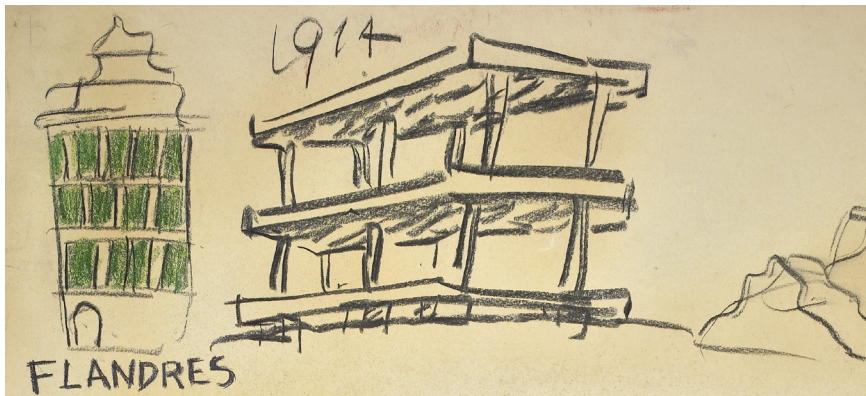# The Tenement of the Purest Form
Christophe Van Gerrewey

Le Corbusier. *Flandres 1914*, 1930. Fondation Le Corbusier/ProLitteris, Zürich, 2022.

In the summer of 1914, Marguerite Yourcenar, born in 1903 in Brussels, was staying with her father at the seaside when the First World War broke out. She later recalled:

> Was it on that morning or the next that we heard the alarm bells of war pealing out across the countryside, from the villages of French Flanders to those of Belgian Flanders, like a kind of sonorous epidemic? What prevailed over all was the vast magma of fear and spinelessness that always appears on the eve of catastrophes. People hunched over their morning newspaper, cup of coffee in hand, avidly drank in that news, just as people today soak up the news that streams from the media concerning the atomic bomb or the pollution that will someday kill them. … One fact, though, was comforting: huge steel monsters loomed in the August mist a few yards offshore. There was a feeling of security—England was watching over us. It didn't occur to anyone that when the first vanguard of German troops arrived, the entire coast would be trapped in the crossfire.[01]

Following increasing conflicts between the European power blocks, Germany wanted to attack France, and requested a hassle-free passage through Belgium. King Albert I couldn't allow that, despite the disadvantage of his troops, and on August 4, soldiers crossed the border near Aachen. Whether the crimes committed by the Germans—"obsessed by the goal of 'intimidating' the Belgians into giving up their stupid and futile resistance,"[02] as Barbara Tuchman wrote—were exaggerated in the foreign press, in a period when almost the entire world seemed to fall prey to propaganda, nationalism, and polarization, remains a point of contention among historians. In 1918 American artist George Bellows made his *War Series*, consisting of five paintings, and the largest works he ever completed. Horrifically realistic canvases such as *Massacre at Dinant*, *The Barricade*, and *The Germans Arrive* portrayed the invaders acting as barbarians on Belgian soil: it was the artist's intention to visually urge the

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01   Marguerite Yourcenar, *Quoi? L'éternité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 264–265. A translation, unfortunately unpublished, of this book was made by Maria Asscher. The author would like to thank her for sharing this fragment.

02   Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 201. See also Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Jeff Lipkes, *Rehearsals: The German Army in Belgium, August 1914* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007).

United States to interfere more aggressively in the war.[03] A more nuanced rendering, depicting the patriotic but futile and not very surefooted resistance of the Belgian army, can be found in two paintings made in 1914 by the German-born British artist Walter Richard Sickert, who was living in northern France when the war broke out: *Soldiers of King Albert at the Ready* and *The Integrity of Belgium*.

Walter Richard Sickert. *The Integrity of Belgium*, 1914.
Crown Copyright, UK Government Art Collection.

These images were also produced to convince the British to help the poor Belgians, and Sickert put a lot of effort into making lifelike paintings, even borrowing uniforms from wounded soldiers in a hospital. "One has a kind of distaste for using misfortunes to further one's own ends," he wrote in a letter, objecting that "if military painters had always been too bloody delicate, they would never have got anything done at all."[04]

In *The Integrity of Belgium*, the landscape is light: the war started at the height of the summer, and the crops are either titian and sun-dabbled, or pastel blue, reflecting the airspace soon to be involved in the war. However, the kneeling soldier in the center of the painting is completely shrouded in shadows; in his gloved hands he holds binoculars, trying to figure out what will happen, and like almost everyone else at that moment, possibly assuming that the war will be over soon. There are a few small buildings in the top right corner, almost the same, curiously enough, as in Bellow's Belgian paintings four years later: single, pale, lonely houses—very modest farms—with a gabled roof or a stepped gable. During the First World War, about 25,000 homes and other buildings in Belgium were destroyed. The most well-known example was the burning of the University Library of

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03   Margaret R. Higonnet, "Child Witnesses: The Cases of World War I and Darfur," *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1565–1576.
04   Quoted in Richard Cork, *A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 59.

the Catholic University of Leuven, leading to the destruction of 230,000 books.[05] Together with the cost of lives and the 1.5 million Belgians fleeing from the invading army, this destruction brought about immense pity in the Western World.[06]

One architect who didn't remain unmoved was Le Corbusier. He was, however, among those who welcomed the war because of the electroshocks it could give to a European culture and architecture that had run out of steam—or, rather, that was not able to adapt and innovate using the possibilities offered by technological innovations and the Industrial Revolution. "We are at a turning point for architecture," he wrote in a letter on September 15, 1914. "The engineers have done everything … but the shoulder bump is given in 1914."[07] He conceived his Maison Dom-ino between 1914 and 1915 to help reconstruct Belgium and Flanders, but it was also inspired, according to the architect's account, by vernacular buildings from that region. Maison Dom-ino is considered Le Corbusier's prototype for all modern and industrialized architecture: a model, not unlike Marc-Antoine Laugier's *cabane primitive* from 1755, that could liberate architecture (and housing in particular) from all redundancies, could be repeated ad infinitum, and was easy and cheap to construct. Its name alludes to *domus*, the Latin word for house, but also to the tile-based game commonly known as dominoes—not because of the toppling during a domino run, but because the units can be realigned and combined differently. Each unit consists of three concrete parallel slabs supported by a few perpendicular columns, raised from the ground on six equidistant footings, and with a set of stairs on one side of the open floor plan. "Two engineers, Max Du Bois and Juste Schneider were responsible for finding the method of construction and making the necessary calculations," as Eleanor Gregh has brought to light.[08] The architect did his best to disguise their input; this is how he looked back in 1930 on his invention, in the book *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*:

> At the moment of the first destructions in Flanders in 1914, I had had a sort of clairvoyant vision of the problems of contemporary housing. … Reconstruction would not take longer than six months. After which, life would go back to normal! … I study the famous old houses of the architecture of Flanders; I draw them schematically; I discover that they are glass houses: fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth century. Then I imagine this: a construction firm will pour, without formwork but by means of ingenious site machinery, the framework of a house of six columns, three floor slabs, and the staircase. The dimensions: 6 x 9 meters. … I tried innumerable combinations of plans within these structural frameworks. Everything was possible.[09]

The reference to "the famous old houses of the architecture of Flanders"—turning Maison Dom-ino into a site-specific intervention—is somewhat puzzling. Le Corbusier studied the history of European cities when he was working on an unpublished treatise entitled *La Construction des villes* in the years leading up to the war.[10] Equally, in *Précisions* from 1930, he wrote about his "prosaic affirmation" that (his emphasis) "*architecture consists of lighted floors*," giving of course an enormous importance to windows, or rather to glazed facades.[11] The *façade libre* is a principle that he claims to have discovered in the history of premodern, vernacular

05   Jan Van Impe, *The University Library of Leuven: The Story of a Phoenix* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006).

06   Preeta Nilesh, "Belgian Neutrality and the First World War: Some Insights," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 75 (2014): 1015.

07   Quoted in Eleanor Gregh, "The Dom-ino Idea," *Oppositions*, nos. 15–16 (1979): 81.

08   Gregh, "The Dom-ino Idea," 66. See also Joyce Lowman, "Corb as Structural Rationalist: The Formative Influence of the Engineer Max Du Bois," *Architectural Review* 160, no. 956 (1976): 229–233.

09   Le Corbusier, *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*, trans. Edith Schreiber-Aujame (Zurich: Park Books, 2015), 92–93.

10   Christoph Schnoor, *Le Corbusier's Practical Aesthetic of the City: The Treatise "La Construction des Villes" of 1910/11* (London: Routledge, 2020).

11   Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, 50.

architecture in Flanders: "when the Middle Ages built their little wooden houses overhanging the narrow streets, they *glazed all they could*, using all the resources of wood. And this was even so convincing that the skillful Flemish of Ghent, of Louvain, of the Grande Place of Brussels, on the basis of that tradition, made the miraculous glass façades with stone stiles that we still admire."[12] Like most architects, Le Corbusier was a rather unreliable historian, cherry-picking the past. It is true that in the Low Countries—present-day Belgium and the Netherlands—prior to the fifteenth century, a type of house can be discerned, with a skeleton in wood and with modulated rooms.[13] The parcels on which they were built were narrow and deep; the facade facing the street and the framework that punctuated the depth of the building consisted of spans of approximately 1.25 and 2.5 meters. These houses were, however, terraced: they stood next to each other in a row, so that only the narrow facade (and not the very long side walls) could be glazed. Specimens of this type can be perceived in the Annunciation scene of the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, completed in 1432 by the brothers Van Eyck, and showing "a street composed entirely of distinctly individual houses, each with its own ridge roof," as Francis Strauven has described it.[14] The wall, though maligned by Le Corbusier, was an indispensable, curtailing, and determining element in this kind of house: the adjoining walls, as well as the numerous solid parts of the facades, were filled, in between the wooden frame, with clay and lime. For safety reasons, this filling was replaced from the sixteenth century onward by brick, and then abandoned in favor of a party wall, shared by two adjacent houses, in masonry. Spiral stairs were positioned in between the beams, placed in a separate volume outside at the back, or built in an elongated corridor on the left or right side of the parcel.
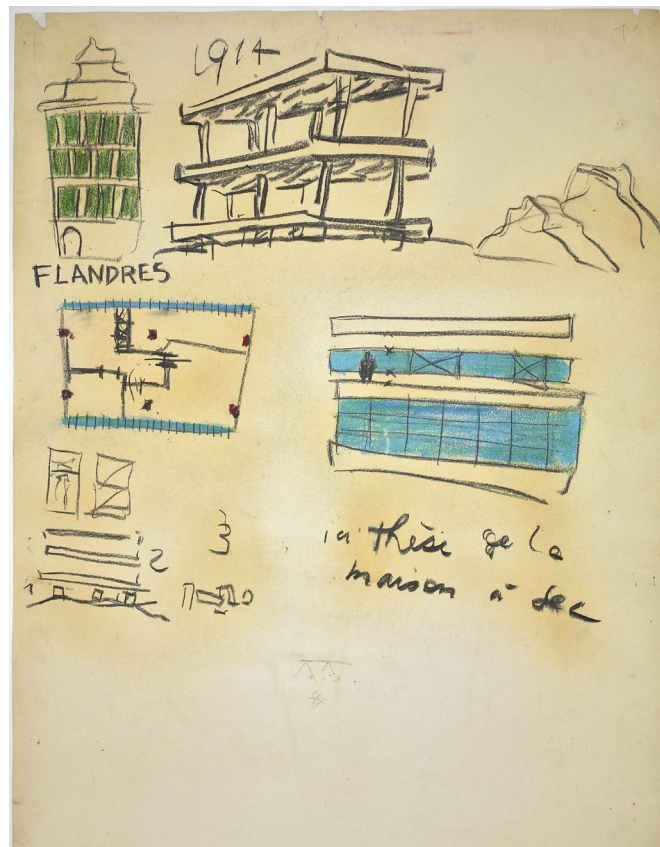

Le Corbusier. *Flandres 1914*, 1930. Fondation Le Corbusier/ProLitteris, Zürich, 2022.

12   Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, 52.

13   For a reflection on Le Corbusier's Belgian influences, see Georges Baines, "Du 'Système Dom-Ino' au 'Type Citrohan,'" in *Le Corbusier & La Belgique*, ed. Patrick Burniat (Brussels: CFC, 1997), 47–61.

14   Francis Strauven, "How Belgium Got Its Present Look: A Short History of Belgian Town and Country Planning," *Sartoniana* 14 (2001): 117.

This "Belgian house" in brick, as it has also been typified by Jean Castex, became the building block of cities from the nineteenth century onward.[15] A suite of two or three adjoining rooms is bordered by a corridor leading to the kitchen. On the mezzanine, at the top of the first flight of stairs, there is sometimes a bathroom; on the second floor, on the side of the street, a room has the width of the facade, and one or two smaller rooms are located at the back. A third, identical floor follows, with an attic on top under a gable roof. A smaller, proletarian version of this bourgeois house, with lower and fewer floors, would be deployed for the piecemeal suburbanization of the countryside, where "the rowhouse stands along the arterial roads out of cities and villages … as one of the effects of the Industrial Revolution," in the words of Wim Cuyvers. In these more peripheral cases, the closed side wall was often not shared at all: as a "waiting façade," it was "standing there, as an uninterrupted surface of red bricks, waiting until the next Belgian decides to build his house against it." Therefore, Cuyvers suggested, "the evident, banal waiting facades are the quintessence of the Belgian house."[16]
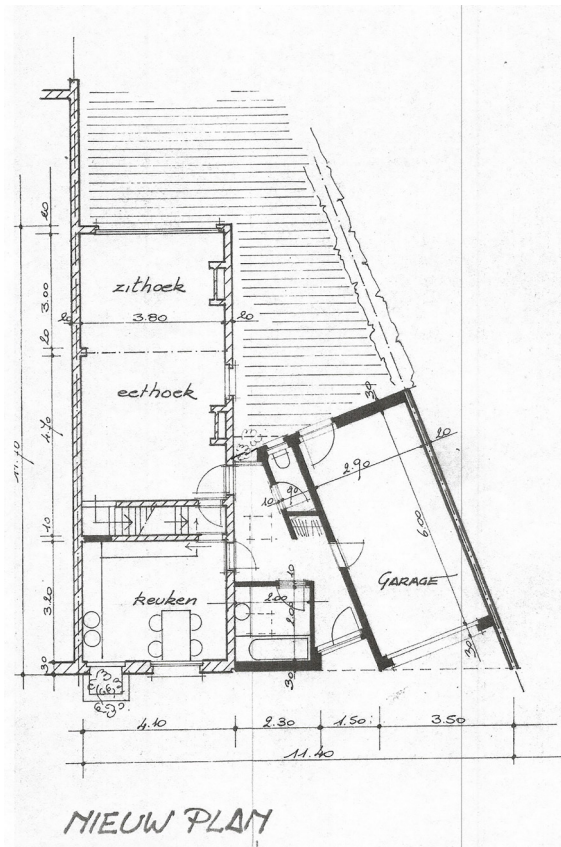
Johan de Moyer. House Van Gerrewey–Coene, Sint-Niklaas, 1982.

I can attest to that: I grew up in a suburban house, built in 1930 by my great-grandparents, at the very end of a row, along an extremely long and straight road leading out of the provincial city of Sint-Niklaas, all the way up to the border with the Netherlands, further north—during my childhood, cars drove by, fast and numerous. The wall to the left was shared with the rowhouse of our neighbors; the wall to the right wasn't shared, simply because this was where the allotment ended; a little bit further, the next one began, with detached instead of serried houses. The

15   Quoted in Tijl Eyckerman, "L'évolution, dans la ceinture du XIXe siècle d'Anvers, de la maison unifamiliale entre mitoyens, à l'appartement," in *En marge des rives. La ceinture du XIXé siècle à Anvers: éléments pour une culture de la ville*, ed. Pieter Uyttenhove (Antwerp: Open Stad, 1993), 236.
16   Wim Cuyvers, "The Belgian House: The Waiting Facade and the Field of Fire," *A+U* 392, no. 5 (2003): 20.

entire row occupied one field on which flax had been grown, until the first decade of the twentieth century. In the early 1980s, my parents seized the opportunity, with the help of local architect Johan de Moyer, to extend the narrow house with a volume of one floor, containing a garage, a bathroom, a corridor, and a more representative front door. The design wasn't without merits: because the extension followed the sloping boundary of the plot, it was possible, from the living room, via a line of sight that ran through the corridor, to see, unobtrusively, who had pressed the bell at the glass front door.

Sharing a wall with our neighbors wasn't always easy, mainly due to acoustics: often, we could hear them running down the stairs, while the father of the family banged menacingly on the wall when the music I was listening to was too loud. We regularly met them in our backyard, which had approximately the same area as the house itself. The two yards were hardly separated, and only a medium-high, completely transparent fence in green metal wire marked the boundary. As the century drew to a close, the neighbor—a construction worker who continuously embellished and adjusted his own house on weekends—decided to raise and reinforce that outdoor partition, first by means of stone slabs, which were later covered with wooden slats. My parents didn't object, and so the common wall was doubled in length and extended outside.

Apart from its variations over the centuries, the type of the Belgian rowhouse seems unlikely as an inspiration for Maison Dom-ino: it's dark, narrow, elongated, isolated, sequestered, built by hand from outdated materials and without prefabrication, and in many ways, it is the opposite of an architecture of lighted floors. Of course, for Le Corbusier, the reference to the *genius loci* embodied by a historical building type would have served as a rhetorical argument to convince Belgium to tackle the reconstruction with his help. He succeeded in meeting members of the Belgian government, and continued to present the project until 1916, but mainly because the war dragged on, application, on whichever scale, never came to fruition.[17] It has been suggested that Maison Guiette in Antwerp, the only built work of Le Corbusier in Belgium (aside from the demolished Philips Pavilion at Expo 58, which he designed in collaboration with Iannis Xenakis), was an application of the Dom-ino principle.[18] But that is only true if many ambitions of the 1914 project are disregarded, as well as the organizational principle and the circulation pattern, which is, in the house completed in 1926, closer in type to the Citrohan house. In fact, Maison Guiette, just like the less canonical and much smaller construction I grew up in, is demarcated by a blind wall to the left, against which another house was built much later, in 1993, designed by Georges Baines, who also renovated Le Corbusier's Belgian house in 1987.

The real significance of Maison Dom-ino lies not in its direct application, or in the way it was or wasn't built, but in its ideal, Platonic, and allegorical character. While it seems plausible that Maison Dom-ino played no part whatsoever in the reconstruction of Belgium, the opposite can also be argued, simply because Le Corbusier's prototype was a prefiguration of the twentieth-century building industry. Maison Dom-ino was, on the one hand, unfeasible on a technical level, while it predicted and symbolized, on the other hand, the future of industrialized building production, and therefore also eliminated the necessity and the authorship of the architect. "As a partly fictional entity that occupies an almost impossible position between the nonarchitectural and the architectural, as if the two regimes were actually compatible," to use Antoine Picon's description, Maison Dom-ino did show how the housing shortage after the war, and the problem of housing in general, could be solved. Le Corbusier's miscalculation consisted in thinking that this undertaking would require his participation, or that of architects in general. As Picon wrote: "What

17   Gregh, "The Dom-ino Idea," 67.
18   Georges Baines, "La Maison Guiette à Anvers," in *Massilia 2011: Annuarie d'Études Corbuséennes* (Marseilles: Éditions Imbernon, 2011), 50–80.

could save architecture in an industrial world in which mass production was becoming an economic necessity was also what could kill architecture itself if improperly used."[19]

INPLANTING
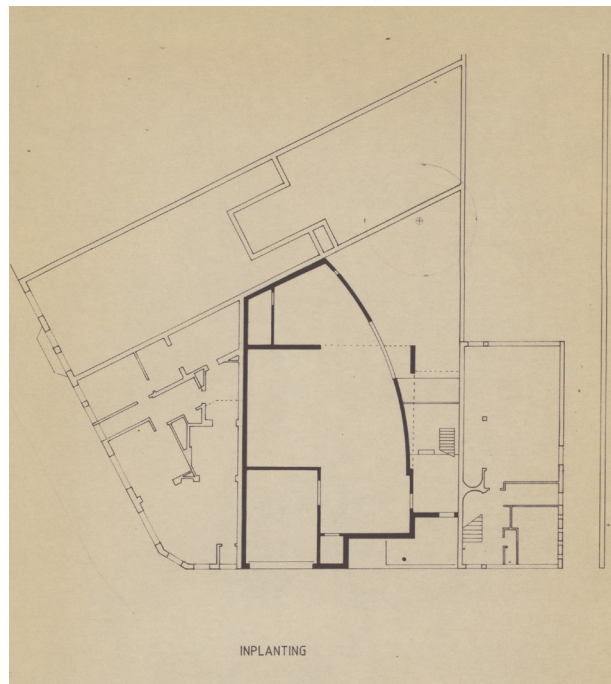
Georges Baines. House Demeulemeester-Robyn, extension Maison Guiette, Antwerp, 1993. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

Rather than being influenced by the historical type of the Belgian rowhouse, the Maison Dom-ino can be considered as its precursor, symbolizing the beginning of Belgium's sprawling and proliferating combination of urbanization and suburbanization. Within the country's endeavor to secure a house for every family, if not to reduce the meaning of life to that quest, two building types have filled up the Belgian territory during the twentieth century: the detached house, as a mixture of a villa and a farm; and the rowhouse, with two shared walls or with one waiting facade, and sometimes even two—the pinnacle of architectural loneliness. And yet, for these types, the Maison Dom-ino also set the bar too high, not only because they remain dependent on traditional, nonserial construction methods, but also because they are not that suitable for combination and concatenation: they can be placed next to each other, or at some distance, but that's about it. This is exactly why they do lend themselves to architectural expression, invention, or singularity—and thus to architecture *tout court*. Belgian architects have manifested themselves, or have defined their profession, by means of individual houses, single or in a row. The most canonical examples, produced by a fin-de-siècle avant-garde, are Hôtel Tassel, a bourgeois rowhouse in Brussels completed in 1893 by Victor Horta, and Villa Bloemenwerf, the residence of Henry Van de Velde, built in 1895, in a suburb of Brussels. These two buildings have foreshadowed how Belgians came to live, but they were also a blueprint for architectural excellence. For architects, meeting the housing needs of their compatriots meant either creatively varying the organization of family life in between two parallel dead walls (often by experimenting with the position of the stairs) or providing an idyllic, pavilion-like construction surrounded by open space. Both types were serialized, but in such a modest way that enough freedom was left for the architect to create forms of architectonic beauty,

19   Antoine Picon, "Dom-ino: Archetype and Fiction," *Log*, no. 30 (2014): 173.

also thanks to artisanal construction and detailing.

If Maison Dom-ino was too advanced, from a technological point of view, compared to the traditional Belgian house, the opposite can also be argued: the formal and conceptual similarities between Maison Dom-ino and the rowhouse and the detached house—two types with origins in medieval cities or agrarian societies—reveal the limited nature of Le Corbusier's invention. As a banal single house with two floors, it can in that sense (and despite its construction in concrete) seem old-fashioned and even antiquated, or at least not absolutely modern. To make the building trenchantly rational and efficient, and to house truly large numbers of people in the cheapest possible way, wouldn't it be obvious to stack the dominoes, rather than to place them side by side? Doesn't an architecture of lighted floors start making sense as soon as a multitude of stories can be realized, exposed to the air, in a large building unobstructed by neighbors? It was in Belgium that Le Corbusier came to realize this, or it's at least in Brussels that he expressed similar insights, more than a decade after the end of the war, in 1930, when the housing shortage had only worsened. This time, he was no longer promoting the Maison Dom-ino but advocating for the Ville Radieuse, characterized by a grid of skyscrapers and a functionalist separation.

In 1929, the topic of the second meeting of CIAM in Frankfurt had been the minimum dwelling or "Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum"; the conference had opened on October 24, known as Black Thursday because of the stock market crash in New York, inaugurating the severe economic depression of the 1930s.[20] This second edition of CIAM was aptly summarized by Sigfried Giedion: "The most difficult task for contemporary construction, housing for people with the smallest incomes, is still unresolved today."[21] When one year later, in 1930, the third CIAM was organized by Victor Bourgeois in Horta's Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussel, that task had not become easier, or less urgent. The main point of discussion turned out to be how many Maisons Dom-ino could be placed on top of each other, a question that was reflected in the title of the lecture by Walter Gropius: "Low-, Mid-, or High-Rise Building?"[22] The discussions held in Brussels were summarized afterward by Karel Teige:

> The actual housing need is so pressing in all countries that when it comes to the classes at subsistence level, we must use the term "housing destitution." … The fact that construction ceased [during the war] for a period of four to eight years is not the only reason for today's housing shortage. Nor is the insufficiency of housing the result of an unusual increase in population. … All the factors which have caused the housing crisis are deeply rooted in the economic conditions of the present day. … Although the restoration of private housebuilding and the free market are the dominant tendencies in nearly every country, nonetheless it remains the fact that private enterprise housing can bring no relief to the housing crisis. … Thus today's boarding-houses, Dutch flats, residences for single women, apartment-hotels, boarding schools, homes for children and for the elderly, etc., are embryonic forms of a future qualitative revolution in our housing form. Instead of the small-scale organization of individual households, we have the centralization of household functions and the conversion of the isolated nuclear household into a modern mechanized operation.[23]

20   Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928–1960* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 34.

21   Sigfried Giedion, "Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum," in *Internationale Kongresse für Neues Bauen. Dokumente 1928–1939*, ed. Martin Steinmann (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1979), 38.

22   Mumford, *CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 50–51.

23   Karel Teige, "The Housing Problem of the Subsistence Level Population: Summary of the National Reports at the International Congress for New Building (CIAM), 1930," *Habitat International* 11, no. 3 (1987): 147–150.

Teige didn't explicitly address the situation in Belgium, where the issue of social housing had been raised only occasionally.[24] That political negligence was seized by Victor Bourgeois, during a gathering of the preparatory committee of CIAM 3, when he justified the repetition of the theme of the previous meeting from 1929: "We believed that we had to raise this question in the light of public opinion, like the Red Cross of Belgium raises the question of tuberculosis or cancer. We must create a vast movement of opinion. To raise this question simply and practically, we could organize classes on modern architecture in the schools of Brussels. … We want to make the most of it so that Belgium is all shaken up."[25] Bourgeois had experienced how necessary collective housing was when he completed in 1925—he was only twenty-eight years old—the Cité Moderne, a garden suburb of 275 houses on the outskirts of Brussels. It became an icon of modern European housing in the interwar period: Giedion considered it, in *Space, Time, and Architecture* from 1941, as "the signal for the present-day movement" of garden cities.[26] The project was featured on the cover of Bruno Taut's 1927 book *Bauen: Der neue Wohnbau*, third in a stack of four photographs, together with the Hufeisensiedlung in Britz by Taut and Martin Wagner, Taut's own Siedlung Freie Scholle in Tegel, and Leopold Fischer's Siedlung Dessau-Ziebigk.
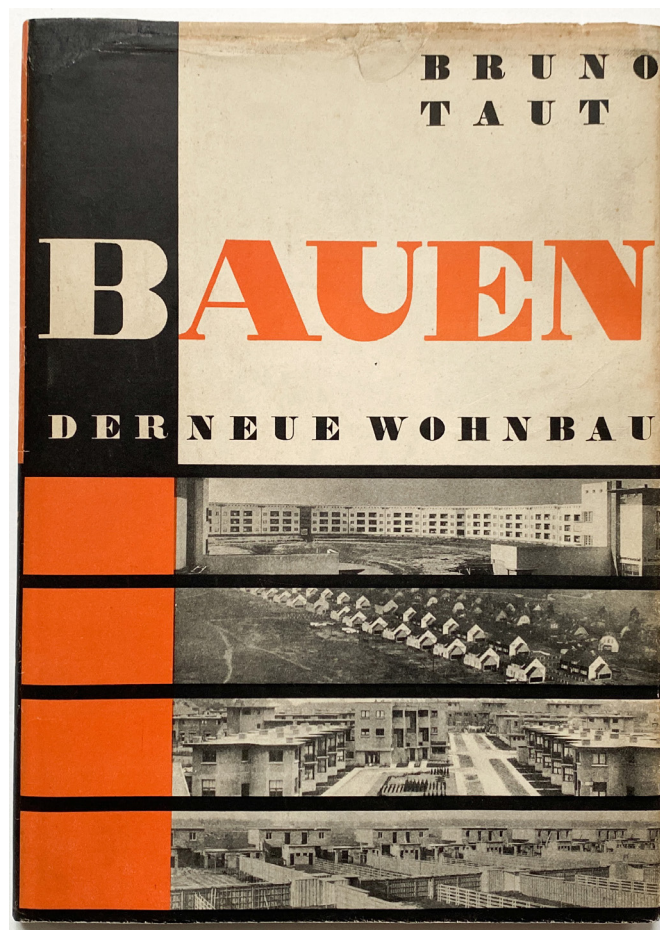
Bruno Taut. *Bauen: Der Neue Wohnbau* (Leipzig, Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1927).
Cover. Collection Josef Chladek, Vienna.

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24   The best overview of social housing in Belgium focuses on Flanders and is already more than twenty years old: Bruno De Meulder, Pascal De Decker, Karina Van Herck, Michael Ryckewaert, and Helena Vansteelant, "Over de plaats van de volkswoningbouw in de Vlaamse ruimte," in *Huiszoeking. Een kijkboek sociale woningbouw*, ed. Pascal De Decker, Eric Van Mele, and Marc Demalsche (Brussels: Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1999), 10–86.

25   Quoted in Iwan Strauven, *Victor Bourgeois, 1897–1962: Modernity, Tradition, and Neutrality* (Rotterdam: nAi010 Publishers, 2021), 169.

26   Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 250.

Nevertheless, the Cité Moderne is also testament to the reluctance that every communal, collective, or social housing project encountered in Belgian society. It was commissioned by a tenants' cooperative with the same name, led by the architect and his brother Pierre. The Belgian government, fearing the emergence of a dangerous "red belt" around Brussels, decided to suspend a system of cheap loans for houses and rooms shortly after the initial plans by Bourgeois had been developed in 1922. His garden city was reduced in size, and apart from three small shops, no communal facilities were built. Apart from these external circumstances, there is something in the architecture of the Cité Moderne itself that expresses, as Auke van der Woud has written, "a preference for the picturesque and the individual, and an aversion to the uniform and the collective."[27]

The same can, of course, be said about the garden city in general, and it explains why this "genre" has been almost exclusively identified, for exactly a century since the country's foundation in 1830, with the ample possibility of social housing in Belgium, as Marcel Smets has shown in his 1977 survey.[28] If the garden city movement tried to conserve nineteenth-century ways of living rurally—opting for suburbanization to flee from urbanization—there is another phenomenon from the same century that has been equally decisive: epidemic diseases, considered the most significant or dangerous consequence of inadequate housing. In 1851, a surgeon named Adolphe Burggraeve from Ghent—often considered the Manchester of the continent because of its textile industry—was involved in the founding of Belgium's first social construction company, the Société Anonyme pour l'Amélioration des Demeures de la Classe Ouvrière.[29] The founding members of the corporation did not lack enthusiasm, as the statutes indicate:

> Never has so much attention been paid to the fate of the working class. Individuals, local authorities, governments, all conspire to try to remove from society the source of the dangers that could come from this side. If anything should reassure one about the future, it is this very solicitude. … Large property, finance, industry, commerce—all have given it the support of their most considerable names. … The society will establish constructions bringing together the conditions of healthiness, comfort, and affordability, including, in addition to housing for households with or without children and for single people, daycare schools, baths and washhouses, restaurants, et cetera.[30]

One year later, Burggraeve, who is also known as the inventor of a cotton splint, designed a *familistère* for Ghent, entitled *Cité Louise*: a radially symmetrical plan with housing units, including collective facilities in the middle and in the corners.

The high bourgeoisie and its representatives in the city council were not amused, and even the federal government issued an alarmed reaction, indicating reprovingly that it wasn't the task of a public administration to compete with private construction initiatives. Moreover, the city council noted, "owning a house gives more security, it gives more satisfaction. … It represents not only the work of our craftsmen and our retailers, but also order, foresight, and paternal love."[31] Burggraeve's project was shelved, and his *société anonyme* was dissolved. Political support was absent, and no enlightened industrial entrepreneur came to the rescue—as had Henri De Gorge, who built a company town near Mons between 1810 and 1830.

27   Auke van der Woud, *Het Nieuwe Bouwen Internationaal* (Delft: Delft University Press, 1983), 40.
28   Marcel Smets, *L'avènement de la cité-jardin en Belgique. Histoire de l'habitat social en Belgique de 1830–1930* (Brussels: Mardaga, 1977).
29   Frank Adriaensen, "Dr. Adolphe Burggraeve: Arbeider als patiënt, stad als panoptikum," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis van Techniek en Industriële Cultuur* 9, no. 36 (1991): 5–23.
30   Quoted in Guido Deseyn, "De negentiende eeuw," in *Volkshuisvesting in Gent. 80 jaar Gentse Maatschappij voor de Huisvesting*, ed. Geert Van Doorne (Ghent: Stad Gent, 1984), 38.
31   Deseyn, "De negentiende eeuw," 47.
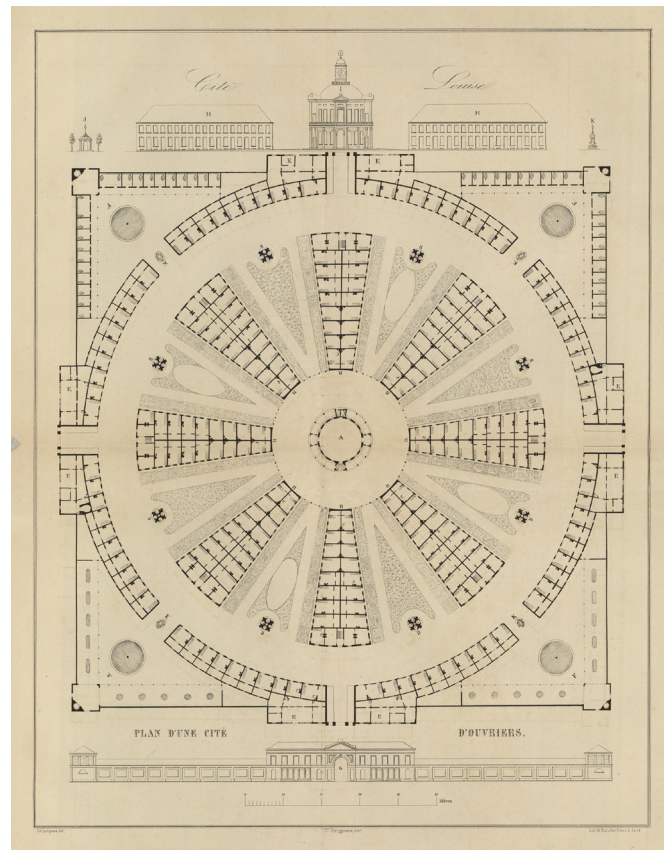
Adolphe Burggrave. *Cité Louise: Plan d'une cité d'ouvriers*, Ghent.
Lithograph De Busscher, 1852. Ghent University Library.

The combination of hygienic and ideological considerations made public housing a perhaps unexpected target: whatever happens, people *shouldn't* meet in architecture, because they can spread diseases but also ideas hostile to the established order. One such instance—and not a garden city—was built before the First World War: Cité Hellemans, completed in 1915 in Brussels in the shadow of the Palais de Justice from 1883, and analyzed one century later by Bruno De Meulder.[32]

This project was an unintentional consequence of the reorganization of Brussels à la Haussmann in reaction to successive epidemics during the nineteenth century. While such operations did clean up certain neighborhoods, deplorable living conditions resurfaced immediately, and much worse, in other quarters. As a replacement of one of those "new" slums, the Cité Hellemans was an initiative from a coalition of Socialists and Liberals in the municipality of Brussels. Named after its architect, Émile Hellemans, it's a composition of seven parallel slabs with four floors and a flat roof, separated by six pedestrian streets, resulting in 272 units with three or four rooms each. While its refined and decorated brick facades were needed to make the presence of working-class housing in the city palatable to the more affluent, almost all other architectural properties are aimed at keeping the residents "healthy," both mentally and physically. What makes this immediately visible is the forest of ventilation pipes on the roofs—in Hellemans's first project, a communal terrace had been planned for the top of the buildings, but that provision was dropped. Private terraces open onto the pedestrian streets, but mainly to enable social control. The insides of the stairwells are clad with the same bricks as the outside facades, which was supposed to give the residents the impression of still being on the street, and to encourage them to behave accordingly—there is domestic, private space, and there is infrastructure,

and any nuance in between must be avoided at all costs. The high level of equipment in these buildings can be interpreted in the same way: every apartment has gas and water, not only to keep the rooms clean, but also to keep residents from having to go down the hall to fetch coal or water, thus protecting the privacy of the family. Comfort, in this way, becomes a soft discipline. Although the Cité Hellemans is an impressive example of concentrated, stacked public housing that guarantees the presence of workers in the inner city, it is not an instance of social housing in the literal sense.

Émile Hellemans. Cité Hellemans, Brussels, 1915.
Photo Simon Schmitt, Global View SRL, 2007.

This rhythmic exception in the urban tissue of Brussels is clearly a product of the nineteenth century, reminding Belgium that, following the First World War, more and different public housing—less fragmented, grander, serried, taller, efficient, more generous, collective, and not superficial— was both very necessary and very unlikely. The gathering of CIAM in Brussels in 1930, despite its desire to consider other large-scale and taller options for public housing, didn't change much: while it certainly makes sense to insert Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino in the architectural history of Belgium, it would be much more difficult do the same with the Ville Radieuse. And yet something did shift at the end of the 1920s, however modestly. Just as European architects felt compelled to respond, on the one hand, to the large-scale public housing buildings being erected in the Soviet Union (while some of them simply decided to move to Moscow) and, on the other hand, to the consequences of the Great Depression, a few city councils in Belgium became convinced of the need to provide tenements for the working class.

In the city of Ghent, mostly thanks to the persistence of a Socialist alderman named Désiré Cnudde, two apartment buildings were completed in 1931, on a 10,500-square-meter site on the Left Bank of the river Scheldt; hence the project's name: Scheldeoord. The soil of the terrain, so close to the water, wasn't resistant, while the municipality wanted a rapid completion of the work because the housing shortage was increasing. Therefore, 890 piles with a length from eleven to twelve meters were used—the so-called *pieux Franki*, patented in 1909 by Belgian engineer Edgard Frankignoul, and used intensively for the development of the metal industry in the south

of Belgium, along the river Meuse.[33] The architect of Scheldeoord was Paul Detaeye, who was also commissioned by the municipality, in the same period, to design sixty rowhouses for workers, as well as a home for the elderly. The two tenements of five or six floors contained 454 housing units, each with two to five rooms; the apartments were distributed to ensure, in almost every one of them, both a north and a south facade, but also the possibility to hang the laundry outside.[34]

Paul Detaeye. Scheldeoord, Ghent, 1931. Collection Museum of Industry, Ghent.

From a bird's-eye view, the influence of the 1920s housing blocks in Vienna by Karl Ehn is visible, for example in the general layout of the buildings, with a long, rectangular courtyard equipped with playgrounds, or in the pronounced porches and the robust balconies in masonry; research by Leen Meganck has indeed shown that the socialist policy in the Austrian capital was well known among Belgian politicians with the same convictions.[35] A first project for Scheldeoord was crowned with saddle roofs and high-rise oriels; underneath the roof, the architect wanted to install a drying loft for laundry. Here too, however, budget deficits intervened, and Detaeye was asked to scrap everything that was not strictly necessary (thus giving the architecture its more abstract look), and to increase the number of units, resulting in sometimes very small apartments. Nevertheless, Scheldeoord is one of the few housing complexes in Belgium that—in the tradition of the Viennese *Höfe*—creates and defines a considerable part of the city, with a scale and a presence that is large enough to symbolize shared values, and to guarantee its survival: although not very judiciously renovated in the 1990s (and now largely hidden behind more recent buildings), this unrepeated sample of public housing continues to function.

The same applies to another realization from the same period, built by Alfons Francken in Antwerp near the Stuivenbergplein: a closed building block, six stories high, of 174 residential units with a sober façade. The building complex has a triangular inner courtyard that gives access to the apartments, starting half a floor above the ground level to assure privacy; the homes on the higher floors are accessed via a stairwell on the street side.

33   Stephanie Van de Voorde, "Edgard Frankignoul," in *Bouwen in Beton in België (1890–1975). Samenspel van kennis, experiment en innovatie*, part 1 (Ghent: Faculty of Architecture & Engineering, 2011), 98–100.

34   Ch. Roset, "Les habitations à bon marché de la Ville de Gand," *La Technique des Travaux* 8, no. 12 (1932): 719–726.

35   Leen Meganck, "Little Red Vienna? The Creation of a Red Ghent (Belgium) in the Interwar Period," in *Studien zur Wiener Geschichte. Jahrbuch des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Wien*, nos. 62–63 (2007): 151–173.

Francken's block was completed in 1931. Four similar buildings, designed by other architects but resulting from the same policy and on behalf of the same housing company, were built in the same decade. In the courtyards of some of these buildings, public swimming pools were installed. Then the Second World War broke out, and the public housing program was halted.

Francken was a precocious, enthusiastic, and well-read architect with metropolitan aspirations. In 1924, he founded a magazine simply entitled *Bouwkunst*, which was announced as a "monthly for new ideas in architecture, art movements, study interests, expertise." It was discontinued after one year, but in one of the articles contributed by Francken himself (and followed by a raving review of *Vers une architecture*), he wrote about the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition of 1923:

> Let us compare the project of the New York architect J. M. Howell and that of the architects Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer. Both designs are very different. That of the former resembles a church tower in English gothic style; that of the other two is a cubist block. The gothic tower may have been the most beautiful design, but the cubist block by Walter Gropius was for the Chicago Tribune the actual office building. Care was taken to ensure that every room of this gigantic building let in plenty of natural light. … Large cities and large residences have yet to be created in our country, with completely new points of view in terms of hygiene and traffic, but … that will only be possible by taking steps forward, not by looking back—only by the exclusive character of the metropolis, not by a rural idyllicism.[36]

Already in 1914, at the age of thirty-two, Francken had designed what can be considered as an expression of the naivety that is required for any kind of urban idyll: a group of five art deco apartment buildings in the city of Antwerp, thirty meters high, three of which were built between 1921 and 1923, with one additional block from 1926 on the other side of the street.

Alfons Francken. Helenalei, Antwerp, 1923, facade.
Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

36   Alfons Francken, "Prijskamp Chicago Tribune," *Bouwkunst* 1, no. 2 (1924): 35–36.

Each floor plan groups two mirrored apartments per floor, around the central staircase with an elevator and skylight. The ground floor offered, among other things, space for the caretaker's house with a lodge and a waiting area, a bicycle shed, and a room for electrical installations. The large backyard accommodated a tennis court and a playground. This was a distinct real estate project, funded and (initially) rented by building companies, and aimed at wealthy clients reaching out for some grandeur in the city, as well as to a cheap domestic staff that had become scarce for countryside villas.[37] The historical importance of these buildings, with names like Cyclops, Vulcan, and Titian, lies in the way in which high-rise residential architecture was "tested" in a Belgian city. Not everyone was pleased, least of all the editor in chief of an Antwerp monthly for "home and hearth," who wrote:

> To which emergency measures the acute housing shortage can force us is proven by the skyscraper that master builder Alfons Francken … is putting up in the last few months. … It needs to be said that we have never felt much for homes that lodge a few hundred people under one roof. Rome has been plagued with it for a long time. The state of health over there is, understandably, most miserable. … That is why we repeat that we are, and remain, determined opponents of homes such as those designed by Francken. One doesn't deem those things necessary in London, where the available land covers an entire province—what an idea, then, to introduce it into our relatively small city of Antwerp! … In these days of popular development and democratic emancipation, it is to be regarded as a curse.[38]

Much more positive was Hannes Meyer, who wrote an article on Belgian art and architecture in 1925, describing Francken's ensemble as "the tenement of the purest form, created with the greatest self-discipline" and as "a building worthy of a shipyard." He suggested, forgivingly, that some decorations in the street facade had been requested by the building promoter, while the back facade, "in the spirit of the postal boat, shows purely the living machinery and the elevator shaft and the fire gables and the kitchen terrace and the emergency exit."[39] Meyer's praise shows the egalitarian potential of this kind of rational high-rise architecture with shared facilities that could also, in its purest form, accommodate housing in a less privileged way.

The apartment building or tenement did catch on in Belgium shortly after the Second World War, but architects were seldom involved. In most cases, the results weren't part of a public housing program, and collective facilities were rarely present. One major exception is the apartment building that Willy Van Der Meeren designed for a social housing company in Evere, on the outskirts of Brussels, which was ready for tenants in 1961. "Van Der Meeren's vision on architecture," critic Karel Elno wrote, "is socially structured nearly ad absurdum."[40] Indeed, he saw it as his main task to make architecture as cheap and as usable as possible, thanks to industrial applications. In his best works, Van Der Meeren succeeded in combining the joyous inventiveness of a constructor like Jean Prouvé with the political ethos of an architect like Hannes Meyer, by showing that the contradiction between the two doesn't have to exist. If there is one Belgian architect who came close to developing a Belgian Maison Dom-ino, not after the First World War but after the second, it is Van der Meeren. This holds true on a figurative level, for he too walked the tightrope—created by the postwar optimism of the welfare state

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37   Smets, *L'avènement de la cité-jardin*, 157.
38   Dirk De Vos, "Werk van jongeren," *De Bouwgids* 12, no. 7 (July 1921): 122–123.
39   Hannes Meyer, "Junge Kunst in Belgien," *Das Werk* 12, no. 9 (1925): 275.
40   Quoted in Mil De Kooning, *Willy Van der Meeren. Architectuur Stedebouw Design Research Onderwijs* (Ghent: Faculty of Architecture and Engineering, 1997), ii.

combined with the final flare-up of industrial capitalism—between individual architectonic expression and its dissolution in rationalism and serialization. But the comparison is also literally valid, because in 1954, he developed a prototype named the CECA house, which was intended to be spread over the territory, but of which only a few were realized.
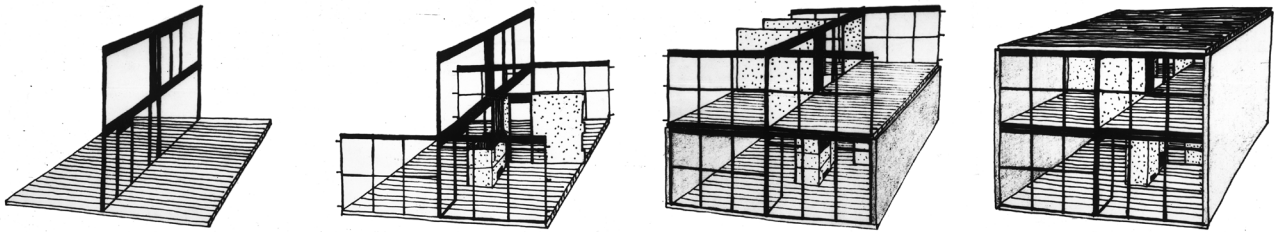
Willy Van der Meeren. CECA house, 1954, structural diagram.
Collection Mil De Kooning.

The single-family houses that were being built to suburbanize Belgium were too expensive for many workers, and whether in use, creation, or representation, they could hardly be considered proletarian. The small, cubic CECA house—its name refers to the Communauté Européenne du Charbon et de l'Acier, founded in 1952—was made of prefabricated construction elements in steel and concrete to minimize manual labor. After being exhibited in Liège and Charleroi, it became a success: 4,500 orders were taken, but the National Society for Housing refused to give its approval or the financial support necessary to enable prefabrication to go ahead on a large scale.

Van Der Meeren was able to start building a housing slab instead, almost at the same time; he presented this project and the CECA house at the final CIAM congress in Otterloo. Once again, an individual was the impetus: Franz Guillaume, Socialist mayor in Evere since 1948, explicitly longed for a high-rise, "as symbolic as a church," out of an "aversion for all those little houses … with candles and crucifixes standing behind the windows."[41] At the beginning of the 1950s, he contacted Le Corbusier about building an Unité d'Habitation for Evere, but the Swiss-French architect declined, and so Van Der Meeren was asked to design his own Unité. It contained 105 apartments on fifteen floors, in a tall, slender volume, almost with the dimensions of a wall, on sturdy, rectangular pilotis—similar, in this regard, to Aldo Rossi's Gallaratese rather than to Corbu's Unité. Two closed stair towers were built in brick; the vertically stacked porches were cast in concrete on site, while the facade panels were prefabricated. Mil De Kooning has correctly suggested, on the part of the architect, "how much imagination was needed, certainly at that time, to be able to *see* an 'industrial' building as a place where people could live."[42] The apartments are organized according to the "triplex principle": twelve inhabited floors require only four galleries; or differently put, three successive floors are grafted onto one single corridor, a *rue intérieure*.

These public *rues intérieures*, unlike those in the Unité in Marseilles, do not go through the center of the building, but run along one of its sides, capturing daylight. It was Van Der Meeren's intention to build a vertical garden city, but although he made sure that all communal areas were as spacious as possible, including a *toit jardin* on top, adding more collective spaces was not possible. Shortly after completion of the building, Van Der Meeren had to admit that there was, for the inhabitants, "little reason to

41   Quoted in Mil De Kooning, "Tussen dwang en uitnodiging," in *Willy Van der Meeren. Ieder zijn huis*, ed. Christophe Pourtois (Brussels: Éditions CIVA, 2012), 12.

42   Mil De Kooning, "Ieder zijn huis," in Kristien Daem, *Apartment, Wall* (Brussels: Gevaert Editions, 2011), n.p.

meet for a longer time."[43]

Mayor Guillaume died unexpectedly in 1963, and nothing came of a whole series of planned high-rise buildings in Evere. A similar endeavor did work out in Liège, where, in a sense, a fragment of the Ville Radieuse was built between 1951 and 1970: the social housing at Plaine de Droixhe, on the banks of the Meuse, three kilometers north of the city center, and designed by Groupe EGAU—short for Études en Groupe d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme.[44]
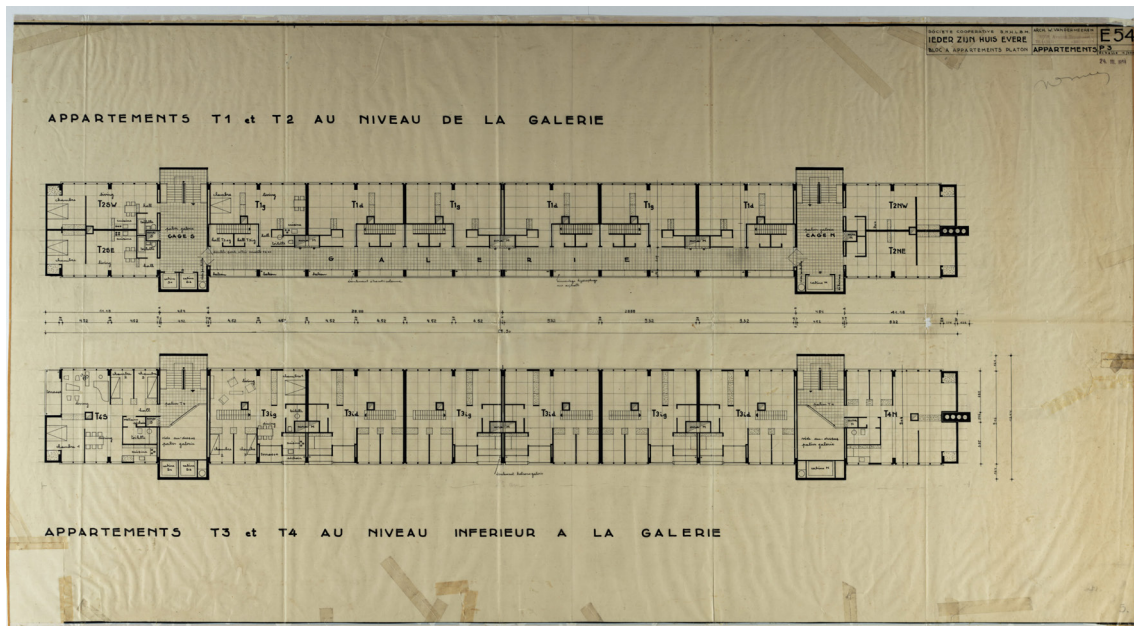
Willy Van der Meeren. Ieder Zijn Huis, Evere, 1961, plan. Collection Mil De Kooning.

Here, for once, housing, at the service of more than seven thousand residents, was not limited to securing private spaces for families: schools, a public library, a healthcare center with a nursery, a reception hall, a church, and a police station were also built. The layout of Plaine de Droixhe is a post–Second World War formulaic application of the CIAM doctrines from 1929 and 1930. The apartments are accessed by internal elevators and dark stairwells, and it's only the entrance areas on the ground floor that are more carefully designed, thanks to transparent facades, for example, or the integration of contemporary works of art. The value of Plaine de Droixhe lies in the open way, monumental and unemphatic at the same time, in which it materializes social housing. But apart from its public financing (and notwithstanding *le prolongement du logis* due to the extra facilities), it comes quite close to the thousands of apartment buildings that arose in Belgium between the 1950s and the 1970s, the period in which the national attachment to rowhouses or villas was expanded to a third housing type: the family flat. This evolution is largely due to two entrepreneurs: Jean-Florian Collin and François Amelinckx.[45] Collin was an art deco architect who published an economic study in 1938, in which he argued for the foundation of a savings bank for real estate that would enable citizens to

43   Quoted in De Kooning, "Tussen dwang en uitnodiging," 35.
44   Mil De Kooning, "Groupe EGAU," in *Horta and After: 25 Masters of Modern Architecture in Belgium*, ed. Mil De Kooning, trans. Gregory Ball (Ghent: Ghent University, 2000), 180–182.
45   Research on the importance of Collin and Amelinckx, and on the typology of the apartment and real estate architecture in Belgium, is being conducted under the supervision of Michiel Dehaene at Ghent University. See, for example, Laurence Heindryckx and Tom Broes, "Transactional Real Estate for the Metropolis," *73rd Annual International Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Seattle, 2020. See also Benoît Burquel, Thaïs de Roquemaurel, and Martin Dumont eds., *The Apartment Building: Real Estate Architecture 1* (Brussels: REA asbl/vzw, 2018).

buy a house. He was convinced that "when there is a large majority of tenants, it is not possible to maintain equilibrium in a society."[46] With his company Etrimo (Société d'études et de réalisations immobilières en faveur des classes moyennes), he built countless apartment buildings all over the country. Amelinckx, who was mainly active in Flanders, also realized social housing flats, in collaboration with municipalities. In an interview from 1971, he announced that his company built fourteen apartments per working day.[47] The activities of Collin and Amelinckx came to a halt by the end of the 1970s because of the economic crisis, a saturation of the market, and a shortage of space. Many of their buildings have survived, often on the outskirts of cities or along infrastructure nodes. In fact, as a child, even before I knew the name of one single architect, I was already familiar with the surname of one of these two businessmen: the five identical, strangely huge slabs, with fifteen floors, standing since the end of the 1960s along the access road to the highway in Sint-Niklaas, were referred to by everyone as the blocks of Amelinckx.
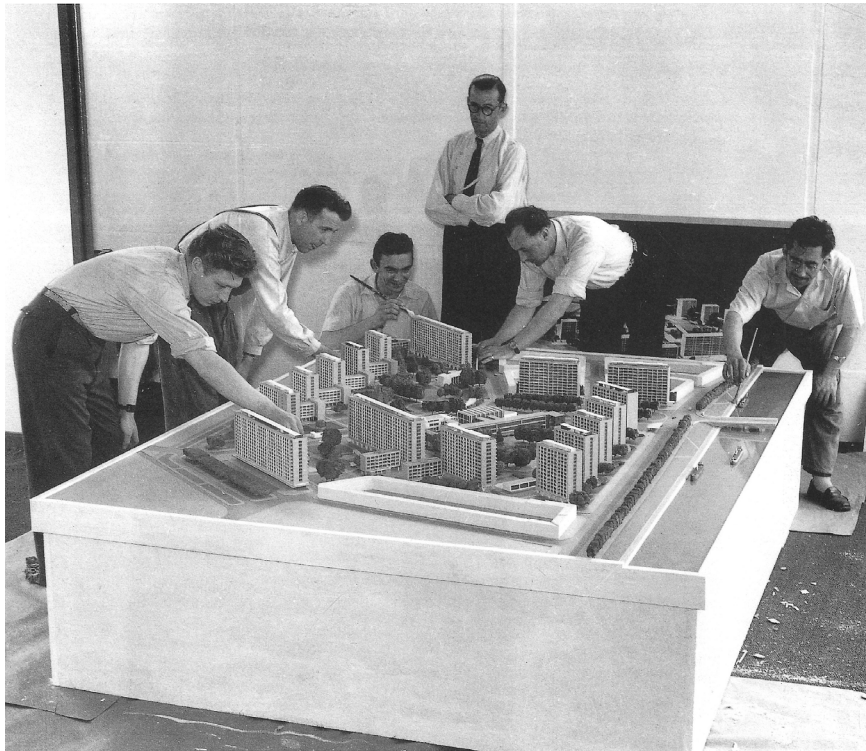
EGAU, Cité de Droixhe, 1959, maquette. Photograph by D. Daniel.

According to some, living in the Amelinckx buildings was something that common people did, while others considered the slabs as proof of modernity and progressiveness. In each case, shouldn't these pieces of anonymous architecture, in their Hilberseimerian efficiency, be considered as the real "tenements of the purest form"? And aren't they the penultimate examples of an "architecture of lighted floors"?

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46   Jean-François Collin, *L'épargne immobilière et sa function sociale* (Paris: Librairie Générale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1938), 292.
47   "François Amelinckx. Voorzitter-stichter bouwbedrijf Amelinck N.V.," *Zie Magazine*, no. 25 (1970): 14.

EGAU, Cité de Droixhe, 1959, maquette. Photograph by D. Daniel.

These questions cannot disguise the fact that this type of housing can also be accompanied by forms of isolation, loneliness, and alienation. Indeed, the oeuvre of the most important Belgian film director of the twentieth century, Chantal Akerman, can be interpreted as a detached, thorough, but humorous analysis of "the flat life" in postwar Belgium—of the *condition humaine* in an apartment. Akerman is well known for her movie *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* from 1975, which was named the greatest film of all time in an international poll by the British Film Institute's magazine in 2022, preceding *Vertigo* and *Citizen Kane*.[48] As the title of this film of more than 200 minutes indicates, the main character is reduced to (or at least identified with) her address, and she hardly ever leaves her apartment at that precise location, living a life of boredom and repetition, until, at the end, an outbreak of violence occurs. On the one hand, the situation of Jeanne Dielman is the consequence of life in any modern city, where dwelling—truly being at home—is impossible. As Jean-François Lyotard wrote in his 1988 essay "*Domus* and the Megapolis," "the city knows only the domicile"—domestic space is reduced to an address, to data, to numbers in a list, and to quantities in a transaction.[49] But on the other hand, Akerman focuses not on urban life in general, but only on a small, private, and yet ubiquitous element of the city. In fact, those moments within her work—*Toute une nuit* from 1982 is a good example—in which the characters find some relief, distraction, or solace, are those spent outside, in the street, or in a café. That her target is literally the apartment became clear in her very first short film, *Saute ma ville* from 1968.

In the 1968 film, a young woman enters an apartment building on the outskirts of a city; other, similar blocks are under construction nearby. Once inside, things get out of hand, as she starts doing typical household chores in a very idiosyncratic way—for example, rubbing shoe polish on her legs instead of on her shoes, or throwing the cat out of the window. And here too everything ends abruptly, when the main character lives up to the title of the film and blows up the apartment, as a *pars pro toto* for the city.

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48   Reggie Ugwu, "Chantal Akerman's 'Jeanne Dielman' Named Greatest Film of All Time in Sight and Sound Poll," *New York Times*, December 1, 2022.

49   Jean-François Lyotard, "*Domus* and the Megapolis," in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 193.

Chantal Akerman. *Saute ma ville*, 1968, stills. Chantal Akerman Foundation, Brussels.

Many years after Collin's and Amelinckx's activities, and after Akerman's films, the apartment has become a fixed value in the Belgian housing supply, maybe even more than the terraced or single house. In a way, it has made a comeback in the twenty-first century, since living in cities has become the more responsible, stylish, and sustainable thing to do, for example in former port, train, or industrial areas that are being converted into residential areas with apartment buildings. The difference is that developers now actually work together with architects, with sometimes surprising results. One building can, in that sense, be regarded as an architectonic masterpiece—a century after the apartment was introduced in Belgium—because it complicates the traditional, standardized building à la Amelinckx or Collin to an almost absurd degree, while nevertheless presenting a certain dignity and unity toward the surrounding city. Krono, designed by De Smet Vermeulen Architecten and completed in 2019, is located on the site of the old municipal gasworks of Ghent. It contains thirty-six apartments, a sports hall, a café, and a fitness club. The trapezoidal plot with one very sharp corner, together with the internal volume of the sports hall, whose girders penetrate the first layer of apartments, made it necessary to compose no fewer than twenty-one different types of floor plans. Nearly every apartment in this building is different from the next, but what all units have in common is at least one outdoor space (a terrace, a patio, or a loggia), and windows in two different orientations. The plans lead to living quarters that are intertwined in unforeseen ways, restoring the unicity of each individual home, while they are nevertheless all part of the same whole.

This is an example of how architects can try to increase the qualities of apartments offered on the housing market. The boom of the genre in recent years, however, can also have questionable consequences, especially when a high market segment is targeted, and architects, including foreign celebrities, are called upon to design an apartment building that is truly something completely different, and for which a corresponding price can

be paid. This is what is going on in the south of Antwerp, where a former shunting yard of no less than 180,000 square meters, after being sold to one single building promoter, is transformed into a new, nearly monofunctional district, based on a masterplan by Secchi-Viganò, consisting of pedestrian streets, thanks to a large amount of underground car parks. Those streets are bordered by apartment buildings with rather interchangeable plans, but with the most sophisticated facades signed by, among others, Shigeru Ban, Max Dudler, and Stefano Boeri. It is striking, and perhaps ironic, that a well-known architect from a previous generation made a project for this area in the early 1990s that predicted a divergent future. To quote from a 1998 article by Kelly Shannon, "Toyo Ito's residential strips in Antwerp, by their measurement and configuration, couple a suburban lifestyle with an urban density. The superposition of simple structuring principles creates a diverse and dynamic series of urban living typologies."[50]
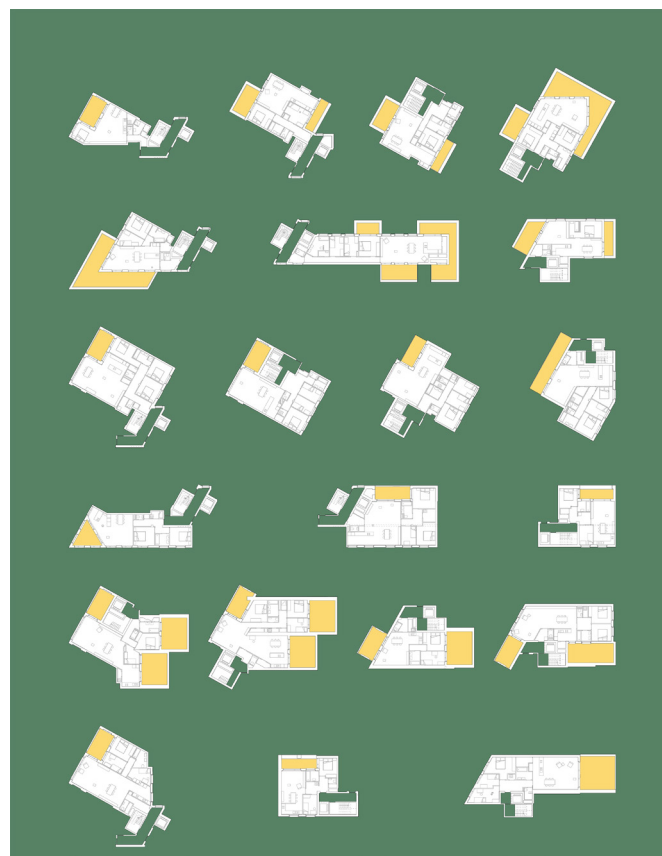
De Smet Vermeulen Architecten. Residential Building Krono,
Tondelier, Ghent, 2018, plans.

What Ito's project—as an uninterrupted linear pattern, perpendicular to the Scheldt—represents most of all within the history of housing in Belgium is a seldom seen blurring of public and private, facilitated by an equal attention to the housing infrastructure and to the open green spaces in between. It is, or would have been, an intimate neighborhood, intended for the residents. But it was also—because of its combination of open and closed, because of the presence of different but clearly separated functions, because of its clarity and tranquility—a proposal that could guarantee a balance between individuality and communality. Mixing and combining all kinds of properties of the Belgian residential triumvirate of the rowhouse, the villa, and the apartment, in this project, the opportunity

arose to redefine, expand, or even dissolve domestic space. It could have been the perfect riposte to the wittiest criticism that Charles Baudelaire fired at Belgium, back in the nineteenth century, when he was walking through the empty city streets (the italics, expressing disbelief, are his): "*Everybody at home!* (tiny closed-in gardens)."[51]

Toyo Ito. Zuid, Antwerp, 1991, model. Archives Geert Bekaert, Ghent University.

Dogma. *Frame(s)*, Westerlo, 2011.

51   Charles Baudelaire, *Late Fragments: Flares, My Heart Laid Bare, Prose Poems, Belgium Disrobed*, ed. and trans. Richard Sieburth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 300.

There are, of course, other projects, also in this century, in which something similar has been attempted, and sometimes successfully so, but not on this scale, and only exceptionally with public housing in mind. One final example can illustrate the tenacity of housing habits and dogmas, with deep roots in the past, and therefore often unconscious and even unmentionable, manifesting themselves outside of the city too, and impeding rather small-scale proposals. In 2011, the municipality of Westerlo, to the east of Antwerp, organized a competition for forty-four social housing units. One of the five proposals stood out because of the installation of a common garden and the interchangeability of every element. In the project by Dogma, entitled *Frame(s)*, the exterior of each of the forty-four houses is indistinguishable within the larger whole. The site—a triangular open meadow surrounded by detached houses with small private gardens—is respected as much as possible: the houses are arranged in an L shape along the two edges. The resulting open area is a common garden, separated ambiguously from the houses by strips of open verandas and allotment gardens.

It's a spatial organization that elides the strict division between infrastructure and the house. The interior plan of the units also complicates this strict zoning: a service wall runs the length of one side in each house, and more than a third of this wall runs outside along the veranda. This, together with the large window framing a view of the garden, has the strange effect of blending inside and outside, and of emphasizing the presence of the common garden without impinging on privacy. Looking out the window, inhabitants do not see the houses of their neighbors or their own small garden, but a grand shared space, idyllic in its natural character, undisturbed by the usual chaos. *Frame(s)* provides every assurance to the inhabitant of not being alone—with all the liabilities and opportunities attendant on social existence. Moreover, it's a project that finally, after almost a hundred years, merges Maison Domino with the Belgian rowhouse: the common wall becomes a kind of snake that swallows everything whole, including the stairs, the kitchen, and the bathroom, indeed allowing the two floor plates to remain fully open and lighted. Dogma's proposal came in second place; the project that won, by Belgian architects Plus Office, had a chaotic overall appearance, explicitly guaranteeing the recognizability of every individual house. Although it hardly differed from the unplanned suburban parceling all around, it was met with strong resistance from local residents. A total of 420 objections were submitted to the municipality. "A healthy mix of owner-occupied and rental properties would be much better for the integration of the people in the neighborhood," a spokesperson said. Not much later, the project was canceled by the city council.[52]

This essay is chapter three of *Something Completely Different. Architecture in Belgium*, forthcoming from MIT Press.

52   "420 keer 'neen' tegen sociale woningen," *Het Laatste Nieuws*, September 17, 2015.

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