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Victor Horta: Vicissitudes of a Work

In this essay, I shall trace the vicissitudes of some of the works of Victor Horta (1861–1947), for they reveal, as much as political or sociological discourse does, the chaos, blindness, and emotional maelstroms that seem inevitably to accompany architecture in Belgium. An international figure in the heyday of Art Nouveau, Horta saw his glory decline between the two world wars, just as he was realizing his most profound aspirations: the erection of public buildings that would guarantee more enduring general recognition than the private houses commissioned at the start of his career.¹ The Palais des Beaux-Arts, the Gare Centrale and the (aborted) development of the Quartier Royal were to put his stamp on the historic center of the city of Brussels. According to Horta's memoirs, begun in 1939, this was to make up for the feeling he had had in 1922, that he was thought of as a "humble Belgian with only second-rate shops to his credit, as well as houses of dubious taste, and a hospital that had swallowed up millions" (*Mémoires*, 241).²

Horta had just been deeply distressed by the mutilations of the Hôtel Roget, a private home he had designed in 1901 and altered personally in 1909 at the request of its new owner, Paul Verstraete (*Mémoires*, 87–90). In 1920, however, Baron Descamps-David had wiped out every trace of Victor Horta's style from the façade, which had then become perfectly dreary. At the time, there were those who saw this action as

1. On the subject of Horta, see especially Franco Borsi and Paolo Portoghesi, *Victor Horta*, trans. Marie-Hélène Agüeros (New York: Rizzoli, 1991); Victor Horta, *Mémoires*, ed. Cécile Dulière (Brussels: Ministère de la Communauté française de Belgique, 1985); *Horta: Naissance et dépassement de l'Art Nouveau*, ed. Françoise Aubry and Jos Vandebreden (Belgium: Loudion/Flammarion, [1996]), accompanying the exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts of Brussels, 4 October 1996–January 1997.

2. Horta is alluding *inter alia* to L'Innovation, the Grand Bazar Anspach and the Brugmann hospital.

the vengeance of a conservative senator against the style chosen by the leaders of the Belgian Workers' Party for the Maison du Peuple. On 3 May 1921, a group of artists, "Les figuristes," signed a manifesto addressed to the Minister of Arts and Sciences, in which they argued that the façade showed "a sincere, noble, new Belgian style (that had been its crime!)." ³ Years later, interestingly enough, Franco Borsi concurred, stating that Horta's Maison du Peuple "was without a doubt the most authentically Belgian work in the history of architecture, it expressed both the values of one of the leading industrial countries of Europe as well as those of that linguistic renewal that was about to spread throughout Europe under the name of Art Nouveau." ⁴

The question of the creation of an authentic national style had endured through much of the second half of the nineteenth century. What style should the recently formed Belgian state (1830) claim for itself? The Flemish Neo-Renaissance style had seemed appropriate at one point, for it conjured up the Golden Age of the old Netherlands: it was, for instance, chosen for the Belgian pavilion designed by Charles-Emile Janlet (1839–1919) for the Paris World Fair of 1878. Fifteen years later, the construction of the Hôtel Tassel ⁵ gave a more definitive answer: Horta wanted an architecture that would "create by renouncing [architectural] styles and relying on the generalized application of clearly visible materials" (*Mémoires*, 30).

If Horta's architecture is the expression of a "Belgian" style, how do we account for the insults it has suffered and the lack of national pride or collective narcissism that should have protected it?

It was because Horta had developed a personal language that had not yet been appropriated by the bourgeoisie, the nobility, or the clergy that he won favor among the leaders of the Belgian Workers' Party. In short: "a new art for a new party." Clearly, however, the views of the progressive young members of the middle-class who had rallied to the party, also played a role in Horta's success. They believed that art had to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life and education of the working class and that artists could only enhance their talent "by

3. "Manifeste des figuristes" (1921), lithograph by Anto Carte, Archives of the Horta Museum (Fondation Jean et Renée Delhaye).

4. Franco Borsi, "Victor Horta et la Maison du Peuple de Bruxelles," in *Architecture pour le peuple: Maisons du Peuple, Belgique, Allemagne, Autriche, France, Grande-Bretagne, Italie, Pays-Bas, Suisse* (Brussels: Archives d'architecture moderne [AAM], 1984), 31.

5. François Loyer and Jean Delhaye, *Victor Horta: Hôtel Tassel, 1893–1895*, trans. Susan Day (Brussels: Archives d'architecture moderne [AAM], 1986).

singing the sadness, the joys, and the hopes" of the People.⁶ These ideas came to life in 1891 thanks to the creation of the department of "Art and Instruction" of the *Maison du Peuple* whose offices were then on the rue de Bavière. Artists invited to teach there, Horta included, did not have to belong to the Party. The creation of the department played a significant role in Horta's career, for his affiliation with the department of Art and Instruction did much to stir interest in his work among many of his future clients, just as his admission into the freemasonry had three years earlier, in 1888.⁷

The construction of the *Maison du Peuple*⁸ (see Figure 1) was intended to strike the imagination and dazzle viewers with a demonstration of the role the Workers' Party wanted to play in political life, even though it had only just obtained parliamentary representation in 1894. Horta intended to "build a palace that would not be a palace, but a house where art and light would be the luxury so long excluded from workers' hovels" (*Mémoires*, 48). He was also aware of the importance of the site, which bordered one of the most working-class neighborhoods in Brussels, the Marolles, which had been crushed some years earlier by the staggering mass of the Palais de Justice. Horta's construction, by contrast, fit into the urban fabric while proudly asserting its presence. From the terraces, visitors experienced the excitement of discovering a vast panorama. The privilege of a beautiful view and the feeling of sovereignty were no longer the exclusive prerogative of the richest classes occupying mansions with noble tiers and balconies. The working-class crowd also took over the public space on days of mass demonstrations, when they were harangued by politicians from the slender balcony hanging above the double door of the monumental hall. The flags of the demonstrators on the square flapped in unison with those hanging on the tapered shafts rising from the balustrade of the coping, flags as red as the bricks and the painted ironwork. In his *Mémoires*, Horta mentions that "in this instance the processions and public demonstrations played as important a role as the inside itself" (50). The *Maison du Peu-*

6. Auguste Dewinne, in *Le peuple*, 13 October 1898, quoted by Paul Aron, *Les écrivains belges et le socialisme (1880–1913)* (Brussels: Éditions Labor [Archives du Futur], 1985), 86.

7. David Hanser, "Victor Horta, Art Nouveau, and Freemasonry," in *Belgium: The Golden Decades, 1880–1914*, ed. Jane Block (New York: Peter Lang [Belgian Francophone Library 3], 1997) 11–40.

8. Jean Delhaye, *La Maison du Peuple de Victor Horta*, introduced and annotated by Françoise Dierkens-Aubry (Brussels: Atelier Vokaer, 1987).



Figure 1. Façade of the Maison du Peuple, rue Joseph Stevens (just before the inauguration on 1 April 1899). Foundation Jean et Renée Delhaye, Musée Horta, Saint-Gilles, Brussels. © 2002-Horta/SOFAM-Belgium.

ple overshadowed the church of La Chapelle and, as Jules Lekeu emphasized, it was a case of the old faith bowing to the new.⁹

The layout of the Maison du Peuple was quite varied: it included shops offering basic staples (like bread and meat) at the lowest prices to members of cooperative societies, offices and meeting rooms, a clinic, a library, and a large hall. The request for a building permit was submitted on 26 March 1896, and the inauguration took place three years later, on 1 April 1899. Even before World War I, the Maison du Peuple had outgrown its space: in 1911, a request to raise the height of the building was submitted to the city. The following year, a new building opening onto the rue Haute was attached to the rear courtyard, which ruined the natural lighting on the rear façade beyond repair. Over the years, the color palette was dispensed with, while heating, electricity, and plumbing fixtures were coarsely altered. By the time the first rumors of demolition began circulating, the building had already suffered many humiliations. A proposal to give the building landmark status was submitted on 23 December 1963, but was never acted on. An international petition was launched by the Société centrale d'architecture de Belgique (SCAB) and the Société belge des urbanistes et architectes modernistes. The text showed a certain restraint, mentioning "a possibly outmoded ornamentation," but insisted on the quality of the space. The petitioners featured, in no particular order, architects like Alvar Aalto, Mies van der Rohe, I. M. Pei, Walter Gropius, Gio Ponti, and Jean Prouvé, and theoreticians like Bruno Zevi, Siegfried Giedion, Nikolas Pevsner, and René Huyghe. Doubts about the merit of this demolition were nevertheless swept aside by the leaders of the cooperative who wanted "modern and efficient premises."¹⁰ When interviewed, politician Camille Huysmans judged that "Horta [wa]sn't worth bothering about. The Maison du Peuple was a pathetic structure." He even went so far as to assert that Horta had built part of the structure "en l'air," a malicious comment that reveals a complete misunderstanding of the cantilever design of the great hall.¹¹

It only took a few months to get the demolition approved, but the outcry had been important enough to make the Minister of Public Works, Georges Bohy, allocate a credit of three million Belgian francs to SCAB for the dismantling of parts of the building under the supervision of architects Jean Delhayé, Pierre Puttemans, and Louis H. De

9. Jules Lekeu, *Vers l'idéal*, special edition of *Le peuple*, 1 April 1899.

10. *Le soir*, 16 October 1964.

11. *Le peuple*, 16 October 1967.

Koninck. White stones, ironwork, and woodwork were numbered and removed for temporary storage at a site in Tervueren controlled by the Musée Royal d'Afrique Centrale. In 1981 the press became concerned about the numerous thefts committed on the site. The thieves may have stepped up their activities because of the Europalia-Belgium exhibit of 1980–81, devoted to Art Nouveau, which had since become widely acclaimed. The components were then moved to an unlocked storage place in the commune of Jette.¹² Two years later, a crook claiming to be the owner of the metal pieces sold them to a scrap dealer for 2.50 francs a kilo.¹³ SCAB lamented "a pitiful conclusion fit to be logged as profits and losses under the heading of national cultural indifference." It made the cover of the English-language Brussels weekly, *The Bulletin*, with the headline: "The Second Death of Victor Horta."¹⁴ In time, ambitions for the use of the remaining components were scaled down so much that people actually rejoiced when in 1985 a few guardrails were presented for inclusion in the new "Horta" metro station in the commune of Saint-Gilles. In 1988 the press announced the "last voyage" of the remains,¹⁵ granted to the city of Ghent with a view to enhancing a future museum of industrial archaeology, a project that eventually fell through. Some pieces were then briefly assembled to form a pavilion at the "Flanders Technology" fair, which opened in Ghent on 22 April 1991 (architect W. Slock).¹⁶ One would have to wait until 1995 for another project to take shape, this time in Antwerp. Three years earlier the remains of the Maison du Peuple had been granted by the Stichting voor Monumenten en Landschappen (Foundation for Monuments and Landscapes) to the city of Antwerp, which had been selected as European cultural capital for 1993. The plan was to incorporate the fragments into a commercial complex to be built at 2 Hopland. The Palm Brewery and the Pension Fund of the City of Antwerp agreed to invest 50 million Belgian francs in the project. The construction company was Cosimco, Ltd. and the architects were the Arrow offices in Ghent. The goal was to divorce Horta's architecture from political culture in order to strengthen the image of a company interested in promoting a different kind of culture (Palm's spokesperson

12. *Le soir*, 12–13 July 1981.

13. *Le soir*, 13 July 1983.

14. *The Bulletin*, 15 July 1983.

15. *Le soir*, 23 February 1988.

16. Marcel Celis, "Van Volkshuis tot schroot: Achtergronden van een kwarteeuw falen" (From Maison du people to Metal Scraps: Background to Twenty-Five Missing Years), *Monumenten en landschappen* 10/2 (March–April 1991): 23–35.

speaks of a “maison de la culture” devoted to beer).¹⁷ One could speak of a bidding war over the “authentically Belgian”: Horta and beer in Antwerp, Horta and comic strips in Brussels (the Magasins Waucquez were converted into the Centre belge de la Bande dessinée, which opened to the public on 6 October 1989). In addition, since almost all the work of Victor Horta, born in Ghent, is actually concentrated in Brussels, it is as though, symbolically speaking, the “Flemish people” were reclaiming one of their native sons many years after they had offered him a faculty position at Antwerp’s Institut supérieur des Beaux-Arts, where he taught from 1919 to 1927. The brasserie-restaurant named after Horta, as well as the skeleton of the large Art Nouveau hall, sheltered in a half-cylinder covered with zinc, were inaugurated on 21 September 2000. During the development of the project, all reservations concerning the relevance of the reconstruction were easily brushed aside: the components of the Maison du Peuple had been lying around for thirty years, and had gradually been eroded by rust. As far as public opinion was concerned, only the rescue effort mattered, everything else was merely a quarrel of specialists more interested in their own publications than in preserving Horta’s architectural work.¹⁸ In January 2000, the press revealed that the cost to investors had finally amounted to 200 million Belgian francs.¹⁹ The multifunctional Art Nouveau hall can accommodate 600 persons for seminars, wedding receptions, and fashion shows, while the Grand Café Horta can hold 150.

The history of the Maison du Peuple is one of the fables of the modern world: even though the improvident grasshopper starves in the winter, it does not learn from its errors. Torn between the architects who “call upon it”—like a spirit at a séance?²⁰—and its cavalier caretakers, the architectural work is being stripped of all materiality. The fragments scattered here and there no longer carry their own weight. Horta’s architecture, where structure and ornamentation are one, where light is subtly shaped, and where walking through a house is like strolling in an architectural landscape, has vanished without a trace. It leaves one speechless to realize that elements weighing hundreds of kilos have now been turned into a virtual reality. In September 2000 a journalist of *De standaard* did not hesitate to give his article the cap-

17. *Café-Revue*, June–July 2000.

18. Speech given by W. Verstraete of the Arrow office (*De standaard*, 20 August 1998).

19. *Trends*, 20 January 2000, 62.

20. See—*sic*: “een evocatie van Horta als Hommage aan zijn werk” (An Evocation of Horta as Homage to His Work), *Het nieuwsblad*, 30 October 1998.



Figure 2. Façade of the Maison du Peuple during the demolition in 1965. Fondation Jean et Renée Delhaye, Musée Horta, Saint-Gilles, Brussels. Photo Jean Delhaye. © 2002-Horta/SOFAM-Belgium.

tion: "Victor Horta in handen van Frankenstein," ["Victor Horta in the Hands of Frankenstein"], for "only Frankenstein brings the dead back to life."²¹ Sadly, the Maison du Peuple is now much more alive in the hundreds of photographs taken by the architect Jean Delhaye in 1965, right before its demolition, than it is in the Antwerp complex (see Figure 2).²²

The decision to save fragments of the Maison du Peuple was made

21. *De standaard*, 23 September 2000.

22. Françoise Aubry, "Jean Delhaye, ses croisades pour Victor Horta," *Art et culture* 11 (September 1996): 6–8.

without much concern for the distressing precedent of the destruction of the Hôtel Aubecq, built in 1899, at 540 avenue Louise in Brussels.²³ In 1947, two years after Victor Horta's death, that had been the first important destruction of one of his structures. The custom (!) of the Commission royale des monuments et sites belge did not allow a building whose designer had died only recently to be classified as a landmark.²⁴ A delay was deemed necessary in order to evaluate the quality of someone's work. Jean Delhaye and Baroness Horta rallied to try to stop the destruction, but were only able to obtain some monies from the Minister of Public Works, Auguste Buisseret, to dismantle the façade visible from the avenue Louise, and the bow window in the corner. The dismantling and demolition took place in 1950. The stones have now been moved five times and are lying in a vacant lot, while the ironwork and frames have been stored in an abandoned building in Brussels.

It would take too long to review the various reconstruction projects. Two of them, published in 1979, had to do with the rue Montagne de la Cour²⁵ (see Figure 3). In the first instance, the Hôtel Aubecq was to be put on a new base in order to move it from its level site on the avenue Louise to a sloping site across from Saintenoy's Old England, another Art Nouveau building suffering from seemingly endless degradation and neglect.²⁶ For good measure, the Cousin Hall, a veranda designed by Horta that had been dismantled in 1969 and bought by the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts for 48,000 Belgian francs, was then to be added to the façade of the Aubecq house.²⁷ This second proposal made a mockery of the scale of the original building, its incorporation into a specific urban context, its orientation to the path of the sun, and the complex-

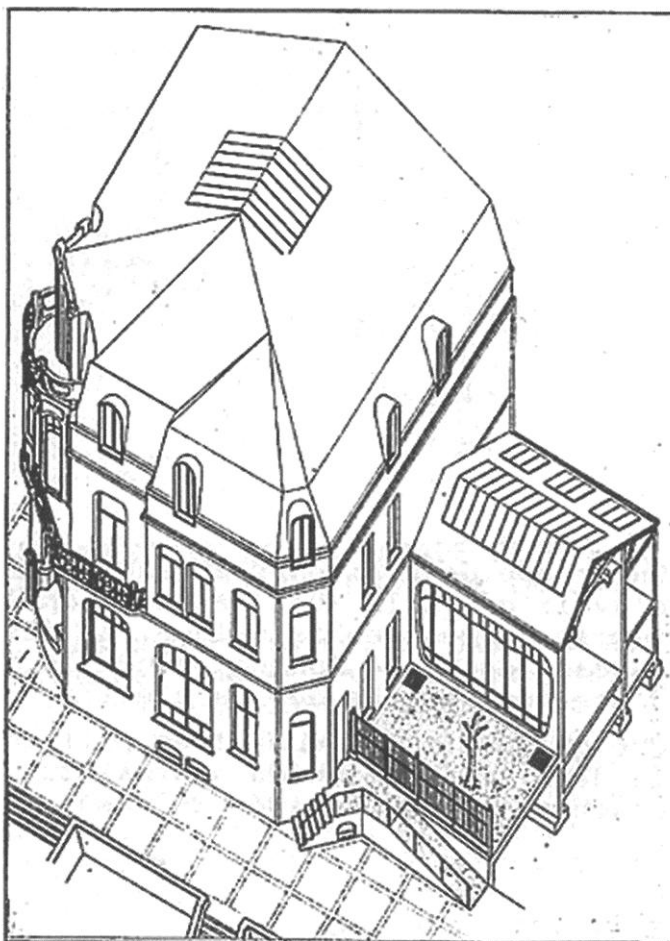
23. Georges Vigne, "Victor Horta et l'Hôtel Aubecq à Bruxelles," *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* 33/1 (1983): 25–34.

24. "Approached about the preservation of that building, we could not consider designation, in view of the relatively recent date of that construction." Letter of 6 May 1949, from the chairman of the Commission, Baron Carton de Wiart, to the director-general of Fine Arts and Letters in the Ministry of Public Education.

25. *Archives d'architecture moderne* (AAM) 16, special edition devoted to La Cambre (1979): 92–99.

26. The restoration of Paul Saintenoy's building and its conversion into a Musée des instruments de musique began in 1989 and was completed in 2000. Eric Hennaut, Liliane Liesens, and Anne-Marie Pirlot, *Old England et la Musée des instruments de musique* (Brussels: Archives d'architecture moderne [AAM], 2000).

27. The "Cousin Hall" was to be incorporated into the future museum of modern art, but this plan was dropped. The elements, parts of which had meanwhile disappeared (particularly the mosaic floor and the bronze mantle trim), were finally transferred to the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, where they were to be displayed in the new halls devoted to Art Nouveau.



● VUE AXONOMETRIQUE DEPUIS LA
PETITE RUE DU MUSÉE

Figure 3. Proposal for the reconstruction of the Hôtel Aubecq and the Salle Cousin, rue Montagne de la Cour, Brussels. Axonometric view. Project by the architects Dominique Delbrouck and Michel Leloup. *Revue des archives d'architecture moderne* 16 (1979): 94 (Special volume on "La Cambre 1928–1978"). © 2002-Horta/SOFAM-Belgium.

ity of the plan, reflected in the structural alignment of the façades. This project is a good illustration of the Brussels trend, since called "façadism," which rests on the mistaken belief that face-saving is all that matters in architecture. To make matters worse, the furnishings of the Hôtel Aubecq were also scattered: in 1980 the Musée d'Orsay acquired forty-six pieces from the owners of the Hôtel Solvay, M. and Mme. L. Wittamer-de-Camps. As for the Horta Museum, it only owns a few chandeliers and a stool. The armchairs of the drawing room, a table, and an easel are now in the prestigious Gillion Crowet collection.²⁸

The fate of another of Victor Horta's works provides an astounding illustration of the vulnerability of a landmark building. In 1889 Victor Horta received a commission for a small structure meant to hold a monumental bas-relief by Jef Lambeaux, "Les Passions humaines." The following year, the newspaper *Le soir* specified that the "very simple and very elegant [building] will be in a Greek style as modernized [*sic*] as possible."²⁹ Horta's Temple des Passions humaines was barely open to the public.³⁰ Dedicated on 1 October 1899, it was quickly closed because of a disagreement between Horta and Lambeaux over the lighting of the bas-relief. In 1909 Horta finally altered the pavilion, which was only sporadically open to the public from the time of its official re-opening in 1910: the official reason was that there was no guard, but the real problem was the allegedly risqué nature of the sculptures. Designated as a landmark by Royal Decree on 18 November 1976, the building was ceded by Minister Guy Mathot to the authorities of the nearby mosque in order to house an Islamic museum. The possible public re-opening of the Lambeaux pavilion right next to the Islamic and Cultural Center of Belgium constituted something of an embarrassment. Legally, however, the ministerial decree of 12 September 1979, which provided for the removal of the bas-relief by the licensee, at his expense, could not be carried out because it went against the Royal Decree of landmark designation. To get around that obstacle, very serious

28. Michel Draguet, *L'Art nouveau retrouvé à travers les collections Anne-Marie Gillion Crowet* (Antwerp: Fond Mercator, 1999), 37, 52, 53, 237–43.

29. *Le soir*, 26–27 May 1890.

30. Cécile Dulière, "Le Pavillon des Passions humaines au Parc du Cinquantenaire," *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art* 48 (1979): 85–96; Jo Haerens, "Jef Lambeaux en het reliëf der menselijke passies. Een historisch overzicht" (Jef Lambeaux and the Relief of the Human Passions: A Historical Review), *Bulletin des Musées Royaux d'art et d'histoire* 53/1 (1982): 89–105; Bruno Fornari, "Jef Lambeaux en de menselijke driften" (Jef Lambeaux and the Human Passions), *Monumenten en landschappen* (September–October 1989): 25–39.

consideration was given to putting the entire building, including the bas-relief, on rails and sliding it to another corner of the Parc du Cinquanteaire, where its presence would not embarrass anyone, a move authorized by a Royal Decree of 30 June 1981. This proposal was then developed in 1987 by the promoters of a museum for horse-drawn vehicles, the Bureau ARC, who planned not only to move the pavilion, but also to enlarge it by adding a cafeteria in the back and a long exhibition hall for old vehicles in the basement (see Figure 4). Horta's building had been conceived in the tradition of the temples and fabriques, or follies, that had decorated landscaped parks of the eighteenth century. ARC's plan did ensure the continuing connection of the main elements of the temple to its formal language. Once again, however, the proposed changes would have ruined the very meaning of the architectural work. If the museum were indeed ever constructed, what visitor would still be able to detect a tradition that had been both respected and reinvented by Horta, who created a new kind of profile that inflected the neoclassical quality of the building? Since it is hardly likely that the developers have the financial means necessary to use the type of subtle curves and scientific stone dressing envisioned by Horta, the contemporary building would only magnify the neoclassical elements and make us forget the pavilion itself. Curiously, Horta would then be brought back into the bosom of Alphonse Balat, his teacher, in spite of the fact that the Temple des Passions humaines bears witness to the young architect's resolve to be independent. The cost of demolishing and rebuilding the Lambeaux pavilion was initially estimated at 50 million Belgian francs. Since then, nothing has been resolved and the Lambeaux pavilion, part of the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, still stands in the same place—closed!

In 2000, four Horta buildings were chosen by Unesco to appear on the lists of the world heritage. Horta did not think he had created a style, but a work that was "the simple expression of his tastes and his abilities, devoid of all borrowing and which, far from being part of a permanent body of work, tended to be ephemeral. Unless a huge detour caused by a shift in artistic and public tastes were to result in having the work that had resisted demolition take on the characteristics of permanence and definitive preservation" (*Mémoires*, 60). Horta's prediction has turned out to be partially accurate. His architecture is recognized internationally. The museum established in his own home, on the rue Américaine in Saint-Gilles (Brussels), attracts tens of thousands of visitors every year, the vast majority of whom come from abroad. Today

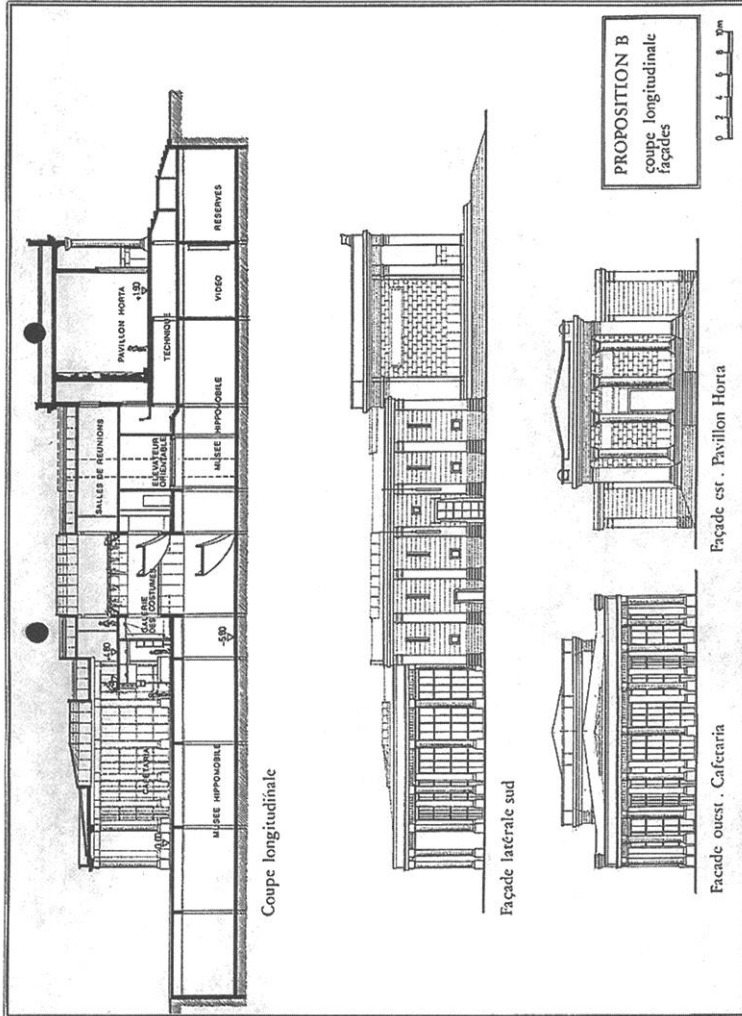


Figure 4. Project for the construction of a hippomobile museum, 1987. Bureau ARC (Philippe de Bloos and Jean-Pierre Hoa). © 2002-Horta/SOFAM-Belgium.

the building is threatened by its own success. In the last ten years architect Barbara Van der Wee has overseen a major restoration that has succeeded in stabilizing the structural weaknesses. Yet, the building is still overburdened and is literally worn out. Paradoxically, while some of Horta's works have disappeared or been profoundly altered because they met with derision and cultural ignorance, others are now threatened by the enthusiasm they generate. Horta's architecture, which transposed the beauties of the natural world into its structures and decors, has turned out to share the fragility of that world: absent a surge of interest from the political world and public opinion, it will remain on the endangered spaces list. We can dream . . .

—Translated from the French by Barbara Harshav