
H-France Review Vol. 18 (February 2018), No. 40

Alec Forshaw, *Brussels Art Nouveau: Architecture & Design*. Norwich: Unicorn Press, 2017. 224 pp. Color plates, maps, index. \$37.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-910065-47-1.

Review by Amy F. Ogata, University of Southern California.

Brussels, the capital city of Belgium, is notoriously hard to love. Known as a shorthand term for the bureaucratic operations of the European Community or the intractable Belgian political impasse, both of which are headquartered in the city, Brussels is less often understood as a center of art and architecture, much less urban planning. Step off the fast train between Amsterdam and Paris, walk around the immediate area of the angular Victor Horta-designed central station, and one encounters the unlovely evidence of a brutal campaign of postwar urban renewal, derisively known as Brusselisation. But venturing away from the touristy Grand-Place to explore the largely intact neighborhoods that radiate beyond the heart-shaped central city one finds the impressive panorama of Brussels's once-faded turn-of-the-century glory is again on full display.

Alec Forshaw's *Brussels Art Nouveau: Architecture & Design*, a travel guide intended for Anglophone visitors on foot or tram, is the right companion for this trek. Sized to have in-hand, and designed for discrete walks around Brussels's Art Nouveau neighborhoods, the book is organized geographically with maps and color photographs that will help both a novice and a specialist navigate unfamiliar areas of the city. This is an architectural guide in the tradition of Nikolaus Pevsner's *Buildings of England* series. That is to say, it is intended for an architecture enthusiast who already knows the difference between a mansard and a bay, *sgraffito* and hipped dormers, whose interest in the deep historical context is less important than the encounter with the formal visual characteristics of buildings conveyed in an authoritative and opinionated voice.

Given the general audience intended for this book, it is not surprising that Forshaw presents a familiar image of Art Nouveau as urban and idiosyncratic. Key buildings such as Horta's lavish Hôtel Solvay, Hôtel Tassel, and Hôtel van Eetvelde as well as Paul Hankar's more middle-class house-studio structures for himself and his artist friends are given due attention. The hybridity of the house and workplace is a theme that Forshaw notes without elaboration, but the keen reader and viewer will observe how the massing of the facades reflects domestic, artistic and business activities; the administration of King Léopold's vast colonial territory, the Congo Free State, was conducted at least in part in Edmond van Eetvelde's sumptuous two-parcel mansion near the Square Ambiorix. While domestic architecture is the main subject, and the individual house rather than the apartment is a Brussels tradition, Forshaw includes several commercial buildings, many now museums or still serving as public cafes and restaurants. He is also careful to mention buildings long disappeared from the city, such as Horta's famous Maison du Peuple, but also Paul Hermanus's grand house for the painter Anna Boch.

Area 8, although it appears later in the book than one might expect, is the central focus for many of the itineraries. For in this wedge, between the Chaussée de Charleroi and the Avenue Louise, is the Maison-Atelier Horta, the architect's own house and studio, a public museum on the rue Américaine, which as

Forshaw rightly claims is the “most famous and most visited Art Nouveau building in Brussels” (p. 141). The Horta museum is in many ways the center of Brussels Art Nouveau tourism, therefore beginning a walking tour from here is practical. Yet to see Art Nouveau only as Horta-defined is to miss many wonderful buildings that look nothing like his. One merit of Forshaw’s itinerary is to take the visitor beyond the well-trod areas of the city into neighborhoods such as Schaerbeek and to showcase lesser-known architects who were active in the same milieu as Horta and Hankar. For example, Henri Jacobs’s brick apartment designs for working-class housing with their emphasis on hygiene and moral rectitude is given textual prominence on the facade of 53-59 rue Victor Hugo and rendered in conventionally Art Nouveau letterforms.

Details like these, such as colorful bands of brick or blue stone, letterboxes, boot scrapers, metalwork grills, balconies, *sgraffito* (the application of colored plaster as graphic decoration to the facade) play a significant role in what Forshaw deems “Art Nouveau” architecture and design. What precisely constitutes the term “Art Nouveau” is not clear. In the introduction, the author claims Art Nouveau as a movement rather than a style (a longstanding and somewhat unresolved issue among scholars), yet most of the information that Forshaw picks out for the reader/viewer to linger on is about style, and references to “pure” examples of Art Nouveau (p. 71) suggest that Art Nouveau style is indeed the center of Forshaw’s attention. This casual reading of the streetscape may be productive enough for the general tourist. The architectural historian, however, will regret the fact that there are no plans or historic photographs included in the guide, as well as the lack of serious comment on the city’s urbanistic development, the ways that “Art Nouveau” changes between the 1890s and 1911, or how the training, business interests, political, fraternal or religious allegiances of architects or clients may have informed their choices. Moreover, the emphasis on Art Nouveau also isolates buildings and neighborhoods from important landmarks such as Jean Baes’s Flemish Renaissance Revival theater, Joseph Poelaert’s bombastic Beaux-Arts Palais de Justice or Joseph Diongre’s modernist Maison de la Radio building at Place Flagey in Ixelles. To be fair, Forshaw makes references to some of these buildings and architects in the slight and highly formulaic biographies that are pulled out from the main text, but they are not discussed as part of the urban or social development of Brussels.

This is not a scholarly book and its limitations are evident. The bibliography is highly incomplete with mostly outdated references that have little to do with Belgium in particular. Since one of the hallmarks of Art Nouveau is the coordination between architecture and interior, the listless and minimal discussion of interiors is disappointing and in some cases misleading. In a description of the important Hôtel Hannon, Forshaw claims that Hannon commissioned “marble” from Émile Gallé, perhaps conflating marble with *meuble* (furniture). Gallé who was known for his exceptional glasswork and ceramics, also gained renown for his fanciful modernizations of eighteenth-century-style marquetry furniture. For Edouard Hannon, he furnished an entire smoking room off the main hall in his umbrella suite. This room, memorialized in a period photograph, shows Gallé’s furniture designs in situ, and perched on a high table, is his celebrated dragonfly vase, now at the Corning Museum of Glass.

Forshaw claims his guide is “the first comprehensive guide to Art Nouveau in Brussels” (p. 16). It isn’t. The Belgian non-profit Archives d’architecture moderne has published a guide to Brussels Art Nouveau by the eminent Maurice Culot (2015) in addition to the thorough guide to nineteenth-century and Art Nouveau Brussels architecture by Pierre Loze with Dominique Vautier and Marina Festre (c.1990). What Forshaw’s guide documents, in English, is the effect of a massive preservation effort begun in the late 1990s that has returned many once-threatened and decrepit buildings to a robust and photogenic state.

In Brussels preservation-mindedness arrived late and capriciously. The infamous demolition of Victor Horta’s c.1897 socialist headquarters, called the Maison du Peuple, in 1965 drew international attention and outcry, but several decades of neglect, haphazard development and antipathy toward the individualized wriggly forms of Art Nouveau nonetheless ensued. With the millennial celebrations and designation of Brussels as a European Capital of Culture in 2000, and World Heritage Monuments

designations for its most famous sites, its Art Nouveau architecture began to reemerge cleaned up and ready for viewing. Forshaw's book is conclusive evidence that Art Nouveau is now firmly part of the *patrimoine*, the cultural heritage of the city and the state, and perhaps more significantly, the international tourist industry that has developed around Art Nouveau.

Amy F. Ogata
University of Southern California
amyogata@usc.edu

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172