Expo 58: the catalyst of Belgium's Welfare State governmental complexes?

Abstract: This text presents the preliminary results of ongoing research into the complex impact of Expo 58, the first post-war world's fair, on the architectural projects of the Belgian government in the heart of the capital. Expo 58 is presented as a catalyst in the Welfare State's initiatives to render the post-war Belgian government visible to its citizens and to foreign nations. Notwithstanding their initial coherence, these projects were never considered as an entity nor as a category. During the period of preparation for the fair, a zone of 1km was planned with six large (semi-) governmental buildings on the rise between upper and lower Brussels. These buildings testify, together with Expo 58, of the Belgian Welfare State's complex appreciation for and discourse on modern architecture. Like the Expo 58 projects of the architects of the fair's Technical Service – many of which also were involved in the planning of the six buildings in the capital – the government's complexes in the centre were omitted from the historiography of Belgian modern architecture. In this article, the early years of the planning of the *Cité administrative* are presented as a challenging case in point.

Keywords: Expo 58; Welfare State; Cité administrative; Mont des Arts; Junction; Brussels; administration buildings; representation; Exhibitionary Complex.

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Introduction

In the early fifties, a large zone stretching over 1 km in the heart of Brussels was planned with six new complexes for governmental and semi-governmental institutions. Located on the strategic and prestigious rise between upper and lower Brussels, these buildings testify of the many faces of the Belgian Welfare State's appreciation for modern architecture. This new administrative front was planned to be finished at the opening of Expo 58, the first post-war world's fair. Although various sources and facts hint at this connection,[1] the full impact of the fair on this zone has yet to be revealed. Today still, (1) the *Mont des Arts* with the *Albertine* Library (1939-'69), (2) the Central Station (1937-'52), (3) the Sabena Air Terminus building (1952-'54), (4) the Telex building (1959-'65), (5) the National Bank complex (1954-'57) and (6) the *Cité administrative* (1955-'80) are the objects of ongoing discussions and renovations. **(figure 1)** Remarkably, this zone was never received as a whole.[2] This is due mainly to the various durations of the construction periods of every one of these complexes, the agitated public and professional discussions, the size of the

buildings and the absence of clear spatial, formal or even stylistic relations between these buildings. This text traces the architectural and governmental contexts of the period of planning of this zone, a moment in which these complexes were intensely linked. This original cohesion was the result of an historical combination of factors: the government's lingering need for representational buildings and large surfaces of office space, the opportunity created by the construction of the 2 km underground north-south railroad axis or Junction,[3] the favourable economic situation[4] and, most importantly, the momentum of Expo 58, the first post-war world's fair. Focusing especially on the *Cité administrative*,[5] this paper investigates how the exhibition was used as a catalyst to push the execution of the project and suggests that their original cohesion might shed a new light on the evaluation of post-war modern architecture in Belgium.

Model State Belgium and its Exhibitionary Complex

Expo 58 was a prestige project to the Belgian Welfare State. For the first time in the long Belgian history of world's fairs,[6] the exhibition was promoted, planned and financed by the national government. The first initiatives for the fair were taken in 1946-'47, but the immediate post-war international economic and diplomatic uncertainties postponed the exhibition. These ambitions were instigated largely by the Belgian Miracle: already in 1947, Belgian economy had reached the level of pre-war (1936-'38) industrial production and became a creditor to other European countries. Also, already in 1944 the Social Pact had created the basis of the Belgian post-war Welfare State. As a result, the increasing involvement of the government in the daily life of its citizens not only created the need for a new 'face' for this government, but also for more administrative services and building complexes to house them. This added to an old shortage, for already in 1937 government official Louis Camu (1905-1976) had published his study on the reform of the state's administrative services in which he forwarded the need for more, more centralized and

more suitable office spaces. Assisted by the architects Raphael Verwilghen (1888-1963) and Jean-Jules Eggericx (1884-1963), Camu stressed rationality and efficiency, also in the spatial organisation of the administrative services: 'L'administration doit produire et les bâtiments dans lesquels elle est logée doivent être conçus en vue de cette production.'[7] Camu's report proposed a new administrative complex on the monumental axis between Suys' Royal Palace (1829) and Guimard's Palace of the Nations (1779, now the federal parliament). **(figure 2)** This complex was never realized as such, but Camu's estimates and suggestions provided a readily available basis for the post-war projects. Eventually, it was the completion of the Junction (1937-'52) which provided the government with the opportunity of erecting the new governmental and semi-governmental buildings on a highly visible place in the centre of the capital and nearby the historical governmental palaces. Hence, in contrast to similar projects abroad, the government opted to locate its administration buildings in the city centre. Although the planning of the new governmental buildings raised intense discussions among Belgian architects, the projects appear to be realized without consideration of the entire site nor reference to the international debate.[8]

The new administration offices were not the only projects for the Belgian post-war Welfare State. Most prestigious was the 1958 world's fair: a festive event which had to establish the Belgian Welfare State internationally, in Europe especially.[9] Focusing on its central theme, *For a more human world,* the organizers invited participants of the fair to demonstrate their contemporary implementation of modernist humanism.[10] When informing the Belgian public on the new projects,[11] the government used the international visibility of the fair as an argument to push the construction of new infrastructure and buildings. Among these are not only the six complexes mentioned, but also the Brussels Inner Ring Road, the new airport, the rebuilding of a part of the museum at the *Cinquantenaire*, a new building for the *Institut royal des Sciences naturelles*[12] and some new constructions in the botanical gardens of Meise. All can be considered as representational

projects to create a new face for the modern, post-war governmental administrative, cultural and scientific institutions.

Considered as a whole, these initiatives can be identified as a the Belgian Welfare State's Exhibitionary Complex. Although a concept developed to asses nineteenth century nation building, Tony Bennett's theory on the Exhibitionary Complex appears to be highly applicable in this post-war context, even these administration complexes. Indeed, the Belgian Welfare State government used the world's fair and other cultural institutions to visualize itself, as 'vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power ... throughout society.'[13] Aiming for visibility and voluntary participation of the public in the new system, such projects are not only involved with the 'ordering objects for public inspection,' but also with 'ordering the public that inspected.'[14] This ordering involved a conformation with post-war modernization – Expo 58 still is remembered at the moment when everything and everyone became modern in Belgium – but also with the new Welfare State and its young King.[15]

The architects of the Welfare State's prestige projects

Bennett's principle of ordering can also be interpreted in terms of architecture. The architecture of the Welfare State's Exhibitionary Complex was a demonstration of the know-how and modernity of the Belgian government, although current historiography on Belgian modern architecture appears to lack important evaluations on this matter. Expo 58 especially was forwarded as the widely spread breakthrough of modern architecture. As Geert Bekaert noted in his authoritative study: 'the period after the expo … is marked, in Belgium and elsewhere, by a ramping of modern design. The question no longer is to be modern or not modern. … The range reaches from the *Cité administrative* in Brussels to the new seat of the Royale belge in Bosvoorde ….'[16] Yet a closer look to the architecture of the fair reveals a complex image of contemporary architectural tendencies, especially when

the architectural choices promoted directly by the Commissariat General of the fair and its Technical Service are concerned.[17]

The Belgian state administration was strongly represented in the Commissariat General of the fair, its legislative organ. This was manifest on an organisational level, but also in the production of representational architectural sites and infrastructure projects. Remarkably, several architects engaged in the Commissariat's Technical Service, all trained at the Brussels *Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles*, were responsible also for the design of the complexes for the Belgian state administration in the heart of the capital. The Commissariat had engaged Eugène Valcke of the Bridges and Roads department[18] as engineer-in-chief and Paul Bonduelle (1877-1955) as Architect-in-Chief. Bonduelle was heir to a long line of world's fair architects.[19] Yet from an ideological point of view, the choice for Bonduelle might seem surprising: as a professor in architectural theory at the academy he was known as an important ideologist to a contemporary Belgian architecture rooted in the classical tradition, opposed to the tabula rasa attitudes of the Modern Movement. In one of his rare testimonies on his plans for Expo 58 he declared that, at least in the Belgian Section, he wanted to demonstrate that 'the heritage of the past can be honoured in the realisation of the most progressive of conceptions.'[20] Although Bonduelle did not live to see his plans for Expo 58 realised, his successor and pupil, Marcel Van Goethem (1900-1960), hardly altered his concepts and plans and neither did Jean Hendrickx-van den Bosch (1890-1961), supervisor for the Belgian Section. The latter wanted to 'turn the Belgian Section into a representative oeuvre of our national unity, symbolised by what we call a 'collective rhythm.''[21] Although no distinct stylistic descriptions can be discerned and even though the Technical Service displayed a large tolerance to diverging tendencies with other participating architects,[22] it should be noted that participants to the fair were not explicitly encouraged to explore the most innovative concepts in modern architecture. Taking into account the background of these architects,

the architectural ideals and idiom of the organizers of Expo 58 appear to tilt towards an apparently high esteem for a now largely ignored, conservative and classical discourse on architecture in the fifties. This is clear in the general layout of the Expo 58 plan, but also in some of the designs of the Technical Service, such as Hendrickx-van den Bosch' Belgium Square. (**figure 3**) Yet this is even more clear, for instance, in the projects for their stern, classicizing complexes in the city centre: the Albertine library by Maurice Houyoux (1903-'60), Architect-in-Chief of the Colonial Section, or the National Bank by Van Goethem. (**figure 4**) It was this architecture, presented by the organizers as 'modern architecture,' that was the mass medium in the promotion of the modern, post-war Welfare State in Belgium. This finding at least complements the still prevailing reputation of the fair's architecture today.

The Cité adminstrative case

The contexts of the exhibition and of the complexes in the city centre differ strongly. The world's fair was constructed as a parallel reality, confined in time, place and significance. The ongoing projects in the centre of the capital lent credibility to the prosperous future projected by the fair. Yet these projects also benefited largely from Expo 58: the highly popular fair – 80% of all Belgians attended enthusiastically[23] – acted as a financial and mental catalyst to step up the other projects of the Welfare State's Exhibitionary Complex. The timing of the construction of the Inner Ring Road (1955-'57), for instance, was consistently motivated by the expected amount of visitors[24] for Expo 58; a doubling of traffic was expected. Finishing the Ring on time was an issue of national prestige according to the promotors of the Ring: 'Il importe en effet que la modernisation de notre réseau routier entreprise par le Fonds des Routes soit l'oeuvre de la Nation unanime […] destiné à faire du réseau routier belge l'un des premiers de l'Europe.'[25] A similar strategy was used to step up the execution of another lingering and rather unpopular project in the city

centre: the construction of the *Mont des Arts*. The Palace of Congresses and the Albertine

National Library of the *Mont de Arts* were forwarded as locations for the world's fair's

extramural activities.[26] These efforts were only partially effective: on 17 May 1958, one

month after the opening of the world's fair, a part of the *Mont des Arts* was opened to the

public. 82 Expo 58-related congresses were organized in the Palace of Congresses. Yet the

international art show planned in the *Albertine* was cancelled and the unfinished library was

hidden behind a fake façade.[27] **(figure 5)**

Less clear is the link between the *Cité administrative* and Expo 58. This is largely due

to the long and difficult period of planning and execution of the *Cité*. Planned originally to

be finished at the opening of the fair – as a permanent demonstration of the organizing

government's new face – the laying of its foundation stone was eventually postponed to 21

April 1958, one week after the opening of Expo 58. The professional discussion on the

representation of the government and its potential role in the public domain of the capital

culminated in the planning of this complex. Following the conclusions in Camu's 1937

report, in 1949 a committee for the centralization of the administration was called into life.

Meanwhile, the number of civil servants had increased from 50.000 in 1911 to 95.116 in

1950. Mid 1955 the government decided to go ahead with the realization of a large

administrative complex, located at a 6.42 hectare lot on the rise between upper and lower

Brussels, in between the newly planned National Bank building and the Inner Ring Road.

The *Cité* had to house, among other things, the offices of 7000 employees, a tower of forty

floors, public squares, gardens and parking facilities for 4000 cars. A group of five

architects was commissioned with the design of the project in October 1955 – one month

after the laying of the foundation stone for Expo 58. The committee was composed of

Jean Gilson of the group Alpha, Georges Ricquier, Hugo Van Kuyck, Marcel Lambrichs

and Léon Stynen. Shortly after, the latter four would also obtain important commissions

for pavilions for the world's fair: Georges Ricquier for the Governmental Palace of Congo,

Ruanda and Urundi; Hugo Van Kuyck for the UN pavilion and the general plan of the

Mundial Section; Marcel Lambrichs designed the Pavilion of Organisations for Research

and Investigations with Philippe Dumont and Léon Stynen became president of the

Pavilion of Buildings and Dwellings,[28] all government-related commissions. **(figure 6)**

Although early in 1956 it was clear that the entire *Cité* could not be finished before the fair,

parts of the mixed programme were envisioned to be completed early 1958, such as the

four level parking, the esplanade and some thousand rooms made available for the visitors

of the exhibition.[29] **(figure 7)** Eventually, the main building works were postponed until

after the fair, while the vacant lot was used as an open air parking for 500 cars during the

fair.[30]

In the professional debates on Brussels in the fifties and sixties, the new

architecture for governmental institutions was heavily criticized, especially the *Cité*

administrative, mainly because of its massive volume and alleged mono-functionality.[31]

Moreover, at the time of Expo 58, the *Cité* was not the only large construction site left in

the city centre. Consequently, the new infrastructure had a somewhat double character: its

prestigious avenues ran through a largely devastated city, displaying vast areas under

construction. 'Ainsi pour l'Exposition de 1958, Bruxelles a présenté, hormis pour sa

'Grand'place-Parking', le visage sans âme d'un centre inachevé ou démantelé, comme un

retour vers l'absence d'esthétique urbaine, propre aux bourgades sans histoire,'[32] the editor

of *Rythme* denounced the situation in the city centre. Belgian architects received the works

with a mixture of enthusiasm on the previously unknown possibilities, but also with severe

criticism and even disillusion. As Brunfaut observed: 'il ne peut être cité aucune

construction qui soit bien mise en place… C'est le cas d'édifices nationaux à prétentions

monumentales.'[33] The Belgian government took the occasion of Expo 58 as an

opportunity to deliver proof of the successful progressiveness of its new constitution by

means of modern architecture and new infrastructure. To the observers of post-war

modern architecture in Belgium, Expo 58 held the promise of profound renewal, both on the exhibition site and in the capital. Yet already before the fair opened its gates, disillusionment was prevalent in the contemporary debate. 'Brussels has missed the chance to become a truly modern equipped capital, Brussels has become the work of engineers; the architects are exhausted, impeded and baited by the public services and their architectonically illiterates,'[34] the Flemish critic K.N. Elno complained. **(figure 8)**

The impact of Expo 58 on the modern architecture of the Belgian Welfare State

Expo 58 is revelatory for the architecture of the Belgian Welfare State. Firstly, the fair was a catalyst to the execution of projects in the city centre. Secondly, the architectural concepts of the organizers of Expo 58 appear to be closely linked with the projects in the city centre, although the *Cité* is a particular case in point here, mainly because of its long period of planning. Thirdly, these architectural concepts, forwarded as modern and representative of the post-war Welfare State, present a challenge to the historiography of Belgian modern architecture.

Even when not always entirely successful, Expo 58 acted as a material and mental catalyst to the government's construction programs in the capital. The interactions between the ephemeral feast and the long-term projects were manifold: on a material and financial level, but also psychologically, since the world's fair lent its popular support, national and international prestige and its claims of progressiveness to the projects in the heart of the capital. Expo 58 serviced, both organisationally and physically, as a vehicle to make the infrastructure of the new Welfare State visible to the general public. Although both the fair and the official buildings in the historical heart of the capital were rarely evaluated as such, the projects should be, at least as far as their intentions are concerned, considered as illustrations of the many faces of what was presented as the 'modern' architecture of the Welfare State. The fact that the buildings – ranging from the *Albertine* to

the *Cité* – are not considered as demonstrations of post-war state modernity is largely due to their formal architectural concepts. Although they constitute one of the largest and most prominent modern fronts in the capital, the majority of these constructions was omitted from the historiography of modern architecture in Belgium. Such is true also for the modern architecture of Expo 58 and the oeuvres of the architects of its Technical Service. In the fifties, the debate on the city centre was dominated by the neologism *bruxellisation,* a depreciative term referring to the planning of a mono-functional city deprived of its inhabitants and 'real life' or, in the terms of the era: non-humanist planning and architecture. Today, the projects in the administrative front are renovated or altered, a large zone is being redressed, yet the Sabena Air Terminus is vacant. The Belgian government sold the *Cité administrative* to private investors in 2003 and today the complex is, apart from its redressed Tower of Finances, abandoned and deteriorated. **(figure 8)** Ironically, mainly because of its poor condition the complex was briefly assessed in recent publications and on internet discussion groups. Moreover, the architecture of the Belgian post-war Exhibitionary Complex still is ignored as a category in the history of Belgian architecture. A close analysis of the architecture of Expo 58 has already revealed the many slippages between the claim for modernity and humanism and the idiom of the architecture used to represent it. More than a historical catalyst to these projects, today, Expo 58 can be conceived as a leverage to a more complex evaluation of the full nature of the architectural implementation of the post-war Exhibitionary Complex in Belgium.

Figures

(figure 1) Google Earth image of the area

(figure 2) Administrative complex, Eggericx and Verwilghen (1937?). Source : Camu, *Deuxième rapport sur la réforme administrative*

(figure 3) The Belgium Square of Expo 58, Hendricx-Van den Bosch. Source: OWTP.

(figure 4) National Bank building (1957), Van Goethem. Photo by the author (2010).

(figure 5) Finished part of the *Mont des Arts* in 1958. Source: OWTP.

(figure 6) The 1956 model of the Cité administrative. Source: OWTP.

(figure 7) The largely vacant lot of the Cité Administrative (front) with the Congres station by Maxime Brunfaut (1952) in 1960. Source: OWTP.

(figure 8) The Cité Administrative in 1979. The tower is still under construction. Source: OWTP.

(figure 9) The Cité Administrative in 2010. The tower is remodeled, the other parts of the complex are abandoned. Photo by the author (2010).

Notes

[1] This text is based mainly on research in the archives of the Expo 58, the photo archives of the former Ministry of Public Works or Reconstruction (OWTP) and contemporary publications.

[2] Even not in more recent ambitious analyses of the *Mont des Arts*, like: Bruno De Meulder and Karina van Herck, eds.,*Vacant City. Brussels' Mont des Arts reconsidered* (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2000) or Bernard Deprez and others, *La Cité administrative de l'Etat. Schémas directeurs et action publique à Bruxelles. Les Cahiers de La Cambre Architecture n. 8* (Brussels: La Cambre and La Lettre volée, 2009).

[3] This railroad tunnel was planned since the nineteenth century, but was dug out in the period 1936-'52, leaving a scar of vacant lots on top, see: Thierry Demey, *Bruxelles, Chronique d'une capitale en chantier. 1. Du voûtement de la Senne à la junction Nord-Midi* (Brussels: Paul Legrain, 1990).

[4] Fernand Baudhuin, *Histoire économique de la Belgique. 1957-1968* (Brussels: Etablissements Emile Bruylant, 1970).

[5] A detailed analysis of the design and realization of this project is beyond the scope of this text. See also: Thierry Demey, *Bruxelles, Chronique d'une capitale en chantier. 2. De l'Expo '58 au siege de la C.E.E.* (Brussels: Paul Legrain, 1992) or, on the occasion of the abandoning of the *Cité:* Guido Jan Bral, *Het Rijksadministratief Centrum* (Brussels: Ministerie

van het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest, 2007 and the film by Yves Cantraine, *La Cité administrative de l'Etat. Histoire(s) d'une utopia à vendre* (2006).

[6] Belgium organized world's fairs in 1885, 1888, 1894, 1897, 1905, 1910, 1913, 1930, 1935 and 1939.

[7] Louis Camu, 'Deuxième rapport sur la réforme administrative. Rapport sur les bâtiments des administrations centrales de l'Etat', *Moniteur belge* (1937).

[8] See for instance: Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, ed., *Ciam 8: the heart of the city: towards the humanisation of urban life* (London: Humphries, 1952).

[9] In 1958, Brussels was indeed temporarily granted the central seat for the European Community.

[10] On the Expo 58 theme, see: Johanna Kint, *Expo 58 als belichaming van het modernistisch humanisme,* Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 2001.

[11] Like: Omer Van Audenhove, *Bruxelles. Carrefour de l'Occident* (Brussels: Ministère des Travaux Publics et de Reconstruction, 1956) or Omer Vanaudenhove, *Hoe zal de nieuwe Kunstberg eruit zien?* (Brussels: Ministerie van Openbare Werken en Reconstructie, 1955).

[12] The project was never executed. The museum was renovated in 2007.

[13] Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary complex', *New Formations,* no. 4 (Spring 1988): 74.

[14] Bennett, 'Exhibitionary complex', 74.

[15] Expo 58 might be considered as a public installation of King Baudouin after the so-called Royal Question, the abdication of King Leopold II in favour of his eldest son Baudouin. On the royalist motivations for Expo 58, see: Rika Devos, *Modern at Expo 58. Discussions on post-war architectural representation* (Ghent: Faculteit Ingenieurswetenschappen, 2008), 22-33.

[16] Geert Bekaert and Francis Strauven, *Bouwen in België 1945-1970* (Brussels: Nationale confederatie van het Bouwbedrijf, 1971), 69.

[17] Devos, *Modern at Expo 58,* 230-256 and 276-281.

[18] A department involved with the construction of the Inner Ring Road and the Junction.

[19] Bonduelle was involved with the 1935 world's fair and was trained in the studio of Ernest Acker, as had been Joseph Van Neck, Architect-in-Chief of the 1935 exhibition. Acker had contributed significantly to the Brussels universal exhibitions of 1897 and 1910.

[20] Paul Bonduelle in 'De Heer Bonduelle: Een halve eeuw Belgische architectuur', *achtenvijftig,* no. 9 (November 1955): 2, 19.

[21] Jean Hendrickx-van den Bosch, 'In de Belgische Afdeling: eenheid en urbanisatie', *het bestek* 1 (1955): 51 or 'Eenheid en urbanisatie,' *achtenvijftig,* no. 9 (November 1955): 6-8.

[22] Marcel Van Goethem, 'Allocution prononcée par M. Van Goethem, architecte en chef', in *Journées de contact des commissaires généraux étrangers. Deuxième session. 21 et 22 Novembre 1956* (Brussels: Commissariat général du Gouvernement, s.d.), 39-41.

[23] Guillaume and Eliane Jacquemyns, *L'Exposition de 1958. Son succès auprès des Belges. Opinions et voeux des visiteurs* (Brussels: Insoc 1 en 2, 1959), 13 and 31.

[24] 30.000.000 were expected, 41.454.412 visitors were counted.

[25] Van Audenhove, *Carrefour de l'Occident*, s.p.

[26] For a detailed study on the library, see: Hannes Pieters, 'De Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België. Vier decennia van nationale representatie in architectuur, stedenbouw en interieurinrichting' (MA thesis, Department of Architecture & Urban Planning, Ghent University, Ghent, 2009).

[27] Demey, *Du voûtement,* 288.

[28] The Stynen office also designed the Belgian pavilion of the Petroleum and of the Liebig Company.

[29] Demey, *De l'Expo '58*, 86. Logexpo

[30] Van Audenhove, *Carrefour de l'Occident,* 93. The Administration City and its Tower of Finances were put into use gradually since 1965.

[31] See for instance: Gaston Brunfaut, 'Métamorphose de Bruxelles', *Rythme,* no. 21 (April 1957): 10.

[32] Gaston Brunfaut, 'Mesure d'une exposition', *Rythme,* no. 26 (January 1959): 2.

[33] Brunfaut, 'Métamorphose, 10.

[34] K.N. Elno, 'Een teleurstellend debat. Fiasco der architektuur in België. Brussel: hoofdstad der gemiste kansen', *De Standaard* (12 December 1957), s.p..