THE RISE OF A SMALL CULTURAL CAPITAL?
BRUSSELS AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Laurence BROGNIER (literature)
Tatiana DEBROUX (geography)
Judith LE MAIRE (architecture)
Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
E-mail: tdebroux@ulb.ac.be

ACLA meeting 2014
New York University, March 21
ANVERS OU BRUXELLES ?

ÉTUDE
SUR L'ORIGINE DES ÉCOLES D'ART EN BELGIQUE
ET SUIV.
L'ÉVOLUTION DES ARTISTES BELGES
VERS LES MILIEUX NATIONAUX

PAR
A.-J. WAUTERS
Critique d'art de la Gazette
Professeur d'histoire de l'art aux Cours supérieurs pour dames

LETtre AU «PRÉCURSEUR » D'ANVERS

BRUXELLES
LIBRAIRIE EUROPÉENNE C. KUIKHORST
MESTUANT & FALE, ÉDITEURS
15-20 RUE DES PAROISSIENS
MÊME MAISON À LEIPZIG
“Need I conclude that the situation will be the same as long as Brussels remains the capital and keeps advantages that result from that status? As long as it is the Belgian city that talks the most, prints the most, has the most movement, commotion, light, anger and pleasure? As long as it remains the city where the powerful convene?”

A.J. Wauters, 1883
1. Brussels as a cultural capital at the end of the 19th century – elements for a synoptic analysis
LE MONT DES ARTS: an urban development opposing State and the City with the construction of a new "cultural quarter"

Project of museum complex « Mont des Arts » in 1858 by Louis De Curte, including a Centre for Fine Arts and a shopping mall
1.1. Where the powerful convene

Convention map of the scenic easements (« servitude panoramique ») for the Mont des Arts, 1904
1.1. Where the powerful convene

Final appearance of the Mont des Arts, ca. 1900
1.1. Where the powerful convene

- SOCIAL & FUNCTIONAL CONCENTRATIONS: Upper Brussels vs. industrial downtown

Structural elements built during King Leopold II’s reign

Map of the industries of Brussels (1910)
1.1. Where the powerful convene

- ART NOUVEAU: a new architecture for an enlightened bourgeoisie
1.1. Where the powerful convene

- Paul Otlet’s mansion, with an artist’s house integrated in the plans

  - Paul Otlet, lawyer, was the founder of a universal bibliography (1895) based on DCU, Decimal Universal Classification

  - He asked the architect O. van Rysselberghe to build an Art Nouveau house that Henry Van De Velde decorated with an artist's studio.
1.2. The city that has the most commotion

A GROWING CITY: more people, more clients, more artists

- Population
- Visual artists

Maps showing population growth and distribution from 1846 to 1900.
1.2. The city that has the most commotion

- ANNA BOCH (1848-1936): art patron and artist, and engine of Brussels’ cultural life

Theo Van Rysselberghe, *Anna Boch in her studio*, 1893
1.3. The city that has the most movement

- A WELL-CONNECTED CAPITAL: Brussels as the core of the Belgian and European railways

Map & tables: Bradshaw, 1913
1.4. The city that talks the most

- LES XX AND LA LIBRE ESTHETIQUE (1883-1914): fostering modernity, artistic interdisciplinarity and internationalisation in Brussels

Theo Van Rysselberghe, *La Lecture*, 1903

Theo Van Rysselberghe’s section at the Salon of la Libre Esthétique, 1904
Local and foreign artists showing at Les XX’s exhibitions (Data: exhibition catalogs, 1884-1893)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibiting artists' main address</th>
<th>BELGIUM</th>
<th>FOREIGN COUNTRIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brussels</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>131</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“For a single visit to Les XX’s salons, I travel willingly each year to Belgium; (...) what we learn during this visit can save us longer journeys to the countries of innovators in decorative arts – England, Scotland, Sweden, Norway or Finland. We do not have anything similar in Paris.”

Octave Uzanne, L’Echo de Paris, 1899
“It is through Belgium that thousands of art’s beauties arrive, that would never reach France otherwise. It has often been said that Brussels only accepts that which comes from Paris; but today one might say, with a nuance of paradox that Paris only adopt that which comes from Brussels. The Belgians, it must be admitted, have often set our trends... For the past ten years we have turned to Belgium to seek news on the spirit of the North.”

Lecture of Maurice Barrès, “The Belgians and the trends of tomorrow”, 1894

1.4. The city that talks the most

La Libre Esthétique
Poster by Theo Van Rysselberghe

Chez Anna Boch, in Bruxelles, Caligula directed by Vincent d'Indy, in the presence of Gabriel Fauré and d'Octave Maus

Gisbert Combaz, Invitation to the performances and exhibitions at the Maison d'art
1.4. The city that talks the most

- Henry Van de Velde, Villa Bloemenwerf (1895): manifesto of his ideas

The Bloemenwerf, “where a couple “can create for itself” a free live, above vulgarity and social injustice, sheltered from the offences of ugliness”

Bing, L’Art Nouveau (Paris)

Meier-Grafe, La Maison moderne (Paris)
1.4. The city that talks the most

- LA MAISON DU PEUPLE: a house “of the people” by Victor Horta
“All light and strength, – from the four corners of the horizon – open and inundated with sunlight, reposing upon an iron musculature from which it rises, indestructible, the new Maison du Peuple faces the capital which it dominates, like the future it evokes. From the height of its terrace, the monuments of the low city seem to gather at its feet.”

From Le Peuple, 1899
1.5. The city that prints the most

- **BRUSSELS’ PREEMINENCE IN PRINTING: literary journals**

  Literary journals published by city (1830 to end 20th c.)

  - Bruxelles (Brussels) 73%
  - Liège 14%
  - Gand 4%
  - Anvers (Antwerp) 5%
  - Charleroi 2%
  - Mons 2%

  Data: Aron & Soucy, 1998

- *L’Art Moderne*, echo chamber for the avant-gardes (Les XX)
1.5. The city that prints the most

- BOOKSELLERS & PUBLISHERS

The map shows the locations of booksellers and publishers in the city during the year 1860. Notable bookshops include Kistemaeckers, Lacomblez, and Deman.
1.5. The city that prints the most

EDMOND DEMAN

Deman and his colleagues in the room with Van de Velde’s lamps

Léon SPILLIAERT, Portrait of Emille Verhaeren, Edmond Deman and Léon Spilliaert, 1908
1.6. The city that has the most pleasure

- **LA MONNAIE**: main setting for aesthetic debates on Wagner’s music

Brussels’ opera house (*Théâtre de la Monnaie*), ca. 1910

Façade elements celebrating R. Wagner (Saint Gilles)
1.6. The city that has the most pleasure

- A PLEASANT NEIGHBORHOOD AROUND LA MONNAIE

Entertainment venues around the opera house and boulevards (1895-1925)

A. Lynen, The singing café (Le café chantant), 1896
1.7. The city that has the most light

- CITY LIGHTS: street lighting marking the night life

“The streets are poorly lit in the evening; the square is black, the avenues deserted. All living things in Brussels take refuge on the square of the Monnaie and in the galeries Saint-Hubert.”

Huysmans, *Notebook*, 1876, p.4

Walckiers, *Rue Royale*, undated

Degouve de Nuncques, *Nocturne au Parc royal de Bruxelles*, 1897
“Here and there, in the evening, from the storefronts, taverns and restaurants, light shines onto the sidewalks, the rooflines stand out in shadow. It seems as though two cities have been superimposed. The first is turbulent, eccentric, full of joy, the other is wild and elusive (…).”

Nizet, *Brussels is laughing*, 1883, p.49

Charles Hermans, *At dawn*, 1875
Paul Otlet was a pacifist who created the idea for the United Nations with H. La Fontaine, Belgian Nobel Prize for Peace, 1913.

He believed that knowledge is the foundation of peace.

He created a universal bibliography system permits renders printed, photographic, filmed knowledge accessible to all.

His invention is now recognized as the ancestor of Google.
1.7. The city that has the most light

Paul Otlet design schemes showing Brussels as the center of European capitals London, Paris, Cologne and Amsterdam, a center radiating the world.

Le Corbusier designed for him a Mondial City for the Unit Nations and the Global bibliography. But Geneva won out over Brussels.
2. Cultural capital? – Attempts at a definition
2.1. Literature: authors from diverse scientific fields

- Pascale CASANOVA, *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999) (literary studies)
  - Autonomy of fields
  - Specialization
  - The culture capital

- Comparative dimension
  - In geographic terms
  - In terms of cultural productions
  - In historic terms

- A flexible criteriology

- Definition: the cultural capital and the « capital effect »
Boris GRESILLON, *Berlin, métropole culturelle (2002)* (geography)

- Cultural innovation and artistic experimentation
- Cultural diversity, within and between disciplines
- Variety of geographical spaces likely to be invested by the culture
- Transformative capacity of cities, or a potential for change
- Ability to integrate and host foreigners, not without tensions
- International reputation and attractiveness for foreign artists
- Good governance and political support to culture
- Cities that never sleep – constant activity, 24 hours a day.
2.2. Comprehensive proposal for a definition of cultural capital

Taking into account different perspectives:

- Importance of the explanatory factors
- Changing scales
- Interdisciplinary approach (2 ways)
- Symbolic and material dimensions

What makes a cultural capital? Criteria

- Material facts
- Symbolic facts

Consequences of being a cultural capital

Geographical  Political  Socio-economical factors
What makes a cultural capital? Criteria

Material facts

- Collusion of political, economical and cultural elites; enlightened art consumers as intermediaries *(Art nouveau)*
- Concentration of actors and resources (schools, publishers, circles, etc.)
- Multilingualism *(Van de Velde)*; multiculturalism
- Multidisciplinary art field; cultural crossroads
- Growing number of consecrating institutions *(circles, societies, etc.)*

Symbolic facts

- Flemish exoticism; “Belgian soul” *(literature)*
- Competition between actors; intellectual dynamism

Consequences of being a cultural capital

- Attractivity of the city for “intermediary consecration”
- Centrifugal and centripetal movements (exporting models)
- Centre for innovation; modernity
- City renovation/restoration & development (public and private)