

The Brussels Times

MAGAZINE N°43

February / March 2022

Mud, sweat, tears and phlegm
on the Tour of Flanders

Union city blue and yellows:
Belgium's new football kings

The fall of Jan Fabre: Belgium's
biggest artist in the dock

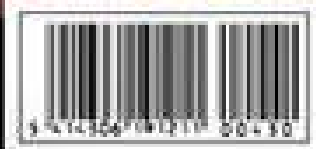
Art Nouveau, Art Deco

Special issue on Belgium's pioneering
architects and iconic buildings

Including features on Hôtel Solvay,
Victor Horta, Villa Empain, Palais Stoclet,
Hôtel Frison and Aegidium



Price: € 12



From the editor



Brussels has a dubious reputation when it comes to urban development, leading its name to 'Brusselization', the process of mindlessly knocking down heritage buildings to replace them with anonymous concrete behemoths.

Conversely, Brussels is also the city of two of the most beautiful and innovative architectural movements, Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

Art Nouveau began in Ixelles and soon spread across the city, its trailblazing architects reimagining not only how to build houses, but the designs inside as well. **Frédéric Moreau** leads our

special section with an analysis of how it was invented at the tail end of the 19th century, then discarded just a few decades later, before being almost rediscovered just a generation ago. Our cover illustration, by **Lectre**, reflects both the beauty of Art Nouveau and Belgium's indifference to it.

Derek Blyth looks at the life of the architect most associated with Art Nouveau, **Victor Horta**, while **Angela Dansby** visits his masterpiece, the **Hôtel Solvay**. **Nupur Tron** explains how she bought Horta's hidden masterpiece, the **Hôtel Frison**, and **Allia Papageorgiou** visits the **Aegidium** on the **Parvis de Saint-Gilles**, which is being restored to its former glory.

Brussels is also home to some of the world's finest Art Deco architects.

Derek Blyth, again, tries to visit the mysterious **Palais Stoclet**, whose doors seem forever locked. And **Louma Salamé**, the Director of the **Sogbostan Foundation** based in **Villa Empain**, explains how the Art Deco marvel almost fell into ruin before being rescued and restored.

Our magazine is packed with other juicy stories. **Harry Pearson**, the author of the bestselling **A Tall Man in a Low Land: Some Time among the Belgians**, and **The Beast, the Emperor and the Milkman: A Bone-shaking Tour through Cycling's Flemish Heartlands**, tells tales about the **Tour of Flanders**.

Dennis Abbott writes about the thrills and spills of the brilliant boys from **Saint-Gilles** – even though **Pro League** table-toppers **USG** are, strictly speaking, based in the **Forêt** commune. **Angela Dansby** explains the rise and fall of **Jan Fabre**, arguably Belgium's most famous living artist, who will be in the dock in **Antwerp** in **March** facing allegations of violence and sexual harassment.

What can you say to 12-year-old 'Little Einstein' **Laurent Simons**, who last year became the youngest graduate in quantum physics? **Justin Stares** meets him. **Simon Taylor** explains how vinyl survived and thrived in Brussels. **Marianna Hunt** goes in search of the **Underwear Museum**, a uniquely Belgian repository for the briefs, knickers and other nether garments of the rich and famous.

While Belgium has been relatively quiet since the 2016 terrorist attacks that killed 32 people in Brussels, the threats are still out there, historian and Arabist **Pieter Van Ostaeyen** writes. **Lukas Taylor**, meanwhile, uncovers some good news from the **Molenbeek** neighbourhood as he meets **Ibrahim Ouassari**, founder of the **MolenGeek** tech school.

Martin Banks explains how the historic **Place des Martyrs** in the city centre is getting a facelift. And **Geoff Meade** writes about his struggle to adapt to the new wave of electric and hybrid cars, which have replaced his beloved knobs with intimidating touchscreens.

Hughes Bellin selects a café, a restaurant, a **spritz** and **chicons** to try out, **Helen Lyons** lists the best exhibitions currently on show in museums and galleries, and **Brendán Kearney** tells us about his favourite beer festivals.

We're thrilled that our first edition of **The Brussels Times Magazine** this year has so many exciting articles about the remarkable people, places and phenomena in our neighbourhood. It's a pleasure to share them with you.

Leo Cendrowicz

Editor, The Brussels Times Magazine

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How I bought a hidden Horta masterpiece

The Hôtel Frison is often overlooked in the Art Nouveau tours of Brussels, but the hidden masterpiece remains a remarkable showcase of Victor Horta's genius. **Nupur Tron**, who bought the house in 2017, explains how she is restoring it to its former glory

When I bought Hôtel Frison five years ago, I had no idea who Victor Horta was. It's embarrassing to admit, but it's true. I did not know anything about the visionary who is synonymous with Art Nouveau, the architect who inspired a generation of builders and decorators, and the man who designed this emblematic heritage house.

Now, five years on, I know the man a little better. I have written a book on my house, and I'm working on my second, exploring the links between India and Art Nouveau – while doing my Master's degree in architecture and restoring the house.

As for Hôtel Frison, it was love at first sight, even then. And I have since come to appreciate Horta as a creative genius who drew from cultures and environments far beyond the traditions of his time.

The Hôtel Frison is hidden in plain sight on Rue Lebeau, which runs from the Sablon down towards the lower town. It was built by Horta for his friend Maurice Frison in 1894. It is his only townhouse in the Brussels city centre. By then, the distinctive Art Nouveau style that Horta is known for was only two years old, emerging with the Hôtel Tassel, quickly followed by the Maison Autrique and the Hôtel Winssinger.

Frison was a distinguished lawyer, a social and civil reformer, architect of the social welfare structure that would become



the CPAS/OCMW, and also the driving force behind project the Brugmann University Hospital, which Horta designed. For his house, he wanted a building that would serve both as his office and home. This double function concept was modern at the time, and the building is an intricate scheme of levels adding up to a total of eight levels from the cellar to the attic. Horta later wrote about the house: “The

“ When I arrived, it was dirty, neglected and run down. It had been on sale for over 18 years but had not been lived in for over 15 years. ”



Above and below: Hôtel Frison's winter garden

“ I felt the house calling to me: “Take care of me!” ”

design, including the expense incurred, was to everyone's satisfaction, including that of the client's fiancée.”

Decades of dirt and neglect

That was then. But the Hôtel Frison fell into disrepair some decades ago. When I arrived, it was dirty, neglected and run down. It had been on sale for over 18 years but had not been lived in for over 15 years.

Yet I found myself almost magically drawn to it. When the owner, an old lady, opened the front door to me, I had a deep feeling of arriving home – or at my parents' or grandparents' home in India – like I was completing a circle of my life. I felt the house calling to me: “Take care of me!” And that was the pact I made: “I will take care of you.” The house is my second baby after my seven-year-old daughter.

I'm just the fourth owner in the house's 128-year history. I soon realized that it would take a monumental effort to restore it. The first six months was just spent cleaning the place. From the outside, it doesn't show how deep it goes, but there is a total of 1,200 square metres. There are around 12 layers of paint to scrape off,

which adds up to hundreds of kilos, a Herculean task.

But the effort has been worth it. The stripping of the paint has uncovered the past, revealing warm frescoes depict-



ing tendrils and natural curves. For the first time in generations, we can see the thought processes, artistry, techniques and human creativity that went into crafting the house, both inside and out.

As the frescoes are painstakingly restored from oblivion and neglect, so too the precious exotic woods and unique metal works are revived, the scattered customised furniture traced, returned and restored. The work is still not complete, but the original glories are already emerging, giving the house a new lease of life, at least as rich and compelling as its first.

And what a house! When you open the front door, you face an imposing marble staircase, flanked by the metal equivalents of a guard of honour in the iron handrails. These bannisters in the entrance hall take his signature curves to a new level, making it appear like a woman arching her back and arms up the stairway.

At the back is the winter garden, which is an extraordinary glass-roofed conservatory designed with almost impossible twists and floral motifs, like an organic greenhouse. That's not to mention the stairwells, the offset kitchen, dining room and living rooms.

The original décor is emerging too. From the bronze door handles to the crémones of the windows, from the ornate panelling and the terrazzo floor to the sliding doors that disappear into the walls. Every detail is meticulously planned.

No wonder this house was seized and occupied by the Gestapo during Second World War – although they covered the walls with white paint, hiding the frescoed patterns. Further alterations were made in 1955 when the façade that opened onto the lawyer's office was altered with the installation of a business. Later, when Art Nouveau fell out of fashion, the house was considered a kitsch embarrassment. I was astonished that the previous owners did not want it to be part of the UNESCO World Heritage listing for Horta.



Above and below right: The winter garden wall décor. Below left: restoring the walls

An Indian connection?

I work in the jewellery sector – I'm not an art historian or an academic – and this house is a diamond.

It also resonates with my Indian heritage. India is almost never mentioned as an influence on Horta. However, it struck me immediately: the shutters, the frescoes, the ottoman shape of the winter





Above: the salon. Below: the staircase to the first floor, and detail from the wardrobe

garden doors, the plant decorations, the cobra patterns, the colours, the red and the mustard that I discovered later while stripping the walls: it all reminds me of Rajasthan.

Horta never went to India, but in a way,

India came to him. Indian culture was being brought to Britain in the late 19th century, influencing arts and crafts, as you see with the designs of William Morris. For Indians, the influence is obvious. It's in the vegetation, the leaves, the flora and fauna, the forms, the spiritual symbols, and the colours. It's always been there, but nobody connected the dots.

It's this connection that made me decide to set up the Foundation Frison Horta in the house. It is a multidisciplinary centre, a living museum that celebrates East-West culture, with concerts and exhibitions like our recent photography show on maharani and the current display by Spanish photographer Bernardo Aja.

For Indians, a house is spiritual. It's part of the family: we don't buy houses as an investment. We buy because it's part of the legacy. It's passed on to the next generation. And why I feel this house, a sleeping beauty, was waiting for me. It's a legacy that my daughter will carry on, as we share this beautiful heritage that unites all cultures.

“ These bannisters in the entrance hall take his signature curves to a new level, making it appear like a woman arching her back and arms up the stairway. ”

