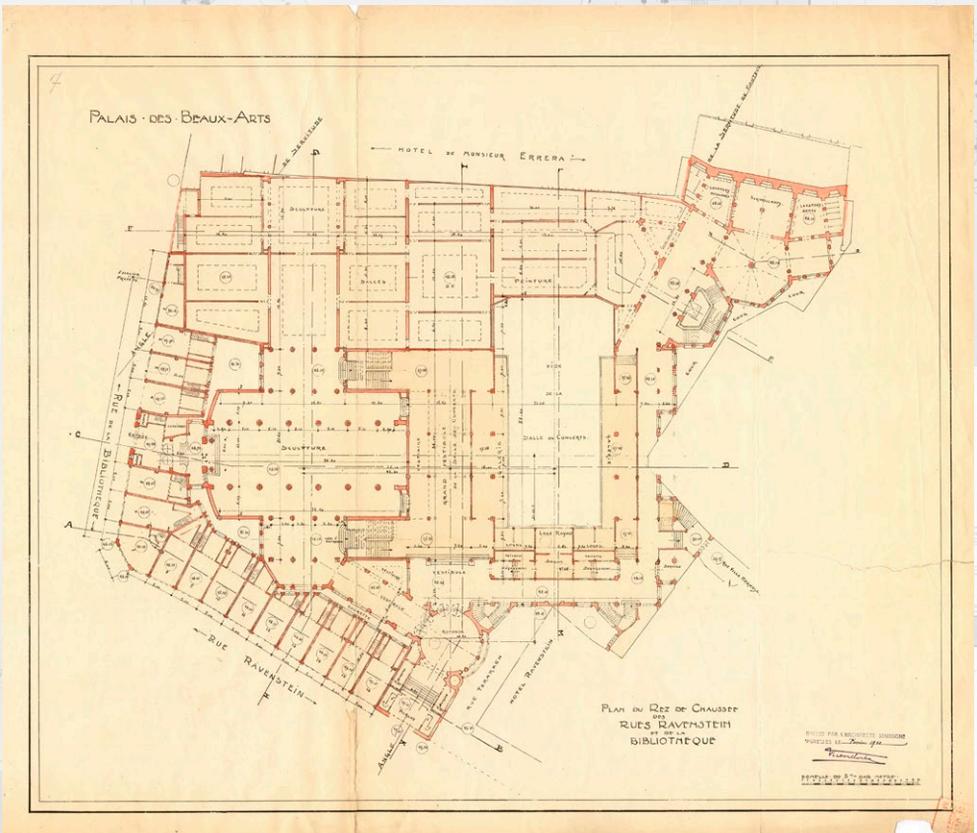


PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BRUXELLES -

HORTA'S DESIGNS

Between the signing of the contract in November 1919 and the submission of the planning application in November 1922, Victor Horta produced five preliminary designs. The plan and sections dated February 1920 clearly show the complexity, both spatially and technically, including with regard to the programme, which took shape simultaneously. Victor Horta, plans and sections for the Centre for Fine Arts.

(plans in black and white © HM, the plan and sections in colour © ACB, perspective drawing © Bozar Archives)



The final design

It was not until 1922 that the plans – in their fourth version and commissioned this time by the non-profit organisation headed by Henry Le Bœuf – assumed their final form. They featured two major exhibition circuits unfurling around two huge interior spaces: the concert hall and the sculpture hall. Initially, Horta focused most attention on the latter space, making the monumental entrances originally planned for the façades into an internal feature. Like a covered public space, it formed part of a passage through the building connecting the Rue Ravenstein entrance to those in Rue Royale and Place des Palais. In the final plans, the separate entrances for the concert hall and exhibition circuits were merged in a rotunda at the corner of the building. This contrasted with the small scale of the commercial premises along the façade,

giving the entrance a certain grandeur. The façade itself was made of blue limestone and was rather homely in scale, while the corner rotunda echoed the rounded corner of the Société Générale de Belgique building. In the same vein, the façade in Rue des Sols picked up that of the Hôtel Ravenstein, in terms of material and shape, with red bricks interrupted on each side of the street by a bow window. In rue de la Bibliothèque, the architect played a clever game by continuing the blue limestone façade as the base of a building that blended perfectly with the neoclassical architecture adjoining Parc de Bruxelles.

Horta used the cylindrical entrance system to bring together the three different axes: those of the commercial premises behind the "detached"

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façades of Rue Ravenstein and Rue Baron Horta, and the internal circulation axis leading from the entrance hall through the sculpture hall to the concert hall. Where the entrance to the concert hall had been, there was a small separate entrance for the king, giving access via the Royal Salon to the royal box located in front of the concert hall stage.

In the various versions of these plans, which culminated in the submission of the planning application and the issuing of the tender documents in October 1922, a small auditorium for recitals was also included on the left, next to the music room beneath the sculpture hall. The large concert hall then evolved, version by version, into a more complex space in the shape of a Latin cross.

For the interior finishes, Horta chose ochre and gold for the paintwork. These colours have now almost entirely disappeared from the building but were in keeping with the different types of flooring he planned: types of marble in the sculpture

hall, the Royal Salon and the passageway to the royal box; herringbone parquet flooring in the exhibition rooms; and a combination of terrazzo and imitation-marble rubber for the inclined corridors into and out of the concert hall.

TENSIONS BETWEEN HORTA AND LE BŒUF

Horta records in his memoirs that the initial plan was to use two different structural systems to build the Centre for Fine Arts: reinforced concrete for the sculpture hall and a steel structure for the concert hall. However, at the insistence of the contractor Armand Blaton, the entire building ended up being constructed of reinforced concrete. Horta took advantage of this radical change to completely overhaul the concert hall during 1923, even though construction had already begun. This new version of the concert hall also addressed the concerns of Henry Le Bœuf, who had been carefully monitoring its design since 1921 and had insisted on making a comparative study of Europe's principal concert halls, their shapes and acoustics. As Horta was already familiar with these venues and refused to undertake further research trips, the banker had one of his assistants draw up detailed reports, which were then sent to Horta. In the end, the architect agreed to seek the opinion of the Paris acoustician Gustave Lyon, who, without any real personal input, gave his approval to the final plans in May 1925.

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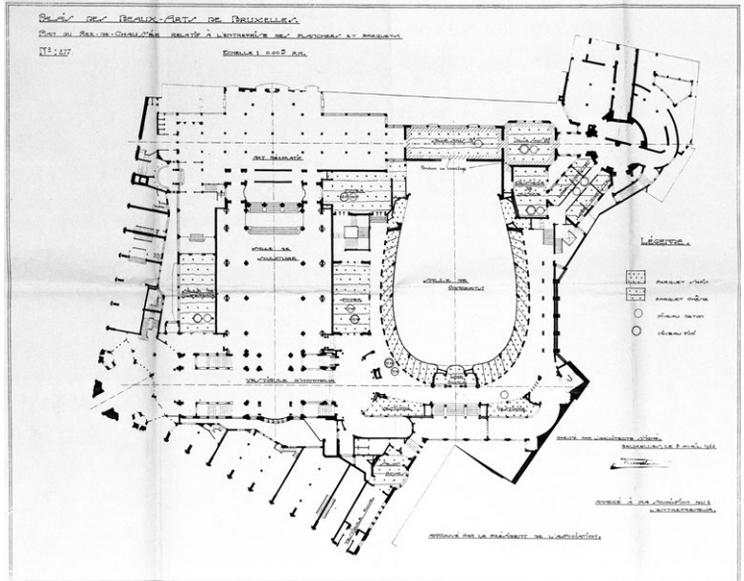


- A The stairs to the Royal Salon. (© Bozar Archives)
- B The boardroom but also fumoir of the big concert hall c. 1930. (© Bozar Archives)
- C The façade on the Rue Baron Horta, in keeping with the neoclassical architecture of the area around Parc de Bruxelles, 2023. (Maxime Delvaux, 2023 © Bozar)

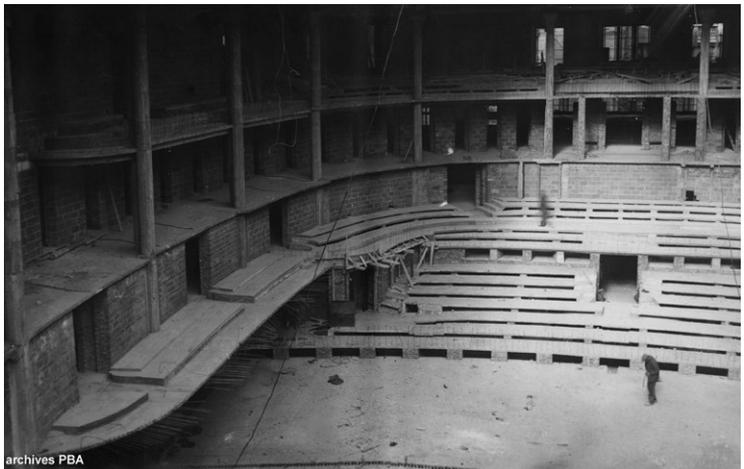
The use of reinforced concrete enabled Horta to design a highly sculptural hall in the shape of a horseshoe which, in his own words, fulfilled two contradictory but fundamental requirements: on the one hand, the economic consideration whereby large concert halls only became financially viable with 2,250 or more seats; on the

other, the desire of the violinist, composer and conductor Eugène Ysaÿe to feel surrounded by the audience during performances. This intimacy between the audience and the stage, despite the hall's large proportions, was made possible by the oval shape of the final plan and cross section.

Victor Horta,
Ground floor plan showing
the concert hall in its final
form, 8 April 1926.
(© HM)



The concert hall
under construction.
15 August 1927.
(© HM)



CONSTRUCTION

In late October 1919, in a note submitted with his initial plans, Victor Horta reassured the commission chaired by Émile Vinck that the building “would be completed by 31 May 1920, except for the two floors devoted to the decorative arts, the finishing touches to the concert hall and the two gardens, which are to be completed before 1 July”. Even taking into account the delays caused by the Belgian Senate’s refusal to approve funding in early 1920, this schedule seems extremely optimistic. In the end, no less than seven years elapsed between the granting of the planning permission and the final touches being put to the concert hall, marking the completion of the building.

The main reason for the long build time was the complexity of the works due to the steeply sloping site. Before construction of the foundations could begin, the builders had to clear away countless old foundations as well as working out how to shore up the ground and neighbouring buildings such as the Hôtel Errera by means of temporary palisades. Another major headache was the discharge of rainwater and sewage onto the site, from the Parc de Bruxelles and from neighbouring buildings respectively. On top of this, there was the decision to build the Centre mainly with exposed reinforced concrete, which meant constructing a formwork of unprecedented complexity in which the smallest details had to be created “in negative”. Furthermore, Horta had thought he would save time by making the whole of the concert hall out of steel, prefabricated in the factory, but at Armand Blaton’s suggestion, it was decided to use reinforced concrete for the entire building. Last but not least, during the years of construction, the non-profit organisation faced financial problems due to a lack of subscriptions and, more particularly, the depreciation of the Belgian franc.

VICTOR HORTA'S FEES

The contract concluded in November 1919 between Victor Horta and the Minister of Public Works capped Horta’s fees at 5% of all expenses incurred for the construction of the building, i.e. 750,000 francs out of a total of 15 million francs for the planned works. Horta was responsible for drawing up the plans and for artistic direction, while the technical and administrative management of the works was entrusted to the Brabant Civic Buildings Department.

After the Senate refused in 1920 to approve the necessary funds for the building’s construction and the project was taken over by the newly established non-profit organisation (asbl) Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, Horta signed a new contract capping his fees at 750,000 francs. Of that amount, 50,000 francs would furthermore be returned to the non-profit organisation for the decoration of the building. In addition, unlike in the original contract, Horta agreed to take on the technical and administrative management of the works.

In November 1927, with the construction costs now estimated at 25 million francs, a decision was taken by the board of directors of the non-profit organisation to raise the architect’s fees to 1,000,000 francs.

In February 1930, Horta wrote to the board’s chairman, Adolphe Max, arguing that the depreciation of the franc since the signing of the contract and the increase in the total cost of the works meant that his fees were insufficient: “Work on the Centre has absorbed my time for 10 years, given the exceptional challenges involved. The rate of 5% is 3% lower than that recognised by the Société Centrale d’Architecture for work of this kind.” Accordingly, the fees were increased to 1.25 million francs.

In July 1933 they went up again to 1.5 million francs, although Horta was still not happy. In 1934, Henry Le Boëuf told a board meeting that the architect had created a masterpiece and was in financial difficulties because he had neglected his other clients for a decade in order to complete the building. He therefore proposed granting Horta an exceptional additional fee of 100,000 francs.

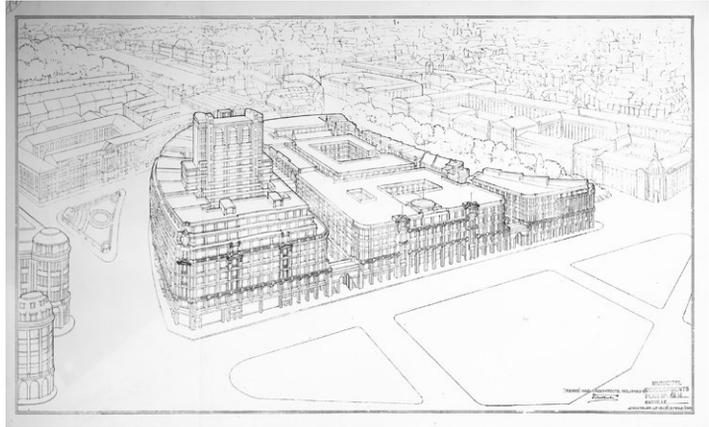


UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The work to construct the Centre for Fine Arts took a total of seven years, from the granting of planning permission in 1922 to completion of the concert hall in 1929.
(© HM)



Victor Horta,
Municipal Development plans,
perspective drawing, 1928.
(© CIVA Collections, Brussels)



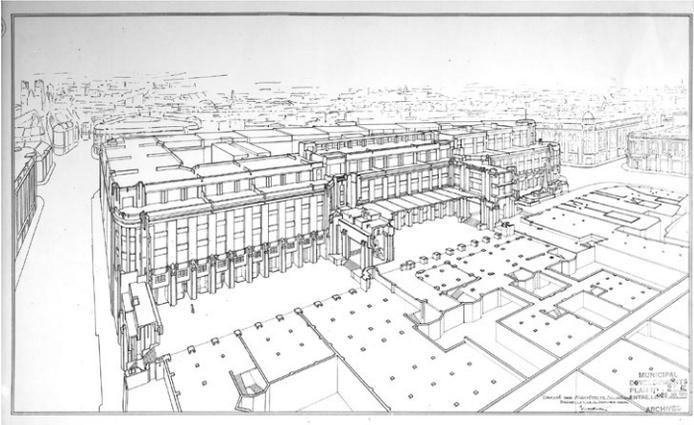
HORTA'S URBAN VISION: MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT

18 The rhythm of the Centre's façades was to find its continuation in a project on the other side of Rue Ravenstein, on which Victor Horta was working with the same contractor but which in the end was never completed: a complex with a 17-storey tower, comprising offices, commercial spaces, apartments and even a stock exchange built on the half-block between Rue Ravenstein and Cantersteen. It was a project by the London-based investment company *Municipal Development Ltd*, which wanted to invest in the Belgian capital by developing this area close to the future Central Station. For Horta, who had already been appointed to design the station, the simultaneity of these projects was an opportunity to test his urban planning vision for this specific site. To create a link between the Upper and Lower Town, he aligned the thoroughfares and sightlines of this part of Brussels with the anchor points from the medieval city, such as the Town Hall tower, while continuing the classical urban principles of the 18th-century royal district, both externally and internally. Within the block, he designed a passageway that would allow people to walk down in an almost uninterrupted line from Parc de Bruxelles to the Galeries

Saint-Hubert in the city centre. The passage through the exhibition rooms of the Centre of Fine Arts was therefore to be carried through into a shopping arcade in the Municipal Development complex. This pedestrian space would have opened out into the Central Station, as Galerie Ravenstein does today. Another unrealised Horta project would have created a final link through to the shopping arcades in the Lower Town. For Horta, there was no distinction between architecture and urban planning in these projects. Indeed, he actually used the term "urban planning architecture". His architectural projects were the material out of which the city was made.

THE MODERNITY OF HORTA'S DESIGN

After the First World War, Horta's architecture tended towards Art Deco. The first manifestation of this style in his oeuvre was the Belgian Pavilion that he designed for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris in 1925. The abstract-geometric ornamentation seems to reference the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, with whom he may have been in contact in the United States, but remarkably enough, it is also associated with the architecture of Minoan



Victor Horta, *Municipal Development plans, section with pedestrian passageway*, 1928.
 (© CIVA Collections, Brussels)

palaces and Mayan temples.

We find this same approach to ornamentation in the façades of the Centre for Fine Arts, where it features as a regular rhythm flanked by the monumental Doric columns of the entrance rotunda. Though Horta was criticised for this by modernist architects, the undeniable modernity of the design can be seen in the programming and use of materials.

The design is characterised by a complex amalgam of programmes: on the one hand, a performing arts centre with a large concert hall, a chamber music hall and a recital hall; on the other hand, an art centre with five different rooms or circuits for each art form or medium: a hall for monumental sculpture, two large exhibition circuits for painting and sculpture, a smaller circuit for photography and a large exhibition hall for the decorative arts. In addition, there were office spaces, catering areas (tavern, restaurant, etc.), reception spaces and commercial premises. This set-up, with two equal clusters for music and exhibitions, was completely unique in the first part of the 20th century, even internationally. In a way, it was reminiscent of the cultural centres and clubs being built in the Soviet Union in the same period. However, the Centre for Fine Arts

had no overt revolutionary dimension as an incubator of a new society. Rather, it can be seen as a utopian space for bourgeois society, where different art forms could come together to contemplate and co-create a changing world. What is more, the fusion of art and commerce, as well as being reflected in the architectural programme, also fundamentally shaped the operation of the arts venue from the outset.

Horta himself chose concrete as the material for the Centre's load-bearing structure. In the 1920s, it was still somewhat unusual to construct large buildings entirely out of reinforced concrete. Whereas at the start of the century, his work was



Victor Horta, *Belgian Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, 1925*.
 Cover of *La Belgique, revue de la participation belge*, 1925, detail.
 (© CIVA Collections, Brussels)

based largely on steel and forged iron, in the Centre for Fine Arts he wanted to explore the expressive possibilities of reinforced concrete in all its simplicity. Horta's initial intention was to leave the concrete exposed. Whereas almost all modernist architects of the 1920s used plaster to create pure, abstract building volumes, thus concealing the concrete and supporting ele-

ments, Horta, as in his Art Nouveau projects, sought honesty in the use of materials. However, due to the lower-quality appearance of concrete, he decided to apply a thin coat of white plaster to smooth out the irregularities, which also had the effect of concealing the characteristic grey-ness of the concrete.

HORTA AND THE MODERNISTS

Horta was lambasted in the magazine *7 Arts*, a leading platform for modernist art criticism. Twenty years after the invention of Art Nouveau, Belgium's best-known architect was clearly no longer considered avant-garde.

Horta's break with the architectural avant-garde of the 1920s was complete, owing to his presumed role as chairman of the jury for the 1927 League of Nations competition, which disqualified Le Corbusier's entry and ended up selecting an extremely traditional

winning design. International opposition to this architectural competition led to the creation of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (International Congresses of Modern Architecture) in 1928, the third meeting of which was held in Brussels in 1930 in the recently completed Centre for Fine Arts. Everyone who was anyone on the Belgian and international architectural scene attended the gathering. Everyone, that is, except Victor Horta.



Third edition of the Congrès international d'architecture moderne (CIAM), Brussels 1930. (© CIVA Collections, Brussels)

PALAIŖ DES BEAUX ARTS A BRUXELLE S. L.
PLAN DU REZ-DE-CHAUSSEE.

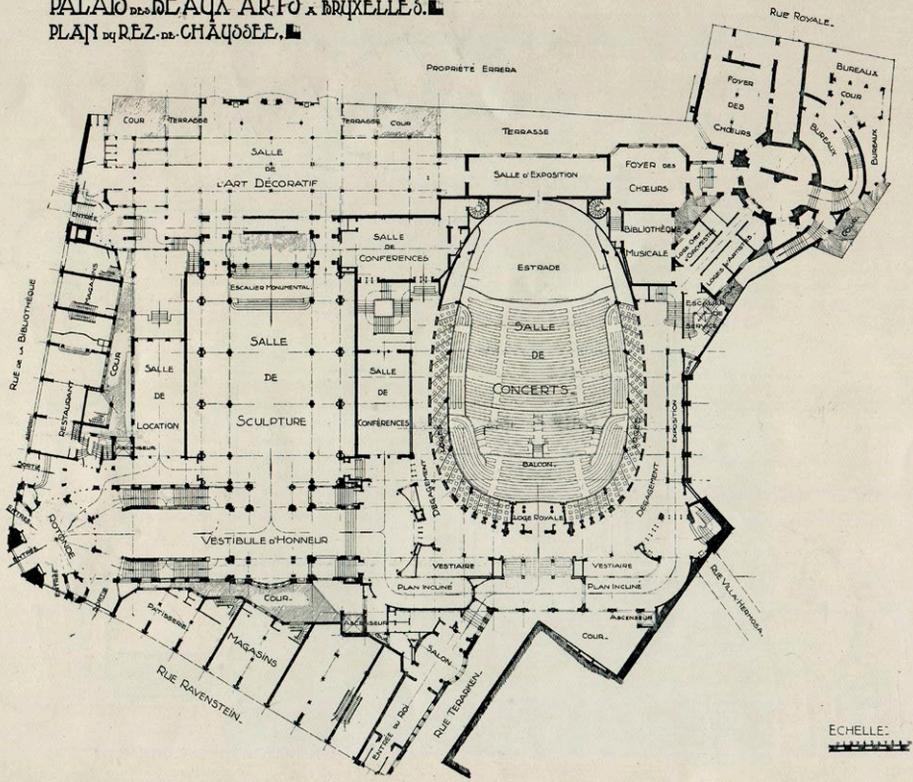


Fig. 22. — Plan du rez-de-chaussée supérieur (rue Ravenstein).

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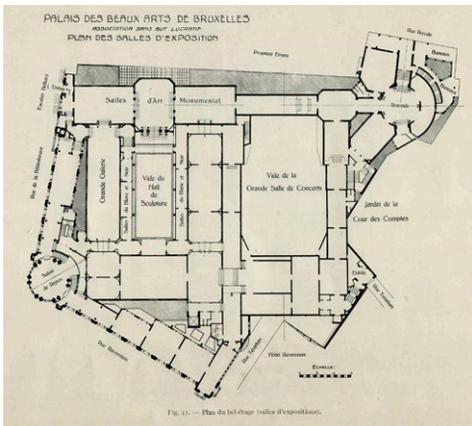


Fig. 21. — Plan de baléage (salles d'exposition).

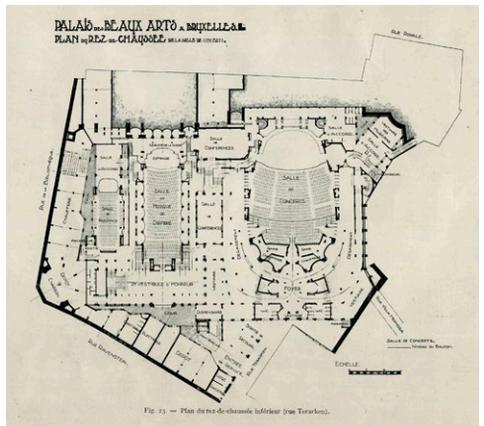


Fig. 23. — Plan de rez-de-chaussée inférieur (rue Terarken).

Victor Horta, Final plans of the three levels, in *Cahiers de Belgique*, special issue dedicated to the Centre for Fine Arts, May 1928.



Inauguration of the exhibition rooms in the presence of King Albert I and Princess Marie-José, 4 May 1928. (© Bozar Archives)

The Centre opens its doors

The Centre for Fine Arts was not entirely finished when the exhibition rooms were inaugurated on 4 May 1928, in the presence of the royal family and numerous VIPs. In his speech, King Albert I empha-

sised the importance of this new cultural venue: "In Belgium's recovery [after World War One], it is vital that intellectual and aesthetic concerns are not neglected. We can now be reassured in this regard."

To mark this grand opening, several exhibitions of Belgian, French, Russian and Swiss works were on display.

Two weeks later, on 18 May, Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes inaugurated the sculpture hall with a performance of *La Sylphide*.

PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BRUXELLES

VENDREDI 18 et LUNDI 21 MAI 1928

BALLETS RUSSES

DE

SERGE DE DIAGHILEW

Location : Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, 10, rue Royale
et à la Maison Lauweryns, 36, rue du Treurenberg, Tél. 297.82

Announcement of the performances of the Ballets Russes, on 18 and 21 May 1928, in Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, 25ième anniversaire, 1928-1953.

"From a national perspective, the very fact that it [the Centre for Fine Arts] exists at last shows our artists that the country honours them, supports them, needs them and holds them in the highest regard. From an international perspective, the new centre will allow different peoples to meet and understand each other, through the surest and clearest of international languages: artistic expression."

Henry Le Bœuf, in a special issue of *Cahiers de Belgique* dedicated to the Centre for Fine Arts, June 1928



Émile Fabry, Poster for the inauguration of the exhibition rooms at the Centre for Fine Arts in 1928. (© Bozar Archives)

THE FIRST SEASON'S PROGRAMME

From the outset, the board of directors had 40 exhibition rooms to manage, representing 1,225 metres of picture rail. Under the centre's programme manager Charles Leirens, a number of major retrospectives were held during the 1928-29 season, with featured artists including Antoine Bourdelle (November 1928 to January 1929), James Ensor (19 January to 17 February 1929) and Gustave Van de Woestyne (2 to 24 March 1929). Exhibition catalogues were produced and visitors were even able to purchase the works on show! From 1930 onwards, architectural exhibitions were also

staged. The 3rd International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) was accompanied by a series of exhibitions, including a full-size CUBEX kitchen designed by L.H. De Koninck. The following season featured a monographic exhibition dedicated to the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

On 18 November 1928, the 627-seater chamber music hall was inaugurated by the Pro Arte Quartet. It was soon hosting a top-quality line-up, including recitals by renowned pianists such as Arthur Rubinstein and Ricardo Viñes, jazz concerts and even dance performances.

The next day, 19 November, the Studio opened its doors in the small recital hall adjoining the chamber music hall, which was therefore

immediately transformed into a screening room. The programme included a film about Parisian life called *Paris 20 Years Ago*, some Max Fleischer cartoons, and *Wolf's Clothing*, a cinematic dream by the American director Roy Del Ruth. The press welcomed the Studio's opening: "Nice auditorium. Comfortable



View of the exhibition rooms, Gustave Van de Woestyne retrospective, March 1929. (G.Mansy, © Bozar Archives)

seats. Excellent films.” (*La Nation Belge*, 23 November 1928)

Finally, on 10 October 1929, it was the turn of the large concert hall – designed for symphony concerts, organ concerts and major recitals – to host its inaugural concert in the presence of the royal family. On the programme were works by César Franck and Peter Benoit.

Edgard Tytgat, Poster for the folk and primitive art exhibition, 1929.
(© KBR)

Banquet in honour of James Ensor at the opening of his exhibition in 1929.
(© Bozar Archives)

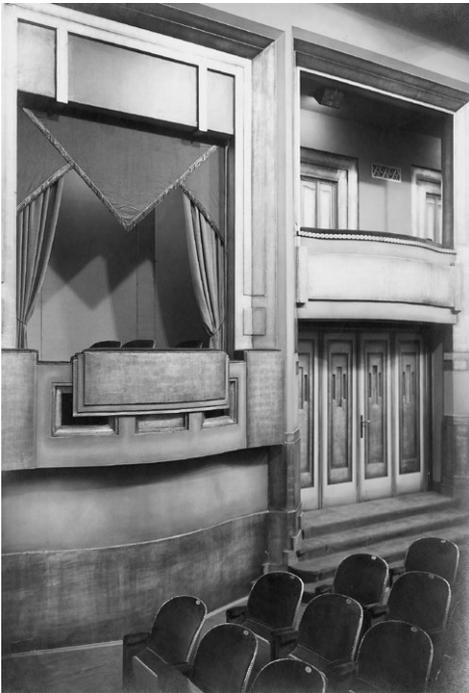
The stage of the concert hall and its decoration, 1929.
(© Bozar Archives)

The chamber music hall in 1928.
(Studio Stone © Bozar Archives)





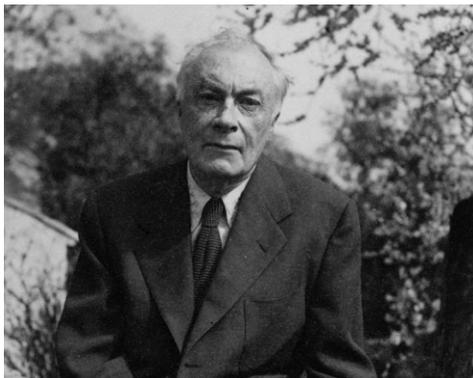
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THE AUXILIARY SOCIETIES

The Centre for Fine Arts quickly became a leading cultural hub in Brussels. Its enthusiastic and dynamic programme manager Charles Leirens put on a wide range of events, including exhibitions, concerts, ballets, plays, films, literary meetings and lectures. While these were popular with the public, they soon led to a significant financial deficit. In April 1929, Henry Le Bœuf wrote to Leirens suggesting that independent bodies should be set up to manage exhibitions, lectures and theatrical performances. As regards music, the Société Philharmonique, founded by Le Bœuf in 1927, was already involved in organising concerts.

However, Leirens carried on as before, ignoring Le Bœuf's recommendations. The board of directors realised that this was unsustainable and would "quickly lead to financial failure". As a solution, in 1929 it proposed setting up *sociétés auxiliaires*



Charles Leirens, 1952.
(© Bozar Archives)

(auxiliary societies) – associations independent of the Centre for Fine Arts, each responsible for a specific sector and each with its own management and board of directors. They would also hand over part of their profits to the Centre and assume any financial losses.

The first two to be established were the Société Auxiliaire des Expositions (in charge of art exhibitions) and the Société Philharmonique (in charge of music), the latter a merger of the Société des Concerts Populaires and the Société Philharmonique. In addition to artistic and musical programming, these two societies were also responsible for room hire.

The third auxiliary society was the Société Auxiliaire des Spectacles et Conférences (responsible for theatrical performances and lectures), but it soon lost this status, simply becoming a tenant of the rooms, as did the Société Auxiliaire du Cinéma, run by the Putzeys brothers. The Société Auxiliaire des Publications, which oversaw publication of the loss-making journal *Les Beaux-Arts*, was quickly wound up.

Aside from disagreements on programming, *Le Bœuf* was critical of Leirens for neglecting exhibition room hire, which provided an essential source of income, and for his careless approach

to administrative management. “Mr Leirens is an artist, not a manager,” he wrote to Max in a letter dated 17 October 1931.

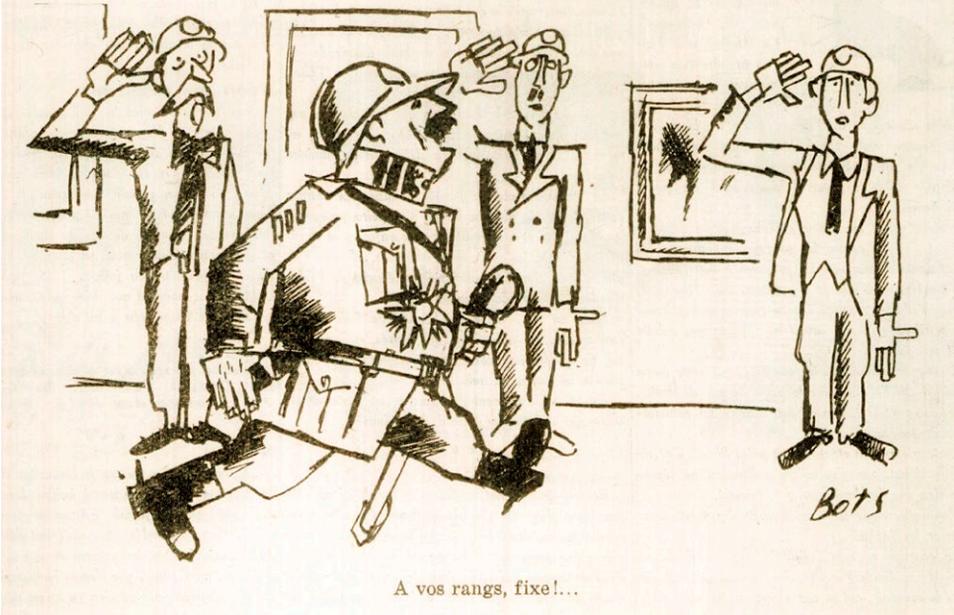
Accordingly, in October 1931, the board of directors decided to terminate the programme manager’s contract. Leirens sued the Centre but lost. He was succeeded by General Paul Giron (1872-1954), former chief of staff to the minister Charles de Broqueville, which prompted a good deal of criticism in the Brussels press: “Since a general has been appointed to run the Centre for Fine Arts, why not put Permeke or Baron Ensor in charge of the artillery?” (*Pourquoi Pas*, 20 November 1931). “A general! Can you imagine?” (*Le Rouge et le Noir*, 9 November 1931).

Programme for a concert by the Société Philharmonique de Bruxelles, 22 and 23 February 1930.
(private coll.)



L'art... militaire

Un général vient d'être nommé directeur du
Palais des Beaux-Arts. (Les journaux.)



A vos rangs, fixe!...

Cartoon published in the weekly newspaper *Le Rouge et le Noir* on 9 November 1931.
(© Universiteitsbibliotheek Gent, BIBJ,000894)

FIRST CHANGES TO THE BUILDING

Although the Centre was able to host exhibitions, concerts and other events from the moment it opened, the programming itself soon began to impose new demands on the building. Despite its multidisciplinary and open character, the Centre for Fine Arts was paradoxically ill-suited to keeping pace with developments in artistic and cultural practices. Throughout its history, successive management teams have sought to adapt and transform the venue in order to meet the expectations of cultural actors more effectively. Even before the building was fully completed, the Centre for Fine Arts was already undergoing its first major change, as Henry Le Bœuf and Victor

Horta argued over the decoration of the chamber music hall, and the architect was still in the process of completing the large concert hall. Barely six months after its opening in 1928, the small recital hall was converted into a Studio to meet the new requirements of cinematic projection. These changes were limited – to accommodate film screenings, curtains were fitted to block out the natural light from the neighbouring patio and a screen was installed – but they were the prelude to more radical interventions from the mid-1930s onwards, and especially in the post-war period. Following the success of the screenings, the Studio, chamber music hall and concert hall were fitted with equipment for showing sound films in the mid-1930s. In the chamber music hall, the

ceiling was modified to enhance the room's acoustics. Meanwhile, some of the other rooms were hardly used at all for their original purposes. After the Antoine Bourdelle exhibition, for example, the large sculpture hall was no longer really used for displaying monumental sculptural works, but served

instead as a venue for major events, such as the legendary buffet for the opening of the Ensor exhibition in 1929, and later for more lucrative ventures such as the exclusive car shows organised by Minerva, the Belgian car manufacturer.

THE PUTZEYS BROTHERS, OSWALD AND ROBERT

In 1927, the cinema-loving brothers Oswald and Robert Putzeys helped found the *Club du Cinéma* in Brussels, initially based in a small screening room in Lever House on Rue Royale and later in the avant-garde gallery Le Centaure.

In November 1928, the film club moved to the recital hall in the Centre for Fine Arts, which became known as the *Studio du Palais des Beaux-Arts*. The 227-seater recital hall was refurbished accordingly, with the installation of a screen and projection booth, sound system, and so on. The film club was initially run by an auxiliary society managed by the Putzeys brothers, but this was dissolved in February 1932: "This society was surplus to requirements as, in reality, the entire operation, with the associated liability and risks, was in the hands of Messrs. Putzeys, the current tenants of the Studio" (minutes of the board of directors meeting held on 3 July 1933). The Putzeys brothers, whose relationship with

the Centre's board of directors was sometimes tumultuous, then became simply tenants of the hall, bringing in a significant rental income for the Centre.

As Belgium's only art house cinema, the Studio showed shorts, avant-garde films, documentaries, feature films, popular science, classics and more. There were screenings every day, some accompanied by recorded music. Some of the films provoked strong reactions, raising the question of oversight and censorship of events held at the Centre.

In 1939, the Putzeys brothers opened the Galeries cinema (designed by architect Paul Bonduelle) in the Galeries Saint-Hubert. Oswald Putzeys left Belgium in 1940 and, among other things, became responsible for audiovisual colonial propaganda in the Congo. He returned to civilian life in 1947 as a cinema operator.



The entrance to the Studio cinema, 1929.
(© Bozar Archives)



Auction room, 1983. (© Bozar Archives)

THE GIRON YEARS (1931-1946)

“In Belgium, the land of particularism, regionalism and individualism, the Centre for Fine Arts has had to show all individualists the way.”

Brochure published by the Centre for Fine Arts in 1932, after four years of operation.

Despite the stock market crash of October 1929 and the economic crisis that followed, the Centre for Fine Arts established itself as a major Brussels cultural venue during the 1930s. Under the auspices of the auxiliary societies, it hosted a steady stream of exhibitions, symphonic and chamber music concerts, recitals, plays, dance performances, films, lectures and more.

Henry Le Bœuf’s beloved Société Philharmonique, whose aim was “to introduce the public to little-known composers, demystify the innovative and resurrect the neglected”, programmed numerous concerts, given from 1931 onwards by the Brussels Symphony Orchestra. In 1936, the latter became the Centre’s resident orchestra, led by a permanent conductor, and was renamed the “Belgian National Orchestra”. However, foreign

orchestras and conductors were also regularly invited to perform.

On the visual arts side, a series of exhibitions were organised under the management of the Société Auxiliaire des Expositions, led by Claude Spaak with the assistance of the artist Robert Giron, son of Paul Giron.

Some lasted little more than a week, while the larger ones went on for three or four weeks. Some were devoted to a particular theme, others to an artist. Among other delights, the public was able to admire paintings by members of the Société Belge des Peintres de la Mer (Belgian Society of Marine Artists), an exhibition of contemporary religious art, as well as exhibitions on Modigliani, Dufy, Van Dongen, Chagall and many others. Belgian artists were also in the spotlight, including Constant Permeke and René Magritte. July 1932 saw the first Exposition Internationale de la Photographie (International Photography Exhibition), featuring, among other artists, Willy Kessels, Eugène Atget, Germaine Krull, Man Ray and Robert de Smet.

The rooms were also hired out for annual shows such as the Spring Salon held by the Société Royale des Beaux-Arts or commercial events (Val Saint-Lambert crystal glassware, porcelain from the Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres, Ilford photographic products, etc.).

From 1931, public auctions of artworks and *objets d’art* were organised by the Société des Expositions, providing the non-profit organisation with a new source of revenue. “Generally speaking, the

proceeds from these sales enable the Société des Expositions to cover its overheads, offset exhibition deficits and pay surpluses to the Centre” (Centre for Fine Arts 25-year activity report).

The sculpture hall hosted everything from furniture companies (“Comfort in the home”) to carmakers (General Motors, Minerva) to competitive examinations (accounting, for example), as well as large banquets and national lottery draws.

In addition to symphony concerts, the large concert hall played host to theatrical performances, dance galas and so on.

As Horta’s plans did not include a permanent theatre, theatrical performances regularly took place in the chamber music hall.

CULTURAL LIFE UNDER SURVEILLANCE (1940-1944)

Paradoxically, cultural life in Brussels remained strong during the years of German occupation, despite the difficult circumstances. At the Centre for Fine Arts, Paul Giron made sure to keep the halls in use to prevent them from being requisitioned in their entirety by the occupying forces. For example, the Concerts de Midi previously held at the Museum of Ancient Art were moved to the rotunda, and a Belgian film was screened every day in the Studio. While there were no longer any major exhibitions due to the closure of borders and transport difficulties, an artists’ circuit –featuring seven painters and a sculptor, each exhib-

Jeunesses Musicales concert with the Athénée de Schaerbeek school choir, n.d., 1942. (© Bozar Archives)



iting two works for a week – was set up in the rooms leading to the rotunda, and small exhibitions of Belgian artists including Henri Evenepoel, Pierre Paulus, Rik Wouters, Constant Permeke and Ensor alternated with exhibitions devoted to German art and artists, for which the space was requisitioned. The auctions also continued.

While the Philharmonic continued to put on regular concerts, it steered clear of certain composers and artists, either out of compulsion (in the case of Jewish artists) or because they were too closely associated with the Nazis.

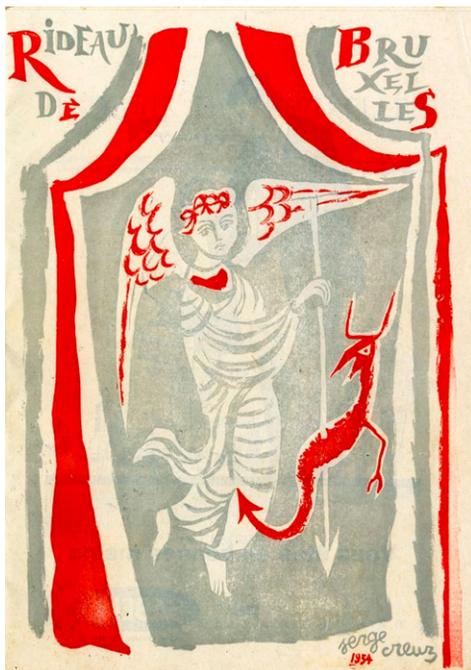
Some rooms were regularly requisitioned by the occupiers for lectures, shows, concerts of Flemish and German music, fashion shows and lunches. It was during the years of occupation that Jeunesses Musicales (1940), Toneeljeugd (1941) and Le Rideau de Bruxelles (1943) were established.

1940, JEUNESSES MUSICALES

Marcel Cuvelier, director of the Société Philharmonique de Bruxelles, founded the youth music organisation Jeunesses Musicales on 17 October 1940, marked by the first Concert for Young People. He had a number of aims: to get young people interested in music, to give them access to symphony concerts at an affordable price, but also to shield them from Nazi propaganda during the occupation period. By the end of 1940, Jeunesses Musicales had already welcomed some 2,000 young people.

Today, the organisation continues to operate in Wallonia and Brussels, putting on school and public concerts as well as musical workshops and courses during the school holidays.

In 1941, a Flemish-speaking artistic movement was created along the same lines. Originally called Toneeljeugd (Performing Youth), in 1950 it merged into a new non-profit organisation, Kunst- en Cultuurverbond (KCV), set up with the support of leading Flemish cultural figures.

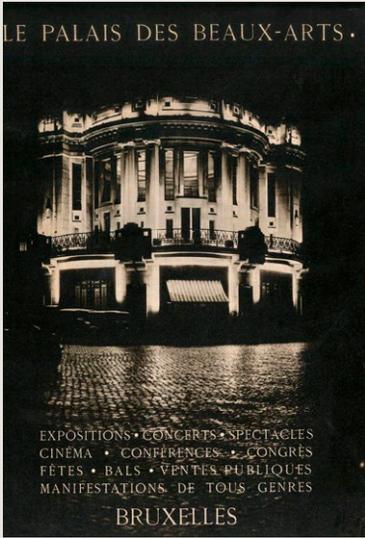


Drawing by Serge Creuz for a programme for Le Rideau de Bruxelles, 1954. (private coll.)

1943, LE RIDEAU DE BRUXELLES

Founded by actor and director Claude Étienne in 1943, theatre company Le Rideau de Bruxelles was based at the Centre for Fine Arts from the start, occupying various rooms. As a promoter of original work, it gave pride of place to contemporary authors, introducing audiences to Belgian playwrights such as Georges Sion and José-André Lacour as well as Paul Willems, who later became the Centre's managing director. Étienne remained at the helm of the theatre company until his death in 1992.

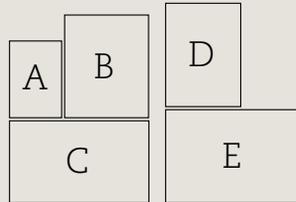
From the 2010-11 season onwards, Le Rideau became a travelling company, performing in a number of partner theatres, before moving to premises in Rue Goffart, Ixelles, in September 2014.





EVENTS

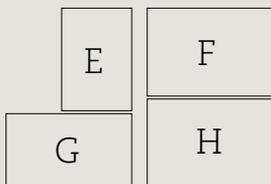
From the start the large sculpture hall became a venue for fairs, competitions, gala evenings and dinner-dances.



- A. Poster
- B. Hairdressers convention
- C. Fashion show
- D. Car fair
- E. Variety show

(© Bozar Archives)





- E. Jazz concert
 - F. The national loterie draw
 - G. Accountancy competition
 - H. Piano concert
- (© Bozar Archives)





archives PBA



archives PBA

Into the modern era

After several years of restrictions in the aftermath of the Second World War, a pivotal period began as the country got back on its feet and new consumer habits emerged, fuelled by the return of economic growth.

The reopening of borders meant that major exhibitions and events were back on the agenda. In June 1947, the first Festival Mondial du Film et des Beaux-Arts (World Festival of Film and Fine Arts) attracted a considerable audience. Each day, the films selected by the 17 participating nations were screened in the large Henry Le Bœuf Hall. An exhibition of surrealist painters, including Salvador Dalí, Paul Delvaux and Max Ernst, ran alongside the festival.

On the musical side, the Société Philharmonique headed by Marcel Cuvelier (1899-1959) resumed its activities. From 1946, Cuvelier invited the French conductor Roger Désormière, whose programme included works by Shostakovich and Mahler, a composer still relatively unknown to the public. In 1948, Cuvelier organised the Festival de Bruxelles, comprising 40 concerts over seven weeks. He became director of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 1951, when it resumed following a hiatus due to the war. Founded by Queen Elisabeth in 1937 as the Eugène Ysaÿe Competition, it adopted its current name in 1951,

with the Société Philharmonique overseeing its practical organisation.

The first session of the Exploration du Monde documentary and lecture series took place on 5 December 1950, when Roger Frison-Roche presented one of the very first colour films, *Mille Kilomètres dans le Grand Désert*, in the large concert hall. This was followed shortly afterwards by Haroun Tazieff's *Au Milieu des Cratères de Feu*. Subsequent contributors included Maurice Herzog, recounting his ascent of Annapurna, and Alain Bombard with his film *Naufragé Volontaire*. The Exploration du Monde series of "travel stories and films in colour" was born.

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René Magritte, Poster for the Festival Mondial du Film et des Beaux-Arts, 1947, RMFAB, inv. 8560. (© SABAM)

The sessions were also broadcast at other venues including Auditorium 44, the Palais des Congrès and various cultural centres in Brussels, Wallonia and Luxembourg. To date, Exploration du Monde has reached a total audience of 20 million people.

ASSOCIATION POUR LA DIFFUSION ARTISTIQUE ET CULTURELLE (ADAC)

While these lectures were initially overseen by the non-profit organisation Palais des Beaux-Arts, it soon transpired that its articles of association did not allow it to organise such events. A new auxiliary society was therefore set up, the Association pour la Diffusion Artistique et Culturelle (ADAC), which took over the role.

Founded in 1951 by Pierre Janlet, Paul Willems and Pierre Arty, it soon encompassed a wide range of artistic fields including lectures, exhibitions, music, opera, song, musicals, classical and contemporary dance, folk dance, cinema, jazz, puppet theatre, mime and pantomime, one-man shows and plays. The first folk dance show was Keïta Fodéba's *Les Ballets Africains*, a performance of ritual dances from Central Africa. It was staged in the large concert hall in 1953, a few months after appearing at the Théâtre de l'Étoile in Paris. The show was a major hit and was subsequently performed at the outdoor theatre in Parc de Wolvendael and on tour in the provinces. As a promoter and presenter, ADAC always remained committed to putting on shows in Brussels and the provinces, and even abroad.

The success of its events never waned, with 50,000 shows attracting a combined audience of over 25 million between 1951 and 2001. It was mainly the funds generated by Exploration du Monde that allowed ADAC to put on large-scale shows with huge audiences worldwide.

However, it also organised more highbrow activities, including the publication of the modern art review *Quadrum* (1956-1966) and theatre performances in foreign languages. Under the direction of Alain Leempoel (1988-2004), theatre came to occupy an increasingly important place in its repertoire.

Despite the enormous success of Maurice Béjart's Ballet du XX^e Siècle, ADAC ran into financial difficulties and had to cease operating in 2006.

Information desk at the
Festival Mondial du Film et des Beaux-Arts, 1947.
(© Bozar Archives)



EXPO 58, A SEMINAL EVENT

The first World's Fair of the post-war era took place in 1958, allowing visitors to discover the "American way of life" and the first colour televisions. Society was becoming more democratic, cars were now an affordable option for many households thanks to increased purchasing power, and the audience for concerts was growing. The world festival held at the Centre for Fine Arts on the sidelines of Expo 58 proved very successful, with no fewer than 51 concerts, 20 exhibitions, 20 theatre shows and a number of ballets, mostly staged in the large concert hall. The Peking Opera left a lasting impression with a truly exceptional performance.

The development of electronics had led to the emergence of new electro-acoustic techniques for amplifying and broadcasting sound. The most spectacular example of this technological progress was the Philips Pavilion at Expo 58, designed by Le Corbusier with assistance from the composer and architect Iannis Xenakis and the composer Edgar Varèse. The latter's composition *Poème électronique* was performed at the pavilion, featuring projected images, coloured and moving lights, and sounds transmitted by 425 speakers and 20 amplifiers!

From 1958 until the early 1970s, there ensued a series of high-profile events – concerts, ballets, and Belgian and international exhibitions. Highlights included Victor Vasarely (1960), the CoBrA movement (1962), the Sistine Chapel Choir (1963), the centenary of the birth of Henry van de Velde (1963), the Kirov Ballet (1966) and the surrealist painters (1967).

JEUNESSE ET ARTS PLASTIQUES

Founded on 22 December 1959 by several directors of the Centre for Fine Arts, the non-profit organisation Jeunesse et Arts Plastiques (JAP) set out to raise awareness of modern and contemporary art through various activities aimed at a wide audience, including lectures by leading art world figures, screenings of films on art and architecture, and meet-the-artist events. These were mainly held at the Centre but were soon taking place in Wallonia as well.

Over the years, the range of activities expanded, taking in everything from exhibitions, cultural trips in Europe and contemporary art workshops for children to designing educational kits for exhibitions and producing artists' multiples and books. Since 2012, JAP has organised ARTISTS PRINT, the independent fair for artists' books and multiples. Each year, around 30 Belgian and European publishers and artists present their limited editions, sometimes signed and numbered.

MODERNISATION OF THE FACILITIES

After the war, a new momentum around cinema emerged, which was to leave a lasting mark on the building. The success of the new Festival Mondial du Film et des Beaux-Arts, held at the Centre for Fine Arts in 1947 and the growing importance of film screenings in balancing the budget prompted the Centre's management to radically modernise the Studio and chamber music hall. Between 1956 and 1959, the architect Constantin Brodzki, in collaboration with Corneille Hannoset, converted the Studio into a proper cinema, with relatively steep tiered seating allowing a better view of the screen. The projection booth was also adapted to the new requirements of colour films. This was not the first time the designers had



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Constantin Brodzki and Corneille Hannoset, conversion of the Studio into a modern film theatre, 1956-1959 and fit-out of the Cinema Museum in the decorative arts hall, 1967. (© Bozar Archives)

worked together: in 1953, they were responsible for fitting out the Blanc et Noir (White and Black) exhibition circuit for the Galerie d'Aujourd'hui, a commercial art gallery providing a permanent home for contemporary art in the building.

In 1959, changes in the regulations for performance venues led managing director Pierre Janlet to undertake a thorough renovation of the chamber music hall as well. Brodzki and Hannoset were called upon once again, but the project proved too expensive and was only partially completed. Eventually, a full refurbishment by Hervé Gilson between 1986 and 1989 gave the room its current appearance.

Despite these efforts to adapt the rooms to the requirements of colour film projection, the calls to give cinema a larger, permanent space of its own at the Centre grew ever louder. Jacques Ledoux founded the Musée du Cinéma (Cinema Museum) in 1962, and the new institution took up residence in the building, occupying the former decorative art hall from 1967 onwards, following a conversion (again by Brodzki and Hannoset). With one screening room initially and two from 1982 onwards, as well as a permanent exhibition space, the museum had its own entrance in Rue Baron Horta and took over part of the building. In keeping with the overtly modernist feel of Brodzki and Hannoset's previous designs, Horta's architecture was dismantled (without any protest) and transformed into a contemporary scenography evoking the magic of the moving image.

MAY 68 AND ACTION CULTURELLE

The protest movements linked to the May 68 revolution also had repercussions for the functioning of the Centre for Fine Arts. Demonstrators began to occupy the sculpture hall on 28 May 1968. The exhibition *Aspects of Flemish Expressionism in Flanders between 1916 and 1930*, which had opened on 16 May, was forced to close in case the

sit-in turned nasty. However, unlike in France, the protesters here engaged in non-violent activities such as meetings, debates, artists talks and campaigns, and entertainment events. A number of prominent figures took part in the movement, including Marcel Broodthaers, Roger Somville, Serge Creuz and Hugo Claus. In June, the protests began to subside, culminating in the publication of a *Cahier de Revendications des Artistes Belges* (Set of Demands by Belgian Artists), which among other things proposed transforming the Centre for Fine Arts into a House of Culture, with a collegial management body in which some of the directors would be artists. Another issue it raised was the lack of contemporary art centres and museums in Belgium.

The occupation of the Centre by students and artists prompted the management to organise an architectural competition in 1969 with the aim of creating a public forum as a spatial representation of a more democratic cultural policy. The objective was to strip the institution of its elitist status and provide a platform that would bridge the gap between artists and the public, turning it into a venue for hosting small-scale events, lectures, performances, concerts and exhibitions, but also a bookshop, restaurant and even a radio studio. Entries were received from Hannoset and well-known architects such as Roger Bastin and Paul-Émile Vincent, but the design eventually chosen was that of Lucien Jacques Baucher, Michel Draps and Marc Libois. As suggested by the management in the specifications, it was inspired by the temporary tubular structure used during the Dutch Days, the party-like event that had provided the backdrop for the sit-in during the revolutionary month of May 1968. Of course, the promise of a highly flexible and adaptable structure – as at the Centre Pompidou in Paris – also captured the imagination. The modular tube system and brown seating blocks were to become a defining feature



of the visitor experience at the Centre in the 1970s and 1980s. Programming at the Forum was assigned to a new association, Action Culturelle, which sought to respond to the visionary spirit of the 1968 occupiers. The transformation of the sculpture hall and the programming by a separate organisation were indicative of a development that had been taking place for some time, whereby the various arts associations adapted the infrastructure to their own needs. The resulting compartmentalisation was partly responsible for the lamentable state of the building at the end of the last century. By the mid-1990s, not only was the roof leaking badly but little remained of the complex internal spatial design that was the hallmark of Horta's architecture.

(A) The Centre for Fine Arts in May 1968.
 (© Bozar Archives)
 (B) The occupation of the sculpture hall in May 1968.
 (© Bozar Archives)
 (C) Marcel Broodthaers, Paul Willems and
 Pierre Janlet during the occupation, May 1968.
 (© Bozar Archives)



Lucien Jacques Baucher, Michel Draps and Marc Libois, entry in the competition to design a Forum in the sculpture hall.
 Perspective drawing and Forum created in the sculpture hall, 1969.
 (© Bozar Archives)

EUROPALIA

The 1958 World Festival had left its organisers with an afterglow of nostalgia, so in 1969, one of the directors responsible, Pierre Arty, set off on a fact-finding trip to Italy with a view to establishing a new cultural festival that would showcase the arts and culture of European countries in Belgium. The project gathered momentum, and the first Europalia, focusing on Italy, was held from 9 September to 10 October 1969, organised by ADAC. The non-profit organisation Europalia was set up in 1970 and a second festival, profiling the Netherlands, was organised the following year. Subsequent feature countries included the United Kingdom, France and West Germany. From 1989 onwards, Europalia opened up to non-European countries: Japan, Mexico, China, Brazil, India, Turkey, etc.

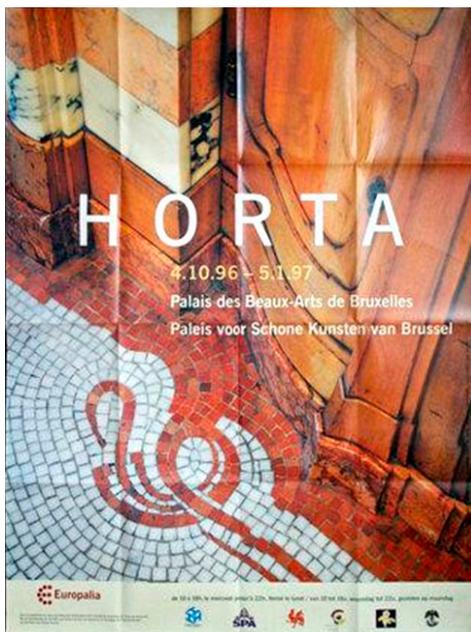
A planned festival focusing on Turkey in 1996 was cancelled for financial and political reasons, and instead became a tribute to Victor Horta, the leading proponent of Belgian Art Nouveau and the

architect behind the Centre for Fine Arts. It was this exhibition that first reversed the public's indifference towards Horta's late work, such as Brussels' Central Station, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Tournai and the Centre for Fine Arts itself. This led to a renewed appreciation of the works of Horta's mature years, based on a realisation that his virtuosity is expressed primarily in the layout, composition and spatial structure of his architecture. In honour of the Horta exhibition, the sculpture hall was restored to its original condition by removing the tubular structure.

Between 1998 and 2003, Europalia was held annually, after which it reverted to the biennial format. Today, creativity across all disciplines is the driving force of the festival, which features exhibitions, theatre, music, cinema, dance, literature, artistic performances, artist residencies, debates and more.

The Rue Ravenstein entrance, 1971.
(© Bozar Archives)

Poster for the 1996 Europalia exhibition dedicated to Victor Horta.
(© Europalia)



The Centre for Fine Arts becomes Bozar

Although the operators of the Centre for Fine Arts managed, with difficulty, to balance the budget until the mid-1960s, the financial situation was becoming increasingly fraught, as revenues were no longer sufficient to cover the costs of building maintenance and staff salaries. Though initially very divided, the board of directors ultimately had no choice but to turn to the state. On 1 March 1971, Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens announced that the government would offer support to the Centre on condition that linguistic parity was respected, as provided for in the first state reform (1970). Belgium's two Communities, French-speaking and Flemish, would henceforth be represented on the board of directors.

In the early 1980s, the Centre for Fine Arts once again found itself in financial difficulties. From 1984 onwards, a public interest body, under the supervision of the state, took over the management of the premises, while the various partners continued their activities as private legal entities.

A review of the Centre's organisation in the early 1990s led to the establishment in 1999 of a public limited company with a social purpose, Palais des Beaux-Arts SA. The articles of association, drawn up in 2001 (Royal Decree of 19 December 2001), set up a cultural institution to manage the building and produce events, modelled on the major international cultural institutions.

The activities of the two main divisions, the Société des Expositions and the Société Philharmonique, were transferred to the new company. The artistic and cultural project became known under the brand name "Bozar".

THE MASTER PLAN

The dismantling of the Forum (formerly the sculpture hall) served as a prelude to the various interventions carried out from 2004 under the master plan of architect and Horta specialist Barbara Van der Wee. The aim of the plan was to restore the spatial structure from 1928 while adapting it to contemporary requirements and standards – an integrated project made possible thanks to separate funding for a comprehensive study.

The master plan thus involved reversing a number of changes that had been made to Horta's original architecture. To make this possible, the new management and board of directors of Palais des Beaux-Arts SA decided to move all the offices to another building, in Galerie Ravenstein. The offices and documentation centre of the Cinema Museum (CINEMATEK) relocated to the Hôtel Ravenstein, right next door to the Centre for Fine Arts. This restored the spatial structure around one of the Centre's finest rooms – the Bertouille Rotunda, located above the main entrance – to its full glory.



The CINEMATEK hall after renovation.
(© Bozar / Y. Gervais 2024)

Remodelling work in CINEMATEK also formed part of the master plan. To restore the spatial design of Horta's decorative art hall, which had housed the Cinema Museum's permanent exhibition since 1973, it was decided to build the two cinema rooms in the basement. The permanent exhibition itself was transferred to the *Wunderkammer*, a space designed by the architects Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem between the columns of the decorative art hall.

The other works in the first phase of the master plan included a new restaurant, the restoration of the two large exhibition circuits (the Ravenstein circuit and the Rue Royale circuit). In the case of the exhibition circuits, the main challenge was how to combine natural light from the roof with an integrated air conditioning system that would meet current museum standards. In addition, the building's roofs are listed structures and the technical equipment was not allowed to obscure the view of the Lower Town from the Royal Palace.

Unlike the operators of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam or the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, the management of the Centre for Fine Arts preferred not to close during the work. This decision was motivated not only by financial considerations, but also by a feeling of obligation towards the city. When Brussels was a European Capital of Culture in 2000, the Mont des Arts – the area between the Upper and Lower Town in which the Centre for Fine Arts is located – had been described rather contemptuously as a “vacant city”. Closing the building for several years while the work was completed would only have helped turn the area into a sort of Sleeping Beauty Castle.

Keeping it open required a segmented approach, with only the part undergoing renovation being closed while all the rest of the building remained fully operational. As a result, a number of important cross-cutting aspects were to some extent overlooked, primarily in relation to user comfort: disabled access, signage, furnishings and lighting. The second phase of the master plan was about integrating the work and focusing on the experience of the building by its various users: the public, artists and technical teams. And not just within the building, but in its immediate surroundings too.

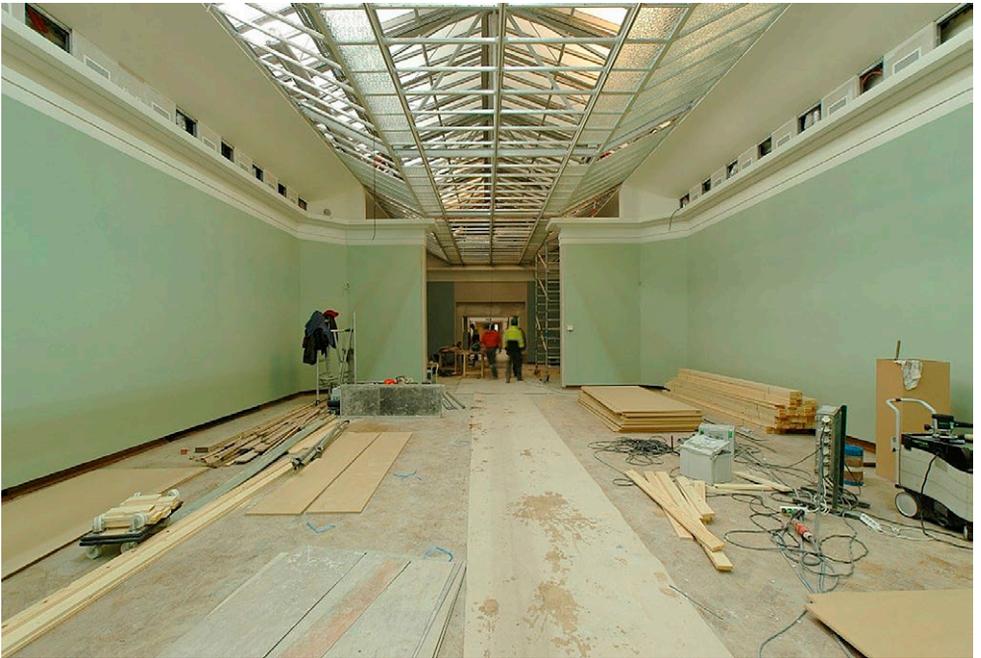
To meet these new challenges, an approach geared exclusively to food and drink was no longer sufficient. The building needed to be modernised, which required a series of interventions at different levels. A large master plan team was assembled, comprising Barbara Van der Wee Architects, Sum-Project and Ney & Partners, together with Robbrecht en Daem architecten. The team was tasked with developing a master plan to optimise the use and operation of the building with a view to enhancing user comfort and making the business more efficient. Robbrecht en Daem architecten designed the new Café Victor, which now occupies all the former shop premises along Rue Ravenstein. Barbara Van der Wee continued to painstakingly restore other parts of the building: the rotunda near the Rue Royale entrance was returned to its original colour scheme, and the flat roofs of the two blocks along Rue Ravenstein and Rue Baron Horta – designed by Horta as proper outdoor rooms – were also restored and now host an artistic programme during the summer months.



The renovation of the roof. (© Barbara Van der Wee architects, 2022 and © Bozar Archives)



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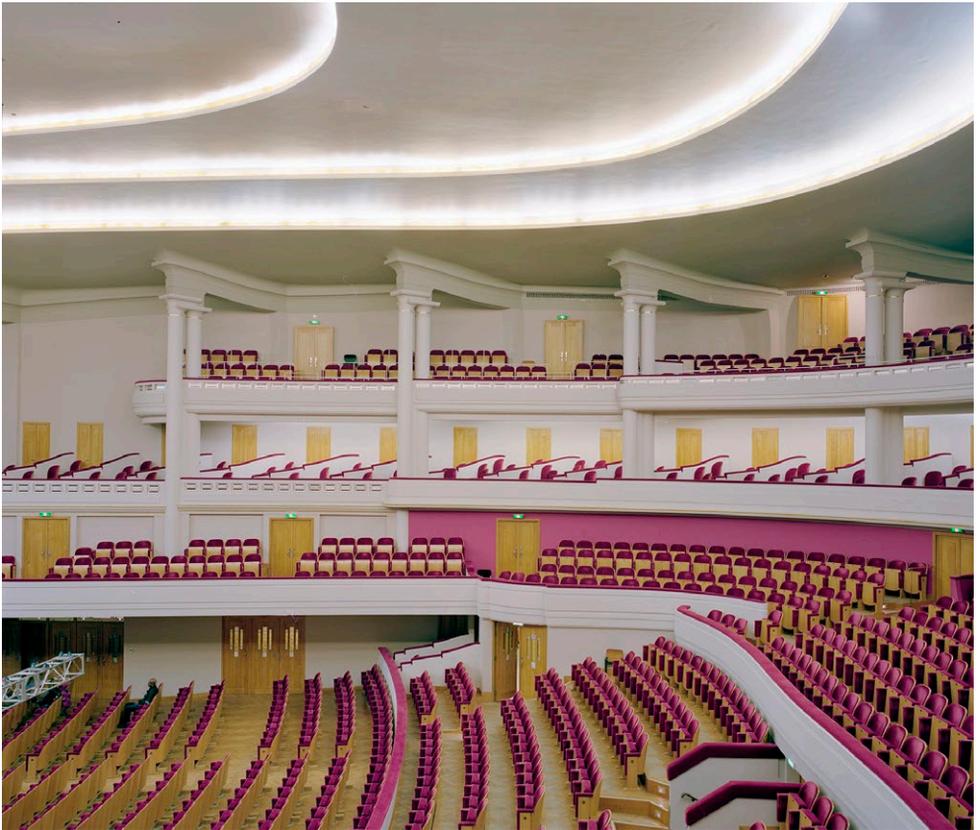
The renovation of the exhibition rooms, 2006. (© Bozar Archives)

FULL CIRCLE

During its almost 100 years of existence, Horta's Centre for Fine Arts has not always been treated with due respect. The various organisations that occupied the building remodelled and adapted it almost beyond recognition. From 1996 onwards, it was gradually restored to its former glory and became a fitting venue for an ambitious international programme. However, the recent COVID-19 and energy crises have shown how vulnerable the institution remains. With an economic model still based on room hire, and programming developed

from the outset with other public and private partners, it suffered more than other institutions from the prolonged compulsory closures during the pandemic. High operating costs and the relatively energy-inefficient building remain major challenges for the new management team led by Christophe Slagmuylder. But to quote the words of Pierre Arty back in 2001: "Fair winds to this wonderful liner, unsinkable despite the icebergs along her route."

The Henry Le Bœuf Hall, 2009.
(Bozar Archives © J. Latteur)





The corridors around the Henry Le Bœuf hall.
(Maxime Delvaux, 2023 © Bozar)

The rotunda near the entrance of the rue Royale, 2021.
(Bozar Archives © D.Antrop)

The entrance to the Henry Le Bœuf hall.
(© Dieter Demey, 2022)



The grand stairs to the exhibition rooms.
(Maxime Delvaux, 2023 © Bozar).



The Bertouille Rotunda.
(Maxime Delvaux, 2023 © Bozar)





Entrance to the Royal Salon.
(© Barbara Van der Wee architects, 2022)

The Bozar restaurant.
(© Bozar / Y. Gervais 2024)



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Keen to promote the wealth and variety of Brussels' heritage, Urban aims, through the Brussels, City of Art and History collection, to stimulate the public's curiosity about the history of the city and to raise awareness about protecting its constituent masterpieces.

As soon as it opened in 1928, the Centre for Fine Arts became a major cultural venue in Brussels. Designed to accommodate a wide variety of artistic activities, it quickly extended its influence beyond the local level to attain a global reputation for high-quality events, thanks to its dynamic and ambitious programming.

The original idea of building a "temple of the arts" in Brussels became a reality in the years following the First World War. Renowned architect Victor Horta was tasked with bringing this ambitious concept to life by developing an architecture programme that was both spatially and technically complex. A veritable city within the city, the design and construction of the Centre for Fine Arts had to contend with the multiple constraints, of the building site. Today, the listed building's ingenuity is still much admired.

Number 63 in the collection pays tribute to this edifice conceived almost 100 years ago. After a painstaking restoration and modernisation to enable it to meet contemporary challenges, it now once again a harmonious blend of architecture, technical infrastructure and cultural programming.

Bety Waknine,
General Manager

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