

Brussels,
City of Art
and History

62

The Mont des Arts

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ACB Archives of the City of Brussels
CIVA Centre International pour la Ville, l'Architecture et le Paysage
KBR Royal Library of Belgium
KIK-IRPA Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium / Institut royal du Patrimoine artistique
RMFAB Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium
MCB Museum of the City of Brussels

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The Mont des Arts. In the foreground, Marnix D'Haveloose's sculpture of three allegorical
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The Mont des Arts

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Bas-relief on the façade of the office wing and shopping gallery,
Alphonse Darville. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

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The Mont des Arts esplanade with its iconic view over the Lower Town. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

A vital link

Forming an essential link between Brussels' Upper and Lower Towns, the Mont des Arts is traversed day and night by locals, tourists and late-night wanderers. It is also frequented by regulars at the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR), visitors to the Brussels Convention Centre (SQUARE), employees of the district's various institutions, users of the Central Station, skateboarders, and many more. Leading in one direction to the Upper Town with its museums and in the other to the Lower Town and the city's historic centre, this thoroughfare forms a point of transition in the urban space. It is also a fusion of different eras, sandwiched between the grandeur of the Royal Quarter and the Îlot Sacré, home to the Grand-Place and its environs.

Its detractors see it as a cold and austere acropolis, a complex redolent of the architecture of

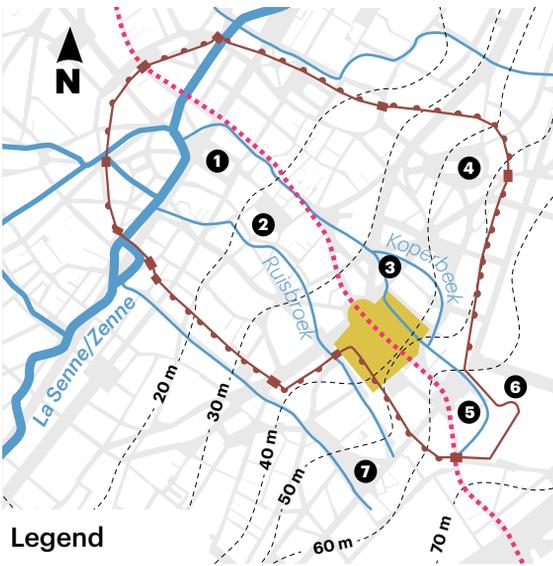
Mussolini's Italy, or even the Soviet Union. Others hark back nostalgically to its former incarnation as Square Vacherot, which survived until the mid-1950s. The more cynical associate it with the horrors of Brusselisation. It is true that, before acquiring its current look, the area was synonymous with neglect, demolitions and a succession of plans – postponed, rejected, abandoned, resumed and amended. Fortunately, our view of heritage has evolved over recent decades, and today there is a great deal of goodwill towards the Mont des Arts. It is, indeed, the signature of an era and in 2022 its style gained due appreciation when the site and architectural ensemble were included on the Brussels-Capital Region's list of protected buildings and sites, owing to its historical, aesthetic, artistic, technical, landscape, urban design and folkloric interest.

AMOUNT...

The capital's residents and visitors have now fully claimed (or reclaimed) the Mont des Arts as their own. Its gardens, walkways, steps and benches are perfect for strolling and mingling, while its central location makes it a prime venue for cultural events and festivities. For urban wanderers, this pivot point – reminiscent in some ways of the Trocadéro esplanade in Paris – is an invitation both to descend into the "bowels" of the city and to ascend to its heights. It also offers two perspectives, one opening onto Saint-Jacques-sur-Coudenberg Church (Place Royale), the other overlooking the spire of the Town Hall on Grand-Place, the latter being one of the most iconic views of central Brussels.

The hill that gives the Mont des Arts its name ("Hill/ Mount of Arts") has undergone many changes over the centuries. The steep slope of the right bank of the Senne was deeply indented by various tributaries flowing down towards the river. The site constitutes the north-west flank of the Coudenberg hill, originally bounded by the Coperbeek to the north (the former Isabelle and Terarken neighbourhoods) and the Ruysbroeck to the south (Rue de Ruysbroeck). These two streams helped give the area its distinctly rugged relief. In the Middle Ages, this steeply sloping terrain brought its share of constraints, both for housing and for the movement of people and vehicles between the upper and lower parts of the city. Some of the narrow streets were so steep that steps were required. A series of four stairs were built, primarily linking Montagne de la Cour with Rue des Sols. Known as the Escaliers des Juifs (Jewish Stairs), they were located

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Legend

Brussels in the Middle Ages

- First city walls
- Watercourses
- Contour lines
- Steenweg

Brussels today

- Present-day streets
- Landmarks
- Mont des Arts

in Rue Villa-Hermosa, Rue Saint-Laurent (or Rue Ravenstein), Rue Notre-Dame and Rue Saint-Roch (or Rue de la Croix-Blanche). It was not until the early 20th century that more drastic attempts were made to mitigate the effects of the topography. These included the construction of a Rue Courbe (Curved Street), the opening-up of the new Rue Ravenstein and, last but not least, the Mont des Arts itself.

These successive developments were an attempt to smooth out the area's steep inclines, which remain particularly evident in Rue Montagne de la Cour. The Mont des Arts thus forms an artificial plateau (with its gardens at an altitude of 50 m) on the slope descending from Porte de Namur (74 m) to the bottom of the valley (17 m).

The Mont des Arts in the historic heart of Brussels and some principal landmarks: (1) Bourse (Brussels Stock Exchange), (2) Grand-Place, (3) Central Station, (4) Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudula, (5) Coudenberg Church, (6) Royal Palace, (7) Sablon Church.
 © urban.brussels and UrbIS/CIRB

“There is a Mont de la Justice, over there in Koekelberg we must have the Mont du Bon Dieu, and here the Mont des Arts.”

(Leopold II quoted by Baron Carton de Wiart, *Léopold II. Souvenirs des dernières années, 1901-1909*, Goemaere, 1944)

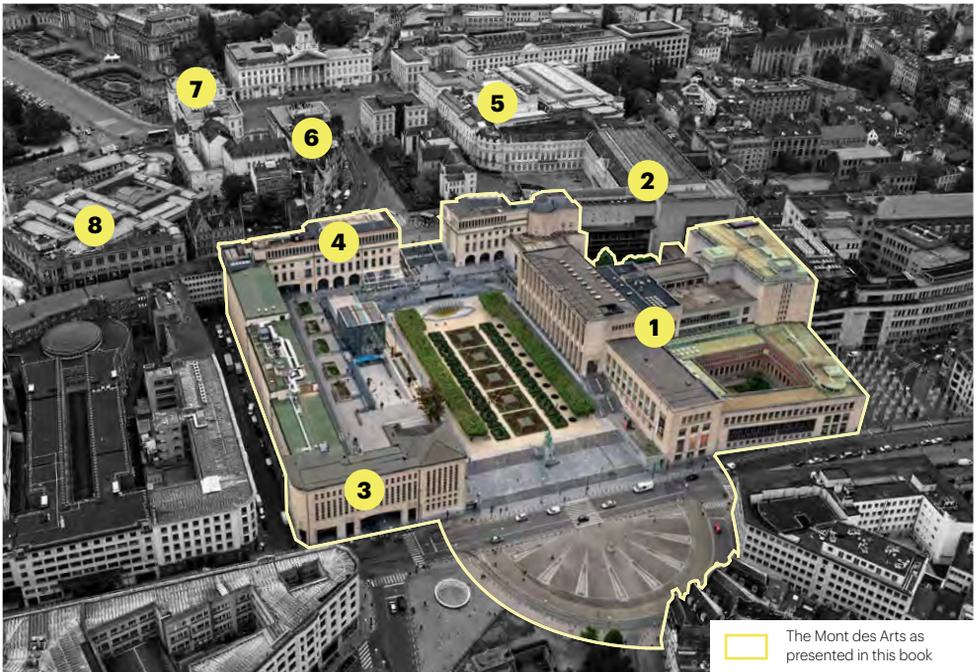
... OF ARTS

Today, the Mont des Arts brings together an impressive number of cultural and artistic institutions in a small area: the Royal Library of Belgium, the National Archives of Belgium, the Palais de la Dynastie and Palais des Congrès, and nearby, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, the Musical Instruments Museum, the BELvue Museum and the Palais des Beaux-Arts (Bozar). Though without parallel in Belgium, such a concentration is not unique in Europe. This is the legacy of a national, centralising vision that was prevalent in the 19th century. At that time, many major European cities

(Berlin, Munich, Amsterdam, Vienna, etc.) built large urban complexes bringing together various museums and cultural and scientific institutions, as a way of reinforcing the status and cohesion of their respective nations as they forged their identities. In Brussels, this trend inspired Leopold II, who had great urban design ambitions for the capital. The sovereign was the driving force behind the project to establish a major cultural centre on the site, although this was not completed until well after his death. He is credited with inventing the name "Mont des Arts", which was first used in 1902 by Henri Maquet, the architect he commissioned to design it.

The main cultural institutions on the Mont des Arts.
(© Schmitt-GlobalView)

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1) Royal Library of Belgium (KBR) | 5) Royal Museums of Fine Arts |
| 2) National Archives of Belgium | 6) Musical Instruments Museum (MIM) |
| 3) Palais de la Dynastie | 7) BELvue Museum |
| 4) Palais des Congrès [SQUARE] | 8) Palais des Beaux-Arts (Bozar) |



Montagne de la Cour

In the Middle Ages, the site was traversed by a commercial artery (*Steenweg*), which crossed the Pentagon (Brussels city centre) from east to west. Its route can still be traced in Rue Montagne de la Cour at the top of the Mont des Arts and Rue de la Madeleine at its foot. Straddling the promontory separating the Coperbeek from the Ruysbroeck valleys, this road crossed Place des Bailles (now Place Royale), the square in front of the Coudenberg ducal palace, before descending the hill.

THE AREA

From the 13th century onwards, the palace attracted both an aristocratic population, which settled on the hillside nearby, but also other social groups: craftsmen and tradesmen working for the elites, Lombard and Jewish financiers. The latter were expelled from Brussels and the Duchy of Brabant in the 14th century, but remained very much present in local place names.

Patrician families acquired plots of land between Place des Bailles and Cantersteen to build often lavish private residences. From the 15th century onwards, this aristocratic neighbourhood was home to many members of the Brabant and Burgundian nobility. The high concentration of mansions belonging to close associates of the palace accounts for the name Montagne de la Cour ("Mount of the Court"). A number of large residences were located along the Escaliers des Juifs: the only surviving patrician mansion from the Burgundian period, the Hôtel de Clèves-Ravenstein, can still be seen on what is now Rue Ravenstein. However, the most remarkable complex in the area was undoubtedly the one belonging to the Nassau

family. It was built in the early 15th century on the site now occupied by the Royal Library of Belgium. An imposing Late Gothic residence with a private chapel dedicated to St George (also known as the Nassau Chapel), it had four wings surrounding an interior courtyard and extensive gardens stretching as far as the current Place du Musée. Archduchess Maria Elisabeth chose to establish her court there after the Coudenberg Palace burned down in 1731. The building was subsequently occupied by Charles of Lorraine, Governor of the Austrian Netherlands from 1741 to 1780, who replaced it with a neoclassical palace in which the old Nassau Chapel was preserved.

While the aristocratic quarter gradually shifted towards the Sablon and Rue aux Laines from the 16th century onwards, Montagne de la Cour and the neighbouring streets remained home to many

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Rue Terarken, the Hôtel de Clèves-Ravenstein and the Escaliers des Juifs (Jewish Stairs). View from Rue Ravenstein before the construction of the Palais des Beaux-Arts.
(© Bibliothèque artistique de l'Académie royale des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles)



« I was also in the Count of Nassau's house, which is very splendidly built and as beautifully adorned. [...] The house stands high, and from it there is a most beautiful view, at which one cannot but wonder: and I do not believe that in all the German lands the like of it exists." »

(Albrecht Dürer, *Diary of His Journey to the Netherlands, 1520-1521*, translation quoted in Albert Dürer by T. Sturge Moore, 1905).

L'hôtel de Nassau à Bruxelles, painting by Willem Van Schoor and Gillis van Tilborgh, 1658. The large garden can be seen in the foreground and the former Montagne de la Cour on the right. (coll. MRBAB, Inv. 224. Photo © Grafisch Buro Lefevre, Heule)

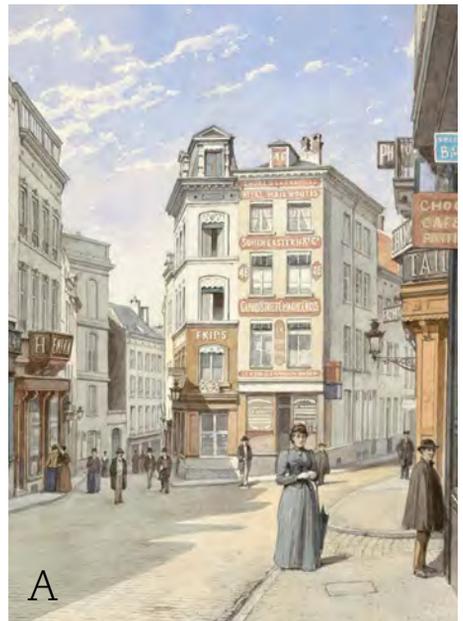
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individuals linked to the court (valets, coachmen, servants, officers, surgeons, artists, etc.) until the second half of the 18th century.

DECLINE

In the 19th century, Rue Montagne de la Cour was one of the main thoroughfares linking the upper and lower parts of the city. Renowned for its luxury boutiques, it played a key role in the commercial dynamism of this part of Brussels. However, it had the disadvantage of a 40-metre height difference between Place Royale and Rue de la Madeleine. By contrast, the adjacent Saint-Roch neighbourhood, between Rue des Sols, Cantersteen and Montagne de la Cour, was beginning to see its fortunes decline. The maze of alleys, dead-end streets and steps was known for its seedy drinking establishments where prostitution was rife. In response to this development, in 1845 the City of

Brussels started to call for "beautification" projects to upgrade the area. The debates about how to transform the neighbourhood were to last for almost a century! Dozens of plans were developed, discussed, amended, postponed and rejected. The aim was to reorganise Montagne de la Cour, clean up the area, get rid of the insalubrious Saint-Roch district, demolish the alleyways that cluttered the slope, and establish easier communications between the Upper and Lower Town.



(A) La rue Montagne de la Cour vue en direction du bas de la ville (Rue Montagne de la Cour looking towards the Lower Town) and (B) L'impasse Saint-Roch, watercolours, Jacques Carabain, 1894-1895. (© MCB, L. 1895.8 and L.1894.11)

REDEVELOPMENT PLANS

Many plans to redevelop Montagne de la Cour were put forward in the second half of the 19th century. They were often self-indulgent, as with the "Palais du Commerce" designed by architects Arveuf and De La Roche in 1854. Others, such as that of Beyaert (1861-1864), would have seen Montagne de la Cour replaced by a series of radiating streets descending towards the Lower Town. The city council made clear its preference for Beyaert's design, but the Belgian state, which controlled the purse strings, opposed it because it involved demolishing the Nassau Palace and Chapel – a controversy that would dog the project until the last few years prior to its completion, a hundred years later. Another downside of this design was the inclusion of straight, steeply sloping thoroughfares.

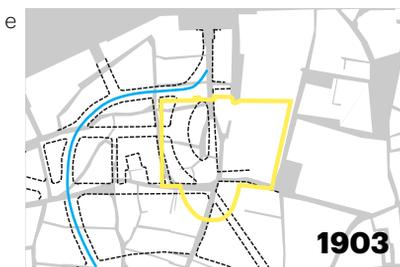
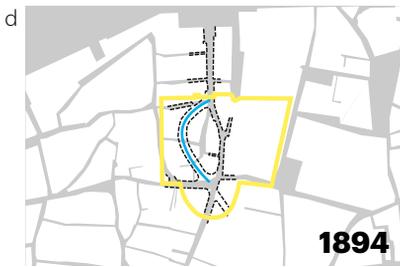
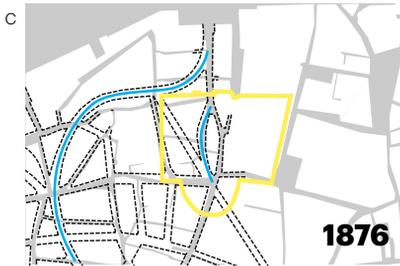
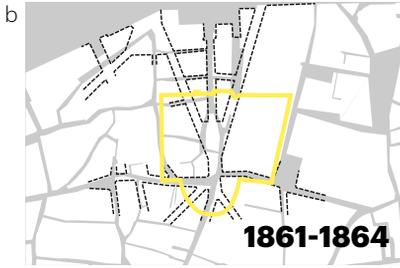
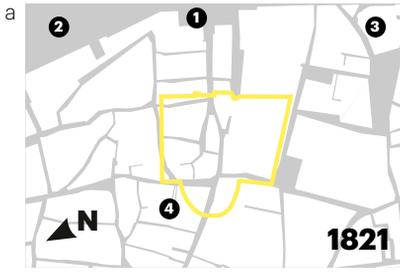


Design for a "Palais du Commerce" by architects Arveuf and De La Roche, 1854. (© ACB, PP 2414)

The plans presented by Henri Maquet from 1876 onwards took better account of the need to mitigate the slopes. He designed two curved streets, the first a sweeping arc from the bottom of Place Royale to Marché aux Herbes, the second, steeper, making a direct assault on the slope as far as Cantersteen. The proposal was greeted with enthusiasm, but was shelved by the city council for a long time due to the uncertainty about the location of the future Central Station and the state of the municipal finances.

The death of mayor Jules Anspach in 1879 marked the end of the major transformation projects spearheaded by the city council (the covering of the Senne, creation of the central boulevards, etc.). Following the economic crisis that hit Brussels in the 1870s, the authorities were primarily concerned with getting the city's finances back on an even keel. It was therefore the State, and especially the ambitious sovereign at its head, that took charge of this mammoth project. In 1882, King Leopold II commissioned Alphonse Balat, architect of the Museum of Fine Arts (1875-1880), to draw up plans combining a museum, archives, library and "Palais de l'Industrie". Balat's design involved a complex built on a substructure extending over the entire





slope of the Coudenberg hill and dominating the lower part of the city.

The King's plans were opposed by Charles Buls, the new mayor of Brussels since 1881, who favoured a layout and style closer to the capital's medieval roots. Also, the taxes levied on the many businesses that were set to disappear made up a substantial part of the municipal budget, which had been under pressure for some years. In 1894, the mayor proposed a more modest redevelopment plan, which retained the network of medieval streets and their shops while also creating a Rue Courbe (Curved Street). In the meantime, however, Leopold II began buying up a large number of plots in the Saint-Roch neighbourhood and made sure that any state subsidy for the area's redevelopment was conditional on the realisation of Maquet's design. The municipal council snubbed the mayor by voting against his plan and accepting the subsidies – a decision that played its part in Buls' resignation four years later, in 1899.

Following Balat's death in 1895, Leopold II appointed Henri Maquet to oversee the "museum area" project, and adapt the plans of his predecessor to incorporate his own road design. The demolition of the Saint-Roch district began in 1897 with the insalubrious blocks around Rue Saint-Roch, Rue de la Croix-Blanche, Rue des

Proposed street layouts as part of the redevelopment plans for Montagne de la COUR. (© urban.brussels and UrbIS/CIRB)

- a. Street layout in 1821 according to the Bastendorf map (in grey)
- b. Henri Beyaert, 1861-1864: radiating streets
- c. Henri Maquet, 1876: curved streets
- d. Charles Buls, 1894: retention of the medieval street network and small curved street
- e. 1903 agreement: complete reorganisation with large curved street (present Rue Ravenstein)

Marked on the map: (1) Place Royale, (2) Parc de Bruxelles, (3) Central Station, (4) Sablon Church.

Site of the Mont des Arts



Proposed elevation for the Mont des Arts by Henri Maquet, Montagne de la Cour side, 1902. (© KBR)

Trois-Têtes and Montagne de la Cour, the north side of which was demolished. In 1902, Maquet presented his design entitled "Mont des Arts" – a name that would ultimately be given to the area as whole. As well as the construction of a "palace" to house major national cultural institutions (Museum of Modern Art, Royal Library, National Archives and various scientific institutions), it also involved the transformation of Montagne de la Cour by creating terraced gardens with steps and slopes to overcome the significant height difference while preserving the view over the city.

In 1903, an agreement was signed between the City of Brussels and the Belgian State for the construction of the Central Station, the complete remodelling of the old neighbourhoods of Putterie, Isabelle, Terarken and Saint-Roch, and the construction of a large "curved street", as originally proposed by Henri Maquet (the current Rue Ravenstein). Although Maquet's design

for a Mont des Arts was not included in the agreement, everything seemed to be on track to move this project forward. However, in 1908, Parliament ultimately rejected the Mont des Arts plans. The area, already largely demolished, remained a wasteland...

The Saint-Roch neighbourhood after its partial demolition, photo from 1905. The site became home to Square Vacherot and later the Mont des Arts as we know it today. (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels, a103011)



SQUARE VACHEROT

With the Maquet plans abandoned once and for all, Leopold II ordered a temporary garden to be created on the empty Saint-Roch site, at his own expense, ahead of the International Exposition of 1910. The aim was to conceal as much of the eyesore as possible while creating a "green balcony" overlooking the city. The square was laid out around 1908-1909 by Jules Vacherot, landscape architect for the City of Paris, who had been head gardener for the 1900 Paris Exposition and created numerous parks and gardens including those of the Trocadéro in the French capital and the Château des Milandes in the Périgord region.

Vacherot designed an elegant garden, full of undulations and breathing spaces, with terraced flowerbeds connected by steps, as well as trees and waterfalls, and sculptures by Godefroid Devreese and Josué Dupon. The upper terrace had an orientation table allowing visitors to identify the visual landmarks of the Lower Town. Much loved by Brussels residents, the square was variously described as a "haven of peace", a "basket of greenery", a "hill-cake" and a "balcony outside the window of Place Royale". Though only intended as a stopgap, the garden remained in place until the mid-1950s.

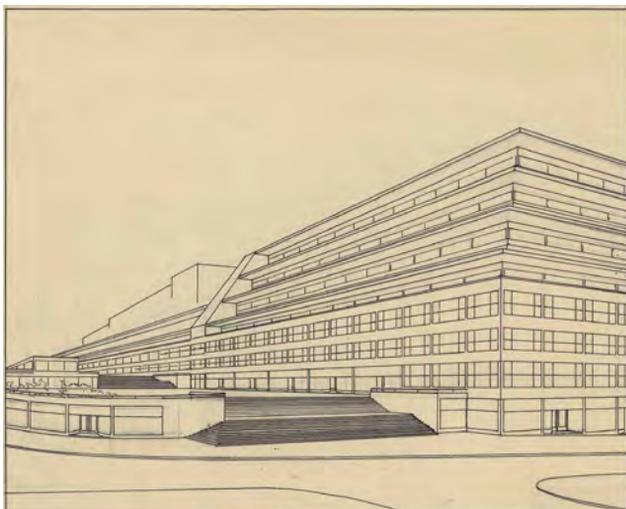


Aerial view of Square Vacherot (centre of photo), c. 1938.

(© L'Émulation, 1938, no. 4, p. 53)

The Albertine

Amid the ongoing indecision from the 1910s to the 1930s, with a succession of new plans shelved by the government, Square Vacherot, though originally designed as a temporary garden, became established as a permanent fixture, which the people of Brussels increasingly took to their hearts. However, a royal event would mark a new step towards the final development of the Mont des Arts. Although it was Leopold II who spearheaded the area's redesign, his successor King Albert I was also, unwittingly, to leave his mark on it. His death in a mountaineering accident in February 1934 was met with an outpouring of emotion among the Belgian people. Public subscriptions were soon being collected to build monuments in memory of the deceased monarch. Plans were quickly under way to build a new Royal Library in tribute to Albert I. In April 1934, a few months after the sovereign's death, the socialist Jules Destrée wrote a piece in the newspaper *Le Soir* calling for the creation of the "Albertine", a designation inspired by other European libraries named after eminent men, such as the Laurentian in Florence, the Ambrosian in Milan, the Bodleian in Oxford and the Mazarine in Paris. A month later, on 24 May, King Leopold III gave his official backing to the scheme in a letter to the Prime Minister. This royal edict resulted on 7 March 1935 in the passing of a law establishing the Albert I Library Fund, an independent public body that would be able to manage the project free from the vicissitudes of politics.



Urban development plan for the Mont des Arts, Victor Bourgeois, 1931. (© CIVVA)

CHOOSING A SITE

One of the first tasks facing the board in charge of the Albert I Library Fund was to choose the location of the library. A lot was at stake in this decision, as the building had to incorporate a symbolic, a commemorative and a national dimension. As such, it needed to combine a central location in the Belgian capital with a suitably monumental design.

With the potential for a substantial injection of public cash, the Albertine project was seen as a golden opportunity to solve one of the many urban planning problems that beset Brussels, including eyesores, run-down areas and inadequate connections. Many sites were considered. Several leading architects published articles in the specialist press advocating different locations. A commission of architects and town planners appointed by the board of the Albert I Library Fund

narrowed these down to 14, but no immediate consensus emerged.

In September 1935, after a further round of discussions, unanimity seemed to be building around the Cantersteen block and the site of the former Granvelle Palace, demolished a few years earlier. The City of Brussels was in favour of the proposal. As the landowner, it was keen to give new commercial impetus to an area gutted by the North-South rail connection. However, it was soon forced to sell the land to a private investor for budgetary reasons. The site was later occupied by Galerie Ravenstein. In March 1936, the committee chose Coudenberg, which had initially been ruled out due to the high cost of developing it, and this decision was subsequently endorsed by the government. The Botanical Garden was the second choice. However, the chosen location meant that the new library would be at the centre of a wider redevelopment scheme, the Mont des Arts project beloved of Leopold II, of which it would only form one part.

URBAN PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE COMPETITIONS

In 1937, a special government commission, including a representative from the Albert I Library Fund, launched a competition to redevelop the entire site. In addition to the library, the candidates were asked to design new premises for the National Archives of Belgium, the Medals Room and Prints Room, the Chalcography Department and an extension to the Royal Museums. Among the requirements was the need to retain St George's Chapel and the façades of the former palace of Charles of Lorraine.

A total of 49 entries were submitted. The jury, chaired by Albert Lilienberg and Henry van de Velde, awarded joint first prize to "Serenity, Order, Expression" by Jules Ghobert and Eduard Van Steenberghe's "Akropolis". Both designs were selected from the category that included the creation of a large central public space. However, the jury noted in its report that none of the proposals fully met the objectives. In its view, the fault lay not with the candidates, but with an overly ambitious

The joint winners of the Mont des Arts redevelopment competition in 1937.

(A) "Akropolis" by Eduard Van Steenberghe. (© KIK-IRPA Brussels, b065921)

(B) "Serenity, Order, Expression" by Jules Ghobert. (© *L'Émulation* 1938, no. 4, pp. 55-56)



brief and conditions that were too strict (exact dimensions of the buildings, the retention of the chapel and the façades of the old palace). The commission therefore had the Public Works Department draw up a blueprint for a new competition. This provided for a large quadrangular esplanade open to the city centre, with a side street running under a covered passage.

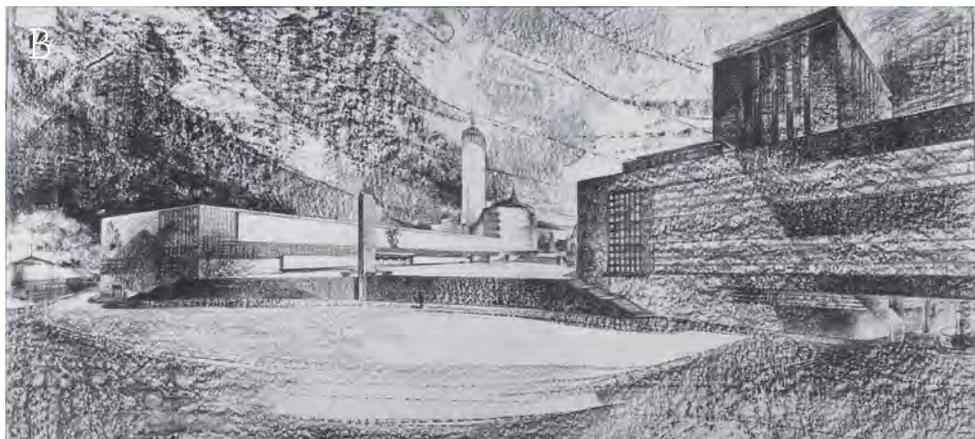
The following year, however, the State's financial position forced the committee to reconsider its choice of location. In September 1938, a new competition was launched to build the library on the Botanical Garden site. This was won by Maurice Houyoux for his design "Measure for Measure". However, the chosen site and the resulting plans to demolish some glasshouses generated public opposition, which in October 1939 led the government to backtrack and revert to its original choice of Coudenberg.

The winners of the two competitions were appointed to implement the final design, with



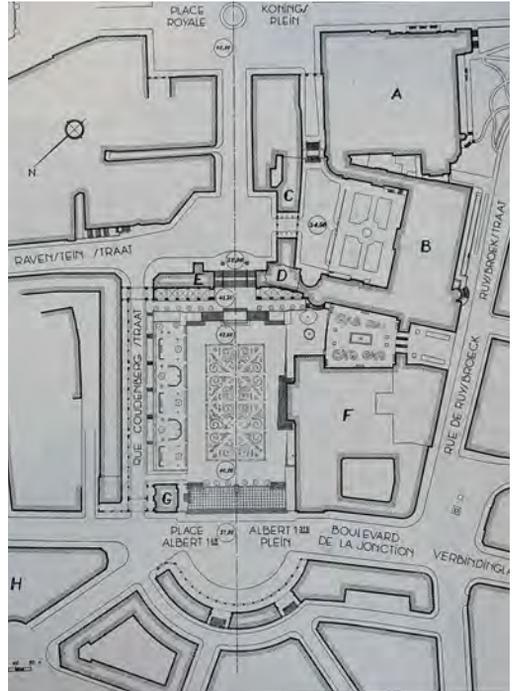
"Measure for Measure": design by Maurice Houyoux for a library on the Botanical Garden site, 1938. (© CIVA)

Jules Ghobert responsible for the overall site layout and Maurice Houyoux for the library and archive building, Eduard Van Steenberghe having with-drawn. Approved by the Albert I Library Fund on 5 June 1946, the final plans combined the two winners' designs and the blueprint drawn up by the Public Works Department.



THE CIVIC COMPLEX

The architects' plans for the Mont des Arts sought to combine functionality with a desire for formal grandeur. Their aim was to provide a showcase for the city, highlighting existing elements (by opening up the views towards Place Royale and the Town Hall tower) as well as new features (the Royal Library, the equestrian statue of King Albert I and the Palais des Congrès). This desire for an impressive setting was reflected in the positioning of monumental buildings clad in white stone around a grand public space that combined an array of functions and circulation routes while exploiting the existing relief by means of platforms, gardens and steps, adjoined by a new street lined with shops. The Mont des Arts thus offered a reinterpretation of the codes of neoclassical urban development.



Final design for the Mont des Arts, 1946.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A. Museum of Ancient Art | E. House of Learned Societies |
| B. Museums and Archives | F. Albert I Library |
| C. Medals, Prints and Chalcography | G. War Museum |
| D. Protestant Chapel | |

(© Fonds Albert I^{er}, Rapport au gouvernement, 1946)

MONUMENTAL AND CLASSICIST ARCHITECTURE

Given the project's long gestation and slow execution, the underlying principles and stylistic choices, which were conceived in the 1930s, might have appeared dated by the time the work was completed. Although the buildings were erected in the 1950s and 1960s, the chosen style drew on the dominant codes of classical architecture from before the Second World War: cubic structures with an imposing monumentality and compactness, characterised by the symmetry, severity and vertical rhythm of the façades. This return to the language of classicism, or what the Italian architect Franco Borsi called the "monumental order", reflects how architectural thinking at that time was made to serve nationalist projects in Europe, both under authoritarian regimes and in democratic countries. The start of this trend was evident in the competition to design the new

League of Nations headquarters in Geneva (1926), in which Houyoux took part, and was consecrated at the 1937 Paris International Exposition.

In Belgium, classicist monumental design was very much in evidence in the public architecture and office buildings of the 1930s and again in the 1950s. In Brussels, this style principally characterised buildings along the new artery laid out as part of the construction of the North-South rail connection, and in particular along Rue Ravenstein, home to Galerie Ravenstein (1954-1958) designed by Alexis Dumont with his nephew Philippe Dumont, and just next door to



Maurice Houyoux's design for the competition to build a new headquarters for the League of Nations in Geneva, 1926
 (© CIVA)

it the headquarters of Belgian Shell (1931-1934) and Assurances Générales de Trieste (1936) by architects Marcel Van Goethem and Alexis Dumont.

The monumental classicist style of the architecture developed along the North-South connection.

- A. Palais de la Dynastie (Mont des Arts)
- B. Galerie Ravenstein
- C. Belgian Shell
- D. Assurances Générales de Trieste
- E. National Bank

(© Schmitt-GlobalView)



STRIPPED-DOWN STYLE AND DECORATIVE SCULPTURE

It was a stripped-down architectural style that made little use of decorative sculpture. When such carving was used, it softened the somewhat austere look of the building, and was often executed by sculptors considered today as being among the most representative of the contemporary Belgian school. Prime examples include George Grard, Marcel Rau and Charles Leplae, who worked on the façade of the National Bank (1940-1957) and on Boulevard de Berlaumont, designed by architect Marcel Van Goethem, another remarkable instance of monumental classicism in Brussels.

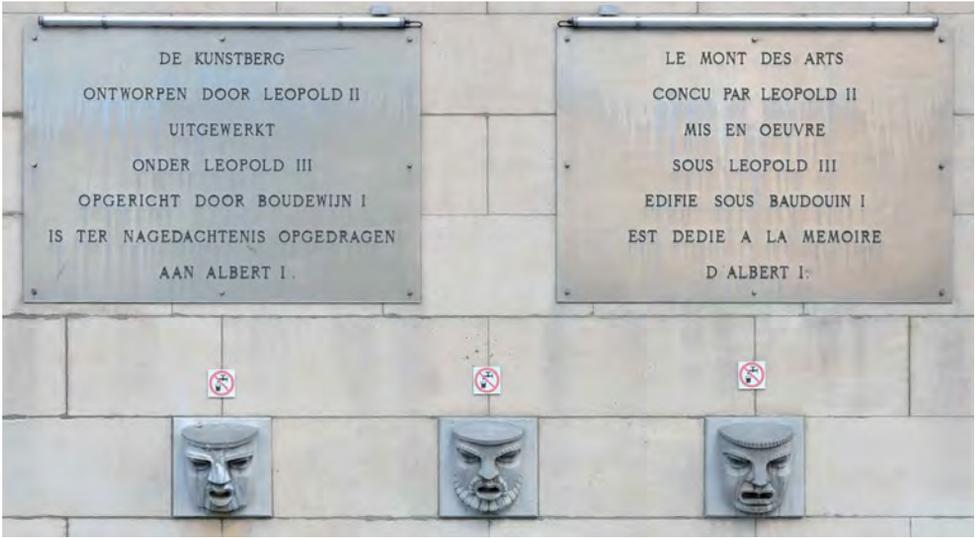
To complement the architecture of the Mont des Arts, the Ministry of Public Works also commissioned a series of sculptors to create bas-reliefs featuring iconography linked to the purpose or function of the buildings, focusing on the sciences, the arts and the history of the area. The formal vocabulary was influenced by the pre-war aesthetic and remained very close to Art Deco, in keeping with the classicist and official nature of the architecture. Although the works were recognisably by different artists, as a whole they

demonstrated a great concern for unity and fitted within a coherent artistic programme. Sculptures and fountains were also designed for the gardens laid out by René Pechère on the esplanade.

Today, these works form a unique and representative account of mid-20th-century Belgian artistic output in the field of statuary. Alongside Alfred Courtens, who designed the equestrian statue of King Albert I, we find works by the expressionist sculptors Oscar Declerk and Oscar Jespers, Mons-based artist Gustave Jacobs, Dolf Ledel and Nat Neujean, both highly esteemed portraitists, Charles Leplae, whose work centres on subjects in pensive and introspective attitudes in a pared-down classical style, and Marcel Rau, designer of the monumental metal door of the Palais de la Dynastie.

On the Mont des Arts construction site, each sculptor had a temporary workshop to carve their bas-reliefs in situ. Note the stone blocks waiting to be carved on the façade of the Palais des Congrès (right). (© CIVA)





Commemorative plaques and Roger Jacob's sculptures *Les Cracheurs* (The Spitters).
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

The Royal Library

The origins of the library's holdings go back to the Dukes of Burgundy in the 15th century. In 1559, Philip II brought the book collection together at the Coudenberg Palace. After the palace was destroyed by fire in 1731, this "Burgundy Library" was moved in 1754 to the *Domus Isabellae*, on what is now Rue Baron Horta, then in 1795 to the former palace of Charles of Lorraine on Place du Musée. The government established the Royal Library of Belgium on 19 June 1837. It comprised the holdings of the former Burgundy Library, together with the 70,000-volume collection of the Ghent bibliophile Charles Van Hulthem, which had been purchased by the Belgian State. The library opened to the public on 21 May 1839, and was housed in the left wing of the Palais de l'Industrie on Place du Musée, a 19th-century extension to Charles of Lorraine's palace. It eventually moved to the Mont des Arts in the second half of the 20th century.



The Royal Library in the Palais de l'Industrie.
In the foreground, the statue of Charles of Lorraine by Louis Jehotte (1848).

(© CRMS)

A NEW LIBRARY

The first stone of the new library was laid by King Baudouin on 16 February 1954. Work began with the large book storage facility, which needed to be built quickly as the old warehouse on Place du Musée was reaching saturation point and had stability issues. The transfer of books to the new facility, via a covered walkway, began in 1957. They could be consulted in a temporary reading room that opened on the top floor of the book store in April 1960. In 1957, major changes were made to the library plans to take account of new functional requirements and the route of the soon-to-be-built Boulevard de l'Empereur (1958-1959). When Maurice Houyoux died in 1960, his colleague Roland Delers took over the project. Delers had to completely redesign the main façade to incorporate the old St George's Chapel, which had been earmarked for demolition in 1946 but was reprieved after a long and heated debate. Meanwhile, work was also under way on the National Archives of Belgium building, which was constructed on Rue de Ruysbroeck between 1961 and 1973. The Albert I Royal Library was inaugurated on 17



The Mont des Arts under construction. Note the temporary façade to conceal work on the Royal Library during Expo 58. (© La Technique des travaux, May-June 1959)

February 1969. An open day to mark the occasion attracted around 3,000 visitors. In the evening, a banquet was held for 250 people, with foreign librarians invited as guests of honour. The different departments showcased the principal items they had acquired since 1954. Publications about the history of the institution and its collections came rolling off the press, and a commemorative medal was created by the Antwerp artist Albert Poels.



The large book store seen from Rue de Ruysbroeck. (© La Technique des travaux, July-August 1959)



Commemorative medal by Albert Poels, 1969. (© KBR)

KBR

In 2019, the Royal Library of Belgium was officially renamed KBR. Combining the Dutch and French abbreviations KB (Koninklijke Bibliotheek) and BR (Bibliothèque royale), the acronym had previously been used unofficially by the library's users.

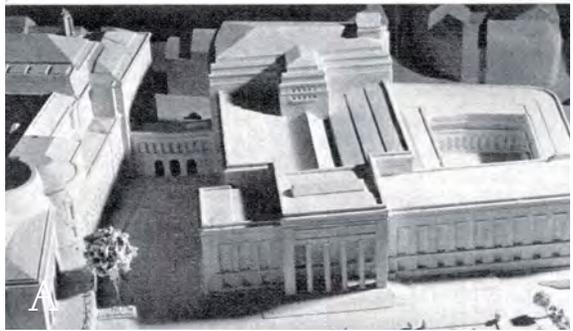
One of KBR's main tasks is to preserve and acquire all written material produced in Belgium, in accordance with the Legal Deposit Act (1965). The general catalogue comprises around five million volumes covering 150 kilometres of shelving! There are also a series of special collections including maps and plans, chalcography, prints and drawings, newspapers, manuscripts, coins and medals, music, and digital collections.

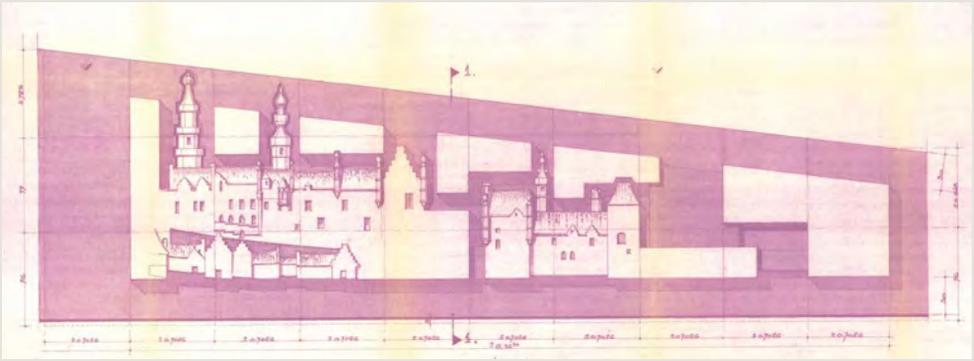
towards Rue de Ruysbroeck and Boulevard de l'Empereur. An open patio of arched arcades occupies the west wing, while a second interior courtyard with a glazed section of façade dominates the east wing. The book store lies to the south; its elevation forming a screen facing Rue de Ruysbroeck is now obscured. Two steles were erected near the entrance: one in memory of a former curator of the Royal Library, Max Raymond Sulzberger, who died at Auschwitz in 1944, the other commemorating a hero of the First World War, Jean-Louis Van Sina, a soldier of the 9th line regiment, who lost his life at the Battle of Liège in 1914.

MONUMENTAL FAÇADES IN A TIME OF MODERNITY

The imposing wing of the library stands to the south of the Mont des Arts esplanade. Bordered by Boulevard de l'Empereur and Rue de Ruysbroeck, the complex is the result of an arrangement of multiple rectangular volumes occupied by separate premises devoted to the various departments and activities (public halls, administration, storage, general reading room, periodicals room, catalogue room, bibliography room, exhibition spaces and book store). Towards the esplanade, the projecting central part features an open gallery with 16 colossal pillars – a late adaptation, when the decision was taken to preserve St George's Chapel. A monumental exterior staircase leads from the bottom of the Mont des Arts, on the Place de l'Albertine side, to the portico overlooking the garden. On either side stand lower wings with alternating opaque and glazed surfaces, extending

- A. Model of the Royal Library.
(© Fonds Albert Ier, *Rapport au gouvernement*, 1946)
B. Aerial view of the KBR as it is today.
(W. Robberechts © urban.brussels)





Design for the bas-relief on the base of St. George's Chapel when this was incorporated into the new Royal Library. It depicts the former Nassau residence that once stood on this site. (© CRMS)

INTEGRATING THE OLD INTO THE NEW

The Mont des Arts complex incorporates – or conceals – two architectural elements of the former Nassau residence and palace of Charles of Lorraine.

St George's Chapel was the private oratory of the Nassau family, who served the Dukes of Burgundy. It was completely rebuilt in the early 16th century, with work continuing until 1524. In the 18th century, during the reconstruction of Charles of Lorraine's palace, the chapel was preserved at basement level. In the early 19th century, it was leased out to a brewer. Later, it was used as a storage area for sculptures, as a laboratory for the Museum of Natural Sciences from 1862, as the headquarters for the International Institute of Bibliography from 1895, and as a reading room for the National Archives of Belgium from 1923 to 1958. Its preservation was already included as a condition in the Mont des Arts architectural competition in 1937. In 1961-1962, the decision was taken to keep it in situ

integrating it into the new buildings of the Royal Library of Belgium. It was then restored and opened as an exhibition hall in 1969. It is a plain Late Gothic chapel made of Ledian sandstone according to a rectangular, west-facing floor plan. The nave is divided by columns, while an elegant rood screen is supported by two wide three-centred arches on either side of a central column. The chapel was listed by government decree on 22 November 2001.

The right wing of the Palais des Congrès also conceals another old feature preserved on the Mont des Arts: part of the Royal Chapel, the former private chapel from Charles of Lorraine's palace. The first stone was laid in May 1760 and construction took just over two years, supervised by architect Jean Faulte. Built in Louis XV style, and a forerunner of neoclassicism, it featured a gallery that allowed the Lorraine family to walk from the palace to the sanctuary. Gifted to the protestants by the Royal House of the Netherlands between 1815 and 1830, it was registered as the Protestant Church of Brussels after Belgian independence.

King Leopold I (1831-1865), a Lutheran, worshipped there. The chapel was rebuilt by architect Henri Van Dievoet in 1890. Restored in 1970 and 1987 in keeping with the 18th-century tradition, it was listed in 2011.



St George's Chapel. In the background: the central core of the library under construction. Undated photo. (© CRMS)

THE SOUTH-EAST PATIO AND GARDEN

The Albert I Royal Library includes two private green spaces within interior courtyards surrounded by the various wings of the buildings. One is located to the north-west, the other to the south-east (main garden). According to Ghobert's initial general plan (1937), in the place currently occupied by the south-east patio, there was to be a pedestrian walkway connecting the Mont des Arts esplanade to Rue de Ruysbroeck. Following the decision to preserve St George's Chapel and integrate it into the library buildings, the extension of the library's main façade as far as Charles of Lorraine's palace, as proposed by Delers with a view to preserving its symmetry, was implemented in 1963. This space, initially designed as a pedestrian walkway accessible to the public, was consequently redesigned to make it a private garden.

The landscaping of this enclosed garden is contemporary with the final phases of construction of the various wings of the library, and has likely not undergone any major modifications since the

1970s. Its modernist style matches the architecture of the surrounding façades. Located slightly below the level of the current reception hall, the space is served by a staircase in bush-hammered blue limestone slabs, echoing the cladding used for some parts of the Mont des Arts gardens.

Access from the garden to Rue de Ruysbroeck is made possible via a passage that can be closed by gates, overlooked by a covered gallery connecting two wings of the KBR buildings. The composition of the garden includes lines and geometric patterns, as well as a horizontality that contrasts with the verticality of various species of trees (deciduous and coniferous) and the façades of the surrounding building. The space alternates between mineral and plant-based geometric zones, featuring surfaces covered with slabs or gravel as well as flowerbeds planted with trees, bushy shrubs – including a corkscrew hazel (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta') – low hedges, ground cover plants and small lawns. A fine saucer magnolia (*Magnolia x soulangeana*) provides an ornamental touch with its magnificent spring flowers.

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The south-east patio of the Royal Library. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

INTERIORS COMBINING PRESTIGE AND FUNCTIONALITY

In keeping with the monumental classicism of the library's exterior, Houyoux and Delers originally opted for an imposing, formal design for the interior. Large, classically inspired rooms were intended to showcase the institution's royal and national credentials. However, these ideas seemed outdated after the Second World War, when there was a tendency to refocus architecture on the human element and on users, and to give a prominent place to modern techniques and technologies. While the "monumental" structures conceived by the architects were retained, it was felt that their final design should incorporate the requirements of a modern national library, combining grandeur and prestige with functionality.

The main architect of this modern transformation of the interiors was undoubtedly the firm of De Coene. A series of contracts enabled the Kortrijk-based company and the head of its design department, Philippe Neerman (who oversaw large-scale customised fit-outs), to establish themselves as the lead designers for the interior spaces of the Royal Library. Their work spanned a decade as the library gradually opened to the public, from the temporary reading room in 1960 to the inauguration of the final departments. These specialist departments (chalcography, medals, prints, etc.) were not delivered until the 1970s, with Philippe Neerman then overseeing the project on a freelance basis. The contracts



covered finishing materials, furniture and decoration. Accordingly, the interior designer was able to propose a "total" design concept, with a choice of furniture and precious materials befitting the high-end specifications: marble from Burgundy and Sicily, teak from Moulmein (Myanmar) and high-quality leather.

The periodicals reading room.

- (A) Design by Maurice Houyoux (between 1938 and 1947) (© CIVVA)
- (B) Interior in 1969 (© KBR)
- (C) As it looks since 2018 (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



(© Beeldbank Kortrijk)

DE COENE

De Coene (Kortrijkse Kunstwerkstede Gebroeders De Coene) was founded in Kortrijk in the late 19th century. During the interwar period, it acquired an international dimension and reputation through the production of its laminated wood furniture. It designed all the interior furniture and some of the stained-glass windows for various prestigious Brussels projects, such as Michel Polak's *Résidence Palace* (1923-1926) and *Forest Town Hall* by Jean-Baptiste Dewin (1926-1935).

After being placed in receivership for economic collaboration during the war, the company sought to create a new, more modern image for itself. In the 1950s, De Coene expanded into carpentry and joinery. Its prefabricated structures and modules met with great success. In 1954, it managed to secure an exclusive licence for the production and sale of Knoll furniture in the Benelux countries and the Belgian Congo. This proved to be a godsend, as the US firm would go on to become an "international icon" in the business world. In 1956, De Coene set up its own consulting engineers office under the direction of Philippe Neerman, as a result of which the company had everything it needed to strike a new balance between prestige and modernity.

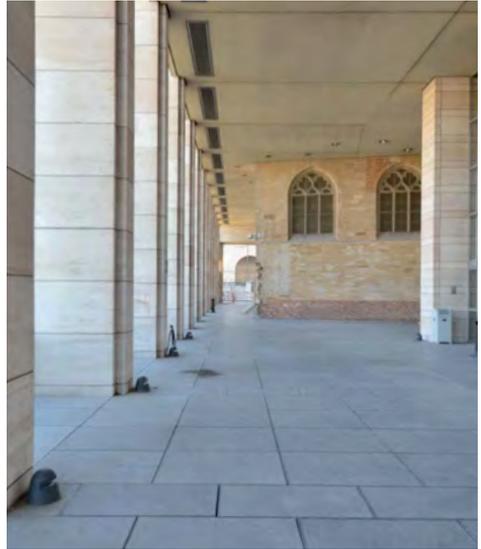
The licence paved the way for numerous complete interior design contracts for offices of public institutions and large companies established in Belgium. De Coene created the interior design for the former headquarters of Banque Lambert in Brussels, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the National Archives of Belgium and the Tour du Midi (South Tower), and for many town halls and Belgian embassies around the world. Elsewhere in Europe, the company designed rooms for the Dutch House of Representatives as well as conference rooms for UNESCO in Paris and at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

Since many of these designs are no longer in existence, the decorative schemes at the KBR, by virtue of both their scale and scarcity, represent an important record of the work of this major international firm.

THE ENTRANCE

The original main entrance was located one level above the esplanade. Under the gallery overlooking the garden, tall windows illuminate the vestibule, which is entered via a glazed anteroom. The vestibule is an extension of the gallery in that its ceiling is the same height and it shares the same materials, with the rough stone facing of the exterior façade and its stonework carried on all the way through the anteroom. Beyond that there is a gradual transition to the interior cladding: light beige marble on the floor and polished Burgundy stone panels for the vestibule, and dark grey marble veined with white in the stairs and circulation spaces open to the public.

The great hall leads to a cloakroom and built-in telephone booths on the right. After that, opposite the entrance, visitors are invited to ascend a flight of stairs leading to the upper level and the general reading room, crossing the perpendicular corridor and main stairwell.



The gallery and St George's Chapel.
 (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

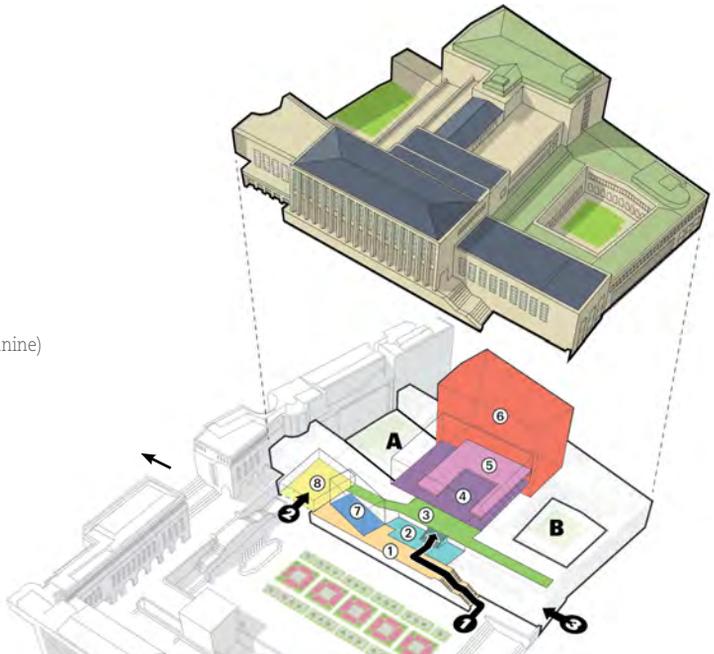
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Plan of the Royal Library.
 (O. Bogaerts, 2023 © urban.brussels)

- (1) Gallery
- (2) Entrance hall
- (3) Corridor and main stairwell
- (4) Main reading room
- (5) Secondary reading room (mezzanine)
- (6) Large book store
- (7) St George's Chapel
- (8) Main entrance (since 2007)

A South-east patio
B North-west patio

- ❶ Original main entrance
- ❷ Main entrance since 2007
- ❸ Secondary entrance (Boulevard de l'Empereur)





The entrance hall. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

The entrance axis thus created enters the right section of the reading room, slightly off centre. This reflects the late alteration to the façade design in order to incorporate St George's Chapel, with the offset resulting from the remodelling of the plan around the parts already built. Where Houyoux had planned a symmetrical, monumental and classical pathway leading directly to the heart of the library, the new layout offered a gradual, less formal revelation, more in keeping with the architectural ideas of its time.

The imposing stairwell running perpendicular to this entrance axis extends over the entire height of the building, from the bottom basement to the sixth floor. The straight staircase features two flights per floor with broad landings. The light flooding in at the top reflects off the white plastered walls and the metal railings. On the stairs, metal gates of the same colour shut off parts not accessible to the public.

THE READING ROOM

Glazed swinging doors give access to the general reading room for contemporary printed documents. This room is a large open space organised in a U-shape on two levels, its areas defined primarily by furniture rather than closed partitions. This openness once again reflects the evolving conception of interior spaces, the idea being to avoid creating a fixed design in order to accommodate future changes to the spaces. The walls and columns are decorated with the same beige marble as the vestibule. On the ceiling, triangular wooden coffers frame the lighting rails.

Within this space, the entrance area leads to a large double-height space, marked out on the ground by grey marble. This accommodates the reception desk and extends as far as the loan desk. Elsewhere, the floor is covered with fitted carpet. Whereas Houyoux had favoured marble for formality and prestige, Philippe Neerman



The large reading room. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

and De Coene opted for carpet for functional reasons linked to acoustic comfort.

The loan desk is very long, following the inside face of the U. It is made of wood and covered with screwed beechwood slats, which are also used for the catalogue consultation tables and other pieces of furniture. The catalogue room and the bibliography room, initially designed as separate rooms, are incorporated into the open space, to the right and left of the entrance respectively. The main reading room lies to the south-east of this space. The double height and large windows opening onto the patio flood it with natural light. A secondary reading room occupies the mezzanine on the upper level. This is accessed by side stairs clad in the same Burgundy stone as the walls.

THE SPECIALIST DEPARTMENTS

The various specialist departments open to the public are spread over several levels on either side of the entrance axis. The Manuscripts reading room and Rare Books reading room each open onto one of the two patios. The low ceilings and warm shades of the teak bookcases along the walls give these rooms a more intimate feel, better suited to consulting rare books. The maps and plans room is a more open space, in keeping with the documents showcased there. Wood is the dominant material in this room, with teak panelling and oak herringbone parquet flooring. Opposite the entrance is the large conference hall, under a ceiling supported by wide arched beams, a stage, proscenium arch and sycamore panelling frame an auditorium of white leather seats.

On the upper floors there are other departments and spaces for associations housed at the

library, including the musicology department, which has a teak-pannelled auditorium with narrow strip parquet flooring. In the wing running along Boulevard de l'Empereur, a secondary entrance gives access to a hall leading into a large exhibition room on the upper floor. Known as the Museum, this hall has white enamel columns on both sides and high windows opening onto both the boulevard and the north-west patio.



The conference room. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

The floor is covered with light Sicilian marble, and the ceiling with semi-cylindrical coffers and light troughs.

In recent years, the building has undergone a number of redevelopments, which have affected the interior spaces. In 2007, KBR's main entrance was moved and incorporated into the base of the building, near the Mont des Arts fountain. The medals room that overlooked the new

entrance was also moved, with the loss of its historical design, to accommodate the new KBR Museum that opened in 2020. The periodicals room also saw its original design completely overhauled in 2018.

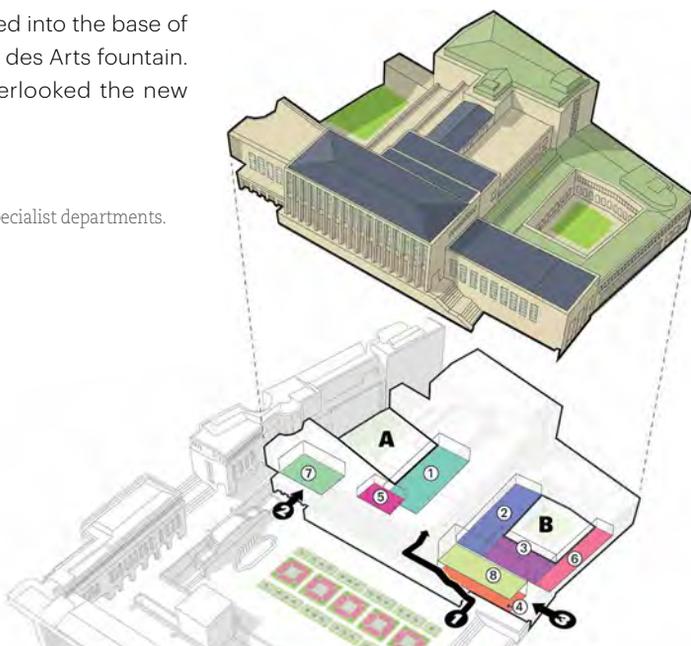
Plan of the Royal Library and its specialist departments.

(O. Bogaerts, 2023 © urban.brussels)

- (1) Manuscripts room
- (2) Rare books room
- (3) Maps and plans room
- (4) Large conference room
- (5) Musicology department
- (6) Exhibition room
- (7) Medals room
- (8) Periodicals room

- A South-east patio**
- B North-west patio**

- 1** Original main entrance
- 2** Main entrance since 2007
- 3** Secondary entrance (Boulevard de l'Empereur)



THE OFFICES

The upper floors of the Boulevard de l'Empereur wing are reserved for the library's management and administrative departments. These private spaces have also been given a high-end look. They are served on either side by two secondary stairwells made of the same materials as the main staircase. The large boardroom is accessed via a double door padded with yak leather. The floor is parqueted and the walls panelled in Macassar ebony. In the curator's office, Moulmein teak and fitted carpet are the dominant materials. The materials in the administrative offices are less opulent but still of high quality, including avodire wood partitions and linoleum. De Coene furniture was chosen to match the finishing materials.



Office corridor.
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



The large council chamber. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

THE CAFETERIA AND STAFF ACCOMMODATION

Located above the central core of the building, the cafeteria is an extensive open space lit by high windows. On the one side, the windows open onto a large terrace overlooking the south-east patio and the Mont des Arts gardens; on the other, they offer a magnificent panoramic view stretching from the Lower Town all the way to Heysel. Features include teak-panelled walls, marble columns and a bar made of reflective metal sheeting. A well-lit ceiling punctuated by strips of wood opens up in the centre of the room. The furniture is tailored to this space, including heavy stone-topped tables and faux-leather upholstered chairs designed by a colleague of Neerman for the Philips headquarters in Eindhoven.

On the upper floor, at the top of the main staircase, there are yet more offices as well as the entrance to the curator's penthouse apartment, which

crowns the building's central core. The high entrance vestibule has a large opening in the ceiling with a wooden grille. It provides the setting for a quarter-turn staircase made of dark wood, with a central stringer, white metal balustrade and wide handrail. The rest of the apartment is mainly on one level. It has a large living room with dark wood flooring and a fireplace clad with stone resembling that used on the façades. A dining room is separated from the living room by sliding wooden partitions. To the rear are bedrooms and offices with built-in furniture and cupboards, probably made of teak. Two large terraces either side of the penthouse are designed as mineral gardens featuring smooth pebbles and flagstone paths.

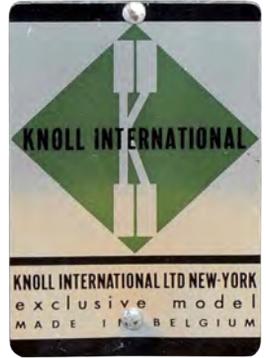


THE FURNITURE

The Royal Library was furnished with particular care and attention, based on a holistic interior design by the company De Coene. With many of the firm's creations having disappeared elsewhere, the KBR's furnishings now represent an example unrivalled in terms of their scale and coherence. Neerman's own designs are combined with Knoll's iconic models: slatted wooden tables, teak bookcases, teak and steel desks, and lecterns for rare books made of Okoume and teak wood strips perfectly complement the full-height teak wall panelling.

The chairs chosen by De Coene for the reading rooms came from the Knoll catalogue's *70 Series* by Eero Saarinen. The versions here feature matt chrome-steel legs and Tibetan yak leather upholstery. With their open backrests and wide seats, they allow

sitters to change position regularly and so remain comfortable during long sessions poring over books. The reading tables, designed by Neerman, combine two wooden tops connected by a chrome base and central beam, thus avoiding the inconvenience of table legs as much as possible. The worktop is made of Okoume wood panels, finished with teak strips sawn from 30-mm-thick wooden panels offering greater



The Knoll International logo on the underside of the chairs.
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



resistance to wear. Other work surfaces have additional features to combat wear. The tops of the counters and the tables used for consulting index cards, for example, are made of 35-mm-thick Bakelite-coated beechwood strips, a material that is not only tougher but also acoustically efficient. As the Bakelite-coated slats could not be glued, they were fixed with stainless steel screws. Although Neerman called these a mere "technical necessity", the regularity of their positioning creates a distinctive look.

The central desk is covered with teak wood, which, together with steel, is the dominant material in the room's furnishings, most notably the desks, book-cases and index card catalogues.

One final thing to note: at the request of Herman Liebaers, the Royal Library's chief curator from 1956 to 1973, the design team sought to create the most effective possible interaction between books, readers and staff. Various items of technical equipment, described as "revolutionary" by Neerman, were installed to this end. From the central desk, staff could relay requests directly to the book warehouse located on the floor below by means of a pneumatic system (now decommissioned), with books automatically sent up to the reading room in a book lift. Once the books arrived at the loan desk, staff could inform readers that their books were available by means of a system of lights built into the reading tables.



B



C

- The original furniture in the large reading room:
- A. 70 Series chairs by Eero Saarinen and reading tables by Philippe Neerman
 - B. Counters and tables for consulting index cards
 - C. Technical equipment

The Palais de la Dynastie

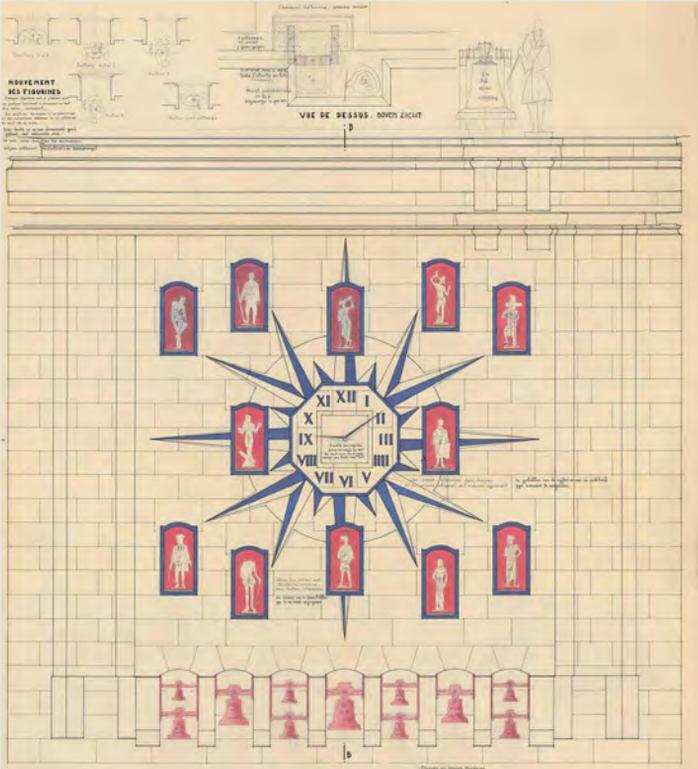
Located at the bottom of the esplanade steps, on Boulevard de l'Empereur, the Palais de la Dynastie (north-west wing) was originally intended to house the Museum of the Belgian Dynasty and contained exhibition and reception rooms. It consists of an imposing main building made of compact Meuse limestone and Pouillenay stone, with an extension spanning the road and connecting it to the north wing of the site. Its exterior decoration, in keeping with the theme, comprises bas-reliefs by Gustave Jacobs and Oscar Declerck. The monumental bronze entrance, designed by the sculptor Marcel Rau, features characters similar to those that Rau created



(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

for the National Bank. Inside, a huge hall lit by six tall windows on the Cantersteen side was originally intended to host "patriotic" ceremonies. On the right upon entering, a marble staircase with a metal railing gave access to a large gallery opposite the entrance, which opened through a tall niche decorated with blue mosaics onto the exhibition spaces occupying the wing extending over Rue Mont des Arts.





Carillon design. ©CIVA)

The statuettes
(clockwise from top left):

1. The tam-tam player
2. The World War One soldier
3. The worker
4. The Gaul
5. Godfrey of Bouillon
6. Jacob van Artevelde
7. Philip the Good
8. Holy Roman Emperor Charles V
9. Peter Paul Rubens
10. The Count of Egmont
11. The soldier from 1795
12. Jean-Joseph Charlier ("Wooden Leg")

THE CARILLON CLOCK

The façade of the Palais de la Dynastie wing, which spans the street running down the Mont des Arts, is occupied by a huge chiming wall clock, installed for the 1958 World's Fair (Expo 58). Each of its 12 spokes points to one of 12 mobile figurines inspired by Brussels history and folklore, designed by Henri van Albada, Henri Lenaert, Jacques Vierset and Rik Poot.

The carillon has 24 bells made by the Paccard foundry: 23 carillon bells (11 visible from the outside) and one large bell on the roof, used to tell the time by means of a jacquemart, designed by Henri van Albada. This bronze statue (2.6 m high) holds a hammer that looks as if it is striking the bell, with the number of strokes corresponding to the hour.

Operating automatically, the carillon plays two tunes as the hour strikes (alternating from one hour to the next): *Où peut-on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille* (Where better to be than in the bosom of one's family?) by André Grétry and *Beiaardlied* (Carillon Song) by Peter Benoit. It plays fragments of these melodies every quarter-hour.

The chiming mechanism was renovated in 2013-2014 and the jacquemart recommissioned in 2021 after a repair to the rotation system used to strike the bell.

In 2014, Unesco selected the Belgian carillon culture on its register of good safeguarding practices for intangible heritage.

<< Detail of the monumental bronze door by Marcel Rau. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

< Preliminary design for the interior of the Palais de la Dynastie, Jules Ghobert, 1955. (©CIVA)



(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

The office wing and shopping gallery

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Built as a private initiative (with funding from the Royal Trust and a group of insurance companies), the north wing is made up of three tiered blocks following the slope of Rue Mont des Arts: on the ground floor, a series of arcades houses a covered gallery giving access to commercial spaces, while the upper floors contain offices lit by regularly-arranged windows. The top floor comprises a loggia behind a gallery. The Euville stone façade is decorated with several allegorical bas-reliefs in the Art Deco style, designed by various artists: Alphonse Darville, Dolf Ledel, Harry Elstrøm, Jacques Talmar and Nat Neujean. The rear façade, in Savonnières stone, overlooks Rue des Sols, where one of the entrances to the car parks under the esplanade is located. The other entrances are on Rue de Ruysbroeck and Rue de l'Hôpital. On the Rue Ravenstein side, the north wing has a semicircular façade with an entrance door in the corner that leads to a hall decorated with light marble and a star on the floor. The curved frontage continues to the right, along Rue Ravenstein, where the façade features

shopfronts on the ground floor and regular windows on the upper floors.



Bas-relief on the façade of the office wing and shopping gallery, Nat Neujean.

(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

The Palais des Congrès

The Palais des Congrès (east wing) consists of two three-storey wings standing symmetrically on either side of the grand staircase on the esplanade, which they dominate. The wide opening between the two wings makes the most of the view towards Place Royale while also closing off the huge quadrilateral formed by the complex as a whole.

The left wing of the Palais des Congrès (with its back to the esplanade) is connected to the office wing by a passage spanning Rue Mont des Arts, while the right wing partially incorporates the Brussels Protestant Church (Royal Chapel) and adjoins the Royal Library.

The Euville stone façades are punctuated by regularly alternating bays with windows enclosed in original aluminium frames. On the ground floor, arcade galleries extend along the garden side – the one on the left being partially partitioned off since the renovation of the building between 2005 and 2010. Some years earlier, in 1983-1984, an attic storey was added, designed by architects Roland Delers and Ezio De Felici.

The bas-reliefs decorating the façades on the Rue Ravenstein side are the work of Charles Leplae, Alfred Courtens and Roger Jacob, with the latter designing *Les Cracheurs* (blue limestone).

THE INTERIOR

Initially, the rooms in the Palais des Congrès were intended to host various events organised as part of Expo 58, and to provide a meeting venue for the first European institutions before they had buildings of their own. The meeting rooms were equipped and fitted out accordingly, while the circulation spaces (entrance halls, stairwells) reflected the functional formality expressed by the architecture, making abundant use of marble.

The main reception and circulation areas were decorated with works of art commissioned by the Belgian State. For example, the main stairwell in the north building (left wing) housed the monumental mural *Abstract Composition* (1961) by Louis Van Lint, a founding member of La Jeune



The Puddler by Dolf Ledel.
(Photo : W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

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Peinture belge and one of the first Belgian painters to experiment with lyrical and gestural abstraction. A sculpture by Dolf Ledel, entitled *The Puddler* (1961), occupied a wall on one of the landings. Below the level of the esplanade, the two large rooms designed by Ghobert for Expo 58 were served by a large entrance hall built behind the retaining wall. To decorate this hall, the State commissioned Paul Delvaux, who created a monumental mural in 1959 with his nephew Charles Van Deun and the artist Isette Gabriels. The fresco, entitled *Le Paradis terrestre* (Earthly Paradise), brought together the surrealist painter's favourite themes: women and Antiquity. This hall also gave access to the Royal Salon, whose blind walls were covered with wooden panelling and fabrics decorated with bees, a motif symbolising the room's

royal function. The original modernist furniture has been preserved here (armchairs, coffee tables, stools and base units).

Adjoining the Delvaux hall, a second reception area was decorated with a monumental mural by René Magritte. This 1961 fresco – *Les Barricades mystérieuses* (The Mysterious Barricades) – also features typical elements from the painter's repertoire such as leaf-trees, a horse rider, a lit house and the bilboquets motif.

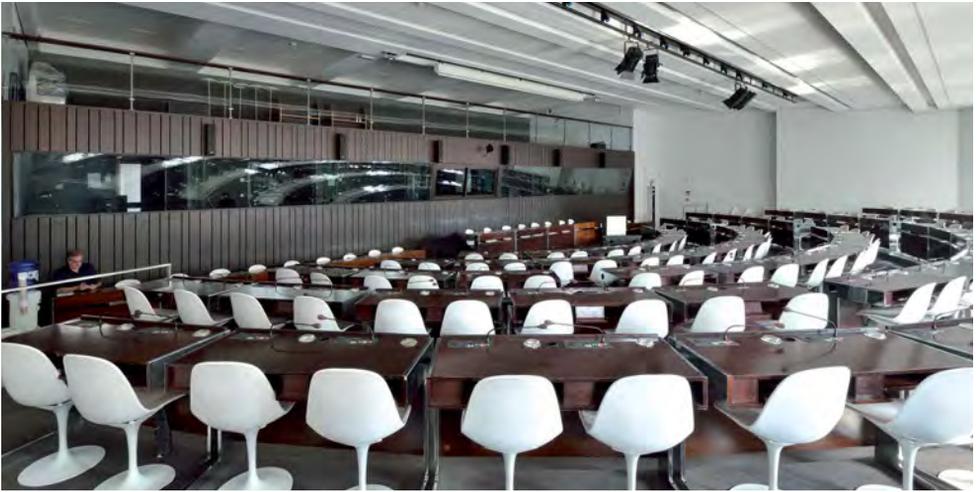
In the mid-1970s, the growing number of meetings and conventions resulting from the establishment of the European Communities prompted the Belgian Buildings Agency to modernise the meeting rooms. Among other things, new wooden panelling was fitted on the walls and new simultaneous interpreting booths were installed. On the second floor, a small semicircular auditorium (now called *The Arc*) retains its design from that time as well as furniture supplied by the firm De Coene.



The Royal Salon. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



Le Paradis terrestre (Earthly Paradise), a mural by Paul Delvaux.
 (© Paul Delvaux Foundation, Brussels – Sabam Belgium 2023; Photo: W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



The Arc conference room. (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

SQUARE

The Palais des Congrès underwent a major renovation in 2005-2010. As part of the transformation, a new entrance in the form of a glass cube was created in the esplanade garden by the architectural firm A2RC. The cube's aesthetic of transparency and light picks up on the landscape architecture. Its monumental quality makes it a strong visual signal, an instantly identifiable feature for anyone reaching the Mont des Arts from the Lower Town. It also provides access to

the steps and walkways connecting the three levels of the 52,000-m² complex, which is connected by an underground tunnel to the Centre for Fine Arts (Bozar) on Rue Ravenstein. New conference rooms, reception areas and car parks were also created or existing ones refurbished. Renamed the Brussels Meeting (later: Convention) Centre [SQUARE], the Palais des Congrès now hosts international conventions, European summits, conferences, gala dinners and exhibitions.



Design for the esplanade gardens, Jules Ghobert, 1946. (© CIVA)

The esplanade and gardens

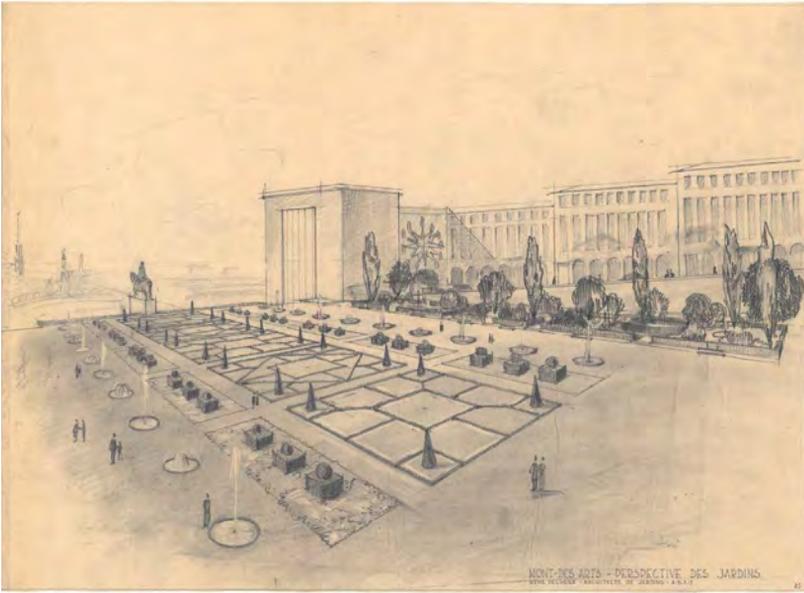
RENÉ PECHÈRE'S DESIGN

Creating the Mont des Arts would have been technically impossible without levelling the old Montagne de la Cour hillock and eliminating Square Vacherot, whose abundant vegetation had gradually come to block the view between Place Royale and the Town Hall tower.

To compensate for the loss of the square, a new garden was to be built on the esplanade. Omer Vanaudenhove, the Minister of Public Works, decided to appoint his ministerial adviser on green spaces, the landscape architect René Pechère, to design the new space. A student of Jules Buysens, Pechère came to prominence as a member of the design team for the gardens of the Belgian section of the Brussels International Exposition in 1935, and as head of the City of Brussels Parks Department from 1937 to 1952. After the Second World War, he set up his own

company and taught garden design at La Cambre (1939-1978). The hundred or so public and private gardens that he created around the world, as well as the historic parks and gardens that he restored, won him international acclaim.

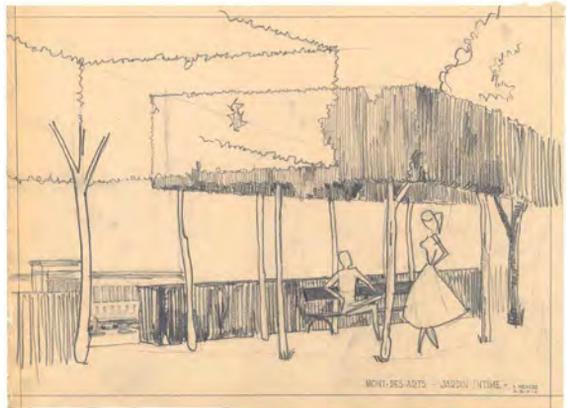
In his 1946 plans, architect Jules Ghobert had imagined a structured garden in the French style, on a slight incline. Pechère reworked the design, altering the proportions to make the gardens appear elongated and slender. The successive drafts were the subject of much discussion. In the final version, the central garden took the form of a succession of five lawned parterres flanked by box hedges and separated by cross-cutting paths, designed to give the illusion of a single continuous parterre when viewed from the overhanging terrace. This "plant embroidery", reinterpreting classic motifs, was intended to resemble



Design for the esplanade gardens, René Pechère, 1957-58. (© CIVA)

a giant carpet that would enhance the façade of the Royal Library and emphasise its primacy within the architectural ensemble. Along the side walks, Pechère placed pools with fountains and planted plane trees which further lengthened the perspective and demarcated the spaces. To the north, a secondary side garden – which would undergo several redesigns over the years – was created parallel to the road. With a more intimate feel and more trees, this "restful garden", made up of three spaces surrounded by hedges, included a pool, fountains and a children's playground. Its design was intended to allow more imaginative freedom (layout of paths, paving, flower beds, irregular shrubs) while preserving a regular appearance from the outside. The gardens were laid out on the concrete slab covering the conference rooms and the three-storey under-

ground car park, creating a huge reinforced concrete box. Up above, the trees and vegetation were rooted in 1.40 m of soil, resting on a drainage layer of fill. These hanging gardens, reminiscent of the mythical gardens of Babylon, were a remarkable feat of engineering which Pechère



Design for the side garden, René Pechère, 1957-58. (© CIVA)

ODES TO A SACRIFICED GARDEN

The development of the new Mont des Arts sounded the death knell for Square Vacherot. The announcement of the demise of the much-loved "temporary garden" was met with dismay in various Brussels circles, both artistic and intellectual. An Action Committee for the Defence of the Mont des Arts was set up to oppose the plans, raise public awareness and try to save the square. From 1955 onwards, a series of books, brochures and articles paid tribute to the soon-to-be-sacrificed green space. Louis Quiévreux, for example, wrote: "This garden of ours, free from the slightest hint of bad taste, has been a jewel enjoyed by the people of Brussels for 45 years. To destroy it, against everyone's wishes, would be a crime [...]. Vacherot, against all the odds, made the most of the location to create a gem that New York would pay us millions of dollars for if it were transportable."

(*Le Mont des Arts cher à nos cœurs*, Eeckhaud, 1955).



Square Vacherot, postcard, n.d.
(Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique
© ARB – urban.brussels)

would repeat in the compartmentalised geometric garden he designed for Brussels' Cité Administrative de l'État.

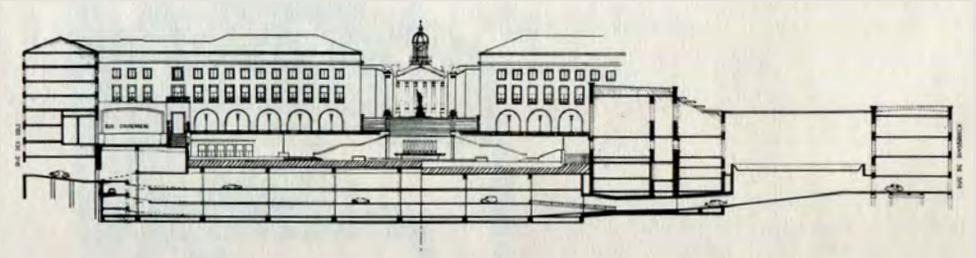
The general layout of the gardens was approved on 12 September 1957 and the design – which was to undergo subsequent modifications – was completed for the opening of Expo 58. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the gardens were enhanced with a double row of plane trees, sculptures, fountains and bas-reliefs which the Ministry of Public Works commissioned from various Belgian artists.

Matching Pechère's strictly classical and geometric style, the gardens harmonised perfectly with the austere architecture of the Mont des Arts. They could be seen in full from the top of the esplanade steps and made the most of the view towards the Town Hall tower.

THE CENTRAL GARDEN

Retaining most of the features of Pechère's design, the current central garden is symmetrical and classicist in style and layout. The central axis is made up of five large square parterres. Separated by perpendicular paths allowing crossways movement, they are decorated with "plant embroidery" in geometric patterns surrounded by box hedges. The different compartments are planted with evergreen shrubs (*Berberis*), as well as perennials and annuals varying in colour and variety from season to season.

On either side of these central parterres are six side parterres bounded by yew hedges and planted with cylindrical topiary, yuccas, perennials and bushy vegetation. Each is lined with benches. Their outer sides are flanked by rows of ten circular pools with fountains, which are in turn framed by two double rows of plane trees with limed trunks, pruned to form a continuous



Cross section of the underground car park.
 (© Bruxelles, *carrefour de l'Occident*, 1956)

RENÉ PECHÈRE AND THE CAR PARK PLAN

"It was the deputy Marc-Antoine Pierson who pointed out that it was unthinkable to build a new park like this one in the city centre without including a car park underneath. This was one of the first times this had been done in modern times. [...] I consulted a German colleague and another from England, who were equally at a loss. So I allowed for sufficient

drainage and, most importantly, the ability to drain off any excess water that might build up, based on the simple premiss that the tree roots should not be allowed to dry out, but should not be treated like water lilies either!"

(Note by René Pechère, s.d., Archives du CIVA)

canopy, which lengthen the perspective and separate the spaces.

To the south-east of the site, two straight flights of steps provide access from Coudenberg to the terrace built from blue limestone slabs, which overlooks the gardens. In the north-east corner of this terrace stands the sculpture by Oscar Jespers, *La Musique et Le Chant* (1960), featuring two muses representing music and song, their rounded, almost abstract shapes created from Vinalmont hard stone.

From the terrace, a monumental set of blue limestone steps with wrought iron balustrades divides into two side staircases providing access to the gardens below. At their foot lies the colossal fountain by the sculptor and painter Tony Van Goolen. Featuring nine columns topped by carved fish and shells spouting water, this fountain stands outside the main entrance to the Palais des Congrès conference rooms. It is also made from Vinalmont stone, a material used in



La Musique et Le Chant, (Music and Song), Oscar Jespers, 1960.
 (W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



Fountain, Tony Van Goolen, 1958.
(© urban.brussels)

a number of places on the Mont des Arts, both in the buildings and on other sculptures and bas-reliefs.

The blue limestone retaining wall that marks the end of the garden, adjoining the steps leading to Coudenberg, is decorated with two bas-reliefs, one by Antoine Vriens representing the symbolism of Eden, the other by Marnix D'Haveloose depicting three female allegories (The Arts). On



the 62nd anniversary of the end of the Second World War, two commemorative plaques (one in French and one in Dutch) were affixed to this wall paying homage to the "Righteous" of Belgium who assisted Jews persecuted under the German occupation.

THE SIDE GARDEN

To the north of the site, the side section, originally designed by René Pechère, underwent successive redesigns in the early and late 2000s. The current design, whose geometric style harmonises with that of the central garden, dates back to the reconfiguration of the site prompted by the construction of the glass cube at the entrance to the Brussels Convention Centre (2005-2010). Near the cube, beside the steps, is a 1962 bronze sculpture by Eugène Canneel entitled *Les Enfants* (Children).

Along Rue Mont des Arts, the slope connecting the terrace overlooking the gardens (on the Coudenberg side) and Cantersteen is mitigated by a rectilinear succession of five terraced areas, ornamented with rectangular lawns framed by benches forming right angles, bordered by large planted containers covered with a white stone facing. These terraces are served by a blue flagstone walkway and separated by short flights of steps.

The walkway leads to a large esplanade of blue limestone slabs adjoining the Palais de la Dynastie. On either side of this esplanade there are benches and solid low walls of blue limestone, as well as planters. Henri van Albada's 1962 sculpture *Composition décorative* (Decorative Com-

Bas-relief symbolising Eden, Antoine Vriens.
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

position) sits atop one of the walls.

From this esplanade, a gently sloping access ramp, punctuated by several flights of steps, leads to the entrance of the SQUARE building located below the level of the gardens. At the foot of the glass cube lies a shallow pool containing a 1958 sculpture by Fernand Debonnaires, *La Nageuse* (The Swimmer).

On one side of the side garden esplanade there are flowerbeds and planters made of Corten steel to emphasise the boundary with the central garden. Three trees are also planted along this axis: an impressive pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*), a Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*), as well as an Ebbing's silverberry (*Elaeagnus ebbingei*).



The side garden, 1960s or 1970s. (© CIV4)

Chien-loup (*Wolfdog*), a 1962 blue limestone sculpture by the Brussels artist Albert Aebly, is situated on the same axis.

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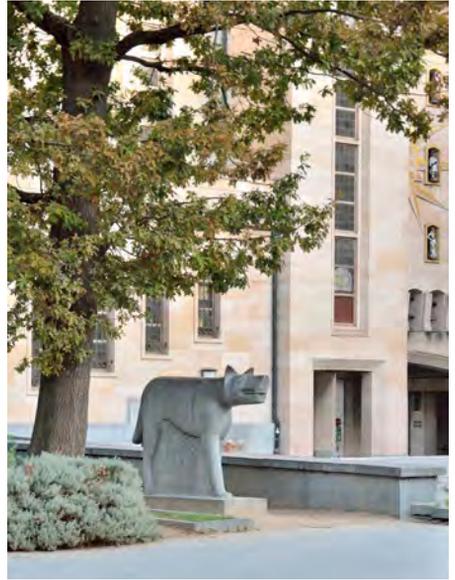
Les Enfants (The Children), Eugène Canneel, 1962.
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



Composition décorative (Decorative Composition), Henri van Albada, 1962.
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

Chien-Loup (Wolfdog), Albert Aebly, 1962.
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)

La Nageuse (The Swimmer), Fernand Debonnaires, 1958.
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



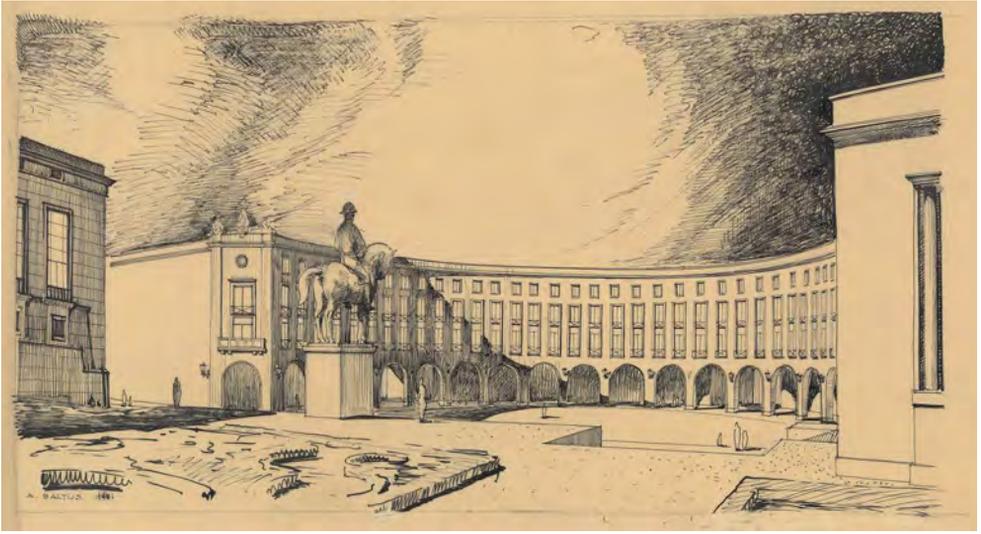
THE ALBERT I MEMORIAL

Inaugurated in 1951, this national memorial attests to the admiration felt by Belgians for Albert I, who came to the throne in 1909. A keen rock climber, the king died in a mountaineering accident at Marche-des-Dames, near Namur, on 17 February 1934. The public particularly praised his attitude during the First World War, when he refused to leave Belgium and took command of the army to protect the country from German invasion. The nation was also grateful for his unwavering support for the humanities and sciences – among other things, he spearheaded the establishment of the National Fund for Scientific Research.

The monument is located at the bottom of the Mont des Arts, opposite Place de l'Albertine, and represents the "Knight King" on a horse, helmet in hand. The sculptor Alfred Courtens was assisted by architect Jules Ghobert in the creation of this equestrian group. The statue is made of bronze (Compagnie des Bronzes, Brussels). The only decoration on the blue limestone pedestal is the name "Albert" surmounted by a crown.



Statues of King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth.
(W. Kenis, 2023 © urban.brussels)



Jules Ghobert's 1946 design for a monumental façade on Place de l'Albertine, drawing by Ado Balthus, n.d. © CIVVA

THE NORTH-SOUTH CONNECTION AND PLACE DE L'ALBERTINE

At the foot of the Mont des Arts, the hugely disruptive work on the North-South rail connection (inaugurated in 1952) sounded the death knell for the old districts of Putterie, Terarken and Isabelle. The project entailed "cleaning up" several blocks and streets by demolishing dilapidated buildings and slums along the route. The space left free was to be used as the location for the Central Station.

A semicircular square was created in the 1950s above the North-South tunnel, both to conceal the works and to enhance the view from the Mont des Arts towards the Lower Town. It was laid out at the junction of Cantersteen, Boulevard de l'Empereur and Boulevard de l'Impératrice with Rue Saint-Jean and Rue de la Madeleine. At the centre of the square stands a monument to Queen Elisabeth (1909-1934), inaugurated on 29 May 1980 and facing the equestrian statue of her husband, King Albert I. The Massangis stone

sculpture is by René Cliquet, the reliefs by Willy Kreitz and the architectural elements by Jean Rombaux.

Place de l'Albertine is flanked to the west by an arc-shaped office building designed by architect Philippe Dumont, whose stone frontage comprises four neo-Baroque gables based on authentic Brussels originals. By contrast, an office building along Boulevard de l'Empereur is in a similar style to the Mont des Arts, thus creating a certain visual continuity. Interestingly, both the design chosen at the time for the square (a small garden raised above the level of the boulevard) and Dumont's proposed architectural look for the buildings that were to surround it generated lively and lengthy debates in the Urban Planning Committee as well as with the city council's services. Pechère, in particular, was very unhappy with the design of the square, which he called a "horrible half-moon" spread out at the foot of the Albert I memorial...

The test of time

The Mont des Arts has not always been viewed positively over the decades. Some have considered the space to be too cold, too centred on institutions and not enough on people, not welcoming enough, and therefore deserted during the day and frequented by unsavoury characters at night. Since the 1980s, the steps and space at the base of the Albert I memorial have been a popular haunt for skateboarders. The resulting noise and hubbub has sometimes left the director of the Royal Library at wits' end, with the clatter of skateboards disturbing the peace of readers and posing a hazard to pedestrians. The creation of a skatepark outside Notre-Dame de la Chapelle Church has gone some way to resolving this problem...

RESTORATION

An opportunity to "revitalise" the Mont des Arts came in 2000, when Brussels was designated a European Capital of Culture. The King Baudouin

A HALFTONE IMAGE

"The Mont des Arts is an ironic site. While many thousands roam every day through its underbelly in the uncanny spaces of the underground galleries and metro-train corridors, the surface space is emptied out, yet strangely re-appropriated by an unlikely mix of users, ranging from skateboarders to Japanese tourists and a lonely academic."

(Erik Swyngedouw, "The Mont des Arts as a Ruin in the Revanchist City", in: *Vacant City. Brussels' Mont des Arts Reconsidered*, NAI Publishers, 2000).

Foundation concluded a partnership agreement with the association Bruxelles 2000 to upgrade the urban complex, with the work being funded and carried out by the Belgian Buildings Agency. The work took place in three phases. The first consisted of restoring the façades of the buildings surrounding the site (Royal Library, Palais des Congrès, Palais de la Dynastie). The white and blue stone was cleaned, repaired, consolidated and repointed, and the white stone covered with a clear water repellent to protect it from water penetration. The project also included a redevelopment of the gardens in the spirit of their designer, René

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The Mont des Arts illuminated.
(Ch. Bastin & J. Evrard
© urban.brussels)

Pechère: renovation of the central parterres, restructuring of the box hedges, creation of a blue limestone esplanade in front of the steps and the entrance to the Palais des Congrès, restoration of the blue limestone walkway along the wall of the Royal Library, creation of a similar walkway along the side garden, creation of a new side garden extending as far as the retaining wall along Rue Mont des Arts, restoration of all the benches, and new lighting along the paths and flower beds. Also part of the work was the renovation of the 20 circular pools and the large fountain in front of the entrance to the Palais des Congrès, the drainage and water supply network for the fountains and the plant watering system.

Finally, the third phase focused on lighting to ensure better visibility of the space. The aim of the Lighting Plan was to showcase the Mont des Arts as a highly symbolic and much-visited location. The lighting is both functional and theatrical, with the buildings lit up in various colours.

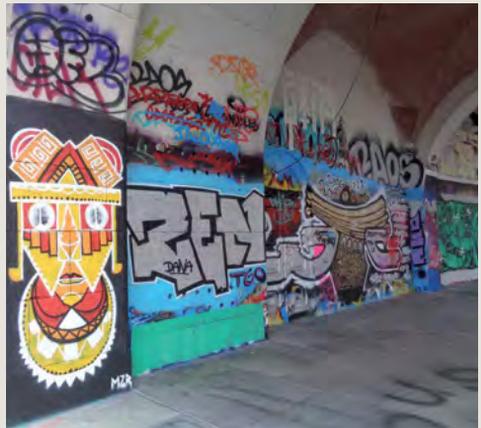
LIFE ON THE MONT DES ARTS

The Mont des Arts is now a hub of day-to-day life in the Belgian capital. People come for all sorts of reasons: to take a snap of themselves on one of the terraces backed by panoramic views of the city, to listen to a busker on the steps, to watch the sun set from a deckchair near Calder's fountain, to marvel at a firework display... or to enjoy an impromptu aperitif in the gardens, or a drink with friends on the KBR rooftop terrace. By pushing open the door of the Palais de la Dynastie, they can attend one of the events regularly staged there, which include everything from exhibitions and evening parties to workshops. Not to mention the many activities that take place at the site all year round: concerts, sound and light shows, pop-up contemporary art installations and open-air screenings, to name but a few. The range of cultural events on offer is huge, and they are invariably successful and well-attended!

TACKLING GRAFFITI

Tagging and graffiti are a major challenge for the Mont des Arts. Indeed, the site has the reputation of being one of the most tagged places in the capital. When the complex was restored back in 2000, the façades of the Royal Library, Palais des Congrès and Palais de la Dynastie were coated in an anti-graffiti clear glaze up to a height of around 3 metres. However, this only shifted the problem elsewhere. A decade or so ago, in a bid to "channel" the tags, the City of Brussels decided to set aside a "free expression wall" of around 60 m² under the arcades of the right wing of the Palais des Congrès, in the hope that the graffiti artists would leave the rest of the buildings alone. To no avail. The surfaces are cleaned regularly, but that only attracts more taggers keen to leave their mark on the newly blank canvas. This raises the question of the boundary between vandalism and urban art, for the two undoubtedly coexist on the Mont des Arts. As part of Bruegel Year in 2019,

the British street artist Phlegm created a gigantic mural on the façade of the KBR building, inspired by Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Lust*.



Graffiti on the Mont des Arts.
(M. Denys, 2021 © urban.brussels)

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In the *Brussels, City of Art and History* series, Urban aims to foster public curiosity about the city's historical heritage while raising awareness of the need to protect its many treasures. This is part of a wider remit to promote the rich and varied heritage of the Brussels-Capital Region.

From the Middle Ages onwards, Montagne de la Cour, in the heart of Brussels, developed into an aristocratic neighbourhood with a high concentration of palaces and mansions. In the mid-19th century, various redevelopment projects were proposed to replace the maze of medieval streets and alleys with an urban design and architecture reflecting the commercial, political and cultural ambitions of the young Belgian nation. Accordingly, much of the district was torn down in preparation for the creation of a Mont des Arts ("Mount of Arts"). However, for a long time, the reconstruction was thwarted by indecision, lack of funds and two world wars. The search for a suitable site for a Royal Library in honour of King Albert I finally gave new impetus to the project. Work began in the 1950s and continued for more than 20 years, eventually resulting in the current ensemble, with its monumental and formal grandeur. In 2018, the site became home to Urban, Brussels' regional public service for urbanism and heritage. This issue delves into the eventful history of this exceptional site, which was given protected status in 2022 for its historical, heritage and urban planning value.

Bety Waknine,
General Manager

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