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TOWARDS A VERTICAL
ARCHITECTURE

'Like all big cities, Liège is suffering from a population decline that affects commercial activities. The city can only be re-populated by creating healthy neighborhoods, which include large open spaces. This can be accomplished by constructing vertical buildings in which a maximum number of flats is placed on a minimum amount of space. This allows housing to be made available to the middle and working-classes.'

Published at the close of the 1930s in a manual praising municipal policies regarding public works, this short text, while it may appear anecdotal, still resounds in the 21st century. The challenges faced by cities today remain the same as those seen in the 1930s and 1960s. A source of hope, the symbol of a new modernity, but also the object of virulent debates and financial stakes, the tall building is perceived as a strong symbolic element in the modernization of cities. After having been forgotten in urban debates, the question of the 'tall building' is back, as a series of recent initiatives attests¹. Here we see a response to the officially proclaimed concern with the parsimonious use of land, but also for many cities, the desire to forge a new image, a modern one, associated with urban reconstruction on a grand scale, operations in which towers play an important role². Additionally, these edifices are often designed by great names of the architectural scene. But this trend to build vertically has also its own history. Throwing some light on the subject may enrich the current debate on vertical architecture.

From the 1930s onwards, Liège witnessed the proliferation of buildings whose height completely changed the historical urban landscape. Was it the 'temptation of America'³, in the words of Jean-Louis Cohen, or a pragmatic response to a demographic downturn which contributed to the emergence of a new housing typology along the banks of the Meuse? Of course, high-rise buildings arouse fascination among architects and the public in general. Whether in the specialized press or in the daily news, articles describing the construction of American skyscrapers are numerous. The response is to be found in a complex examination of both symbolic and demographic relationships as well as technological, formal, economic and political parameters on both a national and a local scale. During the period of time between the two world wars the architecture of housing began to be rethought. Belgium was severely affected by the economic crisis.

The bourgeoisie had to adapt. Life in luxurious family mansions and the onerous services they required, became inaccessible. These adjustments were accompanied by a broader re-evaluation of housing. Modern comfort was quickly associated with the importance of reducing costs, due to the fact that it is partly based on the centralization of collective services (heating, elevator, maintenance of common spaces, telephones, etc.), but also on functional efficiency enabling life without domestic help, which had become increasingly expensive and demanding. The 1924 law on condominiums came at the right moment to reassure the bourgeoisie on this new way of living.

In Liège, the development of apartment buildings started at the beginning of the 1930s. Additionally to the economic crisis and the structural measures mentioned above, the development of new urban planning regulations in 1924 and 1935, were supposed to limit the height of high-rises. However an analysis of the administration's daily work suggests that they gave pragmatic responses to demands for the construction of taller buildings. The study of numerous exemptions from municipal regulations indicates a case-by-case management of building permits that went beyond legal height restrictions.

The permissive attitude of the administration partly explains height differences along a particular street. It seems that the authorities did not want to cause the property developers to lose interest and, at the same time, they aimed at attracting inhabitants in the city. The policies of slum clearance also created opportunities in certain parts of the city, which were immediately seized upon by real estate companies. The pressure that weighed on certain neighborhoods brought new solutions in terms of profitability, the superposing of housing offering a comfortable return on investment. The historical analysis of this vertical construction is articulated around four axes: localization, land division, the floor plan and the form.

THE LOCALIZATION

The question of localization leads to numerous parameters to be studied, concerned as much with the scale of the ensemble of the communal territory as that of the neighborhood, which possesses its own specificities. Different zones at stake can thus be identified. Following their protection from further flooding at the end of the nineteenth century (in spite of the floods in 1925-1926), the quays



Résidence d'Italie, by architect Camille Damman, 1937
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became favored as places of construction for bourgeois apartment buildings. It is not by accident that two noticeable residential buildings; *Résidence d'Italie* and *Résidence Le Petit Paradis* are situated along the Meuse River. Both of them are in open spaces offering panoramic views over the water and the parks behind. The question of location for the construction of apartment buildings became an element of social hierarchy. If the bourgeoisie demanded modern comforts, a beautiful view was equally demanded. This was, of course, much less available.

The policies of slum clearance associated with the opportunism of real estate developers are other factors which explain certain concentrations of buildings. The struggle to eradicate slums brought about the destruction of numerous hovels and provided the city vast pieces of land, which could be sold to private developers. This policy from the end of the 1920s, which included the purchase of land as well as expropriation, made enormous plots of land available for construction. The names of prominent real estate developers such as Moury and Demarche are found in the Outremeuse neighborhood, along the perimeter of Place Théodore Gobert. The square offers a panorama of collective housing projects, ranging from modest apartments to grand private residences and public housing. They are all placed one next to another, creating a rather hybrid ensemble.

Furthermore, the location of tall residential buildings seems to be intimately linked with site preservation policies. The authorities' position was notably defined according to the opinion of the Royal Commission for Monuments and Sites. In the debate concerning building regulations it clearly appeared that certain

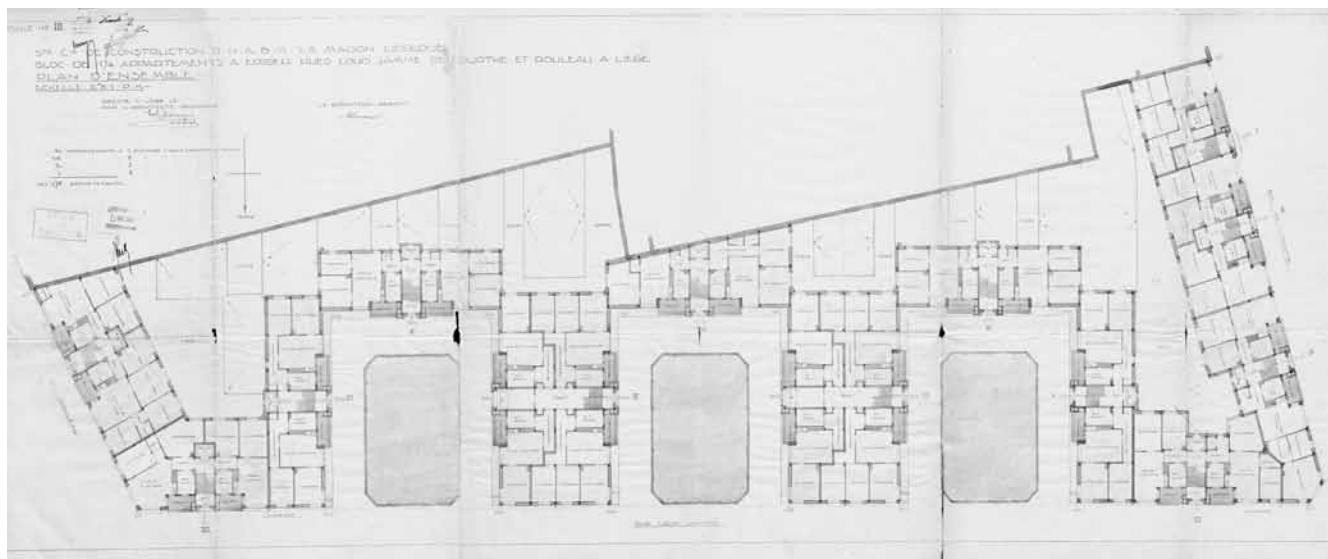
sites had to be protected, particularly by limiting the height of new structures. The construction of apartment buildings in the historical city aroused reactions from the authorities as well as from the inhabitants who wanted to protect their view of the medieval Church *Saint-Martin*. A specific regulation was thus drawn up which limited the height of buildings in the historical center of the city. The view-protection argument was also used against the *Résidence Le Petit Paradis* arguing that it was necessary to preserve the view on Cointe Hill. The opponents also pointed out that 'such a building would represent a danger for car drivers due to a restricted field of vision'⁴. Facilitating automobile circulation, which was experiencing surging growth in the 1930s, became a strong argument.

Later, in the 1960s, the view-protection argument returned concerning the choice of the site for the new administrative tower (architects Henri Bonhomme and Jean Poskin, 1967). Some opponents argued that the tower was found in the narrowest part of the Mosane Valley, thus hiding the view of the hills around the old citadel.

Other obstacles depict, yet again, the fear and resistance people felt concerning these tall buildings. The construction of a five-story building by architect H. Marneffeon Rue Villette in 1937, incited the ire of neighboring residents and of the League of Defense in the interest of the Longdoz Neighborhood⁵. The local residents questioned the repercussions on health (reduction in the amount of sunlight falling on the street and insufficient draining of sewage) and safety (the resistance of gables on semi-detached houses). A long technical debate followed between the deputy alderman and the local citizens concerning respect of the council rules, centered on the permitted height of the building. It finally ended with the approval of the building permit.



Résidence Le Petit Paradis, by architect Louis Rahier, 1937 © Archives de la Ville



Résidence Louis Jamme, by architect M. Jeurgen, 1937 © Archives de la Ville de Liège, fonds des demandes d'autorisation de bâtir

FROM THE URBAN BLOCK TO THE SLAB

The shift from the urban block to the slab primarily concerns the location of the building on the site and the treatment of the public spaces. The first apartment buildings generally follow the preexisting land parcels, but some exceptions go beyond these classical urban forms. The public housing project on Rue Louis Jamme (architect Melchior Jeurgen, 1937) operates beyond the limits of the plot in order to address the urban block. Less subject to profitability imperatives than private development, this large-scale operation (174 housing units) shows a certain care for green space very much in tune with the hygienic concerns of the time. More than half of the 4160 square meter plot was devoted to gardens and courtyards, thanks to setbacks in the alignment of the street.

The shift from the plot to the urban block also demonstrates the developers' new ambition to deal with urbanism. However, the construction of tall buildings was not accompanied by a reflection on the adaptation of roads to the growing number of vehicles. In the Outremeuse neighborhood for instance, the demolition of the slums in order to replace them by tall buildings was never coupled with a broader masterplan for the area. In the 1930s modern city planning, as formulated by the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), was still a focus of the avant-garde. This disconnection between architecture and city planning stirred up the anger of the young modern planners of the *Groupe L'Equerre*: 'When we speak about town planning, many people immediately think of brand new garden cities, filled with flowers. That may sometimes be true, but urban planning consists more

often in the modernization of a city while it keeps functioning. Simply replacing the houses and hovels along existing streets by new buildings creates no important difficulties, but one should not be surprised, when proceeding in such a way even for a thousand years, that humanity will not accomplish all the desired social progress.'⁶

Globally, the work done in the 1960s did not deviate from this customary procedure: essentially the previous urban structure of streets and the small parcels of land was simply re-used, and rarely reshaped. The high-rises were mainly built in the 19th century urban fabric and much less in pre-industrial neighborhoods. The plot structure and the width of the streets were much more appropriate for the construction of tall buildings. Even in the case of large projects, as the one which affected the north-east area of Outremeuse, the classic alignment of adjoining apartment buildings along the existing streets was conserved, with the exception of public housing as discussed above (Rue Louis Jamme). In this respect the Outremeuse neighborhood is particularly interesting in light of the present study. In fact, it illustrates the various sides of urban policy that stretched over almost two centuries: the major works of the 19th century (essentially in hydrography), the renovation of densely populated neighborhoods (and by consequence the disappearance of many small manufactures), hygienic concerns, and later in the 1960s the organization of car traffic along the river banks. Outremeuse thus concentrates the major urban transformations but also offers an interesting sampling of different types of high-rises. An in-depth study of this specific part of the city should allow transpositions to other contexts and to raise questions on different issues: what reaction did these operations provoke

on public opinion? Are the works done differently depending on the nature of the project, whether public or private? The majority of the tall buildings were designed within the existing parcel limits: a given situation with little margin of maneuver regarding an in-depth restructuring of the urban fabric. This situation was in total contradiction to that recommended by the advocates of modern town planning and therefore seen as unfavorable for the application of their theories. For many projects, the scale of intervention remains strongly conditioned by the pre-existing situation, a result of the scattering of little plots of land and the multiplicity of developers (primarily real estate promoters). There are, however, some notable exceptions: in Droixhe, housing slabs were built with an east-west orientation on an ex-military field, breaking the logic of the urban block. But once again, a public housing company constructed this exemplary modern complex. The private real estate developers did not want to invest much in pre-financing road infrastructure, facilities and valuable landscape. They preferred to capitalize on existing urban conditions. In the early 1960s, the municipal council further encouraged the construction of tall buildings. For the town administration, the existing buildings did no longer encounter modern standards of living and, therefore, had to be replaced by modern buildings. A new law on building regulations was passed in 1963 by

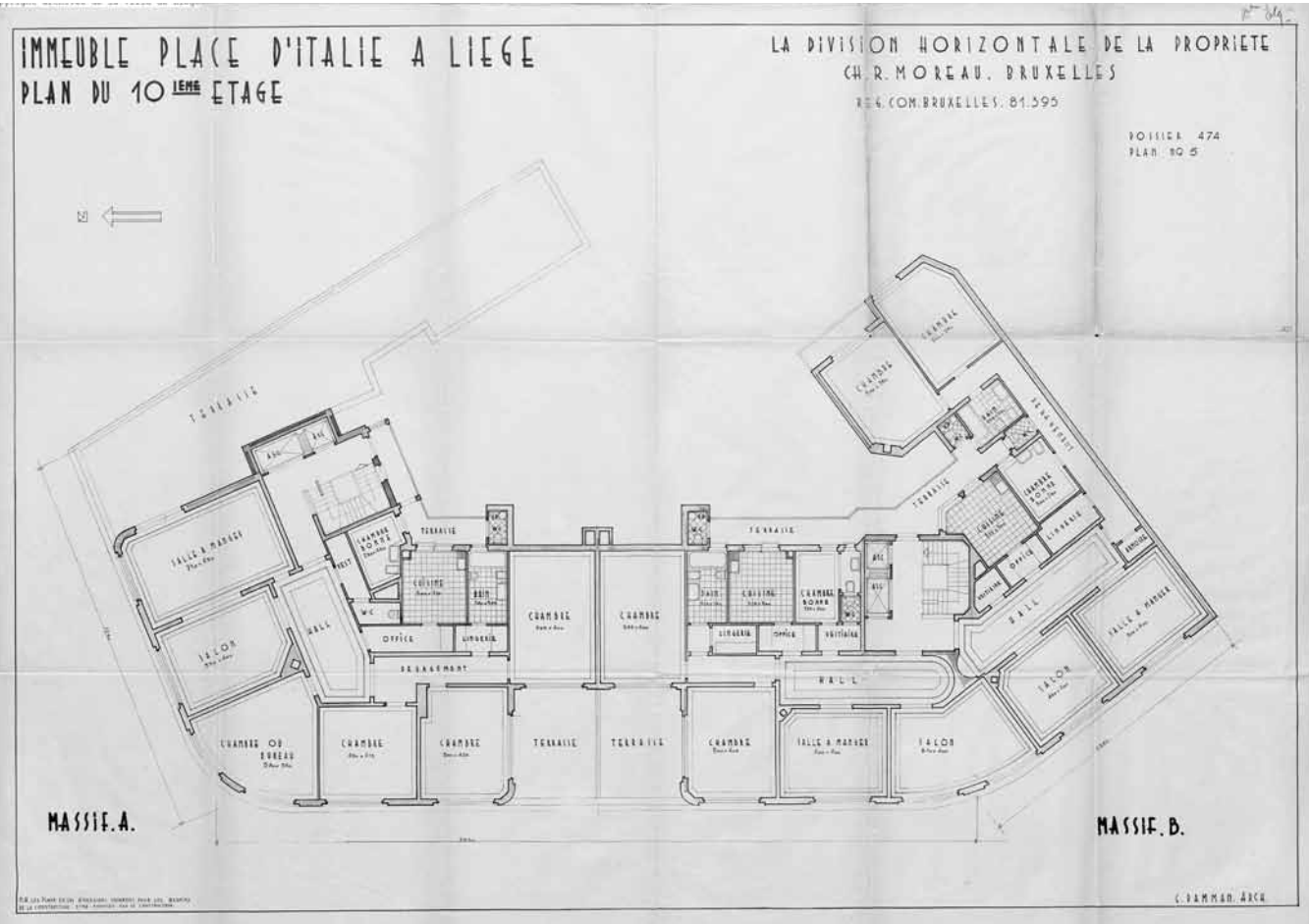
the municipal council, allowing higher construction along the quays and the boulevards. There is no doubt that this permissive planning tool was a great incentive for real estate developers to invest in the city center.

THE FLOOR PLAN

Confronted with the rising costs of construction along with the crisis in domestic help, the bourgeoisie found the apartment building to be a modern and affordable answer to their quest for housing. In many respects, this transition corresponded to the transplantation of the vertical organization of the 19th century town house to a horizontal division of the floor plan⁷.

To what extent and according to which model (details of implementation), did architects translate the subtle hierarchy of space for this affluent clientele into a typical floor plan? How did they organize the hierarchical passage from the more representational space (entrance hall, living room, vestibule) to the intimate rooms (bedrooms & service rooms)?

The floor plan of the *Résidence d'Italie*⁸ shows the persistence of the classical bourgeois way of living on a horizontal plan. Just as in a bourgeois hotel of the 19th century, the living spaces remain separated between those of the master and those of the domestic help. If vertical circulations are shared, they rapidly split, upon accessing the typical floor. The master enters his apartment through a vast entrance



Floor plan *Résidence d'Italie*, by architect Camille Damman, 1937 © Archives de la Ville de Liège, fonds des demandes d'autorisation de bâtir

hall, while the maid reaches her *chambre de bonne* via the outdoor terrace. The living and the dining rooms are situated at the front of the building, whereas the service rooms are relegated to the back. The organization of the floor plan maintains a strong separation between two different worlds. However, while the bourgeois home imposed upon the servants a vertical circulation – the kitchen and laundry are located in the basement and their bedrooms in the attic – this type of apartment relegated the domestic help to the back of the living area. Of course, the distribution of contiguous service spaces (kitchen, laundry, etc) implies a better comfort (and efficiency) for the personnel, but the domestic help remained separated, even hidden, at the back of the apartment. There was no connection between the maid's private quarters and those of the masters. Private exchanges were thus impossible. In the case of the apartments on *Place d'Italie*, some plans placed the service lavatory outside, along the edge of the terrace, as if comfort had to be reserved for the masters. Similarly, the presence of a service elevator, relegated to the back of the building, reinforced this principle of separation.

The massive movement of the middle-class towards homeownership, where domestic help was no longer needed, contributed to a simplification of the plan after 1945. Representation and reception spaces (entry halls) were gradually replaced by more functional circulation systems.

THE FORM

The question of architectural form plays a crucial role in the support and investments in new projects by the bourgeoisie. Traditionally attached to decorative principles from historical styles, the bourgeoisie of Liège was not interested in modern theories of radical simplicity. Therefore, multiple formal influences (Art Deco, modern neo-classical, etc.) can be found more or less ostentatiously in the facades of apartment buildings of the 1930s. The choice of building materials is another representative element of the approach towards modernity, either radical or simply lukewarm. The *de Leval* building, built in 1936 by architect Urbain Roloux, maintains traditional facades in both brick and stonework and the formal Renaissance-inspired details (stylized medallions). The interior decor shows the permanence of historical culture in the bourgeois sensitivity of the interwar period.



Résidence l'Intégrale, by the group L'Equerre, 1938
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A few rare examples, however, oppose the historic model and show the desire of a few architects to adapt form to modern construction techniques. At the same time as the *de Leval* building, the *Groupe L'Equerre* erected the modern residence *l'Intégrale*. The formal treatment of the building is the perfect expression of modern theories, of which the members of L'Equerre were the main representatives in Liège: rejection of all ornamentation, prominence of volume, white coating rather than the traditional brickwork. The building was at the forefront of Belgian modern architecture and preceded by far the wave of apartment buildings that emerged after the war along the quays and boulevards. L'Equerre themselves proudly sent photographs of their great achievement to the Swiss architect Sigfried Giedion, as if they were aware to be part of a cultural turn.

Between Roloux's historicism and L'Equerre's international modernism a wide range of alternative styles existed. However, this exciting quest for an alternative architectural form disappeared after WWII. For many architects functional modernism became the norm and all other formal research was abandoned.

1

See in particular: *L’Invention de la tour européenne*, exhibition and book published by le Pavillon de l’Arsenal, Paris, mai 2009. Book edited by Ingrid Taillandier & Olivier Namias, édition du Pavillon de l’Arsenal, Éditions A.&J. Picard.

2

In Liège towers are again arising along the important axes or close to new development sites. The financial tower by Jaspers & Eysers or the planned Barvaux tower by OMA exemplifies how high-rise buildings are still considered to be strong symbols of modernity.

3

See: Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scènes de la vie future: L’architecture européenne et la tentation de l’Amérique, 1893-1960*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995.

4

Proceedings of the Municipal Council, 1st of February 1937, in *Bulletin administratif de la Ville de Liège*, Liège, Georges Thone, 1937, p.61.

5

The building was constructed for the company ‘*Le logement ouvrier*’. See: Archives communales de la Ville de Liège, fonds des demandes d’autorisation de bâtir, dossier B22180. The petition was written by a group of inhabitants from la Villette street and sent to the Mayor and the municipal council on the 1st of June 1937. See: Archives communales de la Ville de Liège, fonds des demandes d’autorisation de bâtir, dossier B22180.

6

Rapport published by L’Équerre group in February 1940, Getty Research Institute, B 850864, dossier ‘Articles to appear in L’Equerre’.

7

See: Vincent Heymans, *Les dimensions de l’ordinaire. La maison particulière entre mitoyens à Bruxelles. Fin XIX^e – début XX^e siècle*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1998.

8

Built by the real estate company ‘La division horizontale de la propriété’ and designed the Brussels architect Camille Damman in 1937. Archives communales de la Ville de Liège, fonds des demandes d’autorisation de bâtir, dossier B22175.