

18 - 2024

CAHIERS HENRY VAN DE VELDE

L'hôtel Otlet [1896-98]

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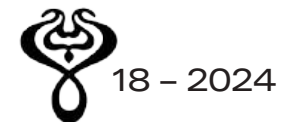
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## CAHIERS HENRY VAN DE VELDE

### **Hôtel Otlet** [1896–98]

Octave Van Rysselberghe, Henry van de Velde  
and Paul Otlet



## FOREWORD

Caroline Mierop, Chairwoman of the Fonds Henry van de Velde  
Benoît Hennaut, Directeur of ENSAV – La Cambre

Following the publication in 2021 of a monographic issue of the Cahiers devoted to Hôtel Wolfers (Henry van de Velde, 1928–30) and its last owner, collector Herman Daled, the association Fonds Henry van de Velde is travelling some thirty years back in time for this new study devoted to one of Van de Velde's rare art nouveau constructions in Brussels, Hôtel Otlet (1896–98), in the area of Avenue Louise.

It is as an interior designer rather than as an architect that van de Velde worked on this project, for which he joined forces with architect Octave Van Rysselberghe (1855–1929). Everything seems to indicate that both men worked together from the outset of the building's design and the overall coherence of the project is indeed striking. Architect Maud Rochez provides a detailed analysis of their collaboration, the design of Hôtel Otlet and its genesis. She concludes her article with suggestions for future restoration work.

Little is known today about Octave Van Rysselberghe, as no scholarly monograph has yet been devoted to the architect. The designation, by the government of the Brussels-Capital Region, of the year 2023 as an 'art nouveau year' provided an opportunity to take stock of our knowledge of his work and to present an up-to-date reading of it. Architectural historian Luc Verpoest has written a well-documented article on the subject. He is also the editor of this issue of the Cahiers.

Beyond the architect and the interior designer, and beyond this exceptional building itself, this publication also looks at the figure of Paul Otlet (1868–1944), who commissioned the house of the same name. A doctor of law, he had a passion for books and was a fellow utopian of Nobel Peace Prize winner Henri Lafontaine (1854–1943). Historian and professor Pierre Van den Dungen paints a portrait of Otlet that places the man in the context of an era and an intellectual and artistic milieu to which his contemporaries, van de Velde and Van Rysselberghe, also belonged.

At once a monograph and a triptych, this issue of the Cahiers aims to contribute to ongoing and future research into an exceptional building and its three protagonists.

Our thanks go to all the authors involved in this publication, including Anne Van Loo, president of the association's scientific committee, for her enlightening introduction. Our thanks also go to translator Patrick Lennon and graphic designer Claude Stassart, to the Périer-D'leteren Foundation for its invaluable help and to the Henry van de Velde Family Foundation for its continued support.



Henry van de Velde descending the stairs leading to the 1st floor gallery of the Bloemenwerf.  
Photo Charles Lefébure, 1898. AML, FSX 187.

## INTRODUCTION

### van de Velde, the Van Rysselberghe Brothers, Signac and Van der Swaelmen: Intersecting Lives

Anne Van Loo, PhD in Architecture, Chair of the Scientific Committee of the Henry van de Velde Fund

Henry van de Velde's early activities as an interior designer and decorator, and then as an architect, remain rather unknown. There is little surviving evidence of his decorative arrangements, despite the relatively large number of them, nor of his first buildings. Apart from his personal home, Bloemenwerf, the only surviving buildings are Hôtel Otlet, which has been partially preserved, and Hôtel De Brouckère, whose original layout has been lost, with the exception of the main staircase. Both buildings were designed in collaboration with architect Octave Van Rysselberghe.



The main façade of the Bloemenwerf with its three different gables.  
Photo Charles Lefébure, 1899. AML, FS X 882.

Virtually nothing remains of the two other Brussels houses he built at the time, both owned by his mother-in-law Louise Sèthe, like Bloemenwerf. All that remains of the house she had erected on the same estate as Bloemenwerf are a few details: a balcony, dormer windows, doors and two magnificent entrance gates. As for the house of his son-in-law, sculptor Paul Dubois, on Avenue Longchamp (now Avenue Churchill), it has been demolished.

Maud Rochez's work on Hôtel Otlet is therefore a timely reminder of how important it is to study the context and environment in which artists work in order to shed light on their first steps in fields with which they are not yet familiar. Her research has revealed, for example, that van de Velde not only created the magnificent decor for this building, but also designed some of its key architec-

tural features with Octave Van Rysselberghe <sup>[1]</sup>. Incidentally, the elegant decorative frieze that originally ran along the plinths and faux wall panelling of the central hall of Bloemenwerf was also rediscovered thanks to the research carried out at Hôtel Otlet!

The various protagonists behind this private house were extraordinary figures, starting with the man who commissioned the building, Paul Otlet, a convinced pacifist and internationalist, and the inventor of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC). Otlet is less well known for having been one of the first Belgians to propose, in 1888, at the age of 20, that Africa should be 'returned to the Blacks' <sup>[2]</sup>. The postcolonial interpretation put forward by art historian Debora L. Silverman of the monumental stained-glass window in the stairwell of Hôtel Otlet may therefore be subject to debate.

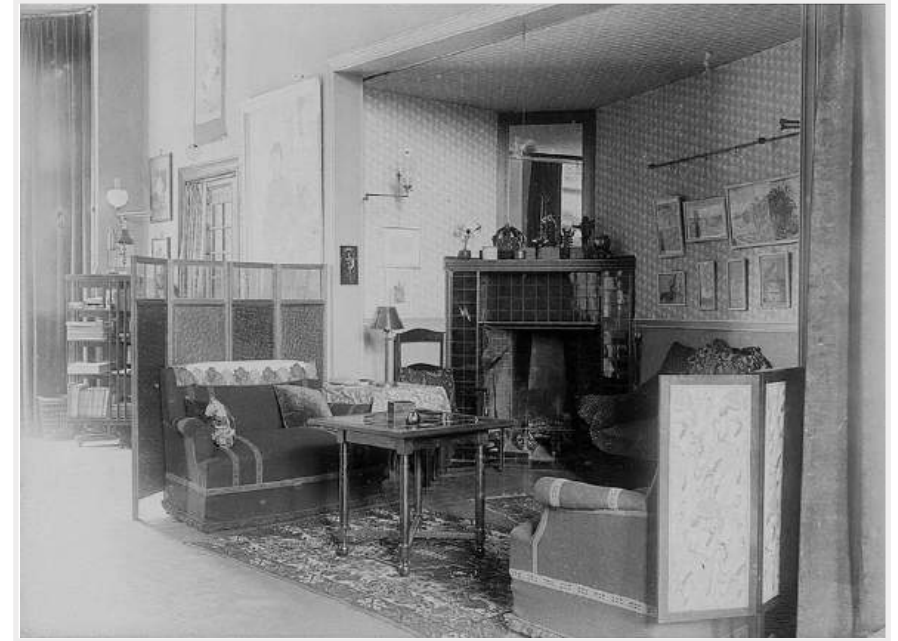
As a counterpoint to the tragic fate of the Palais Mondial (World Palace or Museum) in Brussels, Paul Otlet's urban-planning ambitions and his contacts with Le Corbusier for the construction of a Mundaneum and a Cité Mondiale (World City) in Geneva are also worth recalling.

The charismatic figure of architect Octave Van Rysselberghe was not to be outdone, however: his ability to nourish art nouveau with his classical culture and to produce an early form of modernism – in a discreet and carefree way, almost as a dilettante – has left few traces in the historiography of architecture, despite his role in the birth of the modernist movement in Belgium.

van de Velde and Octave Van Rysselberghe met through 'l'ami Théo'. A neo-impressionist painter, Théo was Octave's younger brother. He was close to van de Velde – he supported his application to join the circle Les XX in 1888 – and especially to Maria Sèthe, his pupil, who was to become van de Velde's wife. In 1891 Théo painted a splendid oil portrait of Maria, now on show at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA). For a long time, this portrait occupied the most prominent position in the hall of Bloemenwerf and inspired all its polychromy.

In the early 1890s, van de Velde was not the only painter to venture into the field of furniture and object design. Around him, Willy Finch, Georges Lemmen and Théo Van Rysselberghe, who had quickly established themselves as the main representatives of neo-impressionism in Belgium, also turned to crafts. For his part, it was to his brother Octave that Théo turned to build his studio on Rue de l'Abbaye in Ixelles (1891), not far from the studio Constantin Meunier would build a few years later. Théo designed some of the furniture himself. Octave subsequently raised the building (1894–95) to allow Théo to live there with his wife, Maria Monnom <sup>[3]</sup>. And it was with the fresh, cheerful colours in mind of the house that the Van Ryssel-

berghe couple were preparing to leave <sup>[4]</sup> that Henry and Maria van de Velde designed the interior of Bloemenwerf, which they moved into at the end of February 1896. In return, the Van Rysselberghe spouses borrowed the *Ancolies* wallpaper created for Bloemenwerf from their friends, which they placed by the studio's fireside, as well as the wall lamps they installed in the entrance hall of their new home. <sup>[5]</sup>.



The fire corner of Théo Van Rysselberghe's studio house, 63 Rue de l'Abbaye at Ixelles.  
Fondation Catherine Gide, PH-16-145, CCBY-SA 4.0.

- 1 – Maud Rochez, *A Restoration Study of Hôtel Otlet, a Masterpiece by Octave Van Rysselberghe and Henry van de Velde* (master's thesis in Conservation of Monuments and Sites, KU Leuven, 2017).
- 2 – Paul Otlet., *L'Afrique aux Noirs*, Ferdinand Larcier, 1888). Debora L. Silverman, 'Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part I', West 86th: *A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no.2 (The University of Chicago Press, 2011): 139–81.
- 3 – She would later become known as the author of 'Les Cahiers de La Petite Dame I, II, III, IV: Notes pour l'histoire authentique d'André Gide'. Published in *Cahiers André Gide* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1973–77).
- 4 – Anne Van Loo, ed., *Henry van de Velde, Récit de ma vie, Vol. 1* (Brussels and Paris: Versa and Flammarion, 1992), 183.
- 5 – These decorative borrowings were revealed by the magnificent photographs of the interior held by the Fondation Catherine Gide.





Maria van de Velde in the Bloemenwerf dining room decorated with the *Ancolies* wallpaper.  
 Photo Charles Lefébure, 1898.  
 Fonds Henry van de Velde, ENSAV–La Cambre, Bruxelles – INV. S 2855.  
 © Henry van de Velde Foundation [Pays-Bas].



The *Ancolies* wallpaper in its light green version, created by Marie and Henry van de Velde [1893].  
 Fonds Henry van de Velde, ENSAV–La Cambre, Bruxelles – INV. S 3926.  
 © Henry van de Velde Foundation [Pays-Bas].

As early as the spring of 1893, Théo encouraged van de Velde's love for Maria Sèthe – she went to London with his wife, where she visited William Morris's shop for her fiancé – and Henry's friendship with the Neo-Impressionist painter Paul Signac (1863-1935). From 1895, Signac and van de Velde met more regularly, both in Paris (including at the inauguration of Samuel Bing's gallery L'Art Nouveau) and in Brussels, at La Libre Esthétique, between 1896 and 1900.

An independent figure, Signac shunned the academies. Like van de Velde, of whom he was an exact contemporary, he felt the need to write to explain the theories on which he had based his work and the movement to which he claimed to belong. As early as 1896, he wrote *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impersonnisme*, which appeared in serial form in the review *La Société nouvelle* in 1898 and then, in 1899, in Paris, published by Éditions de la Revue Blanche, whose premises van de Velde designed that same year.

Signac's rebellious temperament pushed him towards the libertarian theories shared by van de Velde and his French friends Camille Pissarro, Georges Seurat and Maximilien Luce and by Dutch artist Johan Thorn Prikker, all members or close associates of La Libre Esthétique. Signac was elected to the society in 1900. His friendship with van de Velde and his stays at Bloemenwerf date from 1897–98, when van de Velde received his first major commissions. van de Velde included works by Signac and Seurat in his major works of the period, such as the large canvas *Le Chahut* in the offices of the magazine *L'Art décoratif*, rue Pergolèse in Paris (1899).

Was it at the suggestion of van de Velde – who was about to give his lecture 'William Morris, artisan and socialist' at the Art Section of La Maison du Peuple (January 18, 1898) – that Signac proposed, during a stay at his friend's in Brussels in December 1897, to donate his large canvas *Au temps d'Harmonie* to the Maison du Peuple, then under construction by Victor Horta (1895-99)? Émile Vandervelde, leader of the Parti ouvrier belge (POB), agreed to the project, and the lawyer Max Hallet confirmed that he would see to it that this work, which had already been exhibited in Brussels at the 1896 Salon de La Libre Esthétique, would adorn the new reception hall [6]. On 31 January 1899, two months before the inauguration of the building, Signac, who had received no news of the work, contacted van de Velde to express his concern [7]. And rightly so, as Horta, who was probably reluctant to integrate this monumental work into his building architecture, never produced the frame he had been commissioned to design to embed the work in the building. Signac called Horta 'the tire-lignard of the Maison du Peuple' in his diary; [8] and the painting *Le temps d'Harmonie* remained in his studio at Castel Béranger until his death [9]. In 1902, however, Théo Van Rysselberghe produced the magnificent painting *La lecture dans le parc* for Victor Horta's Hôtel Solvay...

6 – Max Hallet had his house on Avenue Louise built by Victor Horta in 1903.  
 7 – Letter from Signac to van de Velde, AML, FS X 726/3.  
 8 – By which he meant an architect who can only draw straight lines (as opposed to an artist). Paul Signac, *Journal 1894-1909* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021), 11 November 1900.  
 9 – Philippe Thiébaud, 'Art nouveau et néo-impersonnisme', *Revue de l'Art* 92 (1991): 72–78.



Théo Van Rysselberghe's studio house, designed by his brother Octave, 63 Rue de l'Abbaye at Ixelles [1891-94]. On the ground floor, a garage replaces the previous dining room.  
Photo Michel Louis, 2024.

Signac, an advocate of new ideas, was among the first to rent a flat and studio at Castel Béranger, Hector Guimard's art nouveau manifesto on Rue Lafontaine in Paris (1895–98). In fact, he was seduced by how bright and comfortable the building was rather than by the architecture's rather intrusive design and decor. Was it because van de Velde's furniture was too expensive for him or because Théo moved to Paris in 1898 that Signac chose to take Théo's advice when moving into this flat? No doubt he feared the intervention of art nouveau professionals, architects and decorators, who were defending aesthetic principles when all he wanted was for his everyday objects to be sturdy and practical. Clearly, he felt at ease with Théo, who designed a few pieces of furniture for him in the spirit of the Arts & Crafts Movement and entrusted their manufacture to cabinet-makers or joiners, as he did for himself – with the collaboration of van de Velde for certain refined brass details [10].

In France, Théo sometimes lived in Paris, sometimes in the Midi, with the painter Henri-Edmond Cross, at Saint-Clair in Le Lavandou, with whom he drew and painted. His brother Octave was a regular visitor: as architect for the Société des Grands Hôtels et des Wagons-Lits, his projects took him to nearby Monte Carlo. In 1901, in collaboration with Théo, he built a vast studio for Signac, attached to the villa La Hune that Signac had bought for himself at the end of 1897 in Saint-Tropez. Théo continued to advise the artist on the furniture for his studio-home, and Octave, who liked the region, eventually built himself a villa in Saint-Clair, set in the middle of an immense garden (1903). When, after Cross's death, Théo wanted to settle on a more permanent basis, Octave gave him his gardener's house, which he enlarged with a studio in 1910 [11]. Both houses still exist. Only Théo's house, 'renovated' to accommodate an art centre (known as *La Maison Théo*), is open to the public, giving visitors a glimpse of what remains of the woodwork and fixed furniture he designed. Also preserved in the studio is one of the famous small brass corner fireplaces that Théo built for himself and his friends, set into a ceramic panel, like those that inspired van de Velde's early work, notably at Bloemenwerf.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, around Cross and the Van Rysselberghe brothers, Saint-Clair soon attracted a small colony of artists, including Maria Van Rysselberghe and André Gide, who became her son-in-law. [12]. As it's a small world, it was in Saint-Clair that Belgian urban planner Louis Van der Swaelmen settled in the spring of 1928. Seriously ill and very weak, he was convalescing there, perhaps on the advice of Henry van de Velde, whose return to Belgium he had facilitated two years earlier and with whom he was

- 10 – Letter from Signac to van de Velde, 10 November 1896, AML, FS X 726/4. Théo Van Rysselberghe had just completed a worktable for Signac, which van de Velde had helped to design.
- 11 – Théo Van Rysselberghe died at Saint-Clair in Le Lavandou on 13 December 1926 and was buried there.
- 12 – Catherine Gide was born to André Gide and Maria Van Rysselberghe's daughter in 1923.



in daily contact in Brussels as director of the École de La Cambre, where he himself had been a lecturer since 1927. Or did he simply keep in touch with Octave Van Rysselberghe, whom he admired? In any case, it was from Saint-Clair that Van der Swaelmen wrote a magnificent letter to Henry van de Velde on 9 July 1928 about 'the spirit of La Cambre', revealing the trust and deep intellectual camaraderie between the two men [13].

In the light of the Midi, he was reunited with Octave Van Rysselberghe before returning to Brussels for the start of the school year in October 1928. On 29 March 1929, Van Rysselberghe died in Nice, and it was Van der Swaelmen who wrote the commemorative article devoted to him in the review *La Cité*. A few months later, Louis Van der Swaelmen died in Montreux, Switzerland, on 12 October 1929, aged 46. And it was left to an emotional van de Velde to recall the essential role he had played in structuring the country's modernist movement, notably through his text '*L'Effort moderne en Belgique*', [14] which did not forget to mention Octave Van Rysselberghe ...



Octave Van Rysselberghe, member of the jury for the architecture competition at the Paris Olympic Games [1924].  
[ www.olympedia.org/athletes ]

## A RESTORATION STUDY OF HÔTEL OTLET IN BRUSSELS [1896]

A masterpiece by Octave Van Rysselberghe and Henry van de Velde

Maud Rochez, Ir. Architect, Master of Science in Conservation of Monuments and Sites



Hôtel Otlet, on the corner of Rue de Florence and Rue de Livourne at Brussels [1900].  
CIVA Collections, Brussels, Otlet-R76-0-04.

Hôtel Otlet was built from 1896 to 1898 and is the outcome of a close collaboration between three important figures: Paul Otlet, the commissioner; Octave Van Rysselberghe, the architect; and Henry van de Velde, interventions the decorator. The house is located on the corner of Rue de Florence and Rue de Livourne in Brussels, close to the? Avenue Louise. The building is divided into a main house and an atelier.p From the exterior, they form a whole but there is no interior passage between the two parts. Hôtel Otlet is characterized by its eclectic façades and by the way all the rooms are structured around a central staircase. The entrance to the main house is at 13 Rue de Florence and the entrance to the atelier is at 48 Rue de Livourne. Today, Hôtel Otlet serves as a lawyers' office – it has been owned by Association d'avocats Berenboom since 1987.

13 – KBR, AML, FS X 780.

14 – Published in *La Cité*, August 1925.



### THREE PROTAGONISTS

Paul Otlet, a lawyer, bibliographer and activist, was part of the Brussels upper class. Within the artistic circles revolving around people such as Edmond Picard and Octave Maus, Paul Otlet knew exactly who he would ask to build his personal house. He gave the architect Van Rysselberghe the opportunity to build something different but following rational principles.

Van Rysselberghe's background was quite classical, influenced by his trip to Italy. The architect holds a particular position regarding both the evolution of the art nouveau movement in Belgium and his colleague Henry van de Velde, a position clearly explained by Luc Verpoest in an article which he dedicates to Van Rysselberghe in this publication.

How Paul Otlet, Octave Van Rysselberghe and Henry van de Velde met to discuss the Hôtel Otlet project is a question to which archival documents have not yet provided an answer. What we do know is that the three men were part of the same social class in Brussels at the end of the nineteenth century and that they must have seen each other often. Octave's younger brother, Théo Van Rysselberghe, was probably one of the main connections. Théo was part of the art group *Les XX* and painted lots of portraits of people from the Brussels upper class. Among others, he made portraits of Marcel, Paul Otlet's son, and of Maria Sèthe, Henry van de Velde's wife.

Hôtel Otlet was Octave Van Rysselberghe and Henry van de Velde's first building collaboration. The inner workings of the collaboration between the architect and the decorator worked are still a mystery, but they must have worked well together, and most likely from the start of the project, to achieve the beautiful ensemble that is Hôtel Otlet [1].

The architect and decorator collaborated again some years later, in 1898, on Hôtel de Brouckère. Madame de Brouckère had indeed visited the personal house of Henry van de Velde, Villa Bloemenwerf, and asked him to build her house. van de Velde accepted the project on condition that he could be assisted by Octave Van Rysselberghe, 'un collaborateur instruit des dernières inventions de la construction moderne et des règlements communaux de la ville de Bruxelles' (a colleague who is up to date on the latest inventions in modern construction and on municipal regulations for the city of Brussels.) The semi-detached house was built on the corner of Rue Jacques Jordaens and Rue de Crayer. Hôtel de Brouckère is of a more sober appearance than Hôtel Otlet in terms of use of materials and composition [2].

### HISTORY OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The parcel on which Hôtel Otlet was built is only one block away from the famous Avenue Louise in Brussels [3]. The urban development of the neighbourhood around this avenue is one of the major extensions of Brussels to have been carried out during the nineteenth century. Like elsewhere in Europe, the city had to expand due to industrialization and demographic growth. The avenue was constructed on a rural site between the city of Brussels and the Bois de la Cambre. It was designed as a straight and green promenade to facilitate access to the forest [4]. Construction started in 1860, the avenue being given a width of 55 m, with adequate space for pedestrians, horse riders and horse-drawn carriages. The neighbourhood was principally residential and attracted mainly the upper classes [5].

Victor Besme,  
*Plan d'ensemble pour l'extension et  
l'embellissement de l'agglomération  
bruxelloise* [1866].  
(extract focusing on Avenue Louise).



- 1 – van de Velde's role as 'decorator' was not limited to designing the central staircase and the interior decorative elements. He also appears to have been responsible for certain elements of the facades, such as bow-windows, etc. On this subject, see A. Raguenet, *Matériaux et documents d'architecture et de sculpture* nr.1, plate 15 (Paris, 1902-1903).
- 2 – Brussels, Archives et Musée de la Littérature, Fonds Henry van de Velde, FS X 89 bis. Franco Borsi and Hans Wieser, *Bruxelles, Capitale de l'Art Nouveau* (Brussels: Vokaer, 1992), 168–89. Léon Ploegaerts and Pierre Puttemans, *L'œuvre architecturale de Henry van de Velde* (Brussels: Atelier Vokaer, 1987), 260–63. Anne Van Loo, ed, *Henry van de Velde, Récit de ma vie, Anvers-Bruxelles-Paris-Berlin. I: 1863-1900* (Brussels: Versa and Flammarion 1992), 374-75. [www.irismonument.be/fr.Bruxelles\_Extension\_Sud.Rue\_Jacques\_Jordaens.34].
- 3 – Avenue Louise was named in honour of the first Belgian Queen, Louise-Marie, the wife of Leopold I.
- 4 – Xavier Duquenne, *L'avenue Louise à Bruxelles* [Brussels: Hayez, 2007], 7.
- 5 – Patrick Crahay, *L'avenue Louise et les rues adjacentes. Considération historiques, urbanistiques et architecturales* [Brussels: Ministère de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, Direction des Monuments et des Sites, 2008], 21-24. Duquenne, *op.cit.*, 55-69 et 137-41.

Urbanization did not only take place on the avenue itself but also in the new neighbourhoods around it. The parcels were usually a bit smaller than the ones on the avenue. A plan for future development around Avenue Louise was drawn up by Victor Besme in 1866 [6]. Hôtel Otlet is situated in one of the new blocks parallel to Avenue Louise. Besme's plan foresaw a dense urbanization. The parcel at the corner of Rue de Livourne and Rue de Florence was bought by Paul Otlet in 1895 [7]. He wanted to build a house where he could live with his wife, Fernande Gloner, and their two children, Marcel and Jean. Otlet decided to work with architect Octave Van Rysselberghe for the design of his home.

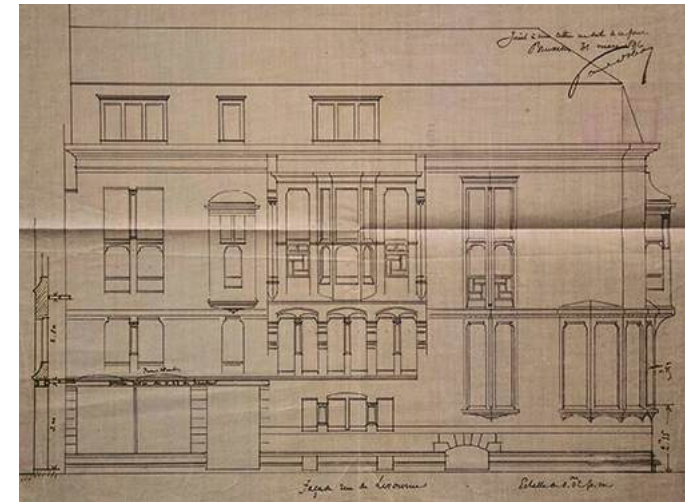
### 1896–98 FIRST BUILDING PHASE

Early sketches of the house were found in the personal archive of Paul Otlet [8]. The first drawing made by the owner is very different from and far more traditional than the end result. Otlet's personal archives also consisted of little notes with lists of what he wanted in the house, for example: hot water in the bathrooms, a dumb waiter for plates and letters in the centre of the staircase, a partially covered courtyard, a mailbox in the door of the bedroom, clothes hangers on the bathroom door, etc [9].

In May 1895, Van Rysselberghe made an initial plan of the parcel [10]. The plot is rectangular and is 20 m long on Rue de Livourne and 14 m deep on Rue de Florence. It took nearly a year before Paul Otlet asked for a building permit for his house. On 23 March 1896, he sent a letter to the city of Brussels stipulating that the courtyard was quite small. He argued that the house was quite well ventilated as it was being built on a corner. The whole parcel would be occupied by a single house, his personal home, and attention was paid to hygienic issues. He threatened the city of Brussels by arguing that if he did not receive the building permit for his house, he would build three investment properties on the same parcel which would not benefit the aesthetics of Rue de Florence [11].

The plans drawn up by Octave Van Rysselberghe for the building permit are dated 31 March 1896 [12]. He delivered a plan of the ground floor, a cross section and two elevations. These plans are similar to the actual situation of the house, with the exception of minor changes and later interventions.

The rear side of the parcel was built as an atelier but initially designed as a shop ('magasin' and 'arrière-magasin'). Soon after work had begun, Otlet asked the city of Brussels to approve this change of function from shop to atelier [13].

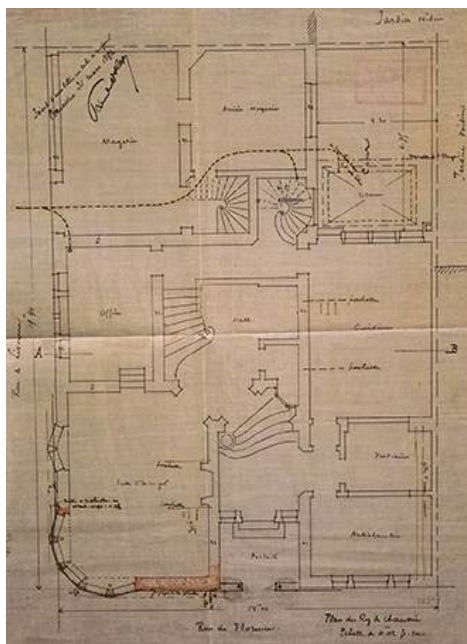


Plans for building permit [1896].  
Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles,  
TP [Travaux Publics] 13794.

Construction started in early April 1896 and the general contractor was Ed. Dublie. The shell was finished a year later, in May 1897 [14]. The interior works probably started in 1897, as can be deduced from letters found in the archives [15]. The reason why Paul Otlet sent letters to his architect or contractors was often to complain about tasks which were not yet finished, the quality of the work, or the timing. Certain problems arose during construction: damage to the sgraffito because of a leaking gutter, a leaking cistern which caused humidity problems in the atelier, the poor quality of the plasterwork, issues with

- 6 – Victor Besme (1834-1904) was a Belgian architect and urbanist. He worked at different administrations in Belgium. In 1859 he was appointed 'inspecteur voyer des faubourgs de Bruxelles' (road inspector of the borough of Brussels). He developed his plans following three important principles: agglomeration, communication and sanitation. Thierry d'Huart, 'Victor 'voyer' aux multiples facettes', *Bruxelles Patrimoines* 21 (2016): 7–8. The preliminary design of the plan was made in 1862 but the final version was approved in 1866. Duquenne, *L'Avenue Louise à Bruxelles*, 114.
- 7 – Cadastre, Bruxelles, Section 11, Art. 542.
- 8 – Mons, Mundaneum, PP PO 648.
- 9 – Mons, Mundaneum, PP PO 648.
- 10 – Mons, Mundaneum, PP PO 637.
- 11 – Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Travaux Publics, 13794.
- 12 – Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Travaux Publics, 13794.
- 13 – Françoise Aubry, «Victor Horta, Architecte de Monuments Civils et Militaires», *Bulletin de la Commission Royale des Monuments et des Sites* 13, 1986: 85. Cécile Dulière, *Victor Horta Mémoires* [Brussels: Ministère de la Communauté française. Administration du patrimoine culturel, 1985], 77. Octave Maus, «L'architecture belge – L'hôtel Otlet», *Le Moniteur des architectes*, 1900: 16.
- 14 – Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Travaux Publics, 13794.
- 15 – Some copies of the correspondence between Paul Otlet and different contributors are kept in the archive: Fonds Octave Van Rysselberghe, CIVA collections Brussels, but this only covers the period from December 1897 to June 1898.





Plans for building permit [1896].  
Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, TP [Travaux Publics] 13794.



Facing the courtyard, the glass wall  
of the artist's studio.  
Photo Maud Rochez, 2016.

the heating system ... In December 1897, Paul Otlet was feeling quite discouraged and wondered when he would be able to live in his house [16]. Although construction of the house was not finished yet, the atelier already found a tenant. The first inhabitant was E. Beetz, who rented the space from 15 October 1897 for a three-year period. The name of Ph. Swynkop also appears in the personal archives of Paul Otlet. A painter, he rented the property from December 1903 onwards. Ilse Conrat, an Austrian sculptor who worked with Victor Horta to make the base of the monument to Johannes Brahms, also lived in the atelier designed by Van Rysselberghe. She probably rented the house after E. Beetz and before Ph. Swynkop, between 1900 and 1903 [17]. Finally, Paul Otlet and his family moved into the house on the corner of Rue de Florence and Rue de Livourne in May 1898 [18].

- 16 – Fonds Octave Van Rysselberghe, CIVA collections Brussels, hôtel Paul Otlet – Several letters dating from 9 to 18 December 1897.
- 17 – Mons, Mundaneum, PP P0 648 – Contract to rent the *atelier d'artiste*, Rue de Livourne 48, between Paul Otlet and E. Beetz on 20 September 1897. Mons Mundaneum, PP P0 648, contract between P. Otlet and Ph. Swynkop dated 6 December 1903.
- 18 – Fonds Octave Van Rysselberghe, CIVA collections Brussels, Hôtel Paul Otlet – Letter from Paul Otlet to the Directeur du service de la population on 10 May 1898 and letter from Paul Otlet to the Directeur du bureau de la population d'Ixelles on 4 May 1898.
- 19 – The numbers between brackets refer to the numbers of each room as written on the plans.
- 20 – Ploegaerts and Puttemans, *L'œuvre architecturale de Henry van de Velde*, 71–73 and 280–81

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PLAN AND FUNCTIONS

The entrance to Hôtel Otlet is on Rue de Florence and has a porch ('portail'). From the entrance hall [0.01] [19], visitors can go straight to the main hall (0.11), which is dominated by an enormous staircase.

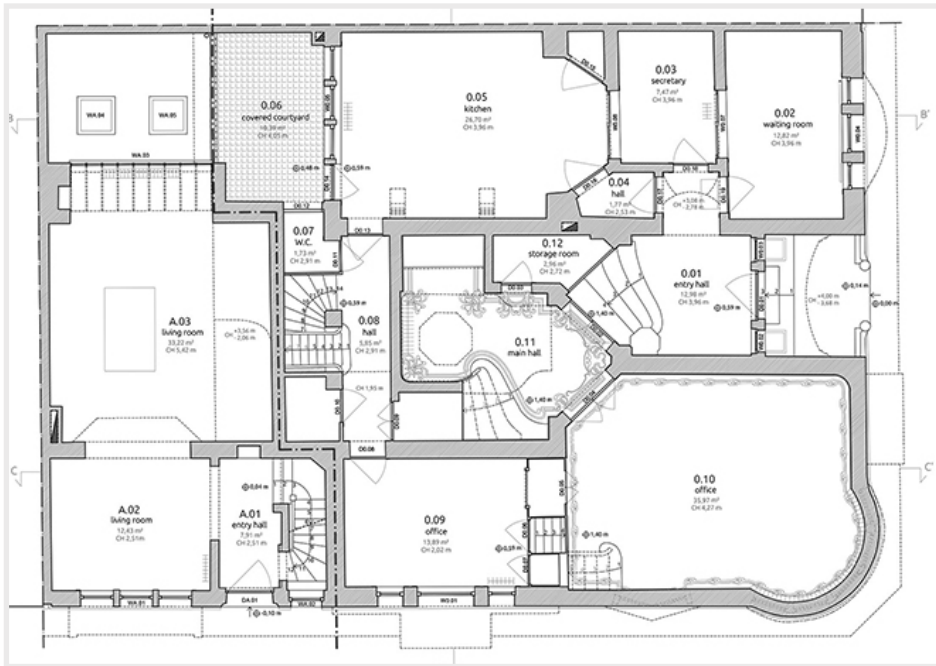


The central staircase as seen from the 2nd floor landing.  
Photo Jordan Vercruyssen, 2016.

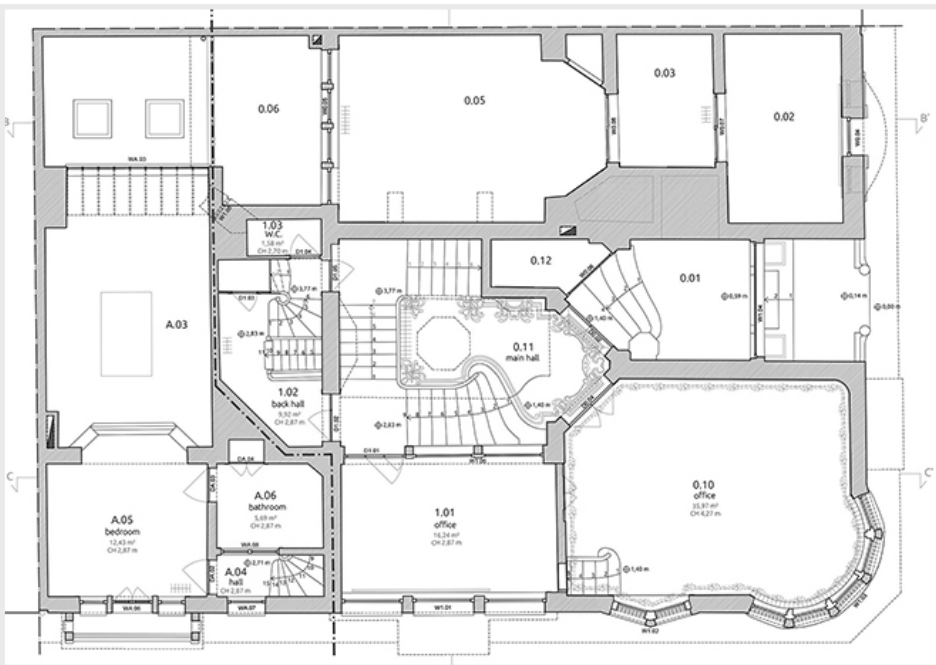
The staircase at the heart of the house is a splendid promenade leading to the different rooms. All the house's activities are gathered around this central space and every level has its own function and corresponds to a period of the day. The house was designed as a spacious, high-ceilinged home, and it feels light and ventilated. This central hall is not illuminated by direct sunlight, but through different openings: windows and stained-glass windows between the hall and the surrounding rooms. An octagonal skylight, with stained glass, was built on top of this hall. Some elements of the main staircase can be found in a later project by Henry van de Velde, the 1901 Folkwang museum for Karl Ernst Osthaus in Hagen: the arches dividing the space, the opening in the ceiling and the stained-glass skylight are similar to the elements of the main staircase in Hôtel Otlet [20].

The staircase starts on the ground floor, which was mainly the dining level. The big room with a bow window on the corner of the house is the dining room ('salle à manger', 0.10).

From the entrance hall, it was also possible to go right to the 'antichambre' (0.02). This space used to welcome guests who were not supposed to enter the private parts of the house. The next room is the 'vestiaire' (0.03) and finally there is the kitchen (0.05). The connection between the dining room and kitchen was made behind the scenes, through a small hall going to the 'office'



Survey of the existing situation: ground floor.  
© Maud Rochez.



Survey of the existing situation: entresol.  
© Maud Rochez.

21 – Maus, «L'architecture belge – L'hôtel Otlet », 15.

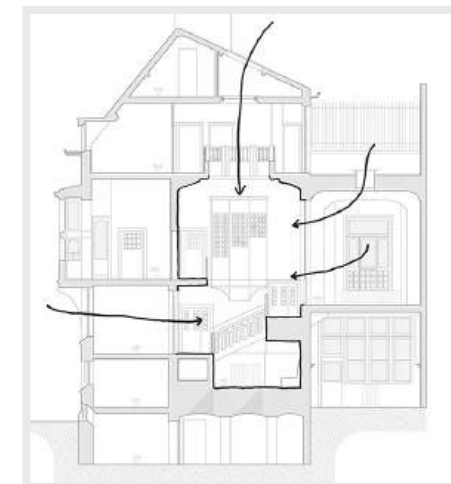
(0.09). A beautifully decorated cupboard separated the dining room (0.10) and office (0.09). A door and four little steps were integrated in this cupboard, which allowed access between the rooms. Plates could be passed through the cupboard without opening the door. It also featured a little staircase that gave access to the sitting room (1.01) one floor up. At the back of the house, the architect had foreseen a service stairway (0.08) and in the corner of the parcel there is a small courtyard (0.06).

The first landing gives access to the sitting room (1.01). From this landing and the second one, a connection was made with the service staircase (1.02). The third landing gives access to the living room (2.01a) and the workspace of Paul Otlet (2.01b-c). This was the level where the inhabitants could devote themselves to intellectual activities: work, listening to music and reading. Finally, the fourth landing led to the more private and night-time space, which were the bed – and bathrooms (2.02-2.06). The two big rooms at the back of the house (2.05 & 2.06), right above the atelier, were the bedrooms of the two children.

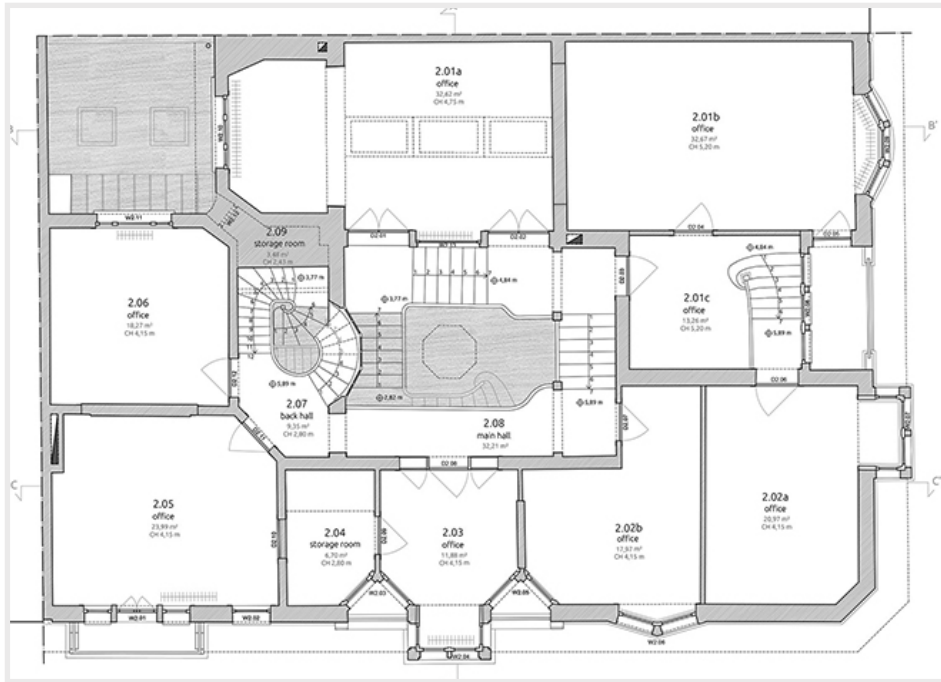
The architect's use of the different levels is a consequence of a rational use of space. The rooms which needed more light and air were given high ceilings, such as the dining room and workspace. Other places, like the sitting room, had lower ceilings, to make them cosier [21]. In the plan, it is remarkable that all the rooms are internally connected to each other. The inhabitants did not have to use the main staircase to go from one room to another.

No plan of the second floor was found during the research and only little has been described. Maus explains in his article that the roof terrace on the second floor could be used by the children to play outside. Here again, the question of maximizing the available space of the parcel is raised as the architect did not foresee a big courtyard or garden in his plan. By lifting the courtyard to the roof, the surface of the parcel could rationally be exploited [22].

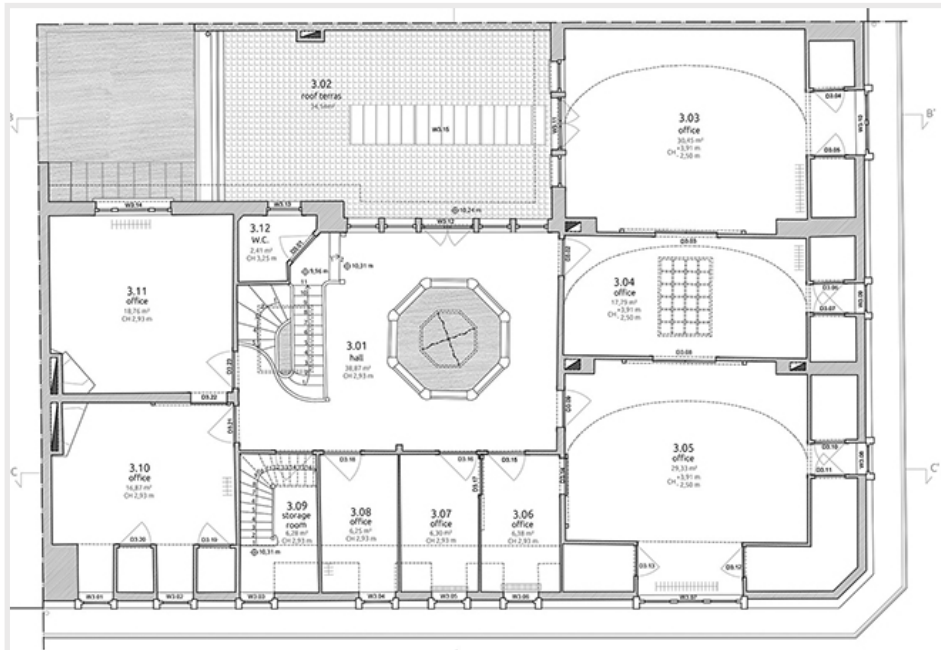
Natural lighting in the main staircase.  
© Maud Rochez.







Survey of the existing situation: first floor.  
© Maud Rochez.



Survey of the existing situation: second floor.  
© Maud Rochez.

The functions of every room on this second floor were not found. A letter from Paul Otlet to his architect suggests that he had a library on the second floor. He asked Van Rysselberghe to analyse the communication between his two libraries (1st and 2nd floor) [23].

## INTERIOR DECORATIONS

A few pictures of the interior of the house were published in magazines at the time and all refer to the work of Henry van de Velde. The pictures show that the house was well decorated with several stained-glass windows, a mosaic at the bottom of the central staircase and integrated furniture. The integration of the furniture and decoration plays an important role in enhancing the architecture. For example, the elegant living room (2.01a) had some wooden arches with an integrated screen to separate the two rooms without obstructing the natural light. This space offers a magnificent view of the stained-glass window, which can also be admired on the other side of the stairwell. The quality of the glass is exceptional, and some texture was added to make it more lively. The design of the windows is original and graceful. The colours of the glass change considerably according to the light, which varies with every season and every hour of the day [24].



The first floor landing.  
Photo Jordan Vercrussse, 2016.

- 22 – Maus, «L'architecture belge – L'hôtel Otlet», 15.  
23 – Fonds Octave Van Rysselberghe, CIVA collections – Brussels, hôtel Paul Otlet – letter from Paul Otlet to Octave Van Rysselberghe on 17 March 1898.

- 24 – Maus, «L'architecture belge – L'hôtel Otlet», 16.

From the archival research it is unclear which specific pieces of furniture were designed or possibly even built by van de Velde and his ateliers. The publications in magazines always mention van de Velde as the decorator, but correspondence between Paul Otlet and several other contractors was found in the archives. From letters of Otlet to 'Damman et Washer', woodworkers, we know that they made, at least, the integrated cupboard from the dining room (0.10) to the sitting room (1.01), the wooden windows, the central staircase and service staircase [25]. Among the correspondence between van de Velde and Otlet, letters were found that concern the wallpaper and painting works for the central staircase [26]. From these original pictures, it is clear that different colours and materials were used to decorate the space. A complementary study on the stratigraphy of the walls should be made in detail to determine the tones and colours as they were applied originally. A stratigraphic study was recently carried out in the central staircase at the request of the Brussels Department of Heritage as part of the restoration of Villa Bloemenwerf, the personal house of Henry van de Velde that he himself designed and built. On old pictures of Hôtel Otlet and Villa Bloemenwerf, the same motif of a frieze appears. As the stratigraphic study did not find traces of it during the preliminary research of Villa Bloemenwerf, a complementary study in the central staircase of Hôtel Otlet was made, with more success. The stratigraphic study showed that in the main hall, the frieze is still in place underneath several layers of uniformly applied colours and that remarkable colours were used: a motif in red/ochre and a background in olive green. The red colour also refers to the ones used for the floor mosaic [27].



Stratigraphic study in the staircase.  
IRPA, 2018.13755.

## FAÇADES

Octave Van Rysselberghe made use of multiple elements of architecture for the façades and the overall composition is rhythmic and symmetric. Each space was designed according to its needs in terms of volume and has a particular height. The façades were composed using many diverse architectural elements influenced by the Italian Renaissance and reveal the interior plan. The façades have their own identity, created by a different design for every opening; straight, curved, in depth, drawn out, symmetric, asymmetric, higher, lower, etc.

As described in Maus's article, the façades of Hôtel Otlet were at once strict and pleasant, matching the personality of Paul Otlet. Depth was created by using different elements of architecture although the whole ensemble is very symmetric. The use of the wooden balustrades, the colours in the stained-glass windows and the sgraffito contrast with the stiffness of the natural stone. The façades have a picturesque appearance and are diverse, original and unexpected [28].

Three types of natural stone were used for the façades: Belgian Blue Limestone for the plinth and a combination of the French stones Savonnières and Euville for the façades. The mortar joints between the blocks of natural stone were probably red, as can still be seen in the joints of the entrance porch, as this part is less exposed to weathering.

Today, wrought iron has been used for the balustrades, which was historically not the case. Like the claustra at the entrance porch, the balustrades were made of wood and had a floral motif. This gave the façades much more expression. The window frames and the entrance door are made out of oak and have a layer of varnish.

At the top of the façades, a sgraffito decorates the house. The word sgraffito comes from Italy and is a type of decoration technique where a dark-coloured render layer is covered by a light-coloured render layer. By scratching the upper layer when it is not completely dry, a drawing can appear. A colour can also be applied on the upper layer [29].

- 25 – Fonds Octave Van Rysselberghe, CIVA collections – Brussels, Hôtel Paul Otlet – letters from Paul Otlet to Damman & Washer on 5 January 1897 and 28 February 1898.
- 26 – Fonds Octave Van Rysselberghe, CIVA collections – Brussels, Hôtel Paul Otlet – Letters from Paul Otlet to van de Velde on 8 February 1898, 28 February 1898 and undated.
- 27 – IRPA-KIK, Hôtel Otlet: étude des décors originaux du grand hall et de la cage d'escalier, 09/2018.
- 28 – Maus, «L'architecture belge – L'hôtel Otlet», 16.
- 29 – [https://monument.heritage.brussels/fr/glossary/221] Octave Van Rysselberghe was one of the first architects to introduce the sgraffito on façades in Brussels with the project of Hôtel Goblet d'Alviella in 1882. Mario Baeck, 'Kunstvol Kunstmatig: (R)evolutie van de decoratieve bouwmaterialen in keramiek, cement en glas', in Steen & Co (Brussels: Directie Monumenten en Landschappen, 2010), 122–23.





Sgraffito restored in 2003.  
Photo Maud Rochez, 2016.

The sgraffito of Hôtel Otlet has a pattern of shells surrounded by an arabesque in art nouveau style. The colours were two types of blue for the background and light brown for the patterns. The sgraffito was in terrible condition but was luckily restored in 2003 [30].

### MOVING OF THE OTLET FAMILY & LATER TRANSFORMATIONS

The Otlet family lived in the house for seven years only. In 1905 they sold the house and moved to Uccle, to a house on Avenue des Ormes [31]. At the time, building a villa in Uccle was very popular among industrialists, bankers, lawyers, musicians, authors, etc. Uccle was still the countryside yet close to Brussels. No particular reason as to why the Otlet family left their majestic house has been discovered. Otlet's uncle, Lucien Linden, did suggest in a letter to Otlet that he sell his house on Rue de Florence for the sake of his wife's health, Fernande [32].

Hôtel Otlet was sold to Alexandre Halot in December 1905. He was a doctor in law and consul in Japan. He lived in the house with his wife Marie Gevaert and their four children: Elisabeth, William, Gabrielle and Stéphane. He died in 1927 but the house was only sold in 1947. Probably, the house was rented after his death. From an old picture dating from 1930 kept at the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (IRPA-KIK), it seems that the house was used as a consulate. From the flag and coat of arms, we can deduce that it was the consulate of Poland [33].

- 30 – Brussels, Archives de la Commission royale des Monuments et des Sites, 2043-0088/03/2002-015PR, TR 878. IPRA-KIK, 2L/44-2002.07724, Sgraffite Hôtel Otlet, Étude préliminaire du sgraffito, Relevé et analyses.
- 31 – Cadastre, Bruxelles: 7, Ville de Bruxelles 11<sup>e</sup> section, Art. 542.
- 32 – Mons, Mundaneum, PP PO 636.
- 33 – Cadastre, BRUXELLES: 7, Ville de Bruxelles 11<sup>e</sup> section, Art. 542. Mons, Mundaneum, PP PO 648. Brussels, Archives de la Commission royale des Monuments et des Sites, 2043/mon 88, Dossier de classement, Conservation des Hypothèques de Bruxelles, 17 October 1977, IRPA-KIK, e037018, 1930. [www.odis.be/lnk/PS\_9487].



Hôtel Otlet used as the Consulate of Poland.  
IRPA, 1930, e037018.

The picture of 1930 shows the first changes made to the house. Three new dormers on Rue de Florence were added. Shutters were placed on top of the windows of the dining room (0.10) and the antichambre (0.02). The little square glasses in-between the muntins of the bow window seem to be bolder than originally.

In 1947 the house was sold to the public company SA Union Industrielle et Foncière [34], but little is known about this period. The next owner was SA L'Assurance Liégeoise, which acquired the building in 1972 [35]. Transformations were made before Association d'avocats Berenboom became the current owners. They rented the house from L'Assurance Liégeoise before buying it. Those transformations considerably altered the experience of the interior spaces as a lot of walls were added to partition the rooms. The original spaces of Hôtel Otlet were very high, filled with air and light. The owners probably found that the spaces were too big to be rented as offices and took the decision to divide them.

Looking at a picture taken from the street in 1976, we can see that Hôtel Otlet has lost much of its charm and beauty. The window frames were all painted white, the balustrades were replaced by monotonous standardized iron ones, and the slates on the roof disappeared. At the entrance, the wooden claustra is gone, having made room for a misplaced white closing gate.

- 34 – Cadastre, Bruxelles: 7, Ville de Bruxelles 11<sup>e</sup> section, Art. 542.
- 35 – Brussels, Archives de la Commission royale des Monuments et des Sites, 2043/mon 88, dossier de classement, Conservation des Hypothèques de Bruxelles, 17 octobre 1977. Cadastre, Bruxelles : 7, Ville de Bruxelles 11<sup>e</sup> section, Art. 3131.



Hôtel Otlet occupied by the SA L'Assurance Liégeoise since 1972. IRPA, 1976, m122834.

After long negotiations and protests from L'Assurance Liégeoise, Hôtel Otlet was listed as a monument in 1984. L'Assurance Liégeoise did not see the heritage value of Hôtel Otlet and had opposed several attempts to list it since 1974. They not only owned Hôtel Otlet but also the whole housing block. When they announced their plan to raze all the houses to build new offices, Hôtel Otlet was finally listed as a monument. L'Assurance Liégeoise had to bury their plans for the new construction and decided to sell. The tenants, Association d'avocats Berenboom, bought the house in 1987 [36].

Association d'avocats Berenboom carried out some work from 1990: cleaning the façade by sandblasting it, carrying out repairs to the window frames, gutters and rainwater pipes, renewing the roof on the courtyard of the atelier (A.11), etc. In 2002–03, a restoration campaign took place led by architect Yves Rousseau. New slates were placed on the roof, the white layers on all window frames were removed, the roof terrace of the house was restored, and plasterwork was carried out at the back of the building [37].

## MASTER PLAN

A master plan was established in 2017 [38], based on the different analyses of the building: urban, historical, architectural and on a value assessment. For this assessment, the Nara grid was used to evaluate the authenticity of Hôtel Otlet [39]. A room-by-room inventory of all the house's architectural elements was made to see which elements were still present and what their heritage value was. From this evaluation plan, a master plan could be made, giving guidelines for future restoration work.

Overall, Hôtel Otlet has a high heritage value. The analysis of the building history shows that no major transformations were carried out in Hôtel Otlet. Only small interventions were made, such as closing openings and placing walls, but these have a greater negative impact on the experience of the spaces.

Considering all previous analyses, the master plan goes back to the building's heyday. For Hôtel Otlet, the heyday can be defined as the situation of 1898, which corresponds to the year Paul Otlet and his family officially moved into the house. Most of the later transformations affected the overall heritage value negatively.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INTERVENTIONS

Future interventions were proposed to improve the heritage value of the house. The ideal situation would be a return to the house's heyday, though this does not seem entirely compatible with the current use of the house as a lawyers' office. An analysis of the current situation was made to understand the needs of the owners. Considering these, a proposal was made to combine the improvement of the heritage value with the current use. Some consideration was given to increase the house's energy efficiency.

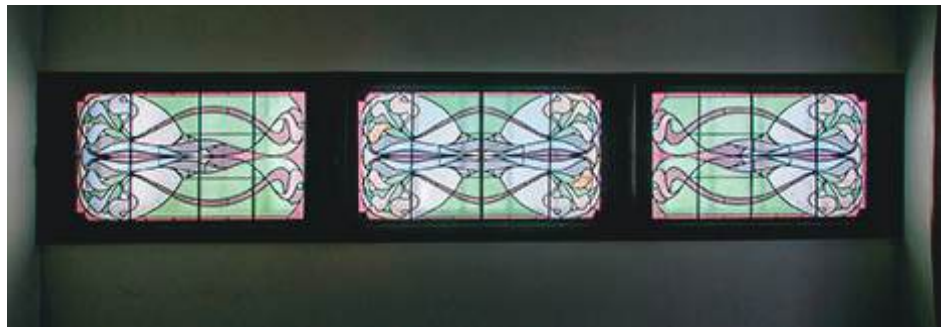
Starting with the exterior of the house, two major interventions are needed: the reconstruction of the wooden balustrades and claustra, and the restoration of the stained-glass windows of the dining room (0.11). The balustrades were originally made out of wood and had a floral motif. Based on historical photos of the house around 1900, the design of the balustrades could be reconstructed. In the same spirit, the claustra, at

- 36 – Brussels, Archives de la Commission royale des Monuments et des Sites, 2043-0088, TR 868, dossier de classement. Letter from the Assurance Liégeoise to the Députation Permanente du Conseil Provincial de la Province du Brabant on 30 July 1981
- 37 – Interview with Alain Berenboom, July 2017. Brussels, Archives de la Commission royale des Monuments et des Sites, 2043-0088/3, TR 878, 23/11/94 plate forme + châssis.
- 38 – Maud Rochez, *A restoration study of Hôtel Otlet in Brussels [1896], a masterpiece by Octave Van Rysselberghe and Henry van de Velde*, Thesis to obtain the degree of Master of Science in Conservation of Monuments and Sites, KU Leuven, 2017.
- 39 – The Nara grid was developed at the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation. It can be used to identify the concept of authenticity through the evaluation of various dimensions and aspects. Before the creation of the Nara document on Authenticity (1994), mostly in Europe, the authenticity of built heritage related only to materialistic aspects. This document, however, makes clear that built heritage can have different cultural concepts and different sets of values. ICOMOS, *The Nara Document on Authenticity*, 1994. Koenraad Van Balen, 'The Nara Grid: An Evaluation Scheme Based on the Nara Document on Authenticity', *APT Bulletin* 29, no. 2/3 (2008): 39–45.



the entrance porch, should also be reconstructed. It has a high architectural expression and forms a transparent screen between the street and the entrance door.

The stained-glass windows of the bow window and the oriel window were both part of the dining room (0.11). They should be reconstructed as they prevent direct sunlight from entering the room too strongly. The design and colours of the stained-glass windows could be based on the historical pictures of the façade but also on the stained-glass skylight of the former living room (2.01a).



Skylight in the living room.  
Photo Maud Rochez, 2016.

Inside Hôtel Otlet, the most disturbing adaptations were the addition of walls to partition the rooms to create separate offices. Proposals were made to combine the use of the building today as a law office and a return to the heyday. The project proposals were made in the form of little schemes as the objective was to reflect on future uses and interventions in the house.

The wall between the former dining room (0.11) and sitting room (1.01) should be opened up again as they formed one ensemble. The office of the managing partner in the former dining room could possibly be combined with an office of a lawyer or secretary working for him or her in the salon (1.01). The two spaces would feel much more open and would regain their lost heritage value.

(fig.1 et 2)

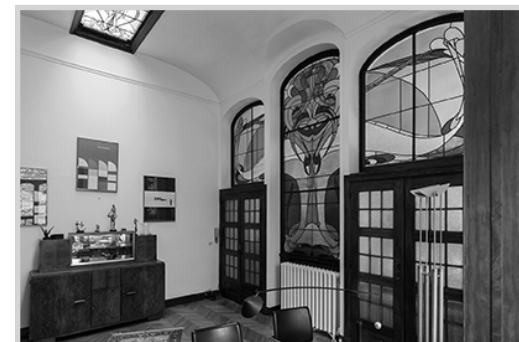
Two walls were added (2.01) to the living room which dampened the feeling of one large and bright room and negatively affected the daylight entering from the street. Originally, Henry van de Velde designed a folding screen to separate the office of Paul Otlet (2.01b) from the living room (2.01a). A new screen could be placed, based on a design by van de Velde, as can be seen on a historical picture. By only placing a screen, the two parts could not be used as separate



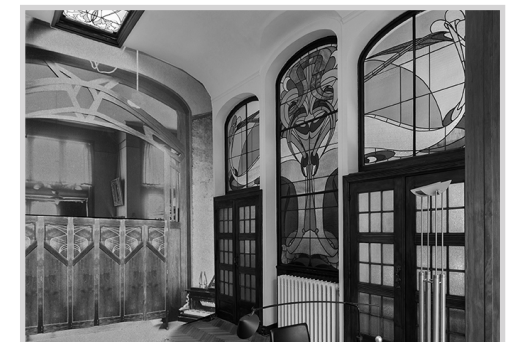
(fig.1)



(fig.2)



(fig.3)

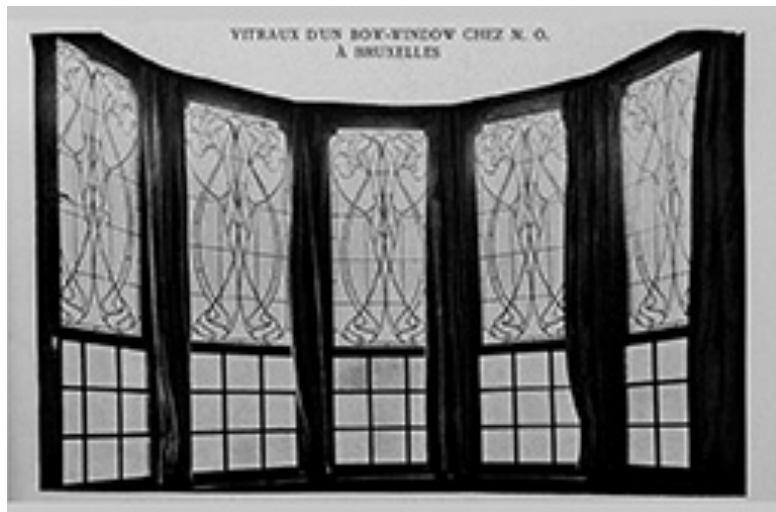


(fig.4)

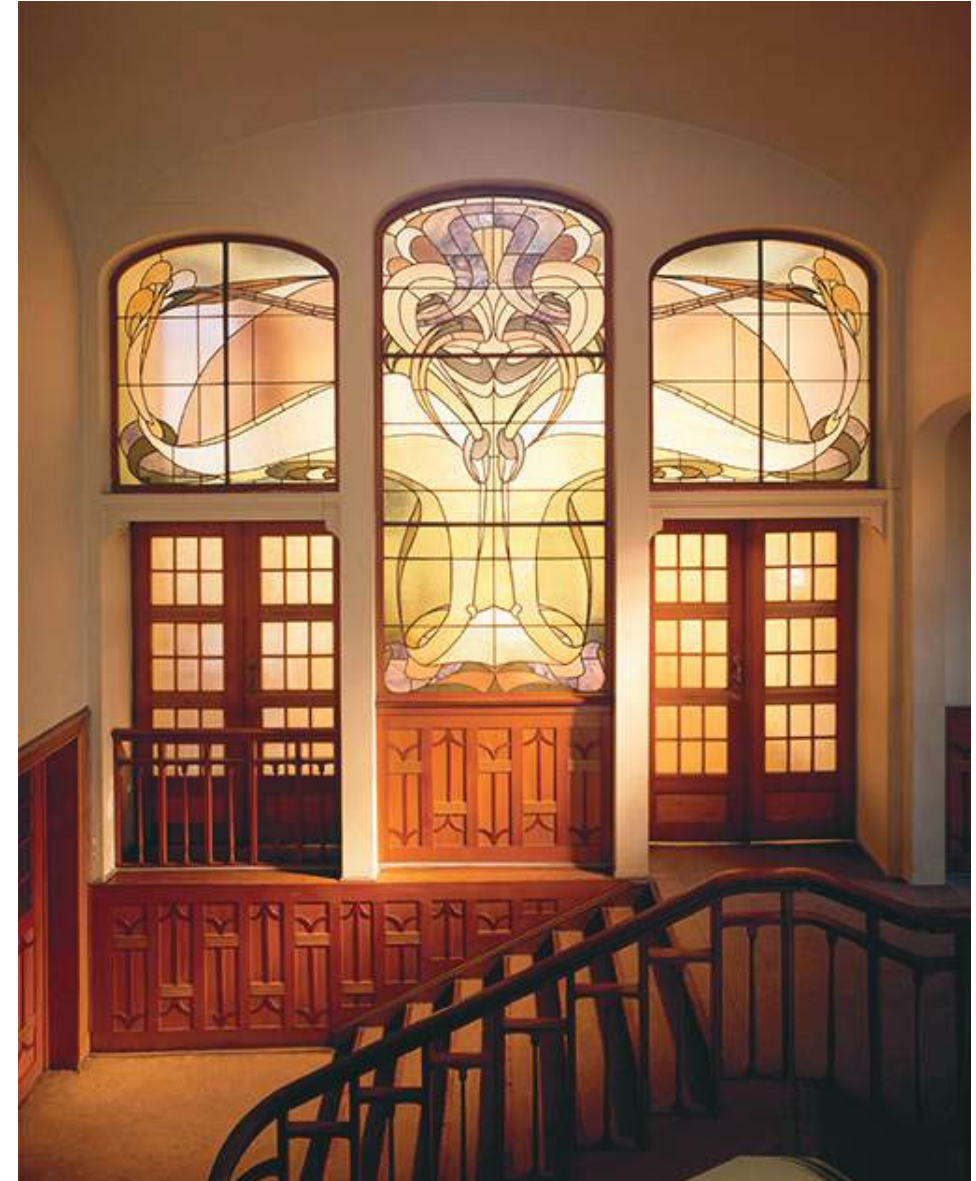
offices, because of the bigger issue of the acoustics. A solution could be to reconstruct an immovable screen and place glass on top. The design could be completed by integrating the reconstructed arches. As such, access would still not be possible between the two rooms but at least light could again flow from the façade on Rue de Florence into the former living room (2.01a) (fig.3 et 4).

## CONCLUSION

Today, Hôtel Otlet feels characterized for the most part by its main staircase. However, all the rooms around this central staircase deserve attention too. They were well designed, with a height according to their function and an appropriate inflow of natural light. The addition of walls to create individual offices terribly disturbed these volumes. Nevertheless, small interventions could restore the house's original architectural glory. Hôtel Otlet is after all an architectural masterpiece made possible by the close collaboration of three important figures: Paul Otlet, the commissioner; Octave Van Rysselberghe, the architect; and Henry van de Velde, the decorator, as carefully described by Octave Maus in 1900: *'We can only praise Mr Van Rysselberghe for his initiative and congratulate Mr. Van de Velde on the additions he has so skillfully made. Let us add that Mr Paul deserved followers of the new art by resolutely braving the jeers and the criticisms which never fail to assail those who allow themselves to break with the consecrated usages and the compliant formulas. It is not enough for an architect to have innovative ideas: it is necessary to find the opportunity to apply them. In this, the owner is the artist's indispensable collaborator.'*



The bow window in the dining room.  
*L'Art Décoratif*, n°1, oct. 1898, p.27.



Henry van de Velde's monumental stained glass window illuminates the main staircase or the courtyard-facing salon, depending on the time of day.  
Photo Sylvie Desauw, 1988.



## OCTAVE VAN RYSSELBERGHE AND ART NOUVEAU From Classicism to Modernism

Luc Verpoest, Architecture historian, emeritus Professor at KULeuven  
and Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation



Portrait of Octave Van Rysselberghe painted by his brother Théo Van Rysselberghe (undated).  
[[www.commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theo\\_Van\\_Rysselberghe](http://www.commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theo_Van_Rysselberghe)]

Hôtel Otlet (1894–98) is a part of Brussels' art nouveau heritage, not only because of its location in the municipality of Saint-Gilles, but also due to the eclectic use of art nouveau forms and undoubtedly also due to the interior decoration by Henry van de Velde. Architect Octave Van Rysselberghe (Minderhout, 22 July 1855–Nice, 3 March 1929) thus joins the four great masters of Belgian art nouveau: Victor Horta, Paul Hankar, Gustave Serrurier-Bovy and Henry van de Velde ... Was he the fifth wheel? There is obviously more to it than a recognizable formal language. The architecture of Brussels art nouveau is ultimately the development of an avant-garde spatial concept for housing, in tune with the new functional concepts of urban life: an open, free and dynamic space that, from a historical point of view, is a fundamental step towards the modern architecture of Auguste Perret, Tony Garnier, Adolf Loos, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. For the first and last of these, is it the concrete framework that was the structural starting point; for Victor Horta, in particular, it was iron technology. Both the concrete framework and the iron technology were developed in the course of the nineteenth century by civil engineers: François Hennebique, Gustave Eiffel, Joseph Paxton and others. This was 'the architecture of engineers'. After all, they were all indebted to French architect and architectural historian Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and in particular to his *'Entretiens sur l'architecture'*, an eclectic plea, in short, for a completely idiosyncratic nineteenth-century architecture. An ambition which, after the astonishing work of the engineers, finally took shape towards the end of the century in a brilliant and virtuoso manner in art nouveau, particularly in Belgium.

Through his family background, his training and his collaboration with Henry van de Velde, who was then at the start of his career, Octave Van Rysselberghe was particularly familiar with this new world in search of its first modernity. His eclectic oeuvre bears witness to this 'patient search' – in the words of Le Corbusier, which means that he can now be fully recognized as a key figure in art nouveau and his contribution to the development of modern architecture can be properly assessed.

**OCTAVE VAN RYSSSELBERGHE'S PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:**  
CLASSICISM, ECLECTICISM, ART NOUVEAU, MODERNISM

Octave Van Rysselberghe's father, Jean-Baptiste Van Rysselberghe (1820–1893), was a contractor mason in Ghent. Apart from the youngest son, the painter Théo Van Rysselberghe (1862–1926), the four other Van Rysselberghe sons were active in architecture, natural sciences and engineering: François (1846–1893), a professor at Ghent University and, from 1877 to 1882, a meteorologist at the Brussels Observatory, which was initially located in Jette, later in Uccle, in new buildings (1886–90) designed by Octave Van Rysselberghe; Charles (1850–1920), architect for the city of Ghent; Julien-Marie (1852–1931), a civil engineer and professor at Ghent University; Max, who took part as the youngest crew member (and as a mechanical engineer) in Adrien de Gerlache's expedition to the South Pole with *the Belgica* (1897–99) [1].

Octave Van Rysselberghe studied at the Ghent Academy of Fine Arts in 1871–74 under Adolphe Pauli (1820–1895). Training at the Ghent academy was directed until 1860 by Louis Roelandt (1786–1864), who was also a professor at the School of Civil Engineering at Ghent University [2]. His teaching and his work bear witness to the slow transition from a strictly classical tradition to a marked eclecticism [3]. His student Adolphe Pauli, who had already succeeded him in 1854 as architect for the city of Ghent, then succeeded him at the university and at the academy in 1861 [4]. In 1890, he was himself replaced by Louis Cloquet (1849–1920) at the university, and by his pupil Charles Van Rysselberghe as professor at the academy (1863) and architect for the city (1879).

In 1875 Octave Van Rysselberghe and Ernest Allard (1849–1898) won second prize at the Prix de Rome architecture competition [5]. Four years later, in 1879, Van Rysselberghe won again, this time in partnership with architect Eugène Dieltiens (1855–1949). Pauli, Allard, Dieltiens, Octave Van Rysselberghe and the magazine *L'Émulation* all shared an interest in eclecticism, which, moving beyond historicizing neo-styles, was searching for a new architecture that was fully contemporary with the art nouveau of the late nineteenth century – the highly original cornerstone of this development. However, for Octave Van Rysselberghe, art nouveau represented merely an eclectic transition between classicism and modernism, between the Renaissance palace of Goblet d'Alviella (10 Rue Faider, Saint-Gilles, 1882) and his own house (83 Rue de Livourne, Saint-Gilles, 1912), a building with complex, irregular volumes, close to the work of C.F.A. Voysey, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Hermann Muthesius, and which seems to herald neo-regionalism [6]. The series of four villas on Avenue de l'Observatoire in Uccle (1883–89), the Grand Hôtel Bellevue in Westende (1909–11) and the social housing on Rue d'Ophem (44) and Rue de Witte de Haelen (1–5) (Brussels), built in 1921, mark an evolution towards modern constructional mastery, functional clarity and formal simplification.



Hôtel Goblet d'Alviella, 10 Rue Faider at Saint-Gilles [1882].  
Photo Maud Rochez, 2017.

Octave Van Rysselberghe's personal home, 83 Rue de Livourne at Ixelles [1912].  
Photo Les Amis de La Cambre, asbl, 2024.



- 1 – Jean-Baptiste Van Rysselberghe and Mélanie Rommens had nine children, three of whom died in infancy. Sylvie Van Rysselberghe (1848–1930) was married to Chilean engineer Valentin Martinez Llamas, who had studied with Julien Van Rysselberghe at Ghent University in 1871–74. In 1876 Martinez Llamas was appointed professor of civil engineering at the University of Santiago (Chile) and he also worked for the Ministry of Public Works, notably on hydraulic engineering projects (canals, sewers); the family returned to Ghent in 1900. A second daughter, Jenny (1879–1966), was a successful organist. In 1905 Max Van Rysselberghe married Isabel Martinez, the daughter of his sister Sylvie, and emigrated to Chile, where he worked as an engineer for the Concepcion railway company.
- 2 – See Pieter-Jan Cierkens, *De architectuuropleiding aan de Gentse Academie voor Schone Kunsten in de vroege 19e eeuw* (unpublished master's thesis, Ghent University, 2012); Pieter-Jan Cierkens, *Architectural Culture and Building Practice in 19th-Century Belgium: The Case of Louis Roelandt (1786-1864), Architect, Academic, Civil Servant* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Ghent University, 2018).
- 3 – The writings of French publicist César Daly (1811–1894) were an important source of inspiration. Daly was the owner-founder and director of the *Revue générale de l'architecture et des travaux publics* (Paris, 1840–88). See Gary Huafan He, "The Organic and the Eclectic in César Daly's 'De l'architecture de l'avenir'"; *JSAH* 81, no. 4 (December 2022): 456–75; Yves Schoonjans, *Architectuur en vooruitgang: de cultuur van het eclecticisme in de 19de eeuw* (Ghent: A&S Books, 2007); Geert Bekaert, ed., *À la recherche de Viollet-le-Duc* (Brussels: Mardaga, 1980).
- 4 – See Linda Wylleman, *Architekt Adolphe-Edouard-Theodore Pauli 1820-1895* (unpublished master's thesis, Ghent University, 1973).
- 5 – Ernest Allard had sat on the editorial board of the magazine *L'Émulation* since it was founded in 1874 by Valère Dumortier (1848–1903) and had been a member of the SCAB (Société Centrale d'Architecture de Belgique). On Allard and eclecticism, see Ernest Allard, 'Étude d'esthétique architecturale. L'éclectisme et la liberté dans l'art architectural', *L'Émulation* 9, no. 7 (1884): 67–69.
- 6 – See Jean-Claude Vigato, *L'architecture régionaliste: France 1890-1950* (Paris: Norma, 1994); Leen Meganck, Linda Van Santvoort and Jan De Maeyer, eds., *Regionalism and Modernity: Architecture in Western Europe, 1914-1940*, KADOC Artes 14 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013).





Grand Hôtel Bellevue in Westende [1909-11].  
Carte postale – UGENT, RUG01\_001024725.



Villa L'Ermitage in Westende [1903],  
published in *L'Émulation*, 1906, pl.43.



The Villa *Les Terrasses* in Westende [1902- 03],  
published in *Petites maisons pittoresques*,  
1st set, pl.2.

It was undoubtedly his contemporaries Henry van de Velde (1863–1957) and Louis Van der Swaelmen (1883–1929) who best understood the position and importance of Van Rysselberghe, who himself probably contributed directly to van de Velde's painstaking search for a rational approach to function, construction, form and space, in other words the essence of the modern vocabulary of architecture. For van de Velde, this 'patient search' initiated in his projects and constructions between 1900 and 1914 finally led to an unmistakable climax and a powerful statement in his evolution: the theatre of the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition in Cologne in 1914, in the summer before the outbreak of World War I. Van der Swaelmen, who had worked with van de Velde at La Cambre since its foundation, died in 1929, a few months after Octave Van Rysselberghe.



Henry van de Velde with the professors  
of the ISAD – La Cambre school in 1928,  
with Louis Van der Swaelmen  
in the centre at the very back.  
CIVA Collections, Brussels.

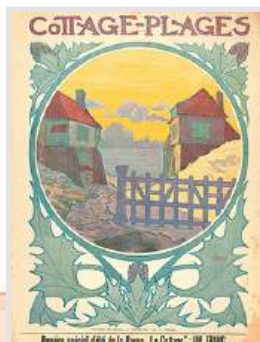
**OCTAVE VAN RYSELBERGHE IN ARCHITECTURAL  
AND HISTORICAL LITERATURE:**

LOUIS VAN DER SWAELMEN, PIERRE PUTTEMANS, HENRY VAN DE VELDE

Regarding Octave Van Rysselberghe, architectural historiography focuses almost exclusively on his art nouveau architecture, which gives him his position in history. This is also the case, although more hypothetically and from a more contextual perspective, in *Antoine Pompe et l'effort moderne en Belgique 1890-1940* (Brussels, 1969), the first encyclopedic overview of half a century of pre-modern and modern architectural history in Belgium [7].

A short bibliographical note includes a quotation from Louis Van der Swaelmen's article, '*L'Effort moderne en Belgique*', published in *La Cité* in 1925. Van der Swaelmen recalls Van Rysselberghe's classical training and places him in contrast to the 'indisputable protagonists of modernist architecture in Belgium', Hankar, van de Velde and Horta: 'Van Rysselberghe and, after him, [Léon] Govaerts, architects par excellence and, so to speak, by the grace of God, retained, in

7 – Maurice Culot and François Terlinden, eds., *Antoine Pompe et l'effort moderne en Belgique 1890-1940* (Brussels: Éditions du Musée d'Ixelles, 1969), published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name at the Musée d'Ixelles. Following on from this exhibition, Culot and Terlinden founded the Archives d'Architecture Moderne (AAM) that same year.



Cover of the magazine  
*Le Cottage* [1904].

Below, general plan of Westende Plage  
by Octave Van Rysselberghe [1903],  
published in *Le Cottage* in 1904.



their firm determination to be of their time, the influence, to a certain extent, of their training and of their classical predilection, with a pronounced hint of Italianism in the case of Van Rysselberghe, [...] [a] classicism that is always tinged with a certain Italianism under whose inspiration the Master discovered in his own temperament the winged rhythms that characterize his entire output <sup>[8]</sup>.

In 1929, in a commemorative article for the same magazine, Van der Swaelmen wrote of the 'two adorable dwellings' that Octave Van Rysselberghe had built in 1906 for himself and Théo Van Rysselberghe in Saint-Clair, Le Lavandou, on the Côte d'Azur: '[...] two small masterpieces in which the Italianate "winged rhythms" have come to fertilize the local tradition of Provençal dwellings'<sup>[9]</sup>. Van der Swaelmen also mentions Hôtel Goblet d'Alviella and Hôtel Otlet as well as Théo Van Rysselberghe's studio house in Ixelles (63 Rue de l'Abbaye, from 1891–94). With regard to the latter, he concludes: 'This house is in a sense the essential expression of one of the innovative trends in architecture of the period', in reference to Henry van de Velde's interior design, but without using the term 'art nouveau'. Lastly, Van der Swaelmen pays a great deal of attention to the projects on the Belgian coast, in Ostend and Westende at the start of the twentieth century. To compensate for the failure of the 'grands hôtels', commissioned by the Liège banker Georges Nagelmackers and the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, Van Rysselberghe obtained a building plot on the dike at Ostend-Mariakerke ('Ostende-Extensions') and around 1910 built the Villa du Ponant, a six-storey building, 'a great novelty at the time, in these parts. Remarkable, even surprising architecture for its time'. For Van der Swaelmen, Van Rysselberghe's 'modernist' work par excellence was 'La Rotonde' (Hôtel Bellevue) of 1909–11, part of the ambitious project for the seaside resort of Westende, for which Paul Otlet had hired Octave Van Rysselberghe. Van der Swaelmen is clear in his assessment: 'This was not a social project, it was a matter of [real estate] development. It was a time – and still is – when it was not thought possible to put "modern art" at the service of real-estate companies.' The importance of these projects for the development of post-war modernism and Van Rysselberghe's work in general was undeniable for Van der Swaelmen, who uses Corbusian language to express himself on the subject: 'Neither boisterous, nor demanding, nor proselytizing, the calm, sure and slow work of Octave Van Rysselberghe achieved a considerable magnetism, which undoubtedly influenced the compass of many pre-war modernist researchers, whom the contingencies of time subsequently disorientated, alas, for the most part.' The patient search ...

8 – Culot and Terlinden, *Antoine Pompe et l'effort moderne en Belgique*, 178;  
Louis Van der Swaelmen, 'L'effort moderne en Belgique', in: *La Cité*, V, 1925, n° 7, 124-143 (129).  
9 – Louis Van der Swaelmen, 'Octave Van Rysselberghe, architecte', in: *La Cité*, VII, 1929, n°11, 145-148.

As regards the more recent literature, it was Pierre Puttemans who first dealt with Octave Van Rysselberghe in the seminal catalogue, *Antoine Pompe et l'effort moderne en Belgique*. Puttemans mentions him initially in a list of architects active for fifteen years in Brussels, Antwerp and Liège, the authors of 'brilliant or charming inventions, masterpieces whose (imminent) disappearance must be mourned today, since [...] they were often built in districts devoted to the most unbridled property speculation'. <sup>[10]</sup> It was a long wait for this new architecture. Puttemans underlines the importance of Viollet-le-Duc, who, based on his analysis of Gothic architecture, drew the lines of 'conventional architectural reasoning' in functional and constructive terms. In 1893–94, Victor Horta's Hôtel Tassel stood unquestionably at the beginning of the new architecture, at the very end of the nineteenth century. Rather than focus on the formal renewal – a radical rejection of all the historical forms that dominated nineteenth-century architecture – Puttemans ultimately points to the very essence of Victor Horta's art nouveau: 'Horta's profound novelty is to have given architecture a new fluidity and to have linked so aptly ornament, its support and its space.' From a modernist-historical perspective, it was the pre-modern contribution of Horta and art nouveau to modern architecture that developed in the 1920s: Adolf Loos's 'Raumplan', Le Corbusier's 'free plan' and Theo Van Doesburg's 'time as the fourth dimension'.

It is also from this perspective that Franco Borsi, in *Bruxelles 1900* (published in 1974), in a chapter on « Van Rysselberghe [...] la leçon de Horta et la permanence historique », places Octave Van Rysselberghe in his context. <sup>[11]</sup> He places Hôtel Otlet, designed from 1894 onwards, 'in the art nouveau movement, but his embrace of it is always measured. [...] The architect filters the art nouveau experience without abandon, without romanticism; standing at the edge of the movement, he does not allow himself to be drawn into the whirlwind and, at a slower rhythm, achieves results that ultimately prove to be more resistant to the wear and tear of time'. Borsi emphasizes 'his capacity for synthesis': a neo-Renaissance balance and harmony', 'Italianate judgement', 'austere academic dignity', 'a simple and rational appearance', 'a finely ordered stereometric play that brings him closer to Voysey and Muthesius, despite his personal tendency towards the verticality, in the Gothic and Flemish tradition, of Japanese reminiscences' and, in conclusion, 'results that herald the Novecento movement through a certain taste for simplification, which reduces morphology to elements that are barely outlined and carved, and which seems to appear outside the art nouveau movement' or, rather, 'a way of making the art nouveau language classical'. Borsi mentions in particular the houses on Rue d'Ophem in Brussels and in Uccle.

10 – Pierre Puttemans, '1890-1914 : de Victor Horta à Antoine Pompe', in Culot and Terlinden, *Antoine Pompe et l'effort moderne en Belgique*, 39–42.  
11 – Franco Borsi, 'Van Rysselberghe (...) la leçon de Horta et la permanence historique', in Franco Borsi, *Bruxelles 1900* (Brussels, Marc Vokaer, éditeur, 1974), 48-54.

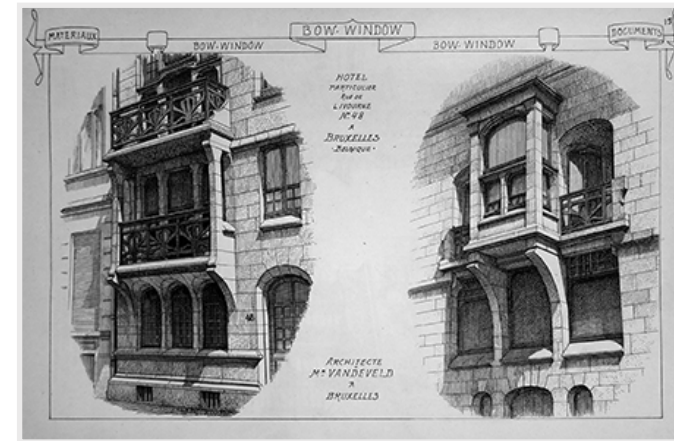


In Borsi's clear analysis, this relates to the new type of spatial concept: 'The fluidity of spaces (...) as opposed to the traditional typology.' This also clearly influences the formal design, for example the façade: 'The upper part of the cornices in the loggia at the entrance or their curvature above the door are reminiscent of Horta's baroque subtleties, but the result is quite different.' Borsi attributes this to Henry van de Velde, 'to whom we can attribute a certain influence on this part of the work', even though van de Velde himself, still searching for its essence, was not yet ready for architecture. Borsi repeated this in relation to Hôtel de Brouckère, built a few years later (1896–98), also in collaboration with Henry van de Velde: 'A neo-Renaissance balance and harmony, in a second phase, benefited from the collaboration of van de Velde, who (...) was not yet in a position to tackle, at least professionally, the architectural problem.' van de Velde also saw Van Rysselberghe as a 'fellow traveller' on the 'sacred path' towards a new architecture. The plastic simplicity and compact volumes of Hôtel de Brouckère herald van de Velde's work in Germany after 1900: various villas and the Werkbund Theatre in 1914 as his Diplomarbeit (his master's work) in architecture. A comparison with Van Rysselberghe's work of the same period is in order.



Hôtel de Brouckère,  
34 rue Jacques Jordaens at Bruxelles [1898].  
Photo Michel Louis, 2024.

In his *Architecture moderne en Belgique* (1974), Puttemans picked up the first analysis of 1969 and explicitly contrasted Van Rysselberghe with Horta. 'Horta's contemporaries generally only borrowed ornamentation from him; this obviously does not apply to Henry van de Velde, Paul Hankar, Octave Van Rysselberghe or Gustave Serrurier-Bovy.' He continues: 'The few buildings that Van Rysselberghe erected have a highly original personality. The 'in depth' treatment of the façades, their strangeness, are the work of a visionary; one cannot help but compare the building on Rue d'Ophem in Brussels and his circular town house in Westende with certain projects by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Of all the art nouveau architects, he is probably the furthest removed from Horta' – a reference to Hôtel Goblet d'Alviella, adding four photos of Hôtel Otlet and Hôtel de Brouckère, without comment [12].



Henry van de Velde,  
drawings of the  
bow windows  
and entrance to the studio,  
Hôtel Otlet,  
Rue de Livourne,  
published in  
*Matériaux et documents  
d'architecture*,  
1902, pl.15.

Pierre Puttemans' writings on Van Rysselberghe and his analysis of the latter's position in the development of art nouveau and Belgian architecture around 1900 certainly inspired the first and most comprehensive overview of Van Rysselberghe's work published in the architecture review *A+* in 1975 and, a year earlier, Franco Borsi's analysis in *Bruxelles 1900*.

The special issue of *A+* magazine devoted to Van Rysselberghe was the work of architects Jacques Stevens and Émile Henvaux. The article contains a biographical introduction, a description and a history of selected projects, including Hôtel Otlet, 'this outstanding person with a Leopoldian figure'. Concerning Van Rysselberghe's later work, after 1900, the article sums it up by saying that, under the impetus of his brother Théo Van Rysselberghe, 'he managed to free himself of the artifice of his academic training and to find at once the contemplated free composition, stripped of all effects and repeated motifs, which had been so commercialized that it had become vulgar'; and that, internationally, these late projects heralded the expressionism of Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn and Hans Scharoun. The director's house in Dudelange (1915), for its part, is, was said to be close to Peter Behrens, Otto Wagner and Richard Riemerschmidt, while also being very close to the German villas designed by Henry van de Velde before 1914. The article concludes by mentioning Van Rysselberghe's relationship with 'his colleagues' Horta and van de Velde, who appreciated him for 'his personality', referring in this to the memoirs of Horta and van de Velde. Finally, the article notes the 'most sincere and generous admiration for the life and work of Van Rysselberghe' shown by Louis Van der Swaelmen [13].

- 12** – Pierre Puttemans and Lucien Hervé, *Architecture moderne en Belgique* (Brussels: Vokaer, 1974), 90. Pieter-Jan Cierkens has highlighted the influence of French neoclassicism (C.-N. Ledoux, J.-N.-L. Durand and others) on architectural teaching at the Ghent Academy of Fine Arts (Cierkens, 'De architectuuropleiding aan de Gentse Academie voor Schone Kunsten').
- 13** – Jacques Stevens and Émile Henvaux, 'Octave Van Rysselberghe 1855–1929', *A+* 16 (1975): 17–54. The text on Hôtel Otlet (27–29) is followed by a text by Octave Maus with a description and analysis of the house, published in January 1900 in the *Moniteur des architectes*.

Some fifteen years later, in 1991, Pierre Loze wrote that Van Rysselberghe, 'as the first to follow Horta, had understood the full richness of his contribution and even equalled the quality of his spaces'. Loze rightly emphasizes the importance of Horta's contribution to the development of modern architecture: not so much through the novelty of his formal language, which abandons all historical forms (or rather transforms them into new constructive and functional proposals), but above all through his revolutionary approach to space, an approach that incorporates new functional concepts of urban life and domestic comfort, and uses the potential of new building materials and techniques; an open, free and dynamic space which, from the point of view of architectural history, is a fundamental step towards Adolf Loos's 'Raumplan', Le Corbusier's 'plan libre' and Theo Van Doesburg's 'espace-temps'. As for Octave Van Rysselberghe, 'from his very first project', Loze writes, 'he demonstrated a surprising ability to design original and interesting spaces', even in the 'classical' architecture of Hôtel Goblet d'Alviella. He states at the outset that 'the eclectic nonchalance of his Italianate style foreshadows his break with academicism'.

In 1891–94, he built the studio-house of the painter Théo Van Rysselberghe and, according to Loze's analysis, discovered 'in the vocabulary of local seventeenth-century buildings, which he freely interpreted, a means of expressing his sense of space. He gave free rein to his taste for narrowing and widening, contrasts between large and small spaces and the surprise that is triggered when one moves from one to the other'. Loze then analyses in detail the spatial and functional concept of Hôtel Otlet, quoting a text by Octave Maus published in 1900 in the magazine *L'art moderne*. As for the exterior of the hotel, Loze highlights 'the originality, the quality of the volume, the skilful interplay of solids and voids, [...] above all [...] the expression of the interior layout' **[14]**.

To sum up, the writings of Puttemans, Borsi, Stevens and Henvaux bear witness to a growing interest in the work of Octave Van Rysselberghe. The latter was not mentioned in the first book on Victor Horta published by Franco Borsi and Paolo Portoghesi in 1970, nor even in the 1990 reprint **[15]**. The importance of his work in relation to that of Horta, van de Velde, Hankar and Serrurier-Bovy is never explained in detail. Only Pierre Loze, in 1991, seems to reach a useful conclusion, but without any in-depth or substantiated arguments.

Marc Dubois, in a long article in 1993 on 'the terraced house', the prototype par excellence of urban housing, emphasized the importance of Hôtel Otlet and the collaboration with van de Velde: 'The figure of Octave Van Rysselberghe is too often forgotten in the panorama of art nouveau. The Otlet corner house [...] is undeniably a masterly spatial creation. The collaboration on the interior with Henry van de Velde certainly contributed to the unexpected way in which the plans were drawn up.' In the same article, Dubois also mentions

Van Rysselberghe's design for Maurice Delacre's house in Ghent, contemporary to Hôtel Otlet: 'the first art nouveau building' in that city, 'a house whose façade is the direct expression of a different configuration of plans'. Unfortunately, the house was destroyed in 1940 **[16]**.

As early as 1991, Françoise Aubry and Jos Vandembreden emphasized the pronounced, dynamic spatiality of Hôtel Otlet and the essential role of the central staircase: 'The plan, the space and their expression in the façade are curious. [...] Caught up in a spiralling movement, the staircase landings become transitional spaces from one zone to another. [...] The stairwell, lit from above, makes up the [connecting] core of the house.' They conclude: 'The collaboration with Henry van de Velde on the interior can be seen in the elegant way in which the staircase has been integrated into the overall design: a new development in Van Rysselberghe's career. **[17]**. It could certainly be said here that, at the same time, the pioneering research carried out by Horta, van de Velde and Van Rysselberghe into a new spatiality linked to a new way of living paved the way for that of Loos, Le Corbusier and Van Doesburg.

#### HENRY VAN DE VELDE AND OCTAVE VAN RYSSELBERGHE : THE LOST PATH

The modernist perspective in which Van der Swaelmen as a contemporary and Puttemans as a historian placed Van Rysselberghe's work could have been deepened by a more complete analysis of his oeuvre and of his complex professional career, his training, his family background and the contemporary debate on architecture. Franco Borsi and Paolo Portoghesi as well as Pierre Loze only briefly address a broader reading and contextualization of Van Rysselberghe's work. We are still waiting for an exhaustive monograph on Octave Van Rysselberghe.

- 14** – Pierre Loze and François Loze, *Belgique Art Nouveau. De Victor Horta à Antoine Pompe* (Brussels: Eiffel Éditions, 1991), 41, 42 and 46. See also Pierre Loze, ed., *Guide de Bruxelles. XIXème et art nouveau* (1985; Brussels: Eiffel Éditions, 1990), mentioning Goblet d'Alviella, Otlet, de Brouckère and Van Rysselberghe's own house.
- 15** – Franco Borsi and Paolo Portoghesi, *Victor Horta* (Brussels: Vokar, 1970/1990). See also Franco Borsi and Hans Wieser, *Bruxelles capitale de l'Art Nouveau* (Brussels: Vokar, 1992), 167–70, 184–92 and 377.
- 16** – Marc Dubois, 'De rijwoning. Een woningtype met een rijk verleden en een toekomst', *Vlaanderen* 45, no. 259 (1996): 8–32 (15). See also Ignace Van Goethem, *Octave Van Rysselberghe ... een legende* (unpublished master's thesis, HAISL Brussels, 1964); Marc Dubois, 'Het eerste Art Nouveau gebouw in Gent, woning Delacre van architect Octave Van Rysselberghe, 1897', *Jaarboek Hoger Instituut Sint Lucas 1992-1993* (Ghent, 1993); Luitje Afschrift, *Woning Delacre: architect Octave Van Rysselberghe als Art Nouveau architect* (unpublished master's thesis, under the supervision of Marc Dubois, HAISL Ghent, 1992). The chemist and pharmacist Maurice Delacre (1862–1938), who graduated from ULB in 1884, moved to his father Charles Delacre's pharmacy on Montagne-de-la-Cour in Brussels around 1890, where Paul Saintenoy (1862–1952) built the neo-Gothic 'Pharmacie anglaise Ch. Delacre' in 1889–1900. In 1892 Maurice Delacre was appointed professor at Ghent University.
- 17** – Françoise Dierkens-Aubry and Jos Vandembreden, *Art nouveau en Belgique* (Brussels: Racine, 1991), 95.





The entrance hall on Rue de Florence.  
Photo Maud Rochez, 2016.



Door handle for the Rue de Florence entrance,  
designed by Henry van de Velde.  
Photo Maud Rochez, 2017.



Interior door handle designed  
by Henry van de Velde.  
Photo Maud Rochez, 2017.

In their 1987 monograph on Henry van de Velde, Pierre Puttemans and Léon Ploegaerts devote a great deal of space to Octave Van Rysselberghe, one of the five 'creators' of art nouveau (alongside Horta, van de Velde, Hankar and Serrurier-Bovy), 'the architectural avant-garde (in Brussels) [...] dominated, in addition to Horta and van de Velde, by the personalities of Paul Hankar and Octave Van Rysselberghe). [...] In 1892, this sudden and rapid flowering of art nouveau was the work of architects in both the classical vein – such as Horta and Van Rysselberghe – and the partly Gothic, partly Renaissance style of eclecticism – like Hankar, or of creators who had come to architecture by the non-academic route, such as Henry van de Velde'. Puttemans writes: 'Van Rysselberghe's work is still little known, despite the special issue of the architecture magazine *A+* devoted to him by Émile Henvaux and Jacques Stevens in 1978.

Building on his knowledge of van de Velde's work, Puttemans looks back at their collaboration in detail. He calls Van Rysselberghe 'the most solitary and singular architect of art nouveau in Brussels'. As regards his collaboration with van de Velde on Hôtel Otlet and Hôtel de Brouckère, Puttemans points out that 'the exact part played by each could not be established with certainty. [...] However, the work presents such unity that the two artists must have worked together constantly and in depth to achieve such a perfectly integrated result. [...] We could therefore imagine a reciprocal influence between the two architects.' Puttemans compares Hôtel Otlet with the Bloemenwerf, Henry van de Velde's only architectural construction up to that point: 'The overall organization of the plan and the distribution of volumes allows for certain similarities with the Bloemenwerf, but it should not be forgotten that this distribution was common in the plans of private houses in Brussels at the end of the century' – Puttemans does not cite any specific examples, however. He concludes: 'The difference in tone is obvious [...]; but what brings them together, apart from the renunciation of stylistic imitation, is certainly the importance given to volume and the overall handling of space, qualities that the two architects would later use in very different ways.' To support this last assertion, an in-depth analysis of Van Rysselberghe's work after 1900 and a systematic comparison with Van de Velde's work between 1900 and 1914 are essential (the Leuring villa in The Hague, the German villas and other projects, the Hohe Pappel in Weimar, etc.). Puttemans also suggests the influence that the experienced architect Van Rysselberghe exerted on the neophyte and self-taught Henry van de Velde, at least as far as architecture was concerned: 'In his memoirs, Van de Velde says little about his collaboration with him or about the personality of this talented architect, whose classical vocabulary [...] suddenly gave way to a very personal aesthetic that no doubt owes nothing to art nouveau other than what van de Velde calls "the renunciation of stylistic imitation" as well as a constant formal search, a way of linking volumes and surfaces together that would soon become that of Van de Velde himself.' [18].

18 – Pierre Puttemans and Léon Ploegaerts, *L'œuvre architecturale de Henry van de Velde* (Brussels: Atelier Vokaer, 1987), 15, 37, 41 and 49–51.

Henry van de Velde and Maria Sèthe had been in contact with the painter Théo Van Rysselberghe, the architect's brother, since 1893, and that year they made an excursion together to Cadzand, on the Dutch coast. The Henry van de Velde Archives at the Royal Library (Archives et Musée de la Littérature) bear witness to their intense correspondence, but no letters from Octave Van Rysselberghe have survived. They had a direct and professional relationship, undoubtedly the result of a mutual appreciation that led to collaboration on Hôtel Otlet and Hôtel de Brouckère [19]. In *Récit de ma vie*, Henry van de Velde writes that Octave Van Rysselberghe 'played a decisive role in the development of art nouveau in Belgium'. And further on: 'I always thought that Octave Van Rysselberghe, who was of the same generation as Victor Horta and, I believe, who graduated from the same school as him, could have become his most formidable rival at the head of Belgium's art nouveau architects. Van Rysselberghe was well suited to the role and had the character not to abuse it. He was devoid of ambition to such an extent that he gave himself over entirely to his need for solitude and contemplation after agreeing, for years, to build large European houses for the Compagnie des wagons-lits. As far as I know, none of his contemporaries took pleasure in testifying to his contribution to architecture' [20]. Except for van de Velde ...

On the other hand, van de Velde's characterization of the person and work of Van Rysselberghe echoes a certain disappointment, for in his later, more 'commercial' work in Ostend, Westende and for the Compagnie des wagons-lits, Van Rysselberghe had ultimately moved away from 'the sacred path'... Louis Van der Swaelmen's *in memoriam* published in *La Cité* had apparently escaped him, even though in 1929 van de Velde, Horta and Van Rysselberghe were honorary presidents of the SBUAM (Société belge des Urbanistes et Architectes modernistes), the publisher of *La Cité*. By the time he published his memoirs, van de Velde also seemed to have lost all knowledge of Van Rysselberghe's best work after 1900, which had nonetheless followed the same salutary path.

19 – In 1897 van de Velde met Florence de Brouckère who, at the suggestion of her friend Élisée Reclus, asked him to design a 'private house' at 34 Rue Jacques Jordaens on the corner of Rue Gaspard De Crayer. van de Velde suggested Van Rysselberghe as the architect, 'whose talent I value and what I knew of his creations'. Paul Otlet also commissioned van de Velde to design two villas and a chapel in Westende in 1900. See Anne Van Loo, ed., *Henry van de Velde, Récit de ma vie 1917-1957* (Turnhout: Brepols and Versa, 2023), I, 385 (n.1) and 411.

20 – Anne Van Loo, *Henry van de Velde, Récit de ma vie 1917-1957*, I, 93 and 374-75

## PAUL OTLET, AN ENLIGHTENED COMMISSIONER WITH A MULTIFACETED AND COMMITTED PERSONALITY

Pierre Van Den Dungen, PhD in Philosophie and Letters, Professor of twentieth-century history at ENSAV - La Cambre

[In collaboration with Luc Verpoest]



Paul Otlet in his office on Rue Félix Fétis, circa 1937. Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

### AN ENTERPRISING FAMILY

Paul Otlet was born into an affluent Catholic family in Brussels on 23 August 1868. His father Édouard (1842–1907), a senator for the province of Luxembourg (1894–1900), was primarily a businessman. In 1866 Édouard married Marie Van Mons (1846–1871), who came from a family of notaries and stock-brokers from Brussels and was the cousin of poet Émile Verhaeren. She died shortly after giving birth to their second son, Maurice (1869–1924). Édouard remarried in 1876, this time taking Valérie Linden for his wife. She was the daughter of Jean-Jules Linden, the director of the Botanical Garden and the consul for Luxembourg in Belgium.

Édouard Otlet was a renowned collector of modern and ancient art who contributed to the discovery of pre-Columbian art. In the family town house on Chaussée de Charleroi (Brussels), his son Paul had the great fortune to live surrounded by works of art. Paul was introduced to his father's relations, businessmen and artists who also socialized in Ostend and the South of France, where Édouard Otlet owned a yacht and, from 1880, the *Île du Levant*! It was this island that inspired Paul's first publication in 1882 [1].

1 – P. Otlet, *L'île du Levant*, Bruxelles, E. Guyot, 1882, available at [ [www.gutenberg.org/files/59431/59431-h/59431-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/59431/59431-h/59431-h.htm).]



In the 1870s and 1880s, Édouard Otlet made a name for himself as one of Europe's leading entrepreneurs in the then new tram industry. He was nicknamed 'the King of Trams'. He also developed the seaside resort of Westende (on the Belgian coast). Paul Otlet, who ran the company that managed the project, La Westendaise, chose Octave Van Rysselberghe as 'official architect'. He also entrusted Van Rysselberghe with the plans for his own house on Rue de Florence in Ixelles (built between 1896 and 1898). Paul was personally involved in the urban-planning aspects of the business. He drew up an overall plan for Westende, designed as a garden city, as well as a set of binding 'specifications' for every plot of land purchased. His brother Maurice took care of financial matters. However, poor investments in railways forced Édouard Otlet to liquidate most of his businesses in 1900, including La Westendaise [2]. As for Paul, in 1890 he married his stepmother's niece, Fernande Gloner (1870–1944), with whom he had two children, Marcel (1892–1966) and Jean (1894–1914). He sold his house on Rue de Florence in 1905 and moved to Uccle, a district of Brussels popular at the time with industrialists, bankers, lawyers and artists, as it was both rural yet close to the city centre. In 1908 he divorced Fernande Gloner. He died in Brussels on 10 December 1944.

### TRAINING UNDER EDMOND PICARD

After completing his secondary education at Collège Saint-Michel (a Catholic school for the Belgian elite), Paul Otlet attended the universities of Leuven, Brussels and Paris. He received his doctorate in law on 15 July 1890. In the early 1890s, he worked as a trainee for Edmond Picard, whom he had known since childhood. The Brussels town houses of the two families were just a few dozen metres apart. Picard, the 'master of the Palace' (of Justice) and a key figure in the legal, cultural and artistic life of late-nineteenth-century Belgium, advised Édouard Otlet in his business affairs. It was through Picard that Paul Otlet made the crucial acquaintance of the lawyer Henri La Fontaine, who soon afterwards became a Socialist senator and ... Nobel Peace Prize winner [3].

In fact, Paul practised law mainly to protect his father's business interests. So, once these businesses had been wound up, he left the courtrooms behind and devoted himself entirely to his bibliographical work. He was able to do this because his father, despite his business setbacks, had left him enough money to live on.

2 – J. Delmée, 'La S.A. la "Westendaise" 1898–1906: Naissance de la plage de Westende, le rêve urbanistique de la famille Otlet', *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine* 3–4 (1985): 447–72. On Édouard Otlet, see: G. Kurgan-van Hentenrijk, 'Edmond Otlet', *Dictionnaire des patrons en Belgique*, ed. G. Kurgan et al. (Brussels: De Boeck & Larcier, 1996), 496–97.

3 – Paul Aron and Cécile Vanderpelen-Diagre, *Edmond Picard (1836–1924). Un bourgeois socialiste belge à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle* (Brussels: Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 2013).



A key meeting in Otlet's life: Henri La Fontaine (right), here around 1930, at a meeting of the Union interparlementaire (Interparliamentary Union) with the liberal Charles Magnette. Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

### A WIDE RANGE OF INTERESTS

It is impossible to touch on all of Otlet's passions here, so let's just focus on two fields of interest. Firstly, from 1908, Otlet chaired the Union de la Presse Périodique Belge (Belgian Periodical Press Union), founded in 1891. This association aimed to protect the interests of the 'learned' press in the face of the massification of the daily press. It expressed the mistrust that existed among the elite in the late nineteenth century with regard to the expansion of 'Americanized' news that marked the triumph of reporting and 'sensationalism' [4].

Secondly, Otlet supported the 'garden city' model advocated by the Arts and Crafts in Britain, the movement that inspired art nouveau. He shared this passion with his friends, whom he also met at Picard's, such as poet Émile Verhaeren, journalist Léon Dommartin, architects Octave Van Rysselberghe and Henry van de Velde, mayor of Brussels Charles Buls, and authors of works on urban planning.

Otlet was one of the twenty-two founding members of the cooperative society Association des Cités-Jardins de Belgique (Association of Garden Cities of Belgium), which promoted the creation of 'new housing centres offering all the advantages of the city, alongside those of the countryside'. They all wanted to link progress in architecture to progress in 'hygiene and home economics' and, in particular, to combat alcoholism and tuberculosis. The project clearly had a moral, paternalistic dimension.

4 – Pierre Van den Dungen, 'Paul Otlet et l'UPPB', in *Paul Otlet, fondateur du Mundaneum*, pp.115-121, p.116.

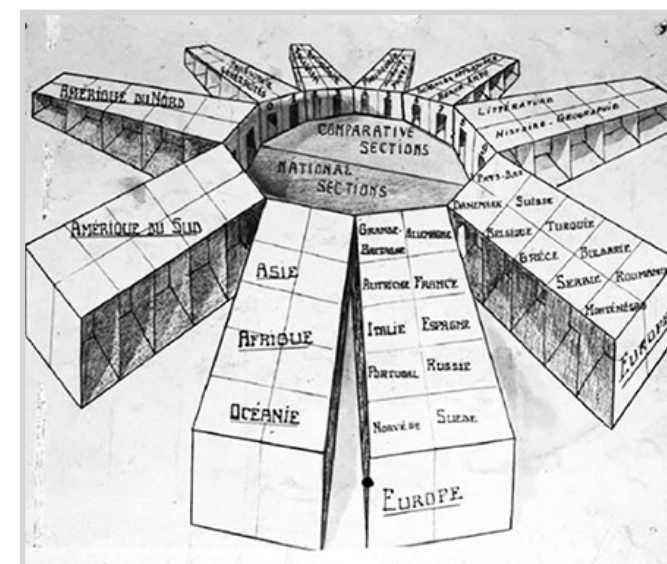
The association's commitment to 'modernism' was reflected in the fact that its members included architect Antoine Pompe, who called himself a 'pseudo-modernist'. In the 1920s, Pompe designed several garden cities in Brussels, including La Roue in Anderlecht (with Fernand Bodson and urban planner Raphaël Verwilghen) and Kapelleveld in Woluwe-Saint-Lambert (with architect Huib Hoste and landscape architect Louis Van der Swaelmen, among others) [5]. Essentially, as the 'propaganda committee' wrote in 1910, the idea was to draw inspiration from both the British garden city and the German Gartenstadt because, they explained, a city dweller who is worn out by work must have a 'home' where he can be better housed than in the 'big city', with more air, space and tranquillity. In that respect, the idea of housing spread out 'horizontally' took precedence over the 'vertical stacking' usually preferred. [6].

It was through this 'garden city movement' and as part of the research committee 'Pour le plus grand Bruxelles' that, before the war already, Paul Otlet had come into contact with landscape architect and urban planner Louis Van der Swaelmen (1883–1929). In 1913 Van der Swaelmen drew up a development plan for the Cité Mondiale (World City) project by Hans C. Hébrard and Ernest Andersen (1912) opposite the Musée Colonial in Tervuren. In 1913 too, the project was presented at the Ghent International Exhibition during the *Premier congrès international et exposition comparée des villes* (First international congress and comparative exhibition of cities), under the aegis of the Union internationale des villes (International Union of Cities), founded for the occasion. Otlet and Van der Swaelmen played a prominent role in all these initiatives, as both organizers and theorists. During the war, they helped to found the Comité Néerlandais-Belge d'Art Civique (CNBAC, Dutch-Belgian Civic Art Committee) in 1915, along with architects Huib Hoste and H.P. Berlage, in order to prepare for post-war reconstruction. It was also during the war that the CNBAC and Van der Swaelmen developed an *Encyclopedie der steden en der civieke kunst* (Encyclopedia of cities and civic art) whose 'form of publication ... was adopted in application of the most modern international methods of universal documentation' (Van der Swaelmen) – that is, according to a classification system based on Paul Otlet's *Manuel abrégé de répertoire bibliographique universel* (Brussels, 1905) [7].

## FROM BIBLIOGRAPHY TO MULTIMEDIA

Above all else, Otlet took an almost obsessive interest in bibliography, a field in which he made a lasting impact. In 1895 he founded the Office international de bibliographie (OIB, International Office of Bibliography) with La Fontaine. Together they modified the decimal classification created by American librarian Melvil Dewey, with the latter's approval. Essentially, Dewey had proposed a catalogue arranged by subject using decimal notation; the two Belgians perfected the system, developing a Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) that was more detailed, that was flexible and that allowed the creation of new categories. [8].

Otlet fully committed himself to this project. Today, he is regarded as the founder of information and communication science and he was the first person to use the terms 'document' and 'documentation'. He authored a pioneering work on the subject, *Traité de documentation: le livre sur le livre, théorie et pratique* (Brussels: Éditions Mundaneum, 1934). For the index card, Otlet chose the 'old universal postcard' format, whose measurements ensure concordance between the metric system and Anglo-Saxon measurements (12.5 x 7.5 cm – 5 x 3 in.).



Scheme of the organization of the Palais Mondial, installed at the Cinquantenaire from 1912 onwards. Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

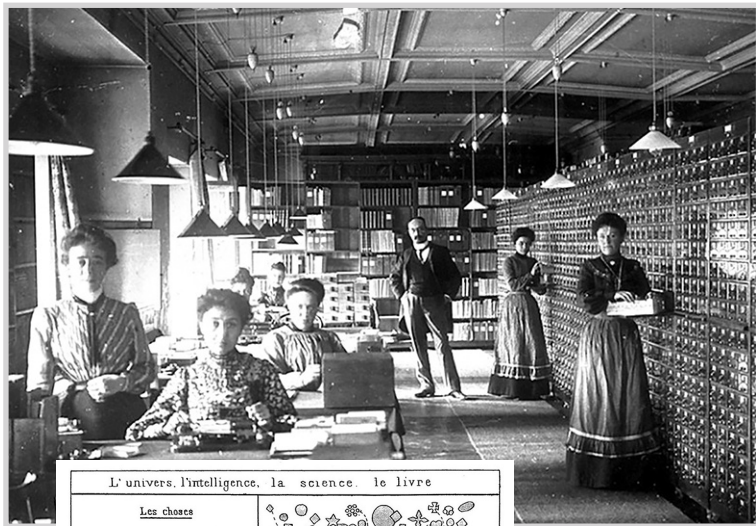
Also in 1895, Otlet and La Fontaine set up an Institut International de Bibliographie (IIB) tasked with bringing together 'the world's bibliographic forces'. They set up office in Hôtel Ravenstein, where dozens of employees worked shoulder to shoulder hours at a time, drawing up standard cards based on strictly defined rules. They would then store their work in 'standardized' cabinets,

- 5 – On Antoine Pompe (1873–1980), see: P. Puttemans, 'Antoine Pompe', in *Nouvelle biographie nationale* vol. 7 (Brussels: Académie Royale, 2003), 293–96.
- 6 – HLF, 009-1, *Cités-jardins, Les Garden Cities*, Comité de Patronage, January 1910.
- 7 – See: Louis Van der Swaelmen, *Préliminaires d'art civique mis en relation avec le cas clinique de la Belgique* (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1916), XIV. See also: Paul Otlet, 'Un projet grandiose de Cité internationale', in *Premier congrès international et Exposition comparée des villes*, Gand, 1913 (Brussels: Union internationale des villes, 1914), 79–83; Herman Stynen, *De onvoltooid verleden tijd. Een geschiedenis van de monumenten- en landschapszorg in België 1835-1841* (Brussels: Stichting Vlaams Erfgoed, 1998); Marcel Smets, ed., *Resurgam. La reconstruction en Belgique après 1914* (Brussels: Crédit communal de Belgique, 1985); Marcel Smets, *L'avènement de la cité-jardin en Belgique: histoire de l'habitat social en Belgique de 1830 à 1930* (Brussels: Mardaga, 1977); Iwan Strauven, *Victor Bourgeois, 1897–1962: Modernity, Tradition and Neutrality* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2021).
- 8 – On Melvil Dewey (1851–1931), see: A. Béthery, 'Melvil Dewey', *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France* 1 (2012): 22-27 and Wayne A. Wiegand, *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey* (Chicago: ALA, 1996).



according to the rules of the UDC, in order to allow additions, corrections, reclassification and copies for researchers and the general public. As Warden Boyd Rayward has observed, this structure was similar to that of a 'database'. Not least because Otlet and La Fontaine wanted to archive the whole spectrum of knowledge in its multiple forms (texts, images, objects, etc.). This idea pre-figured the World Wide Web and hypertext and can safely be described as the 'paper Internet'. In 1906 they created the Universal Iconographic Repertory comprising photographs, postcards, glass plates and slides. The following year, they established the Documentary Encyclopedia, which, shortly before 1914, contained a million items classified into ten thousand subject files on human activity in the broadest sense.

Otlet's notebooks show that he was always thinking two steps ahead. He wrote for instance about the 'telephoto book', a digital book before its time, as it were. His aim was always to make information accessible to the world as a whole. The year 1907 saw the creation of the Central Office of International Institutions, located at Rue de la Régence 3a, in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts. The Office was a centre dedicated to all (scientific or corporate) associations and institutions that pursued international goals. It became the Union of International Associations (UIA) in 1910 [9].



The Répertoire Bibliographique Universel (Universal Bibliographic Directory), circa 1900. Note the presence of a large number of women responsible for compiling the index cards. Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

L'univers, l'intelligence, la science, le livre	
<b>Les choses</b> L'Univers, la Réalité, le Cosmos	
<b>Les intelligences</b> qui pensent les choses fragmentairement	
<b>La science</b> Rassemble et coordonne en ses cadres les pensées de toutes les intelligences particulières	
<b>Les livres</b> Transcrivent et photographient la science selon l'ordre divisé de la connaissance La Collection de livres forme la Bibliothèque	
<b>La Bibliographie</b> Inventaire et catalogue les livres La réunion de notices bibliographiques forme le répertoire Bibliographique universel	
<b>L'Encyclopédie</b> Donne (Texte, images, cartes) un résumé concentré, clair et coordonné de son contenu des livres	
<b>La Classification</b> Confère à l'ordre que l'intelligence découvre dans les choses, une forme à l'ordonnance de la science des livres de leur Bibliographie et de l'Encyclopédie	

Traité de documentation : le livre sur le livre, théorie et pratique, Published by Mundaneum, Brussels 1934, 41. Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

Paul Otlet, Traité de Documentation (1934), p.41

## FROM WORLD PALACE TO WORLD CAPITAL

In 1912 all of Otlet and La Fontaine's creations and structures were brought together at the Cinquantaire as the Musée or Palais Mondial (World Palace or Museum), made up of sixteen 'national' and 'comparative' sections. Then came 1914. The collections did not fall under German control but staff was no longer paid. Otlet himself went into exile in the Netherlands, the home of Cato Van Nederhasselt, his second wife, whom he had married in 1912. The couple also spent time in England and later France. Otlet was trying to trace his youngest son, Jean, who had gone missing on the Yser front. Sadly, in 1918, he learned that his son had been killed in action in October 1914.

The end of hostilities saw the reopening of the Palais Mondial, soon to be known as the Mundaneum, now spread over 0.75 ha of floor space at the Cinquantaire [10]. But Otlet had another, even more ambitious plan. Before the war, he discovered a project by Hendrik C. Andersen and Ernest Hébrard to found an international city, the World Centre of Communication. Otlet immediately tried to convince them to choose Brussels for this project because, like La Fontaine, he advocated an international League of Nations, with the Belgian capital as its headquarters. The horrors of the world war and the loss of his son strengthened this conviction. He published no fewer than four books and brochures on the future 'international organization', including *La Fin de la guerre. Traité de paix générale basé sur une Charte mondiale déclarant les droits de l'Humanité et organisant la Confédération des États* (Brussels and The Hague, 1914). In 1916, a revised edition of this book was published in English. It is worth noting that in the same year, La Fontaine published his *Magnissima Charta* in the United States, which dealt with the same subject. Otlet then issued *Les problèmes internationaux et la guerre. Tableau des conditions et solutions nouvelles de l'économie, du droit et de la politique* (Brussels and Paris, 1916); *Constitution mondiale de la Société des Nations. Le Nouveau droit des gens* (Paris and Geneva, 1917). Lastly, in 1919, he wrote a long article, 'La Société intellectuelle des nations' (The Intellectual League of Nations).

- 9 - *Congrès mondial des associations internationales, Bruxelles, 9-11-05 1910*, 2 vols, ed. UIA (Brussels: F. Hayez, 1911-12). Today, under UN mandate, the UIA continues to publish a *Yearbook of International Organizations*. Its headquarters are still in Brussels (see: Union of International Associations – Union des associations internationales, <https://uia.org>).
- 10 - At the end of 1933, it consisted of a 'Musée mondial' (World Museum), the 'world and ... civilization' across different historical periods, and sixty rooms organized according to 'nations, sciences and fields of activity'. The 'world documentation' section consisted of 15,500,000 index cards, 1,000,000 (archival) documents, with 150,000 volumes stored in the library. The Palais also had a meeting centre and a 'ciné mundaneum'. Most of these services were in principle free of charge because, as the promoters explained, this was 'a large collective offering'. For its part, the government gave them 'free rein' over the premises and an annual subsidy of 70,000 francs (HLF 218-6, duplicate, *Appel à la coopération au Mundaneum et à ses instituts du Palais mondial*, n.d. [ca 1933]).

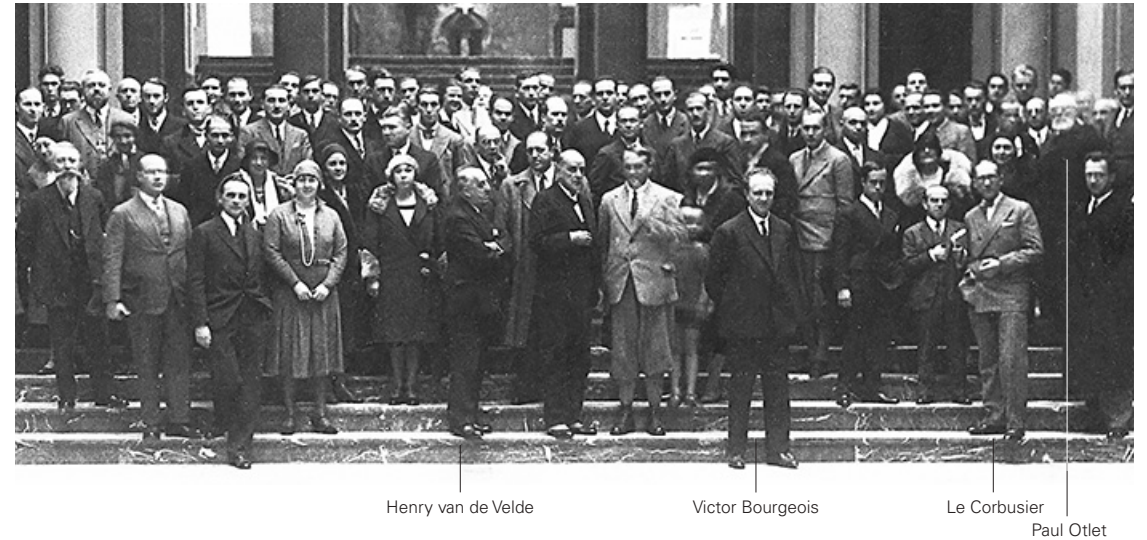
The international body dreamed up by Otlet and La Fontaine would also bring together all the leading scientific associations. As early as February 1919, they sent a memorandum to the 'presidents and delegates of the Peace Conference in Paris' via the UIA. Their text advocated a charter of moral and intellectual interests – to protect intellectual culture – which would be protected by a body dedicated to that task.

But the ideas of the two friends failed to resonate in Belgian political circles. What's more, they embarrassed the French government of Aristide Briand, who also wanted to create a Cité Internationale Scientifique, but in France, and devoid of any pretence to create a 'super state'. This was the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris, which benefited from the valuable contacts and connections of André Honnorat, a French member of parliament. A pacifist, universalist and short-lived minister for public education in 1920, Honnorat managed to get the project endorsed by the French chambers and government in 1921. He immediately set up a national foundation (over which he presided) to assert the state's influence on the Cité. In 1925 the first building was erected, courtesy of French patron Emile Deutsch de la Meurthe. <sup>[11]</sup>

The French authorities went even further. In July 1924, they agreed to 'subsidize and maintain' an International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation in Paris. Yet the initiative seemed to be largely inspired by the UIA's proposal, originally drawn up by Otlet and La Fontaine. Seduced by this project, the League of Nations agreed to let the Institute move into a wing of the Royal Palace. It started operating in the autumn of 1925, but was officially inaugurated in January 1926. This structure prefigured UNESCO, which was created in 1946, also in Paris.

In Belgium, Paul Otlet didn't stand idly by. In 1919 he was behind the presentation of Andersen and Hébrard's International World Centre project at the Reconstruction Exhibition in Brussels. In 1921, under the aegis of the UIA, he invited Louis Van der Swaelmen to the Université Internationale. In 1928 he was appointed member of the Committee of Patrons of the CIAM, or Congrès Internationaux d'architecture moderne (International Congresses of Modern Architecture), an initiative of Le Corbusier. In 1930 the third CIAM was held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, under the presidency of Victor Bourgeois (1897–1962). A group photo taken in the main entrance hall of the Palais shows Otlet alongside Le Corbusier and Victor Bourgeois. In 1931 Bourgeois presented his Cité Mondiale project – including a Mundaneum – in Teruren. He then presented the project of an Urbaneum at the Journée de l'urbanisme in Brussels on 25–26 April 1931. Bourgeois continued to rework the latter project for Jemappes (in the context of the Borinage's development) and subsequently, after the Second World War, for his home town of Charleroi.

Third CIAM Congress in Brussels [1930] – CIVA Collections, Brussels.



Finally, in 1934, the ultimate disappointment for Otlet and La Fontaine came when the Belgian government closed the Palais Mondial in Brussels. As the economic crisis raged, the government found the structure too costly, and the rise of nationalism made its internationalist credo suspect. Otlet considered moving the headquarters of the Palais Mondial to Geneva, which had become a centre for international associations. The famous Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier, with whom Otlet had maintained a rich correspondence since 1925, began to draw up plans for this new 'Mundaneum'. His 1933 project, based on Otlet's own sketches, was integrated into his urban plan for the Left Bank of Antwerp (1931) as a Musée à croissance illimitée (Museum of unlimited growth) <sup>[12]</sup>. Otlet remained fixated on this project of a Fondation centre-cité mondiale (World Capital-Centre Foundation) up until his death.

Like La Fontaine, Paul Otlet taught at the Institut des hautes études de Belgique, an offshoot of Université nouvelle, itself an offshoot of Université libre de Bruxelles (Free University of Brussels). In 1921 Louis Van der Swaelmen gave a series of lectures on 'municipalism'. Otlet also directed the first regular course on librarianship in Belgium at the École centrale de service social (1920). The Palais Mondial was his life's work, however. He even had it engraved on his tombstone: 'He was all about the Mundaneum.'

**11** – On André Honnorat (1868–1950), see: G. Tronchet, *André Honnorat, un visionnaire en politique* (Paris: Hémisphères-Maisonnewe and Larose, 2020).

**12** – Paul Otlet, «Louis Van der Swaelmen et le palais mondial», in : *La Cité*, VIII, 1930, n° 6; id., «L'Urbaneum-Bruxelles, Cité Mondiale, Bruxelles, Grande Ville, Bruxelles, Capitale de la Belgique», in : *La Cité*, IX, 1931, n° 10, 121-129. See also about Otlet, Bourgeois et Le Corbusier: Iwan Strauven, op.cit.



## CONCLUSION

Researchers today agree that Otlet was a key figure in various fields. They usually rank him alongside La Fontaine. Anne Rasmussen emphasizes the role of both men in the development of learned societies. She also highlights their desire to institutionalize bibliography and propose a universal version of it [13]. For his part, Daniel Laqua considers Otlet a key figure in the field of ‘universalism’ (part 6), not least for his contribution to the creation of the League of Nations [14].

In short, Paul Otlet, like Henri La Fontaine, was a partisan of what Armand Mattelart calls a ‘planetary utopia’. Mattelart points out that these ‘globalists’, stemming from a tradition born in the Renaissance, significantly intensified and coordinated their activity ‘in the period from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the First World War’ [15].

It was also the period when the foundations were laid for modern thinking in architecture and urban planning. And it was here that Otlet, the commissioner, joined the intellectual and activist...



Inside the Palais Mondial, in the 1920s.  
Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

- 13 – Anne Rasmussen, ‘Jalons pour une histoire des congrès internationaux au XIXe siècle: régulation scientifique et propagande intellectuelle’, *Relations internationales* 62 (1990): 115–33.
- 14 – Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
- 15 – Armand Mattelart, *Histoire de l’utopie planétaire. De la cité prophétique à la société globale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), esp. 195–216 and 217–42.

## ACTIVITIES OF FONDS HENRY VAN DE VELDE

### AIM AND OBJECT OF THE ASSOCIATION

To support and advise  
ENSAV – La Cambre in the conservation,  
scientific management and highlighting  
of the Henry van de Velde archives  
held by the school.

### KEY DATES

01.06.2004

Creation of the non-profit association  
Fonds Henry van de Velde.  
President Herman Daled..

16.03.2010

Decree from the Government of the  
Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles  
(French-speaking Community of Belgium)  
officially classifying part of  
the Henry van de Velde archives at La Cambre  
as Treasure.

18.03.2019

Presidente Caroline Mierop.

### MEMBERS 2022–24

Régine Carpentier, Benoît Hennaut,  
Eric Hennaut, Fabrice van de Kerchove,  
Caroline Mierop, Kevin Saladé,  
Priska Schmückle von Minckwitz,  
Thomas Simon, Estelle Van Geys,  
Ellen Van Impe, Anne Van Loo,  
Jérémy Van Steenkiste, Luc Verpoest,  
Sabine Walter et Benjamin Zurstrassen,  
as well as Claude Katz, honorary member.

Since its foundation, the association has  
benefited from the support of several  
honorary members, now deceased:  
Herman Daled [1930-2020]  
Manfred Osthaus [1933-2012]  
Pierre Puttemans [1933-2013]

### PREVIOUS ISSUES

#### Cahier 14

*The Henry van de Velde archives  
at La Cambre* [2015]

#### Cahier 15/16

*Henry van de Velde and Bauhaus* [2018]

#### Cahier 17

*Herman Daled and Hôtel Wolfers* [2021]

### ACTIVITY 2022–24

#### RESTORATION CAMPAIGN

January 2023 – December 2023

Third restoration campaign of Henry van  
de Velde’s furniture plans. Restoration and di-  
gitization of 150 plans thanks to the support  
of the Fonds René and Karin Jonckheere ma-  
naged by the King Baudouin Foundation and  
the Commission du patrimoine culturel mobi-  
lier (Movable Cultural Heritage Commission)  
of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles.  
Following the first two campaigns in 2010 and  
2018, supported by the Fonds René and Karin  
Jonckheere and the Fonds Baillet Latour,  
more than 600 plans have now been preser-  
ved and made available for research.  
Restoration: Marianne De Bovis, Lucie Page,  
Julie Swennen.  
Digitization: Atelier de l’Imagier.

#### DIGITIZATION CAMPAIGN

December 2023 – December 2024

Launch of the first phase of archive  
digitization as part of the Pep’s plan  
of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles

#### EXHIBITIONS

17 March–1 May 2022

*Sweet home.* Research, selection  
of documents and writing of notes  
for the historical part of the Prix des amis  
de La Cambre 2021 exhibition organized  
by ENSAV – La Cambre and Les Amis  
de La Cambre.  
ENSAV – La Cambre, Hôtel De Bodt  
[27-29, Av. F. Roosevelt, 1050 Bruxelles].

1 June 2023 – 5 June 2024

*Art(s) nouveau(x) belge(s) / Belgian Art  
Nouveau. Van de Velde, Serrurier-Bovy,  
Hankar & Co. Reproductions of four  
wallpaper samples for the inaugural  
exhibition at Maison Hannon*  
[1 Rue de la Jonction, 1060 Bruxelles].

## PUBLICATIONS

### April 2023

*Henry van de Velde. Récit de ma vie, 1917-1957.* Text compiled and annotated by Anne Van Loo, 2 volumes, published by Brepols.

### May 2023

Translation and publication of Caroline Mierop's article « Le fonds Henry van de Velde de La Cambre. Une histoire en quatre temps » by Luc Verpoest, «Het Archief Henry van de Velde in La Cambre. Een verhaal in vier bedrijven», in : *M&L* [Monumenten, Landschappen en archeologie], 42 no.3.

### April 2024

*Henry van de Velde et le Bauhaus. Art, industrie et pédagogie.* Edited by Kevin Saladé and Priska Schmückle von Minckwitz. Proceedings of the conference of 15 February 2019, published by the Royal Academy of Belgium.

### 2023-2025

Collaboration on the research and publication by Klassik Stiftung Weimar of the two new volumes of the catalogue raisonné of Henry van de Velde's objects devoted to furniture (forthcoming 2025, on line). Research mission entrusted to Priska Schmückle von Minckwitz.

## SYMPOSIUMS AND LECTURES

### 4 July 2022

Participation in the Summer School Art Nouveau organized by ULB La Cambre Horta Faculty of Architecture, Henry van de Velde Day: *Henry van de Velde, Pioneer of the Bauhaus and Founder of La Cambre.* Lecture by Kevin Saladé. *Henry van de Velde's Conception of Private.* Lecture by Priska Schmückle von Minckwitz. Tour of the Henry van de Velde archives at La Cambre and workshop, guided tour of Bloemenwerf.

### 29 March and 18 April 2023

*Henry van de Velde - autobiographie critique d'un protagoniste du mouvement moderne.* Lecture by Anne Van Loo at the Royal Academy of Belgium and ENSAV – La Cambre.

### 20 June 2023

*Henry van de Velde, pioneer of the Bauhaus en founder of La Cambre.* Conférence de Kevin Saladé dans le cadre de la Summer School Art Nouveau 2023 organisée par la faculté d'architecture La Cambre Horta de l'ULB.

### 24 October 2023

*Un architecte dans la Belgique de l'entre-deux-guerres: Henry van de Velde.* Lecture by Anne Van Loo at the Fondation Périer-D'leteren.

## INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS, RESEARCH PROJECTS AND TOURS OF BUILDINGS

### 6 July 2022

Tour of Bloemenwerf by Priska Schmückle von Minckwitz and Kevin Saladé for Katherine Kuenzli (Wesleyan University, US), Mathijs Van Houweninge and Frieda Gouwetor (Henry van de Velde Family Foundation) and Ruben Mantels (Ghent University).

### 20 July 2022

Tours of the Leuven Technical School (today Library and Archives Tweebronnen), the Leuven City Archives and the Raphaël Verwilghen Collection at the KU Leuven Archives by Luc Verpoest for Catherine M. Kuenzli (Wesleyan University, US), Kathleen James-Chakraborty (University College, Dublin, Ireland) and Ruben Mantels (Ghent University).

### 25 September 2022

Tours of La Nouvelle Maison and Bloemenwerf, guided by architect Guido Stegen, for the Henry van de Velde Family Foundation.

### 19–22 April 2023

Kevin Saladé attends the General Assembly of the Art Nouveau Network in Budapest

### 29 September 2023

Visits to La Nouvelle Maison and the Bloemenwerf, guided by Priska Schmückle von Minckwitz for members of ICOMOS France.

### 17 October 2023

*The inspiration of Henry van de Velde, art without borders.* Study day at the sanatorium built by Henry van de Velde in Trebschen/Trzebiechów (Poland). With the participation of Kevin Saladé and Sabine Walter.

## Summer and autumn 2023

Research by Anne Van Loo into Henry van de Velde's collaboration with the National Railway Company of Belgium (NMBS/SNCB) between 1931–32 and 1938.

## SUPPORT FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND RESEARCHERS (SELECTION)

Documentation, at the request of Xavier Tricot and for his *Inventaire raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné de Henry van de Velde* (published by Galerie Ronny van de Velde, Antwerp, 2022), of the handwritten notes taken by Henry van de Velde in his catalogue of the J.F. Millet exhibition of 1887 (École des Beaux-Arts de Paris) which inspired van de Velde's pastels and paintings. Documentation, at the request of Jessy Van de Velde (Ronny Van de Velde Gallery), of the painting illustrated on the cover of the book by X. Tricot, unfortunately reproduced upside down.

Documentation and iconography for the publication by Elie Georges Haddad, *Henry Van De Velde on Rational Beauty, Empathy and Ornament*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.

Documentation for collaboration with Train World, François Schuiten, Stéphane Disière, Françoise Aubry and Anne Van Loo, with a view to publishing an illustrated book on the collaboration of Horta and van de Velde with the National Railway Company of Belgium (NMBS/SNCB) : *Victor Horta - Henry van de Velde. Chemins croisés - chemins de fer.* The book is due to be published in June 2024. It will accompany the exhibition *Draw me a train*, which will be inaugurated at Train World in September 2024.

Documentation of the history of the NMBS/SNCB logo and van de Velde's contribution. Examination of the upholstery fabrics of the 1st and 2nd class benches (coaches of the K1 direct trains) found in the Raphaël Verwilghen archives of the van de Velde Fonds. Provision of numerous documents to illustrate the book.

Documentation and iconography for the publication by Lucy Huskinson, *Nietzsche and Architecture: The Grand Style for Modern Living*, Bloomsbury [London and New York], forthcoming 2024.

Provision of photographic reproductions for a permanent exhibition at Tweebronnen public library, former Leuven Technical School, built by H. van de Velde and V. Rosseels in 1936-42 (opening April 2024).

Selection of documents for the *Untold Stories. Designers femmes en Belgique, 1880-1980* at Design Museum Brussels [October 2024-April 2025].

Provision of numerous original drawings and digitised documents illustrating the work of Henry and Maria van de Velde on the reform of women's clothing at the request of Anika Reinette, Curator of the Textile Collections at the Kunstgewerbesammlung und Henry van de Velde Museum Chemnitz, for the exhibition *Reform of Life, Henry van de Velde mittendrin* (November 2024 - March 2025), as part of the Chemnitz European Capital of Culture 2025 programme.



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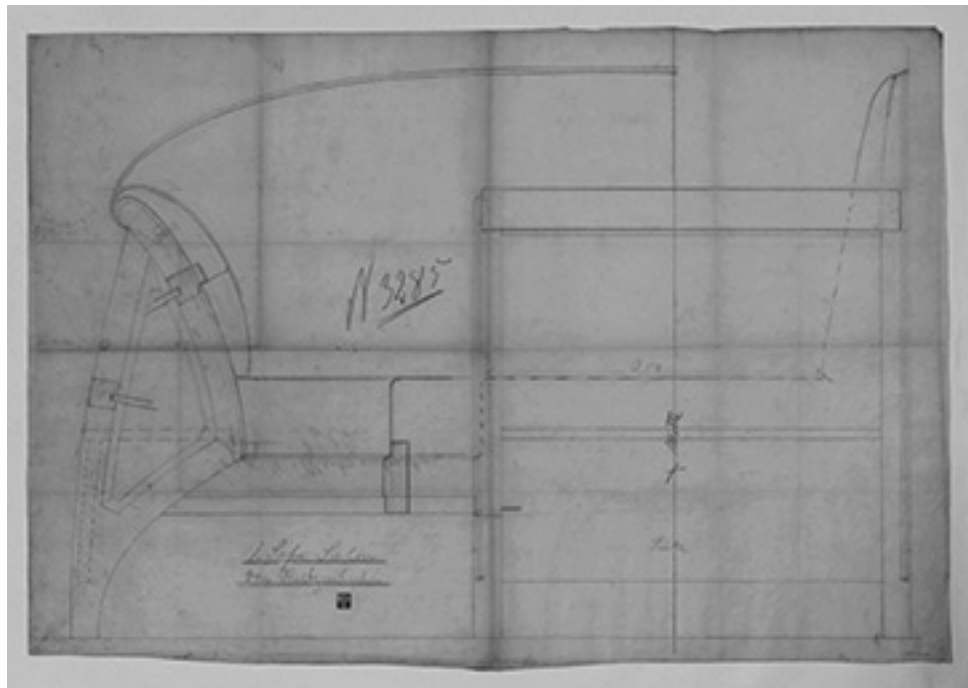
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Restored furniture plan (sofa for Baron von Mutzenbecher), graphite pencil on tracing paper, 154x109 cm.  
Fonds Henry van de Velde, ENSAV-La Cambre, INV. S 3477 – © Henry van de Velde Foundation (Netherlands).