

Smaltz, googie and honky-tonk?

Belgian architects at Expo 58 and the Atomic Style

“On the latest reunion of the Belgian C.I.A.M. it was unanimously agreed to declare EXPO 58 a grand fiasco from the architectural point of view and the most pretty ensemble there will be ‘Old Belgium’.”¹ Belgian members of C.I.A.M. did not await the opening of the Brussels’ World’s Fair to condemn the exhibition’s architecture. Their austere judgment was echoed in the *gros* of the Belgian architectural press at the time of the fair; repeated on later occasions, it was hardly ever nuanced. This official C.I.A.M. note was no more than a lone scribble in the modernist magazine *Architecture*, but it formed the first frank criticism of the exhibition’s architecture in the professional press. Taking into account that over sixty percent of the architects who voted upon the declaration were involved in building one or more of the fair’s pavilions,² the one-line note provided clear evidence of confusion among Belgian modernist architects *vis-à-vis* the building practices at the exhibition site. Though none of the Belgian members of C.I.A.M. belonged to the official organs supervising the planning of the exhibition, authoritative modernists like Léon Stynen and Victor Bourgeois, and even Charles Van Nueten, were positioned to play a significant role in the representation of the Belgian architectural scene at the exposition through their pavilions and through their position on the committee of the Belgian exhibition group *Buildings and Dwellings*.³ This group proposed building a pavilion “significant of the actual state of architecture in Belgium. [...] The focus will be placed on avant-garde concepts and techniques, as far as they are likely to favour the development of the economical and social life of our country.”⁴ The Buildings and Dwellings pavilion, planned in 1955 as a fragment of a prestigious *unité de résidence* for 4000 people with an *as used* presentation of the building industries, did not meet the high expectations placed upon it.⁵ The pavilion as built consisted of two wide halls with a cabinet-like presentation of the exhibits – with one successful section documenting contemporary Belgian architecture – and a model home. Like most buildings of the Belgian Section, the professional press ignored the pavilion; its own architect, Charles Van Nueten, considered it a failure.⁶

The gap between the concept and early models describing the Buildings and Dwellings pavilion, on one hand, and the pavilion as it was built, on the other, is stunning. It should be noted though, that the planning story of this pavilion is a ubiquitous refrain throughout the Belgian and Commercial Section. The architects’ plans, the prescriptions of the Commissariat General and the demands of exhibitioner-clients often appeared irreconcilable, even for exhibition groups and architects who had put their stakes far lower than had group thirty-

seven. In the case of the Buildings and Dwellings pavilion, the building history is highly instructive – almost as a caricature – for understanding the positions taken by the most influential of Belgium's architects and offers some clues for evaluating the scarcity of publications on the Belgian Section.

The design process for the pavilions in this Section – the events that led to the architects' disappointments – falls beyond the scope of this paper. The paper rather considers the assembly of pavilions in the Belgian and Commercial Sections as a given and questions the architects' and critics' dismay, which stands in conflict with the visitors' enthusiasm and the immense popularity of the fair overall. Brief formal analyses of the pavilions and their immediate environment reveal the elements of a modern exhibition architecture which was labelled as *Expo Style*⁷ or *Atomic Style*.⁸ Finally, the paper tries to relocate *Atomic Style* from the panorama of contemporary architectural criticism towards the impact of popular taste in architecture, Belgian and foreign, though will not engage in the aesthetic and sociological theory on this matter.

The number of Belgian architects whose designs were realized in the different sections of the fair grounds amounts to over 160. Of this number, 120 participated in the Belgian, Commercial and Colonial Sections, where foreign architects were scarce. Precisely these sections were either criticized in unison or bluntly ignored in the architectural press, both in Belgium and abroad. The Belgian architects building at Expo 58 were mainly Brussels-based and trained at the La Cambre school (*Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et des Arts Décoratifs*) or at the Brussels' Academy (*Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles*).⁹ They obtained commissions for building pavilions in one of three possible ways: simply by assignment by the exhibitor or exhibitors' group, on invitation by the Commissariat General of the Exhibition or by winning the open or invited competitions organized by some exhibitors or by the Commissariat General.

The general layout of the exhibition ground, the overall architectural concept and governing regulations were designed and serviced by the Technical Service of the Commissariat General, composed of experienced practicing architects, trained at the Brussels' Academy and supervised by architect-in-chief Marcel Van Goethem.¹⁰ The exhibition pavilions of the Belgian 'collectivities',¹¹ situated alongside Belgium Avenue and Belgium Square, were the object of 'urbanistic' prescriptions by which the organizers strove for a formally and volumetrically uniform entity, promoting "unity and urbanization" and "rhythm and discipline." Head-architect of the Belgian Section, Jean Hendrickx-van den Bosch,¹² saw the concept of the section's layout as an opportunity to "avoid the same methods used in 1935

that resulted in a very disparate panorama for the Belgian Section. This time we absolutely want to offer the visitors a Belgian Section in which the absolute unity of concept is the foremost important feature. This unity, should 'hit the eye.'¹³ His guidelines resulted in a rigorous gabarit and an imposed colour scheme of cold, 'technological' tones: grey, white and blue. The colour, size and font of the letterings were prescribed; inscriptions and additional accents were to be executed in fixed contrasting colours: mainly yellow and red.¹⁴

Belgium Avenue formed the central axis of the terrain, which had already been used for the 1935 World's Fair. The axis ran from the Benelux Gate, past the Atomium - the central feature of Expo 58 - to the Heysel palaces on Belgium Square, also a focus of the 1935 exposition. Belgium Square, where "the monumental unity [had] to be absolute,"¹⁵ was redressed. Architects Jacques Dupuis and Albert Bontridder designed a new façade for the central hall at the top of the axis, Palais V, which marked the fair's main entrance. The façade was a mask-like construction, simply placed before the original: a light blue flattened parabola constructed of wooden panels on metal scaffolding, decorated with copper stars and a giant peace dove, extensively lit at night. A lower classically styled portico offered a double façade towards Belgium Square and was repeated, slightly modified, at the other edges of the open space, even across Belgium Avenue, thus framing the view towards the Belgian Section. The portico also linked the monumental urbanistic scale of the axis and the smaller elements in the streetscape of the exposition site. Often colourful and gaily shaped fountains, benches, lanterns, speakers, flags, flowerpots, dustbins, signposts and kiosks designed especially for the fair, discretely introduced a 'human' scale in the monumental environment of the Belgian Section. These elements linked and distinguished the different areas,¹⁶ as did alterations to the building prescriptions. Four areas were designed for the Belgian section, with decreasing degrees of building regulation: those of (1) the aforementioned Belgium Square and (2) Belgium Avenue, (3) the Esplanade and (4) the the Avenue of Construction – Atomium Avenue and the Commercial Section.

With few exceptions, pavilions in the Belgian and Commercial Sections were constructed as rectangular sheds of varying degrees of transparency, complying with volumetric constraints and offering wide, column-free spaces for exhibitors and their architects or decorators. In contrast with the uniform regulations imposed upon pavilion exteriors, interior decoration was only bound by a specific way of lettering. Quoting Hendrickx van den Bosch: "Moreover, these talents [of the architects] could manifest themselves in the interior of the palaces with total liberty, diversity and fantasy."¹⁷ In the end, the architectural achievements of the Belgian Section were counted a success by the Technical Service. One suggested the birth of a new, Belgian, style. In a letter to the president of the S.A.D.Br. after the fair, Van

Goethem expressed his gratitude to all the architects who willingly cooperated in the master plan of the Belgian Section, which had achieved its goal; the result presented “a good example that an architect’s personality can perfectly inscribe itself in an urbanistic frame for the good of greater architectural honour.”¹⁸ The organizing committee considered the layout of the section both ‘worthy’ of the host state and ‘typical’ of Belgian modern architecture.

More recently, critic Geert Bekaert agreed with this assessment, his reading of the project facts positioning the Belgian Section as a fitting overview of the contemporary architectural scene in Belgium: “The banality of Belgian architecture in the international panorama is perfectly illustrated therein.”¹⁹ Indeed, both the Belgian Section and the critical reactions it provoked were rooted in a contemporary debate on the position of modern architecture. Magazines like *Bouwen&Wonen* or *Architecture*²⁰ reported on a crisis of post war modern architecture. In 1958, Roger Thirion, in his then six-year old magazine *Architecture*, concluded that the efforts of young architects trying to revitalize modern architecture had lead to a meagre result. If *Architecture*’s initial bold programme of 1952 had raised the impression that “it looked as if a militant and principled architectonic consciousness would arise in Belgium,”²¹ by 1958 its founder-director had to concede that little had happened since the magazine’s first issue: many architects remained in favour of “the flavour of bad bourgeois taste.” Modernists “too often lacked faith, ardour and conviction. Compromise between the holy tradition and the taste of the day are too frequent.”²² *Bouwen&Wonen* started the year 1958 by picking up the thread of a public debate ‘Où va l’Architecture Belge,’ held in the Brussels’ Palais des Beaux Arts.²³ Comments by Jos De Mey, Jean van de Voort, Emiel Bergen and Renaat Braem illustrate in different ways the loss implied in a statement that modern architecture had given up its interwar ideals and was found without a common goal. A ‘human’ architecture – vaguely conceived and ill-defined – was promoted, but few projects in Belgium were thought to successfully encapsulate its principles. Moreover, Belgium, future capital of the young European Community and host to the first post war universal and international world’s fair, compelled to lead the way in modern urbanism and architecture, was accused of shamefully limping behind.

Many Belgian architects concerned with the present state of modern architecture saw Expo 58 - with its humanist theme ‘Balance Sheet of the World for a more Humane World’ – as a chance to formulate alternatives. It became clear that modern architecture had won the plea at the fair ground and for the first time, a complete modern environment was to be designed and presented to the public. But Expo 58 could not really boast an architecture that was, as had announced Van Goethem, “twenty years [ahead] of its time.” The fair’s architecture was contemporary in every way and remarkably representative of post war modern

architecture's polemics on 'structuralism,' 'populism,' 'humanism' and early 'regionalism.' Presenting the diffuse scope of its post war appearance, modern architecture confronted laymen and professionals with its diverging interests and means of expressions. While this diversity might, on balance, form the main quality of the Foreign Section, in the Belgian Section it was seen as proof of confusion and whimsicality pervading contemporary concepts of modernism in Belgium.

With its architecture bound to the abovementioned regulations, criticism of the Belgian Section targeted its urbanism. Such architects and critics as Renaat Braem, Gaston Brunfaut and Jean-Pierre Blondel all pointed to the fair's lack of general planning principles, the scarcity of open space, the mixture of styles and the absence of a prolific interpretation of the fair's humanistic theme.²⁴ Only Blondel and the Brussels critic Pierre-Louis Flouquet²⁵ dwelt with care upon the Belgian Section, delivering some deliberate comment of the attitudes and phenomena at stake. Blondel, for instance, questions the relationship between urbanism and architecture at the fair, wondering about the possibility of a clear distinction between both disciplines, especially on the all-by-all small scale of the Belgian Section. He accuses the administration of Expo 58 (and by extension the administrations in charge of urbanism in Belgium) of operating solely at a formal level in imposing size, form, colour, ascribing the perseverance of this method to an incapacity to formulate a sound definition of contemporary architecture. According to Blondel, the administration thought of architecture as "a form, an empty box without scale, with or without columns, but 'decorated' by the taste of the day."²⁶ This attitude places modern architecture automatically in the field of the *jamais vu* as happened with the fair's architectural programme. The unexpected was not to be seen at Expo 58; it rather showed a "passionate confrontation of architecture as could only be guessed at by architects. This demonstration opened up the world of contemporary form to the public." According to Blondel, this was the fair's major merit. That it had offered (or had the ability to offer) a welcome rapprochement between modern architecture, was acknowledged as a major achievement in such foreign journals as *The Architectural Review*, *Architectural Forum* and *Architectural Record*.²⁷ With eighty per cent of all Belgians having visited the exposition and 95.6% of these regarding the exposition a major success, the potential impact of the fair's imagery should not be underestimated.²⁸ However, as earlier noted, the modern architecture that clearly pleased the public was not accounted a complete success by most professionals. Flouquet nuanced the benefits of the *rapprochement*, stating: "The public, after the first choc, appeared to get a bit familiar with the new architectural forms and find some pleasure in contemplating certain constructed and polychrome perspectives, of which the specific lyricism appears as a dangerous thing to men of taste."²⁹

The predominance of a non-avant-garde and therefore 'lesser' modernism can be widely read into the many accusations of 'betrayal' of the 'true modern spirit,' undermining Giedion's belief in world's fairs as laboratories for new architecture:³⁰ spectacular structures which did not bother to express the correct stress diagrams, screens and signs added for promotional means only, repetition of identical building typologies and even the extensive use of ornaments. James Maude Richards, editor of *The Architectural Review*, stated that the pavilions of the Belgian Section were "not only [are the buildings] composed of clichés; they are themselves clichés."³¹ According to Richards, the architecture of Expo 58 would be of no significance to the history of modern architecture, and in any case less significant than the 1951 *Festival of Britain*,³² which had introduced the British to post war modern architecture. However, between these two events, Richards had made a remarkable point in defence of the cliché in architecture, saying that it was an unavoidable phase in the public acceptance of modern architecture. He said: "The genius of revolution supplies ideas and direction, but the welfare of architecture itself is a load only the more humble followers of genius can carry. [...] Nor, if it (architecture) exists perpetually in a state of revolution, will it achieve any kind of public following, since the public interest thrives on a capacity to admire what is already familiar and a need to label and classify."³³ Notwithstanding his conviction that the public dissemination of modern architecture was a principle goal deserving support, Flouquet questioned who had to make the effort, and if the resultant architecture would be 'worthy'. Looking at the Belgian Section, he wondered "if Belgian taste is able to bear true simplicity, an aristocratic simplicity through finesse and lightness contrary to the heaviness, the opaqueness, the vulgar abundance."³⁴ Criticism of the banality of the Belgian Section raised a moral dilemma regarding the duty of the architect *vis-à-vis* the people and his metier, and implicitly questioned definitions of 'the people' and 'modern architecture.' Braem had repeatedly declaimed against bourgeois taste, vigorously defending modern architecture; in his reaction on the *Débat 57* he once more prophesied architecture as a social art, in which the use of styles free from constructional or functional demands would be 'immoral.' But, to Braem, the 'common man'-orientation of modern architecture "is completely different thing to following the taste (the lack of taste) of the 'public.'"³⁵

The exceptional situation of the World's Fair slightly alters the definitions questioned as above. The architecture of pavilions seeks by all means to draw people's attention, to catch the eye in the visual abundance of the panorama. Even though a World's Fair, under B.I.E. law, bans all commercial activities from the pavilions, and despite all products having to be presented under the general banner of Expo 58's humanist theme, the information, education and entertainment provided at the presentation of the many consumer goods are above all

prestigious means to raise the advertising value of the fair for these products, seducing the public, the market. The mercantile layout of the interiors of several pavilions of Belgian collectives, and of course of the pavilions of such private firms as I.B.M., Coca Cola, M.B.L.E. or Marie Thumas, addressed visitors, indirectly, as potential customers. Or, in Braem's words, the visitors were confronted with "Barnum-commercial oriented pavilions."³⁶ The concept of an architecture for and by a consuming mass and its importance to modern architecture was found at the roots of an ongoing quarrel between *The Architectural Review* and *Architectural Forum*. Whether or not post war modern architecture should resist and remodel or endure and study the popular commercial modern was discussed at length in various articles and editorials from the time of the 1951 festival to the end of the fifties. While *Forum* took an interest in documenting American roadside architecture as a popular commercial and domestic vernacular - 'The Debacle of Popular Taste' - and questioned the architects' role in the process, the *Review* launched a counter-attack such phenomena as 'the mess that is man-made America,' the ugliness of the 'Usonian Idiot's Delight,' 'cuteness' or 'borax design.'³⁷ Though it is dangerous to over-polarise this discussion on popular taste, the editorial viewpoints become irreconcilable on the matter of the position the architect ought to take towards popular taste and the ethics of the impact of his actions. *Forum* promotes an interest in the building practice of common contemporary man (or the common advertiser) and considers the balance between post war modern architecture and (the lack of) tradition and history, or even 'taste'; the *Review* looks for ways to cure popular visual language. The latter driving force appears shared by the planning concepts of the Commissariat General for the section of the host state. From its humanist ideals of Man, culture and science the general plan advanced a quiet, unified ensemble at a monumental scale, trying to avoid popular commercial building practices by inscribing the designs of the different pavilions in a 'universal' whole. But the forceful commercial imagery – or style – was not eradicated, but tempered. The imaginative attempts to spice up the monotony of the Belgian Section (using elements of streetscaping, fancy detailing in the pavilions) gave birth to a distinct new environment, easily recognizable. When the Commissariat General tried to launch the myth that the fair's architecture would illustrate a new era in the history of modern architecture (being twenty years ahead), this 'style' was certainly not considered. Nevertheless, it was both prominent and popular, as a worried Flouquet noticed: "Should one fear to notice the rise of an Expo 58 'style' of which the formula would be exploited by the mediocre, which would recognize in it a new expression of a picturesque architecture?"³⁸

If, today, notions like *Expo Style* or *Atomic Style* exist as well-defined wholes by fifties aficionados or Expo 58 gadget collectors, this is not due to the promotion of the fair's

architecture by the Commissariat General, nor to Belgian architectural historiography.³⁹ The architecture of the fair is considered non-prolific and if any influence is to be noted, the resulting practices are to be avoided.⁴⁰ It follows the moralist modernist conviction in which a first analysis of the style is given by the influential art and design critic K.N. Elno: “Expo-Style is a polymorph but nevertheless no vague notion. If the word is used, one understands. Whether the word has a sarcastic or neutral sound, is always clear.”⁴¹ To Elno, the Expo Style embodied all things untrue to modern creativity. The style did not originate from the fair, but Expo 58 was its powerful catalyst, leaving the country in the early sixties with a modernist “hangover”. Elno summarised some of its features as parabolic, edgy or boomerang shapes, chromium, aluminium alloys, poisonous colours, gilded shields covering up for a weak temporality: “A spiritless interpretation of what is taught to be marking for the style of this time.” *Expo Style*, as an explicit reference to Expo 58, presented itself deliberately as a ‘Style,’ a contemporary fashion and therefore, to ‘true’ modernists, could never belong to modern architecture. Moreover, one of the main elements of the style – its primary concept – was the introduction of ornament in and on modern architecture, while, since Adolf Loos, “everyone knows that modern architecture is undecorated. This concept is the laymen’s recognition check: flat roof, big windows, no decoration. It is also one of the great seminal half-truths that have now become rules of design morality.”⁴² Attempts of a critic like Nikolaus Pevsner to weaken the idea of ornament being a threat to modern architecture and even to promote the use of contemporary fancy – “it is no more than spice added to a modern setting” – hardly found solid ground. To Pevsner, interpreting the educational viewpoint of the *Review*, ornament was inherent to popular taste and no professional designer had the ‘right’ to deprive the public from it: “All these objects of fancy have their *raison d’être*, and the problem is not to get rid of them, but to raise their aesthetic quality.”⁴³

A quick formal analyses of the pavilions in the Belgian Section brings to the front some constancies in the pavilions’ designs. They are conceived as large column-free spaces, sheds, which provide a free floor for the exhibitors. The demand for large spans provokes some architects to use structures more imaginatively, such as may be found in the prize winning pavilion of Transportation, the Marie Thumas pavilion, the I.B.M. pavilion, the Pavilion of Graphic Arts and Paper but even in the Pavilion of Gas, where the structural system is composed of metal scaffolding. Most structural systems are not hidden; some of them are accentuated in the facades. Playful awnings draw the attention of visitors and mark the entries to the pavilions (Jacques Pavilion, Pavilion of Foodstuffs, Pavilion of Metallurgy and Metallic Products, Pavilion of Chemical Industries), adjoined by rising signs as signal masts or flags (Eternit, Pavilion of Electrical Energy, Pavilion of Foodstuffs, Pavilion of Post and

Telecommunication, Palais of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi; also several foreign pavilions: Monaco, Turkey, the Netherlands–, Germany and Yugoslavia). The façades, often metal cladding with glass curtain wall, are decorated with neon signs (Pavilion of Electrical Energy, Commercial Section), abstract patterns (Pavilion of Finance, Credit and Savings, Meurisse Pavilion, Hungary Pavilion, Pavilion of Foodstuffs) or colourful shapes (Jacques Pavilion, Alimenta Pavilion, Pavilion of Gas, Pavilion of Glass, Ceramics and Terra-Cotta Industries). In some occasions, these decorations or the general shape of (parts of) the pavilion refers directly to the content of the pavilion: the electricity mast of Pavilion of Electrical Energy, the earth layers of the colonial Pavilion of Mines and Quarries, the giant bible of the International Bible Community Pavilion, the transistor shape of the M.B.L.E. pavilion, the gas container of the Pavilion of Petroleum, the Dexion Pavilion, or the giant paper sheet at the Pavilion of Graphic Arts and Paper. By the time the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fair was celebrated – and the denomination *Atomic Style* was officially launched – Pierre Loze summarized the elements of the style as “contrasts in materials not alluding to the architecture, but to the decoration. [... The Atomic Style] loves to show the tour-de-force the new materials are capable of and allows itself small architectural gestures which are unnecessary, but by which everyone is seduced.”⁴⁴ If the euphoria on the Atomic Style graphics – one should not underestimate the importance of the work of Lucien De Roeck, designer of the ‘Expo Star’ here – and architecture is blatant in the commemorative publication by Didier Pasamonik, the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of architectural magazine *A+* reveals little enthusiasm on the architectural merits of the fair. The architects interviewed refer to their expo-design as youthful indiscretions, labelling the *Robbedoes Style* as an “irresponsible architecture, for it is mere decorum. The extraordinary fact is that in Belgium, one actually succeeded in building such an architecture.”⁴⁵

Twenty-five years after the exhibition, the existence of a specific *Atomic Style* became more and more accepted, though the style was appreciated solely in innocent, nostalgic terms. It was not given thorough consideration until Lieven De Caeter interpreted the style as an embodiment of the fulfilled utopia of an affluent society.⁴⁶ The historiography of the 1951 *Festival Style* reveals a similar, if ultimately different dynamic. In his essay on the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1951 Festival of Britain, Reyner Banham deconstructed the style, ignoring its claims for novelty and Englishness: it was a myth, created by the spokespersons of the Council of Industrial Design and the ‘editorial We’ of *The Architectural Review*. Nevertheless, Banham succeeds in building a complex image of what was claimed to be the *Festival Style* and illuminated the different roots and motivations of the architecture at the *Festival*, which was, to Banham, nothing but a catching-up to post war modernism. His ideas

reappear more recently in Allan Powers' commentary, which stressed that, in spite of its human scale detailing and strive for levity, the South Bank architecture, as a call for "collective or symbolic content"⁴⁷ complies remarkably well with Giedion's 'Nine points on monumentality.' Both commemorative publications reveal a multilayered, though coherent image. The *Festival of Britain's* imagery reinforced the event as an important moment in the dissemination of modern architecture in Britain.

But if the idea of a *Festival Style* as a simplification of the architecture at the 1951 South Bank prevented a thorough evaluation of the site for several years – it was, for example, something to react against – the *Atomic Style* is more so a 'ghost' that encumbers a full evaluation of the architectural strategies to hand at the fair. This is more so the case in the Foreign Section, where architects like Sverre Fehn, Reima Pietilä or Egon Eiermann realized pavilions of high significance to their oeuvre, without addressing issues of popular taste or style, while the neighbouring pavilions of Edward Durell Stone and Ernesto Nathan Rogers simultaneously provided proof of the popular interpretations of popular taste and the means to deal with it in modern architecture. Nevertheless, the consistent use of bright coloured ornaments and lettering and whimsical detailing was a main attraction at the fair. If *Atomic Style* is to be defined as the ornamental add-ons to modern architecture for means of diversion or communication, it also illustrates the thin line between post war exhibition architecture and its commercial counterpart. The *Atomic Style* as manifest in details and decoration objects resulted in a style accessible to all and sundry and thus provided the public with a portable modernism, a means to redress the existing environment. Though it rarely happens that these vases, ceramic tiles, aluminium front doors etc. are directly traceable to the fair, they are commonly labelled as *Expo Style* and, today still, widespread throughout the country.⁴⁸ The survival (and revival) of this cheerful design and its perpetual reappearance on the streets and in interiors seems to endorse Pevsner's disbelief that "the common man was hostile to modern design. He went modern as lustily as Le Corbusier, but he went jazzy."⁴⁹

Jazz, googie and honky-tonk were precisely the vital elements discerned by Douglas Haskell in America's popular building in the year of the fair, resuming the old discussion on popular taste.⁵⁰ Haskell considers it a psychological task for the architect to meet the desire of the masses for more romance, decoration and the architectural counterpart of jazz.⁵¹ The thematic play of jazz was "more fun and better sense" and offered a potential "relief from its [modern architecture's] thin flat one-one-one-one rhythm."⁵² Haskell points at roadside architecture and New York's Times Square as potential sources for modern architecture: a mutual effort of rapprochement could take place as modern architecture is confronted with "the democratic wilderness."

Indeed, if one tries to evaluate the exhibition architecture of Expo 58, especially in the Belgian and Commercial Section, the ‘classic’ vocabulary and criteria of modern architecture – composition, orientation, use of structure, programme layout – is of little use. A more suitable vocabulary is to be found in the Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour analysis of the architecture along the Las Vegas Strip.⁵³ ‘Decorated Sheds’ (where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of the program, and ornament is applied independently of them) and ‘Ducks’ (where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form, following Peter Blake) are to be found all over the fair’s site. Though its mercantile character was tempered by the administration’s prescriptions, in spite of itself, it also promoted the decorated shed typology, leaving the architects little more to decide upon than the decoration of the façade and expression of the entrance in the most strictly regulated areas. Victor Mulpas defined the expo architects’ commission as involving no more “to cover a huge surface and express a publicity program right away.”⁵⁴ Contrary to the high humanist ideals of Expo 58, commercial demands and economical constraints dominated the design policy of most architects, complying with the demands of the exhibitors and building regulations. The fair could only be a laboratory for architectural experiment insofar as the administration’s rules, the client’s budget and judgment and the architect’s competence were up to it. Moreover, the most popular pavilions (those that received the most visitors) were not those of greater architectural interest.⁵⁵ The pragmatist attitude of the Belgian architects at the fair had led to an unplanned, but welcomed *rapprochement* with the public. The shed typology, decorated in *Atomic Style*, may be considered a modernist exhibition vernacular at Expo 58, a building type not questioned by its builders, but widely accepted, recognizable and gaily ‘friendly’ decorated. The theme varies in different ways: overall glazing, stilts, round corners, passerels, and so on; it ‘goes to town’ only on scarce occasions. The situation is not an exception on the fair ground. As Bekaert noted: “The modern architecture from the fifties is above all marked by a mediocrity, a correct, but little stimulating application of modern common place, a ‘no-nonsense’ architecture.”⁵⁶ The *Atomic Style* was an exquisite cover up.

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Abbreviations

C.I.A.M.: Congrès International des Architectes Modernes

FGS E58: Archival Fund Expo 58, Federal Government Service Economy, SMEs, Self-Employed and Energy [followed by preliminary number]

S.A.D.Br.: Société d'Architectes Diplômés de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles

S.C.A.B.: Société Centrale d'Architecture de Belgique

S.B.U.A.M.: Société Belge des Urbanistes et Architectes Modernistes

Endnotes

¹ Lors de la dernière réunion des C.I.A.M. belge, l'opinion fut unanime pour déclarer que l'EXPO 58 est un grand fiasco au point de vue architecture et que le plus bel ensemble sera "l'Ancienne Belgique."¹ "Activités C.I.A.M. belge," *Architecture* 22 (1957): 905. 'Old' or 'Merry' Belgium, as it was called, was a full-scale wood and plaster reproduction of an old Belgian city centre, housing mainly cafés and restaurants.

² The counting is based on a Belgian C.I.A.M. members list dating 1953, CIAM, *archival funds Bourgeois* coll. AAM. 10 out of 14 members were involved in Expo 58, including the members of the 'groupe des jeunes' the quota ends at 17 to 34.

³ Léon Stynen was president of the exhibition group 37 *Buildings and Dwellings*. At the time, he was president of the La Cambre institute (Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et des Arts Décoratifs). He assigned Charles Van Nueten, then (1955) his colleague at La Cambre, as architect for the pavilion. Josse Franssen, president of the exhibition class *Architecture* (37-1) and then president of the S.B.U.A.M was responsible for the display of the Belgian architects. Architects Albert Bontridder, Constantin Brodski, Peter Callebaut, Eliane Havenith, Lucien Kroll, Jean Stuyvaert, Jean Van Coppenolle and Paul-Emile Vincent were assigned as decorators in the pavilion of group 37. In letters to Lucien Cooremans, then alderman of public instruction and fine arts at the Brussels' city (Echevin de l'Instruction publique et des Beaux-Arts de la ville de Bruxelles), most probably in reaction to the appointment of Van Nueten, Louis Baes (1883-1961), a renown structural engineer and former teacher at the Brussels' Academy and the Université Libre de Bruxelles, and Léon Devos (1897-1974), the then director of the Academy, complained on the predominance of La Cambre and the Antwerp Institute (Nationaal Hoger Instituut van Bouwkunst en Stedenbouw te Antwerpen) over architects of the Brussels' Academy, in group 37. (Brussels: FGS E58 1.215.031.140) From the architects mentioned, only Josse Franssen was an Academy-trained architect, though he was teaching at La Cambre at the time he was appointed. In reaction, Stynen invited Joseph Van Neck (former director of the Academy) to join the group 37 committee and Bernard Augustin (professor at the Academy) to join the committee of class 37-1.

⁴ "Significatif de l'état actuel de l'architecture en Belgique. [...] L'accent sera mis sur les conceptions et les techniques d'avant-garde, dans la mesure où elles sont susceptibles de favoriser l'essor de la vie économique et sociale de notre Pays." Letter by Léon Stynen to the exhibitors of group 37, May 28th 1955. (Brussels: FGS E58 1.215.031.110)

⁵ Roger Thirion, editor of *Architecture*, referred to the model as "une fort intéressante maquette." R.T., 'Bruxelles 1958,' *Architecture* 15 (1955): 634.

⁶ "L'architecte ne cache pas sa déception de n'avoir pu réaliser son projet tel qu'il avait été conçu. La réalisation qui voici ne correspond pas du tout à ce qu'il avait désiré, pas plus que les matériaux qui lui furent imposés et qui, pour des raisons budgétaires, sont inférieurs à ceux que prévoyait son projet." Final remark in 'Le pavillon "édifices et habitations",' *La Maison* 7, 2^{me} numéro spécial consacré à l'exposition de Bruxelles 1958 (July-August 1958): 261.

⁷ K.N. Elno, 'Expo-stijl.' (1961) in *De Vorm der Dingen* (Hasselt: Heidelandt, 1965), pp. 112-115.

⁸ Didier Pasamonik, ed. *Expo 58 en de Atoomstijl* (Brussel/Kortrijk: Magic Strip/Albino, 1983), 127 p. One of the main exhibits on Expo 58 was the latest discoveries in nuclear energy. The atom became commonly known, the Atomium, a 156 billion times enlarged iron molecule, hosted the nuclear exhibits.

⁹ Looking merely at quantities, there exists a minor preponderance in architects trained at the Academy. The Academy devoted their annual journal almost entirely to Expo 58: *SADBr 1958* (Brussels: Siège de la Société. Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, (1958)), p. 201. In their book on the oeuvre of Jacques Dupuis, Cohen and Thomaes claim: 'La SCAB, la Société Centrale des Architectes Belges, coordonne les candidatures et, bien que tous les architectes puissent proposer leurs services, 90% des architectes sont originaires de Bruxelles.' Maurizio Cohen en Jan Thomaes, *Jacques Dupuis. L'Architecte* (Brussels: La Lettre Volée/ Communauté française de Belgique, 2000) p. 218.

¹⁰ Marcel Van Goethem (1900-1960) succeeded Paul Bonduelle (1877-1955) as chief architect of the fair after his decease. Jean Ado Balthus (1918-1990) assisted Van Goethem during the fair and supervised the liquidation of the architectural patrimony of the fair after Van Goethem's death. It was Balthus, the only 'younger' architect in the Technical Service, who edited the volume on architecture of Expo 58's memorial book. Ado Jean Balthus, ed. *L'Architecture, les jardins et l'éclairage*, vol. 4 (Brussels: Commissariat général du Gouvernement près l'Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles 1958, 1960), p. 196.

¹¹ Exhibition collectivities are exhibition groups of familiar industries, such as group 37, uniting the industries and societies of building and dwelling. The different groups (52) and classes are imposed by the B.I.E., the Bureau International des Expositions.

¹² Jean Hendrickx-van den Bosch (1890-1961), then former president of the S.C.A.B., studied at the Brussels' Academy.

¹³ "voorkomen dat dezelfde methodes van 1935 worden aangewend waardoor de Belgische Afdeling een zeer dispaaraat uitzicht bood. Ditmaal willen wij er volstrekt toe komen de bezoekers een Belgische Sectie aan te bieden waarin een absolute eenheid in conceptie het bijzonderste kenmerk is. Die eenheid moet, als wij ons zo mogen uitdrukken, 'in het oog springen.'" Jean Hendrickx-van den Bosch, 'In de Belgische Afdeling: Eenheid en Urbanisatie,' *Het Besteek 1. De Algemene Wereldtentoonstelling te Brussel maakt het besteek op* (Brussels: Directie der Public Relations van de Algemene Wereldtentoonstelling te Brussel 1958, 1956) p.48.

¹⁴ Architects were provided with the colour schemes, alphabet and proscriptions by the Technical Service. In the Commercial Section, firms which had a specific font in their logo (like Coca-Cola) were allowed to use their corporate font. (FGS E58)

¹⁵ Jean Hendrickx van den Bosch, 'L'Architecture: unité de style, servitudes et obligations.' in *Rapport de la réunion des présidents de groupe 17 avril 1956* (Brussels: Commissariat Général du Gouvernement. Section Belge, 1956), p. 2.

¹⁶ Noteworthy are the lanterns of the Colonial Section, which designed as distinctly 'African'. American designer Raymond Loewy drew the blue-yellow-red neon signposts used all over the fair's site. The Belgian firm Claude Paz Silva produced most of the lightning for the fair.

¹⁷ "Ces talents pourront d'ailleurs se manifester à l'intérieur des palais avec une liberté, une diversité et une fantaisie totales." Hendrickx van den Bosch, *Rapport de la réunion*, p. 2.

- ¹⁸ “La personnalité de l’architecte peut parfaitement s’inscrire dans un cadre urbanistique pour le plus grand honneur de l’architecture.” Marcel Van Goethem, ‘Lettre de M. Marcel Van Goethem au Président de la S.A.D.Br.’ in *SADBr 1958*, p. 8.
- ¹⁹ “De banaliteit van de Belgische architectuur in het internationale panorama wordt daar perfect gedemonstreerd.” Geert Bekaert, “Het alsof van de moderne architectuur.” in *1951-1991. Een tijdsbeeld* (Brussels: Paleis voor Schone Kunsten van Brussel, 1991) p. 79.
- ²⁰ Renaat Braem was editor of *Bouwen&Wonen*, *Architecture* was then edited by Roger Thirion. Both were members of the Belgian C.I.A.M. Braem was secretary to the committee of class 37-1 (Architecture) and had participated in the competition for the pavilion of Finance, Credits and Savings, won by Josse Franssen. Roger Thirion designed the main station for the Expo 58 chair-lift.
- ²¹ Geert Bekaert, ‘Operating Instructions for Architecture’ in Mil De Kooning, ed., *Horta and After. 25 Masters of Modern Architecture in Belgium* (Ghent: Ghent University, 1999), pp. 28-29.
- ²² Roger Thirion, ‘Situation 58,’ *Architecture* 25 (1958): 66.
- ²³ Little is known on this congress. It was held on December 12th, 1957 and themed three questions: 1. Is there a contemporary Belgian architecture and how is it related to the international currents?, 2. Leaving the Grand’Place, which are your impressions of modern Brussels? and 3. What should the politics of renovation be like? Speakers on the congress were Léon Stijnen, Augustin Bernard and Gaston Brunfaut, who all three made a negative report on the state of post war modern architecture in Belgium. The congress is reviewed by Emiel Bergen, ‘Waarheen gaat de Belgische Bouwkunst?’ *Bouwen&Wonen* 1 (January 1958): 19.
- ²⁴ Renaat Braem, ‘Goede wil is niet goed genoeg of de boom der kennis geplant in dorre grond ...,’ *Bouwen&Wonen* 2 (February 1959): 59-60. Gaston Brunfaut, ‘Mesure d’une exposition’ *Rythme* 26 (January 1959): 2-3. Jean-Pierre Blondel, ‘Architecture Exposition Urbanisme,’ *Rythme* 26 (January 1959): 14-15. The young architects’ trio Blondel, Odette Filippone and Lucien-Jacques built the 3 successful pavilions for Expo 58 and participated in over 17 architectural competitions for the fair.
- ²⁵ As an editor Pierre-Louis Flouquet (painter, poet, writer and editor, 1900-1967) devoted two special issues of the magazine *La Maison* to the architecture of Expo 58: *La Maison* 6 (June - July 1958) on the Foreign Section and *La Maison* 7 (July-August 1958) on the Belgian Section. The project descriptions are factual but of high informative value. Flouquet’s ‘Propos d’un flaneur’ in both issue offers the most lengthy and shaded criticism in Belgian architectural press on Expo 58.
- ²⁶ Blondel, ‘Architecture Exposition Urbanisme,’ p. 14.
- ²⁷ *The Architectural Review* 739 (v. 124, August 1958), *Architectural Forum* 6 (v. 108, June 1958) and *Architectural Record* 6 (v. 123, June 1958).
- ²⁸ “Jamais au cours de nos sondages nous avons rencontré une telle quasi-unanimité” Guillaume and Eliane Jacquemyns, *L’Exposition de 1958. Son succès auprès des Belges. Opinions et vœux des visiteurs* (Brussels: Inscop 1&2, 1959), p. 31.
- ²⁹ “Le public lui-même, après le premier choc, paraît se familiariser un peu avec les formes architecturales nouvelles et prendre plaisir à contempler certaines perspectives hérissées et polychromées, dont le lyrisme particulier semble périlleux aux hommes de gout.” Pierre-Louis Flouquet, “De l’ambiance de l’exposition et de quelques autres aspects. Propos d’un flaneur,” *La Maison* 7 (July-August 1958): 205.
- ³⁰ Siegfried Giedion, ‘The Great Exhibitions,’ *Space, Time, Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969, 6th ed.): 241-277.
- ³¹ James Maude Richards, ‘Expo 58,’ *The Architectural Review* 739 (v. 124, August 1958): 75.
- ³² Classes of the La Cambre school have visited the 1951 South Bank Exhibition of Festival of Britain (Lucien-Jacques Baucher in conversation with the author, winter 2003)
- ³³ James Maude Richards, ‘In defence of the cliché,’ *The Architectural Review* 680, v. 114 (August 1953): 75.
- ³⁴ “On se demande, après avoir passé en revue ces bâtiments “importants”, si le gout belge supporte la vraie simplicité, une simplicité aristocratique faite de finesse et de légèreté, opposée à la lourdeur, à l’opacité, à la vulgaire abondance.”
- ³⁵ Renaat Braem, ‘Staande tegenover 58, nogmaals, waarheen?’ and ‘10 commandements pour une architecture,’ *Bouwen&Wonen* 1 (January 1958): 20-22.
- ³⁶ Renaat Braem, ‘Goede wil is niet goed genoeg,’ p. 60.
- ³⁷ Mary Mix Foley, ‘The Debacle of Public Taste,’ *Architectural Forum* 2, V. 106 (February 1957): 140-145, 238, 240, 242. See also ‘Man Made America. Reply to the magazine of building,’ *The Architectural Review* 658, v. 110 (October 1951): 217-220.
- ³⁸ “Faut-il craindre de voir surgir un “style” Exposition 1958 dont la formule serait exploitée par les médiocres, lesquels y verraient une nouvelle expression d’architecture pittoresque?” Pierre-Louis Flouquet, “De l’ambiance de l’exposition et de quelques autres aspects. Propos d’un flaneur,” *La Maison* 7 (July-August 1958): 224.
- ³⁹ Only recently “Expo Style” popped up in the ‘official’ historiography on Belgian architecture, Thomas Coomans, ‘Wereldtentoonstellingen.’ in Anne Van Loo, ed., *Repertorium van de Architectuur in België. Van 1830 tot beden* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2003), p. 576.
- ⁴⁰ “Weliswaar heeft die populariteit van de architectuur in 1958 niet alleen maar gelukkige gevolgen gehad; we hoeven hier enkel te wijzen op de talrijke dancings, garages, werkplaatsen, restaurants die als paddestoelen langs de autowegen uit de grond zijn gerezen, voorzien van twijfelachtige structuren in gelijmd hout ...” Pierre Puttemans, *Moderne bouwkunst in België* (Brussel: Vokaer, 1975) p. 160 and “De enige invloed die van de Expo op de Belgische architectuur is uitgegaan, schijnt geweest te zijn, dat juist die architecten zich erdoor geruggesteund voelen die moderne architecture al een handig modeverschijnsel exploiteerde. Indien een generatie beschouwd moet worden als “een antwoord op een uitdaging,” is de naoorlogde generatie voor een goed deel een verloren generatie geweest.” Geert Bekaert and Francis Strauven, *Bouwen in België* (Brussels: Nationale Confederatie van het Bouwbedrijf, 1971), pp.
- ⁴¹ “Expo-stijl is een polymorf maar toch geen vaag begrip. Als het woord valt, verstaat men elkaar. Of het woord een al sarkastische of neutrale klank heeft, steeds is het duidelijk.” K.N. Elno, ‘Expo-stijl,’ p. 113.
- ⁴² Reyner Banham, ‘Ornament and Crime,’ *The Architectural Review* 721, v. 121 (February 1957): 85-88.
- ⁴³ Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘Postscript’ in Michael Farr, *Design in British Industry. A mid-century survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 319.

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- ⁴⁴ Pierre Loze, 'Architectuur 58. Het 'Chique' en het 'Kitcherige.'" in Didier Pasamonik, ed. *Expo 58 en de Atoomstijl* (Brussel/Kortrijk: Magic Strip/Albino, 1983), pp. 15-16.
- ⁴⁵ Constantijn Brodzki interviewed by Pierre Loze, *A+ 82* (May-June 1983): 14. Robbedoes was a Belgian cartoon set in a fifties decor.
- ⁴⁶ Lieven De Cauter, 'De panoramische extase. Over wereldtentoonstellingen en de desintegratie van de voorstelling,' *Archeologie van de Kick. Verhalen over Moderniteit en Ervaring* (Amsterdam/Leuven: De Balie/Halewijnck, 1995) p. 144.
- ⁴⁷ Allan Powers, 'The Expression of Levity' in Elain Harwood and Allan Powers, *Festival of Britain* (London: The Journal of the Twentieth Century Society, Twentieth Century Architecture 5, 2001), p. 54.
- ⁴⁸ The same goes for the pavilions: though several pavilions of the fair have been reconstructed in Belgium and abroad, it often happens that sport halls, schools, community centres are remembered as 'stemming from the fair,' while in fact they were designed on the spot, in the late fifties-early sixties.
- ⁴⁹ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Postscript,' pp. 318-319.
- ⁵⁰ Douglas Haskell, 'Architecture and popular taste,' *Architectural Forum* 2, v. 111 (August 1958): 105-109. Haskell explicitly refers to the *The Architectural Review* ('draftsmen') and their dismay for American popular architecture
- ⁵¹ Karina Van Herck, 'Architectuur en het volk: van 'das Leben der Masse' tot 'honky-tonk,' Hilde Heynen, André Loeckx, Lieven De Cauter en Karina Van Herck, eds. *Dat is architectuur' Sleutelteksten uit de twintigste eeuw* (Rotterdam: 010, 2001), p. 864.
- ⁵² Douglas Haskell, 'Jazz in architecture. It makes more fun and better sense,' *Architectural Forum* 3, v. 113 (September 1960): 110.
- ⁵³ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989), p. 192.
- ⁵⁴ "Een grote oppervlakte bebouwen en meteen een publiciteitesprogramma uitdrukken.' Victor Mulpas interviewed by Pierre Loze, *A+ 82* (May-June 1983): 19. Mulpas designed the Solvay pavilion. He collaborated with André on the interior of the Palace of Science.
- ⁵⁵ For example, only 27,4% visited the Philips pavilion, 54.1% visited the pavilion of Belgian Food Industries. See Guillaume and Eliane Jacquemyns, *L'Exposition de 1958*, p. 51.
- ⁵⁶ "De moderne architectuur uit de jaren 50 is in de eerste plaats gekenmerkt door middelmatigheid, een correcte, maar weinig stimulerende toepassing van de moderne gemeenplaatsen, een 'no-nonsense' architectuur." Geert Bekaert, "Het alsof van de moderne architectuur," p. 79.