

# Relaunching towns and cities

Between the 1970s and the mid 1990s, little new architecture in **Wallonia** was worthy of note, but since then there has been a sense of change in the French speaking part of Belgium.

■ BELGIUM — TEXT: MAURIZIO COHEN

What a strange destiny, that of Wallonia. In the early 20th century, its mines and industrial activities made it one of the world's richest regions. Its cities produced benefits that were transformed into high-quality buildings. But the crisis that arose after WWII, with the gradual closure of the mines and the disappearance of ancillary activities, produced a knock-on effect that was to last for decades. This decline left the landscape dotted with abandoned factories, colliery tips (hills formed by coal-mining waste) and worker towns left to fend for themselves.

In the 1950s and '60s state intervention led to the construction of a lot of public buildings and infrastructure. Private construction played a major role in shaping the cities, and in particular their suburbs, and brilliant architects such as Jacques Dupuis, Roger Bastin, the EGAU group and Charles Vandenhove rose to fame.

From the mid 1970s onwards, decline set in, not only leaving an economic void with inevitable social consequences, but also impoverishing the existing heritage while failing to take any significant initiatives in the field of architecture. Many projects took many years to complete, thereby aggravating the pervasive sense of weakness.

In the face of this crisis, Belgium's adoption of regionalization in the late 1980s resulted in the restructuring of political and administrative responsibility. In terms of territorial and urban-planning management this brought a radical change of identity. The idea of regional architecture, of an urban and, above all suburban, spatial practice, became a bastion of local interest.

## Introversion

In Flanders, the consequences of Belgium's regionalization produced a voluntary policy of promoting contemporary architecture, a reflection of a region experiencing economic

growth and capable of delineating an autonomous culture oriented towards modernity. Brussels, a cosmopolitan but poor city, was prey to ferocious property speculation facilitated by political powers incapable of tracing a consistent future. Home since 1958 to the European institutions and NATO, the Belgian capital was repeatedly ravaged by destructive property deals that favoured largely anonymous and invasive office buildings. This phenomenon intensified after regionalization.

Wallonia, on the other hand, which has a larger surface area than Flanders and a smaller population, took pains to preserve its territory and to promote a 'local culture' characterized by references to a pre-industrial agricultural past that had little basis in reality. The regulations governing land management, town planning and architecture drawn up by the Wallonian authorities were among the most draconian and reactionary in Europe.

This introversion can be explained in several ways. The crisis that hit the region as a whole pushed it to conserve everything that would serve to construct a respectable and authoritative image of itself. Many of Wallonia's industrial structures were dismantled in an effort to erase the traces of economic defeat and the depressing image of decline. Unfortunately, prevailing heritage values failed to safeguard many sites that deserved a different fate. Only those deemed capable of conveying a picturesque and idealized image of the industrial world were conserved. This paradox of destroying the industrial image and conserving the traces of the 19th-century farming past had a direct effect on architectural production. Between the 1970s and the mid 1990s, little architecture was worthy of note, most being inspired by explicit post-modern practice or, in the best cases, designed by engineer-architects exploring other routes and other languages. While in Flanders a new generation of architects was

emerging, active interpreters of the new social direction, Wallonia was looking back and rejecting all forms of innovative and progressive expression.

## Renaissance

The mid 1990s brought the first signs of a renaissance, thanks to the drive of the Communauté Française de Belgique, a government institution covering the French-speaking part of the country (Wallonia and Brussels), which acted as public client and started to intervene by proposing the creation of new cultural infrastructures.

One such was the MAC project by architect Pierre Hebelinck, which involved the conversion of part of the old Grand Hornu colliery into a contemporary art museum (completed 2002). This project was the political test bench of the renaissance of architecture in Wallonia but it also prompted a furious debate between the defenders of the status quo and the champions of renewal via contemporary architecture.

Unfortunately the 'heritage' argument became a weapon against all forms of expression other than that of the conservative historical identity. The past was beyond dispute and the policy publicly advocated by the regional institutions was designed to oppose any form of expression that might jeopardize its consistency.

Today, the building regulations still adhere to a restrictive mimetic reasoning whereby all elements must correspond to a local characteristic or at least be inspired by it. Over the years, this position has begun to weaken and to allow increasingly 'contemporary' designs, partly because younger officials often do not share these radically conservative and, at times, excessively provincial views.

Thanks to its resolve to use architecture as an instrument of progressive politics, the Communauté Française continued to propose new projects and promote initiatives for →



← Social dwellings, Dison (Olivier Fourneau, 2007)

Bank, Embourg (Georges-Eric Lantair, 2005)



House, Montigny le Tilleul (Matador, 2008)

↑ Offices, laboratories and facilities for young enterprises, Liège (Atelier d'Architecture Alain Richard, 2008)





↑ MS House, Huccogne (Martiat + Durnez, 2007)

→  
Delsaute House,  
Queue-du-Bois  
(Atelier d'Architecture  
Pierre Hebbelinck,  
2007)



Lennox  
Residence,  
Ottignies,  
ARTAU, 2006



→  
Salamun House,  
Liège (Baumans-  
Deffet, 2003)



openness and debate, clashing regularly with the Wallonian authorities. This resulted in an increasingly mature awareness of renewal that gradually started to produce results.

### Change of mentality

After a few years and following the success of certain projects, the situation has started to change. It is not yet a real movement; Wallonia is not turning into a new Vorarlberg. On the other hand, many architects are beginning to put forward alternatives to the anti-modern *diktat* and the pressure on authorities has created fresh interest in contemporary architecture. Many young architects have the opportunity to tackle small-scale typologies such as single-family housing and this allows the development of a laboratory of ideas and more importantly – something that has long been lacking – a 'critical mass' of interesting projects that provides for a change of mentality.

In this sense, Flanders' superior economic situation put it approximately fifteen years ahead. Flemish political authorities invested a great deal in the 'Flemish' image, favouring the desire for a new look. In Wallonia, on the other hand, there was no common regional policy that identified contemporary architecture as a motor for renewal.

The reasons for change importantly included a new economic policy that sought to make the most of local resources, such as the extensively logged timber of the Ardennes forests. Timber-promoting associations rode the wave of opportunity, multiplying their publications and exhibitions devoted to projects featuring wood. Energy concerns offered another approach to urban and architectural issues, forcing a change of mentality.

A10 has already illustrated several completed and ongoing projects in the public sphere: the extension of the Museum of Photography in Charleroi, a cinema complex in Liège, a cultural centre in Soignies, a skating rink in Liège, et cetera.

### Alternative culture

Many recent initiatives have focused on relaunching towns and cities in Wallonia, trying to enrich them with new public and cultural institutions, but also with new transport infrastructures. The construction of the TGV line has allowed them to rethink the railway network and, more importantly, to think about new stations suited to the new use of transport. Santiago Calatrava is nearing the end of the long-running construction of his new Liège station that has replaced the interesting 1958 modernist building by EGAU, which was no longer able to cope with today's traffic volumes.

Calatrava has also won the competition for a new station in Mons. This same city, a candidate for European Capital of Culture in 2015, has recently seen a boost in the number of major initiatives linked to its regional and international promotion: the Maison Folie (architect: Matador), a space for alternative cultures; the Manege.Mons theatre (Pierre Hebbelinck), built on the site of a disused military riding school; the Dépôt des Oeuvres d'Art (Pierre Hebbelinck), which will house the Communauté Française de Belgique's collection of artworks; the 'Abattoirs' (F. Roland with Matador), the old city abattoir converted into a contemporary art centre; the Carré des Arts (AGWA with L. Ney & Partners), where the huge courtyard of a vast 19th-century building will be covered to host cultural

events and performances; and BAM, the museum of fine arts (C. Menu), reconfigured to change the image of this classical and introvert museum by opening it up to the street.

Liège, too, is doing a lot to regenerate outlying zones and enrich the urban panorama with new constructions. In this case, however, we are witnessing a less coordinated and sometimes inconsistent policy. As well as major initiatives like *Mediacité* – a huge project designed by Ron Arad that will boast a large shopping centre, a multiplex cinema and the new public television premises – and Daniel Dethier's refurbishment of the Curtius museum complex, the city authorities have also signalled the partial demolition of *Cité de Droixhe*, one of the most characteristic examples of Modernist social urban planning. The conversion proposal, which totally ignores the qualities of the existing site, is based on a desire to erase the memory of this problematical district. Having said that, many of the buildings in the *Cité* have been respectfully and intelligently refurbished (D. Dethier). Another sign of uncertainty in Liège is the long-standing debate about how to refurbish the area in front of Calatrava's new station, despite the fact that a public competition has already defined its future contours.

Walloon Brabant, close to Brussels, is the region least subject to change, partly because urbanization has focused mainly on single-family housing developments that were required to blend in with the existing villages. On the other hand, this has not prevented the emergence of active institutions like the *Maison de l'Urbanisme*, which has published numerous articles on the architectural debate against the trend of the majority conservative mentality.

### Practices

The **Alain Richard** architectural practice in Liège has designed new premises for the public investment company SPI+. The building contains a promotion centre for new companies and its location in a Liège suburb is in accord with the decision to invest in the less favoured parts of the city, recreating an economic fabric. The building's expression fulfils a demand for visibility and functional appropriateness.

One area much favoured by young architects is that of single-family houses built on suburban developments or on sites that sometimes afford great spatial advantages thanks to the beauty of the scenery. A much-publicized recent project was designed by the young architects **Martiat & Durnez**. Located on a slope overlooking a deep valley and charming scenery, this small dwelling is characterized by skilfully and precisely applied strips of timber, giving the whole an elegant and well-proportioned appearance.

One emerging practice is **Matador**, comprising the duo Olivier Bourez and Marc Mawet. They started out building small designs that defied the regional banality and ended up making a name for themselves with works related to the contemporary art world and with public competitions. They recently finished a small 'manifesto' house in a Wallonian town near Charleroi which is totally lacking in contemporary architecture. The house explores the theme of breaking up the cube in relation to its context.

**Baumans & Deffet** have just completed an urban single-family house in Liège. Behind a simple and graphically elegant facade, lies a very effective interior that exploits the sloping terrain and the dynamics of openness, thanks to a play of

planes and columns. The freedom of the structural elements expands the perception and directs the gaze to the urban panorama.

**Anorak** is a young, Brussels-based practice engaged in a major town-planning project on the 'Bavière' site in Liège. Two years ago, Anorak, in association with several other Belgian practices (Poponcini – Lootens, DMT, ARTAU, G.-E. Lantair, etc.) won a competition for this former hospital site. Of the several buildings due to be erected on the large urban site in the coming years, Anorak's – a block of apartments with flexible layouts – will be the first.

In 2005, **ARTAU** built an activity pavilion for the disabled at Ottignies, in Walloon Brabant. Situated in a forest, it is reached via a walkway that zigzags between the pine trees. The structure is timber and metal and the curtain-wall facades provide intense contact with the surrounding nature. A partial reinterpretation of the Farnsworth house, it is reminiscent of that iconic house's relationship with outside space and the rigour of its form and execution.

**Stekke & Fraas** is a young practice that has made a name for itself with elegantly constructed timber and metal houses in which the combination of Modernist ideas and manufacturing technology produces fascinating results, not least because of their ability to exploit the project sites, which are often located in woods or on hillsides overlooking scenic landscapes. Despite institutional reluctance to accept this type of architecture, the fact that they were 'hidden' by nature became a positive argument in favour of building them.

**Olivier Fourneau** has built a small apartment building that sits on the corner of a residential block in a small industrial town. Breaking with the usual rules that require new projects to blend in, the design of the two volumes lessens their impact and enhances the corner by reinforcing it.

**Georges Eric Lantair** has realized several designs that display great attention to detail and a reluctance to follow passing fashions and trends. His bank in Embourg exemplifies this ability to read the context and to enrich it with a modest but forceful design. The use of materials like timber, copper and exposed concrete makes it possible to work with the patinas that will build up on the building's skin. The articulation is geometrically complex and the whole is enriched by the balance of solids and voids.

**Pierre Hebbelinck** is certainly the best known in Belgium and now also abroad, thanks to several major public works and to his desire to conduct in-depth and sensitive research for every project, regardless of its scale. His free thinking has prompted several controversies with authorities reluctant to follow his creative paths. This project concerned a 'turnkey' construction which he covered with a metal mantle of perforated Corten that allows the internal spaces to expand and create new relationships with the space outside. Hebbelinck has extended his field of action and become a publisher of architecture books that promote young designers and highlight the working practices of the emerging generation. Change is in the air. Expect some surprises. ←