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Congo Style: From Belgian Art Nouveau to Zaïre's *Authenticité*

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Humanities,
University of the Witwatersrand,
In fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Art History)

Supervisors:
Prof Sarah Nuttall
Dr David Andrew

Johannesburg, September 2017

Abstract:

This thesis analyzes how the Congo has been represented in modernist design situations, from colonial depictions to variegated forms of Congolese self representation. Architecture and art exhibitions in Euro-America and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are approached as points of contestation and intersection. The aim is to look at mutual dependencies and interrelations in modernist forms and spatial practices that migrate and mutate across huge distances and time spans. Links and recurring tropes are located in Art Nouveau total artworks in Belgium (circa 1890 -1905), Congolese objects in 20th century gallery space (from MOMA in the 1930s to 1970s Kinshasa), imperial remains from the early 1900s (in present day Mbanza Ngungu and Kinshasa) and the Africanist aesthetics of Mobutu Sese Seko's era of *retour a l'authenticité* (1970s). In revisiting historic representations of the Congo, certain forms and spatial practices emerge, whose meanings are revealed according to how they engage with and are acted upon by their different contexts and temporalities.

Keywords:

Congo, Zaïre, Art Nouveau, modernism, theory from the Global South, postcolonial studies, design practices in Africa, independence era aesthetics, colonial architecture, decolonizing the museum.

Declaration:

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.



Ruth Sacks

On the 27th day of September, 2017

To my late mother, June Sacks, a model of intellectual commitment and generosity.

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Congo Style

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Introduction: Modernist constructions and the Congo



Figure 1. Contemporary view from Mont Ngaliema, Kinshasa

Modernist Constructions of the Congo

If the Congo did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it.
(Jennifer Wenzel, 2006: 1)

My purpose is, from the ordinariness of lines as figures determining spaces in the practice of everyday life, to interrogate what they suppose and impose in allegories that bring us in dialogue or separate us in confrontation. (V.Y. Mudimbe, 2013: 28)

Ce geant est un monde. ('This giant is a world'). (*500 Visages du Zaïre*, 1975: 2)

This study analyses how the Congo has been represented in modernist design situations, from Belgian colonial depictions to variegated forms of Congolese self representation. Architecture and art exhibitions in Euro-America and the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are approached as points of contestation and intersection. The aim is to look at mutual dependencies and interrelations in modernist forms and spatial practices that migrate and mutate across huge distances and time spans. Links and recurring tropes are located in Art Nouveau total artworks, Congolese objects in 20th century gallery space, imperial remains in postcolonial Zaïre and the Africanist aesthetics of Mobutu Sese Seko's independence era.[1] In revisiting historic representations of the Congo, certain forms of design and spatial practices emerge whose meanings are revealed according to how they engage with, and are acted upon by, their different contexts and temporalities.

The foundational precedent of this thesis is the highly complex branch of Art Nouveau that developed in Belgium (existing from approximately 1890–1905) during the time of King Leopold II's imperial inroads into the Congo.[2] Belgium's *Style Congo* (a little known term for the movement) is introduced by way of its fascination for the exotic, with a particular notion of the natural world as both estranged and enticing bound up within this. An in-depth look at how the Art Nouveau total artwork developed

1. My definition of the independence era is the period of Mobutu's policy of *retour à l'authenticité* (return to authenticity) in the 1970s.
2. The Congo Free State existed from 1885–1908, prior to becoming the Belgian Congo.

in Belgium addresses prevailing societal ideas and assumptions embedded within this regional version of the international style. Accordingly, its relationship to non-European cultures, in particular its deep entanglement with the Congo Free State, in the 1890s and early 1900s, may be explored. Because the Belgian avant-garde movement came to represent the African colony in colonial commissions, at the same time as it paved the way for key aspects of international modernist design, it serves as the pivot of this study. As the initial access point into ways of understanding 20th century design, from the point of its inception, Art Nouveau is the connective tissue that links the disparate analyses of representing the Congo that follow. They were selected as subjects for this thesis, from a variety of modernist exhibitions and examples of architecture, because of a chain of influence that starts with Art Nouveau and leads into the successive production of new design formats and spatial practices.

Beginning with contextualizing Art Nouveau within the young Belgian nation, the complex nature of its development of organic abstract form and its particular articulation of the total artwork, in which all aspects of a building and its interior make up a harmonious whole, will be discussed, with a focus on the work of Henry van de Velde, Victor Horta, Gustave Serrurier-Bovy and Paul Hankar. The manner in which beguiling design formats were then used to sell an idea of the Congo, as a lucrative African colony, follows, featuring sites like *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* (1898) and the *Palais des Colonies* (1897). As modernist design moved into the 20th century, certain aesthetic theories incubated in Art Nouveau are seen to influence the design of more minimal modern art museum exhibitions. At the same time, the African ethnographic object came to be exhibited within institutional displays, with Congolese exhibits featuring prominently. In following these objects into now-iconic exhibitions, the manner in which they worked together with modern design is interrogated. Major shows of Congolese objects in art centres in Euro-America, as well as colonial Leopoldville and independence-era Kinshasa are revisited, by way of their exhibits.

Further Art Nouveau lineage can be located in imperial relics erected in the early years of the 20th century. Looking at buildings that began as prefabricated iron skeletons in the metropole, from the perspective of their current situations in Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu, sees these built remainders of the Belgian regime as endemic parts of surrounding urban space. From examining how Art Nouveau offshoots have been appropriated by the Congolese city, the final link of this thesis is located in the

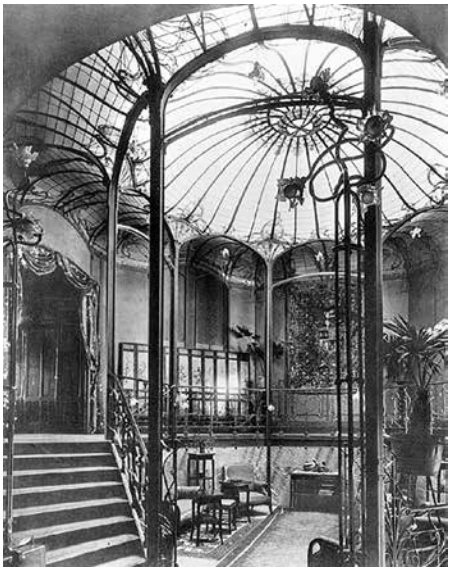




Figure 2: Archival image of *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*, Brussels (circa 1899);
Figure 3: Postcard image of *Hotel ABC*, Leopoldville (circa 1930)

era of Mobutu Sese Seko's policy of *retour à l'authenticité*. Zaïrian government commissions in the early 1970s incorporated certain elements of colonial structures while also declaring a futuristic vision of African autonomy. Although superficially displaying very different decorative principles to the ornamental curvature described in the opening chapters, Mobutu's ambitious theaters of Africanity may be seen to display similar overriding principles of manipulating and totalizing built space. Within parallel projects of nation-building in both Belgium and Zaïre, distinct kinds of spatial practice and ways of taking recourse in tradition begin to emerge.

All of the buildings and exhibitions outlined above are, in different ways, representative of an idea of what the Congo was, or could be. Whether they were conceived by avant-garde design, in direct service of the imperial regime (Belgian Art Nouveau), as suitable casing for the artworks of Congolese people (modern art galleries), capsules for settler communities to occupy the colony with (prefabricated imperial buildings), or setting up a vision of a mighty African nation (Mobutu era constructions), they describe a version of this massive tract of central Africa. Originally annexed by Henry Morton Stanley to be artificially looped together, as a colony, the area known as the Congo is made up of "2 345 409 square kilometers … of extremely diverse" ecosystems and people (*500 Visages*, 1975: 2). All of the representations of it that follow, in one way or another, simplify and mythologize the Congo into a fiction that does not necessarily correspond to the realities of daily living in the actual space of its vast





Figure 4: Mobutu era commissions: Contemporary view of *Tour Gécamines*;
Figure 5: Postcard image of the MPR compound at N'Sele, Kinshasa (circa 1973)

terrain. Specifically, in differing ways, they all mask the histories of violence that underline the era from which they emerged.

As will be delineated according to each context visited, violence in the Congo has a mythic hold on international public consciousness. From the initial annexation of the area in the late 19th century, and throughout the Belgian Congo (1908–1960), violent suppression and intimidation of Congolese people was necessary in order for colonial powers to maintain control. The uneasy independence that followed from liberation in 1960 was marked by further violent clashes, followed by Mobutu's rule. After he took power in a 1965 military coup, the state progressed into militant totalitarianism. This thesis outlines the violence that underwrites each of the representations of the Congo described, in order to relink them to the realities of their contexts. In so doing, the aim is to avoid stereotypical versions of the Congo story that sees its "history moving from violence to violence, malfeasance to malfeasance" (Hunt, 2016: 3). By addressing different constructed manifestations of Congolese cultures — in nationalistic symbols, international trade fairs, displays of traditional art and various government and administrative buildings (across Africa and Europe) — this thesis describes the aesthetic forms and patterns that coalesce around particular types of governance and systems of power. Accordingly, it attempts to make sense of the seductive power of designs that give eloquent physical form to fictive projections of the Congo, in the face of incriminating and painful histories.

The goal is not to bind sophisticated exhibitions and buildings to a heavy historical burden, thereby running the risk of reducing them to exclusively serving as tools to repressive systems. That is to say, looking only for what these designs have omitted or reveal about the social conditions that surrounds them exhausts their possibilities (Felski, 2011: 585). Rather, the analyses that follow seek to extrapolate recurring complications and slippages in the relationship between designs, whose overriding narratives appear to echo that of oppressive regimes, and their surrounds. In order to understand how they are and are not complicit in supporting violent systems, the architectonics employed to represent the Congo in design are analysed for their power to beguile and fascinate. Within fantastical constructions, each utopian in its own way, the potential enthrallment and devotion to a fiction of what the Congo and its people might be is allowed for.

The different environments and buildings are treated as whole objects, each with long and active social lives, animated by eventful histories that date back to tense origins. Instead of employing history as a source of facts to bolster visual analysis, this study takes its cue from Arjun Appadurai (1986: 5), locating meaning in "the things themselves," inscribed in their form and use. Accordingly, they are broached as being formed by their public lives and not entirely via the intentionality of their creators. The primary concern is to allow for materials and things to display some of their own agentic qualities. This involves teasing out the agency of man-made objects and structures, as well as certain natural materials and forces, in situations where subaltern points of view have been marginalized. At the same time, ascertaining what version of the Congo is being promoted in these various modernist constructions helps to explicate how their power dynamics are evident; imprinted into their frameworks, in plain sight.

Given that the object of this thesis is to look at mutual dependencies and points of exchange across different temporal and ideological realms, its main title attempts to introduce a capacious approach to the terms employed. While the French appellation "*Style Congo*" was a term used for the Art Nouveau movement in Belgium, "Congo Style" can also refer to Congolese aesthetics at large. Many of the structures and exhibitions discussed in this thesis, especially those that are located in the Congo (specifically in Kinshasa and the nearby Mbanza Ngungu),[3] were developed by Congolese people, or

3. Mbanza Ngungu is included because colonial remains that are linked to the Art Nouveau style are there.

for them.[4] Similarly, in introducing this study as looking at examples of modernism, the modernism referred to is not, strictly speaking, the Modernist design movement. According to official biographies,[5] this is a lineage of formal innovation in design and architecture that begins with the British Arts and Crafts movement, leading into pared down aesthetics that outwardly display qualities of rationalism and universalism.[6] While the ubiquitous authority and influence of what would become the International Style is assumed (particularly because of this study's focus on Art Nouveau), the examples of modernist design to be discussed are not necessarily pure and, most emphatically, not restricted to an immutable canon in Euro-America. While the Congolese exhibitions, interiors and buildings discussed all bear obvious stylistic allegiance to the main channel of international design — whether it is an iron skeleton, the slick lines of an art gallery's white cube or shooting silhouettes of skyscrapers — they also contain their own socio-historic realities.

With this thesis beginning with proto-modernist Art Nouveau and closing with Congolese modernism (revisiting the modern art gallery and colonial modernism along the way), it is intended to challenge the hegemonic assumption of the term "modernism." The main idea is to allow for alternative traditions of modernism, "taken from the neglected works left in the wide margins of the century" (Williams, 1989: 35). More than just modern, stylistically these sites are approached as configurations of "endlessly surprising combinations and recombinations" embedded in complex layers of modernities (Goankar, 2001: 22).[7] Accordingly, this study takes into account the overall tone of Jean and John Comoroff's (2011) provocation to consider that Euro-America is evolving towards the Global South. A search for ways in which the Congo influenced modernism, rather than at how modernism spread to the Congo, forms the underlying premise of this thesis.

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4. Only structures in Kinshasa and nearby Mbanza Ngungu are discussed. As the capital city in both colonial times and on independence, Kinshasa and its locus were the most appropriate focus for this study. Other Congolese cities, like Boma and Lubumbashi, have their own distinctive forms of Congolese modernism that are beyond the scope of this thesis.
5. For example, Pevsner (1960) or Frampton (2007).
6. This is commonly seen to peak in the International Style of Mies van de Rohe and Le Corbusier, arguably the most influential style of the 20th century.
7. In looking at forms of modernist design outside of Euro-America and at the influence of the Global South on Euro-American design, this study taps into the idea of alternative modernities. As argued by scholars like Dilip Goankar (2001: 15), building on traditions developed by Paul Gilroy, Dipesh Chakrabarty and others, this aims to "destabilize universalist idioms" and "pluralize the experience of modernity," while recognizing that "western discourse on modernity is a shifting, hybrid configuration." However, when talking about modernist design outside of Euro-America (as the product of alternative modernities), this thesis does not employ the term "alternative" in favour of simply referring to Congolese styles of "modernism."

Repeated Patterns: Thematic overview

With multiple modernisms in mind, a particular set of themes converge around the different sites of this thesis. The first is ornamentation, which is intertwined with that of artificiality. Connected to the latter are repeated variations of simplifying cultures into homogenized and romanticized entities. These themes are explored according to how they relate to nature. Within an idea that nature can be controlled, and architecture and design acting as a framing device, the theme of the Congo as resource recurs across this study. Moving from the total artworks of Art Nouveau, through art galleries and settler architecture into the totalitarianism of the Mobutu era, the theme of totality and totalizing views is also played out, bringing with it the trope of enclave that reverberates across this study.

The central theme of ornamentation is initiated in discussions concerning Art Nouveau, a style that was characterized by abundant embellishment based on organic principles. The particular manner in which man-made artifice was used to enlarge and distort aspects of natural growth is discussed. Within this aesthetic of fake growth, further artificialities may be found in the Art Nouveau colonial exhibition, one of which is the construction of a primitive Congolese subject portrayed as less evolved than the European one. This construction was then carried into the 20th century art gallery. Congolese objects were displayed as tribal relics, perceived to be part of a fictive primitive life that was closer to nature. They were cast as de-natured objects, dislocated and preserved in the artificial environment of the art gallery. In following these objects into different exhibition situations, this thesis refutes their de-naturing, seeing them rather as having a particularly emplaced relationship to modernist display environments. These resilient Congolese objects resisted the framing devices that attempted to reduce them to ornamental props to the temple of modern art; they refuse to be wholly subsumed by the dominating narratives of modernist discourse.

In the actual place of the colony, remainders of Art Nouveau were sent from the metropole, as prefabricated iron structures, to frame the Congolese landscape. Intended as tools with which colonists could pursue their larger project of extraction — harvesting natural resources — these structures were here surrounded by exuberant tropical growth. As this robust greenery joined forces with heat and humidity, it became intrinsically enmeshed with the modernist structures, altering their character. The buildings' entanglement with the natural surrounds draws into question what is artificial and what is



Figure 6: Zaïrian five dollar bill, featuring an images of traditional art and the Inga Dam

natural in the Congolese urban fabric. This query is drawn through into the discussion of Mobutu-era constructions and the manner in which they relate to the contemporary city. Here, too, the role that environmental factors played in the make-up and appearance of historic designs affects their contemporary meanings and uses.

Themes of artificiality and ornamentation are prominent in the material performance of the rites of nationhood, in both Belgium and independent Zaïre. The manner in which the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1993) is played out, at the beginning and close of this study, sees nation-building necessitating the manufacture of traditional pasts in both the European and the African. This leads to the essentializing of cultures into easily recognizable symbols and motifs. The manner in which Art Nouveau romanticized cultures from Belgian history (alongside those of the exotic Orient) is therefore discussed as basis against which to reflect on how it represented the Congo. By the time of Mobutu's *retour à l'authenticité*, precolonial Congo was simplified into a utopian idyll, across various motifs and scenes. Whereas patriotic Belgian Art Nouveau, in the late 1890s, paraded the African colony as a lucrative ornament to the nation of Belgium, Mobutu in the early 1970s developed his recourse to traditional Congolese life in direct opposition to colonial rule. With certain of Mobutu's representations of traditional Congolese tribal life echoing those of the colonial, the major constructions of Zaïrian independence staged African culture as a magnificent ornament and officially endowed its traditional objects with primary importance.

Of all the resources ensuing from the colony, some of the most vital and enduring were the objects of its imagined traditions. Accordingly, they underscore the theme of the Congo as cultural resource throughout this study. When squashed into modernist frames, whether it be by Art Nouveau, the modern art gallery or Mobutu's showcase structures, Congolese culture deflects being simplified into another raw material that can be capitalized on. This is also true of its mythic natural heritage, portrayed as a seemingly inexhaustible resource in Art Nouveau environments as well as building projects overseen by the Belgian Congo administration. With Zaïrian independence, claims attempting to assert African ownership of the construction of Congo as resource, its agricultural and mineral abundance is celebrated as much as its cultural icons. The Congo thus provides a rich ground for projections that stretch across the design situations of this thesis. As each modernist representation is examined, the primary focus remains on the problematics of attempting to describe or simplify aspects of a Congo that, in different ways, continually reasserts itself.

With the theme of resource borrowed and reinvented across different traditions and administrations, the manner in which it was manifested in built space and display environments reveals overlapping tendencies in spatial design across contexts and times. In their own particular ways, these buildings and exhibitions alienate individual human bodies, separating and obscuring privileged space from the mass of the city. Accordingly, the overbearing tropes of the enclave and enclosure that dominate this thesis speak to its overarching themes of totality and control, articulated in the questing forms of total artworks as much as the commissioned structures of a totalitarian dictator.

Art Nouveau sought to make total artworks, an aesthetic concept which saw whole buildings — interior, exterior, support structure and furniture — all working together to create a unified whole. However, in the process of ornamentalizing interiors, Art Nouveau logics severed its individual patrons from the outside world. The total artwork is thus discussed as an exclusionary principle, privileging the bodies of its patrons (the urban elite) by immersing them in utopian space. Seeing total artworks as tools of dislocation and separation in societal space sets the scene for looking at their influence on the art arenas and colonial architecture that follow. The manner in which total space was pursued in the space of institutional display is examined, highlighting its role as enclave within greater city space, as much as that of the taste maker of high art. As the modern art museum display system moved to





Figure 7: Contemporary exhibit of an Art Nouveau interior, by Henry Van de Velde, in Gent, Belgium;
Figure 8: Archival image of the VIP rooms of *Stade du 20 Mai*, Kinshasa, 1974

the Congo (seen in colonial Leopoldville and independence-era Kinshasa), it continued to propagate its status as elevated, separate space not easily accessible to the general public. In colonial urbanity, defined by the compartmentalization of racial segregation, all of its built constructions were intended as systems of separation and control. Analyses of the iron-based off-shoots of Art Nouveau reveal that these structures were particularly well-suited to the task.

With the advent of the Mobutu era, government commissions took on monumental proportions. Constructions that built skywards triumphantly dwarfed earlier versions of colonial modernism. While purporting to look respectfully to past traditions, shoots of glass, metal and concrete scream down at the surrounding city, in a mixture of looming threat and enticement. As shows of luxury cajole and potent rule makes itself known, through sheer scale and mass, totalitarian space is seen to take lessons of control from the total artworks of earlier eras. Mobutu's Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork) of *retour à l'authenticité*, stretching its net across the city skyline, was given material form in a gigantic register of looming constructions. Within the new skyscrapers of giant Kinshasa,[8] itself contained by "the giant" that is the Congo (*500 Visages*, 1975: 3), normal-sized human bodies are overwhelmed and rendered insignificant. As totalizing architectonics install a system of spatial annexation that polices and

8. At the same time as being an ever-extending metropolis, there exists a legendary giant named "Kinshasa," discussed in De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 63–67).

terrorizes citizens, it harks back not only to imperial logics, but to the basic foundations of modernist design.

Artificial Constructions: Rationale

In looking at various modernist representations of the Congo, this study covers new ground. While the relationship between Belgian Art Nouveau and violence in the Congo Free State has begun to be exposed,[9] the connection between the Art Nouveau total artwork, as a colonial exhibition, and subsequent displays of African art in the modern art gallery have not. Similarly, no study has yet dealt with the relics of Art Nouveau offshoots in the space of the colony in any depth. Further, the link to Mobutu-era architectonics as a version of a total artwork and as a form of Congolese modernism has not been broached before. Those few studies of Art Nouveau that have entertained the Belgian movement as a colonial style have not looked to Congolese self-representation to understand the kind of spatial formations, images and design logistics that have emerged.

The manner in which the different modernist moments of this study are analysed is intended to counter the more typical approaches utilized within the canon of art history. In order to better come to terms with recurring patterns of form-making and space-claiming, this study looks at examples of architecture and design from the context of their contemporary situations. This approach is particularly prominent for sites in the Congo, where the provenance of the buildings and exhibitions under discussion are not well documented. In addition, dealing with Congolese artworks in the art gallery as emplaced modern objects rather than pure ethnographic facts is not a traditional art historical perspective.

Primarily, this study attempts to circumvent exclusively Euro-American perspectives by giving structures in Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu as much attention as those in the metropole. Further, Congolese agency in the production of these buildings (and the other objects and environments under discussion) is considered. Traditionally, art and architectural history describes a dominating narrative of progress that sees modernist architecture and design, beginning with experimental movements like Art Nouveau, evolving into Bauhaus minimalism and, ultimately, peaking with the sleek machine aesthetics of the International Style. This narrative allows modernism to exist in the Global South only

9. Primarily by Deborah Silverman, as will be discussed shortly.

as subsidiary to the main event.[10] With differing agendas and ideologies, buildings and paintings are merged under the banner of modernism for their privileging of innovation and new technologies. This thesis also looks to innovation, but attempts to locate it in multiple flows and confluences, according to the terms of intercultural exchange (albeit usually highly uneven), as well as invention born of necessity.

Attempting to look at built constructions from the point of view of the capacious modernisms of the African city allows for a series of breaks from the single, linear narrative. In the unstable but, crucially, more fluid urbanity of Kinshasa, meanings and uses of the built environment are not static. This study follows Abdelghani Abouhani and Simone Abdoumaliq (2009: 9) in seeing key structures within the African city as an "intersection of intensities that is not that of fixed objects and identities with clear boundaries." It sees the construction of identities as a process of continuous (non-directional) movement and exchange and applies this towards objects and built environments describing the Congo (in a variety of locations not limited to the African city). Seeing Congolese artworks and buildings, alongside the total artworks of Art Nouveau, as a collective production of exchange, even if based on hugely unequal terms, aims to shift and soften the established lines of Euro-American discourse. It especially seeks to complicate definitions that see certain forms and designs as being representative of "Africa" or "Europe," of the "Congo" or of "Belgium."

Describing what are, essentially, the colonial relations and networks around structures and objects, this study further aims to avoid predictable stories of overarching imperial domination and African subjugation. Reading built form "against the grain" of colonial structures attempts to recast Congolese subjects (and, later, citizens) as agents who make decisions and have opinions of their own (Stoler, 2009: 50). These are neither tethered to antiquated tradition nor are they a unified voice. With different subjects having his/her own experiences, allegiances and sentimental attachments, their responses to oppressive regimes are varied, particularly in their different forms of creative practice.[11] Similarly,

10. According to this script, modernist architects and artists are cast as heroes in the journey towards High Modernism (in the case of the designers) and abstraction (for painters and sculptors). In this world of modernist aesthetics, major names — Picasso and Le Corbusier amongst them — are lionized in laying down increasingly refined paths towards capturing the modern moment.

11. While recognizing that collective voices do exist (especially when organized in opposition to repressive regimes), the individuated subjects of this study are particular to their contexts and tend to deflect homogenizing methods of analyses.

when describing colonial processes of occupation, the colonizers themselves were never a completely clarified force, with all manner of messy attachments, loyalties, vulnerabilities and inconsistencies defining how they encountered colonial territories (Cooper and Stoler, 1997: 9–36; Fabian, 2000: 4–15). Discordant voices and motivations are thus evident in the work of the various architects and artists who are called on by colonial and postcolonial regimes to represent them. It is, in part, because those in power were never monolithic or omnipotent that they commissioned appealing aesthetic events and impressive modernist displays to attempt to legitimize themselves.

A flexible approach to the material concerns of representing the Congo thus attempts to complicate and destabilize the strictures of Eurocentric art history and the assumptions of Enlightenment philosophy that underscore it. This study aims to open up an awareness of underlying discursive structures within analyses of architecture and design. V.Y. Mudimbe (2013: 28) uses the motif of the line as a bounding mechanism: "one may … move towards the directionality of the line, both the idea of separation and the distinction of parts it creates. Our physical geography, the whole domain of our culture, including mental configurations and our relations to nature, are topographies structured by lines." As Mudimbe uses the analogy of lines to speak about alterity politics in Africa (which are rooted in colonial constructions of difference), he also provides the foundational motivation of this thesis: to read line formations (including actual architectural ones that direct the movement of people) as particularly effective and emotive framing devices. The aim of this study is, thus, to find routes (often circumlocutious and oblique ones) through complicated contexts to expose the discursive outlines and ideological underpinnings of representations of the Congo. By making the content of the lines of Art Nouveau and other modernisms visible, the intention is to expose systems of hegemonic control as artificial constructions while, at the same time, allowing for changeability and subtle shifts.

The aim is thus to recognize that complex designs carry some of the history and societal attitudes of the greater patterns of influence of their making (and, as such, are recognized as articulations of power). At the same time, they are also seen to play singular roles within their particular settings. As buildings and objects are claimed by their respective localities, from high end official decree (becoming heritage sites or government and civic buildings) to informal networks on the ground, they represent different Congo-nesses. In reading off the lines these constructions draw, within pockets of space and sky, and the

wider connotations of their permutations that follow, this study attempts to proceed with an awareness of polarizing and essentializing philosophies that potentially underscore modernist form. At the same time, it allows for surprises, looking for possibilities that these have been overwritten, inventively reconfigured or ironically refuted within their respective settings. Accordingly, the overall goal is to "adequately resist totalizing structures, while still recognizing how these construct objects of study" (Green, 1997: 292).

Starting at Surface: Theoretical Grids

In bringing together interlinking material imaginings of the Congo, this thesis has developed a sustained theoretical approach according to the needs of the different objects, sites and environments discussed. Postcolonial studies, with Edward Said as an essential source, forms the foundation of the proposed mode of analysis. The basic lesson of *Orientalism* (first published in 1978), that sees both the Orient and the Occident as fabrications, helps to understand the othering of Africa that occurs in its representation by colonizing nation-states. The postcolonial premise that knowledge of a culture may be used as a means of dominating it is then overlaid with ideas concerning the agency of things. A focus on the potential agency of non-human agents draws in ideas from Arjun Appadurai, object-orientated ontologies and Bruno Latour. In looking for material agencies in complex designs, the aim is to release them from the overbearing confines of their social context.

Within this agentic realm, it is possible to establish an atypical ecology of forms used to describe the Congo. This attempts to topple evolutionist approaches to modernist design that judge architecture according to a scale of teleological progress. Art and architectural history, in Euro-America, has traditionally seen design as either improving or degenerating, according to the supposed degree of civilization of the peoples concerned.[12] This study, in contrast, pursues horizontal logics, whereby forms that remain and reoccur, in a Darwinian process of natural selection, are not deemed more superior or refined, but the most able to adapt to their surroundings.

12. This bias is racially based, with more impermanent habitation of non-western cultures judged as primitive, compared to more technologically-advanced modes of construction. The historical precedent for this way of thinking may be found in works such as Viollet-le-Duc (1863) and Jones ([1856] 1997), both of which were a large influence on Belgian Art Nouveau.

The approach described allows for cross-cultural forms of mingling and mutual dependencies, which owe some debt to Édouard Glissant. Glissant's (2008: 81) notion of creolization opens up a wider terrain of self-sufficient thinking, being born of passage and transience, using "the fabric of a great expanse, the relational complicity with new earth and sea" as a tool of diffraction for multiculturalism.[13] It also relates to Homi K. Bhabha's conception of hybridity, which can be used as a counter-narrative to deconstruct mainstream colonial narratives. Bhabha (1994: 5) calls for a profound redefinition of absolute concepts of "homogeneous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities — as the grounds of cultural comparison."[14]

The postcolonial theory adhered to in this thesis is, thus, one that ascribes to diverse and diversifying discussions, about experience of various kinds and also about response to the master discourses of imperial Europe (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995: 2). As Said proposes to dismantle the discourse of western hegemony, so, too, do the opening chapters of this study attempt to reveal the colonial desires and structures prevalent in Art Nouveau form. These follow formal logics as much as ideological ones, with a hierarchy of objects and directed ways of experiencing them put in place. Accordingly, these modes of analysis may then be followed into unpacking the dominant narratives that underpin the modern art gallery and modernist architecture. However, when dealing with objects and constructed images, as opposed to texts, certain material truths come to the fore that, potentially, undercut overbearing languages of "domestication and acquisition" (Miller, 1985:15). With the objects and built environments of this thesis being non-representational (in the sense that they do not illustrate stories or histories, largely employing architectural and abstract sculptural form), critical approaches to written discourse and literature cannot always be directly applied.

Where Said's *Orientalism* tends to see culture as "simply hegemonic and disciplinary," this study attempts to avoid analyses that allow for monolithic constructions (Clifford, 1988: 263). Rather, the aim is to push the boundaries of those compartmentalizing structures made visible in the examples to hand and reveal them to be teetering on the point of crisis. Further, while certain ideas concerning

13. Aime Cèsaire's notion of transplanting and cross-pollination, which draws on ideas of an organic interculture of collective symbols that is both mobile and moving (in an emotional sense), is also of relevance.
14. This theory does, potentially, allow for the trap of only critiquing western hegemony, a major criticism of postcolonial studies espoused by scholars like Arif Dirlik (1994).

Euro-America's conception of the Orient may be applied to Africa — especially the way in which the former poses the latter as Other as a way of defining itself — there are fundamental differences between Africanist and Orientalist studies. While a great deal was known about Africa, willful myths and untruths, labelled as fact, continued into the 20th century (possibly to a greater extent than for the Orient) (Miller, 1985: 20).[15] Accordingly, unpacking forms describing Africa (specifically the Congo) require a combination of tools provided by Said's thinking and the greater realm of postcolonial theory, mixed with African modes of thought, with a critical eye to both.[16]

As scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Frantz Fanon have emphasized, Eurocentric disciplines such as history (and, for the purposes of this study, art and architectural history) only tell the story of the west, with non-western narratives perceived as a means through which to bolster western narratives (Chakrabarty, 2000: 27; Fanon, 1967: xv).[17] Chakrabarty's (2000) challenge to provincialize Europe, taking down its claims of universal rights to the story of modernity, recognizes the complete entanglement of objects in the metropole and colony with each other. His proposal, which is taken up in these pages, is thus not to abandon European thought, but rather to develop ways of using it "from and for the margins" (Chakrabarty, 2000: 16).

If postcolonial studies brings unseen subaltern voices to the fore, the more sensory-orientated, material-based approach adopted here, concerned with surface textures and discernible signs of interactions and age, serves to highlight what was visible all the time. While still allowing for the excavation of hidden meanings, it also looks to the make-up of things to see what was already present, before reflection and aesthetic critique was employed to interpret them. This takes on Merleau-Ponty's notion of phenomenology, which maintains that things exist according to how they are perceived.[18] At the same

15. Within the false hierarchy of European eugenics, while Asian and Arabic peoples were considered less developed than Europeans, so-called tribal cultures of Africa and Polynesia were seen as lowest on the evolutionary chain.
16. Afro-centred theories developed in liberation movements, like Negritude, are important to this study. As will be delineated, they tend to set up reactionary monolithic systems: pitting that which is African against European. In so doing, they tend to pay credit to European constructions of Africa, by taking its positive essentialisms — for example, pre-colonial culture as noble and awe-inspiring — while discarding that part that saw its people as savage and uncivilized.
17. Thinking along similar lines, V.Y. Mudimbe has made substantive studies of Western scholarly construction of Africa, through scientific disciplines and philosophical thought. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (1990) is thus an important guide in systematically detailing the history of western discourse building up a construction of Africa-as-other.
18. Merleau-Ponty (1962: xii) decries the idea of a detached consciousness of thought, insisting that "the world is not what I

time, the body being "in the world as the heart is in the organism" is seminal in linking the perceptive body to greater networks, outside of themselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 8).

The manner in which bodies encounter artworks and built environments is important for understanding their impact. In being aware of bodily reactions, a heightened awareness of a more "sensuous interrelationship of body-mind environment" attempts to advance beyond an analysis that relies purely on sight to gain understanding of architecture and objects (Howes, 2005: 7). This pushes against the rules of formal visual analysis, which dissect creative form down to a narrative of line, shape and plastic mass and judge these according to their aesthetic goals. Without discarding this mode of working entirely, this study seeks to recognize bodily logics in architecture and objects, examining the way in which materials and spatial practice communicate with the senses. While some objects and environments to be discussed work through textures and proportions that display empathetic anthropomorphic qualities (Congolese museum objects), others are immersive, setting up an out-of-body experience (fantastical Art Nouveau environments). At the same time, more disciplinary architectonics of outsized inorganic forms dominate and threaten the fragile body (totalitarian architecture).

In all of the above observations, looking to the "thing-power" of structures does not take attention away from their inscribed politics or the intended message of its maker/s, but seeks to complicate them by adding additional layers of interpretation (Bennett, 2010: xvi). In speculating about the experiential qualities of man-made constructions that were intended to entertain, delight, seduce and impress, looking closely at what their formal composition can tell, as well as what their surface effects say about what they are made of, allows for a closer connectivity to the original spheres and activities that led to their making. With this in mind, this study seeks to reinsert some of the wonder of these carefully constructed objects and scaffoldings, seeing them as vibrant entities or animated amalgamations that have a "small but irreducible degree of independence from the words, images and feelings they provoke in us" (Bennett, 2009: xvi).

According to a reading that sees man-made matter, or crafted natural materials, as intrinsically lively,

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think but what I live through." The primary text referred to is his *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

without actually being alive, they cannot be seen only as isolated masses of texture, colour and form, but as something that exists within a larger organization. The manner in which an object or building fits into, interacts with and impacts on the greater field in which it is situated is of as much importance as its relationship to the perception of human bodies. Following Arjun Appadurai's thinking, in the *Social Life of Things* (1986), all architecture and exhibitions discussed in the following pages are viewed in terms of their sociability, within the stretch of their trajectory of existence. As constructions that, in one way or another, inhabit an idea of the Congo, they are seen as "thoroughly socialized things" that endure because of interactions with people and other things (Appadurai, 1986: 6). It is in unpacking what this sociability consists of — the process of exchange — that meaning can be extrapolated.[19] As objects interact with interiors and buildings with cities, they are partially responsible for renegotiating the terms of their value. This point of view thus bestows the agentic quality of things in motion (semiotically, if not literally) onto inanimate things whose meanings within societies are not static.

In order to navigate and trace the agentic life of man-made designs, this study attempts to reinsert the context of the present-day, while allowing them to carry the various weights of their histories. This approach aims at returning some agency to subaltern, non-human things, often mistaken for having none. In so doing, Bruno Latour's (2003: 3) idea that there are no pure forms, such as "society" and "thing," but "circulations, transfers, translations, displacements and crystallizations" is drawn on. Within such thinking, there is a notion of reading design as a series of enveloping entanglements, with humans inside it moving "from envelope to envelope, fold to fold, never from one private sphere to the Great Outside" (Latour, 2008: 8). When looking at constructions within environments, or objects in interiors, they may thus be seen as embedded in networks, rather than contexts.

Further, Latour's (2005) notion of actor-network theory, as a cluster of actors involved in creating meaning that is both material and semiotic, provides a key into discussions around man-made constructions as objects in motion in a world that, in itself, is not static. Within this, non-human actors and greater environmental forces need to be considered. Particularly apt in coming to terms with

19. This exchange, which is the source of the object's value (and, accordingly, the catalyst for its ability to move through contexts and temporalities), may be seen as a consequence of common goals: the material result of a process by which value is determined reciprocally (Appadurai, 1986: 3).

buildings and objects, whose circumstances at the beginning of their lives are different from those at the end, is their status that is determined by various actants around them, including the community's attitude to them. This, in turn, is related to the manner in which they have managed to establish themselves within organic and inorganic systems. Overlaying these irrevocably interlinked factors is the constant motion of the natural environment, itself co-dependent on human and human-made actors and the manner in which they dwell alongside and within it.

This thesis thus attempts to focus on its objects of study, so often subjected to subaltern status in relation to human subjects, in order to better see the "subject-object relationship" (Brown, 2001: 4). Accordingly, it aims to look at (rather than through) constructed environments, within greater hybrid ecologies.[20] In opening wide the arena of objects as actors within networks, colonial claims that tend to see "things as facts" (or the objects of othered cultures as proof of their primitivity or degeneration) are challenged (Brown, 2001: 4). As such, it disassociates with modernism's artificial ontological distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects (Latour, 2014: 12). It does not seek to read designs purely in terms of their modernism — their links to previous constructions across stylistic categories — but also their connections to the organic and inorganic networks around them. That the seeds for this approach may be found in Art Nouveau form itself (which sought to break down barriers, see objects as organisms and look to nature for a inspiration) is testament to the positive side of its legacy.

In setting up a specialized formula of approaches, which alters according to the context and special qualities of the objects and environments of each chapter, this thesis's overall theoretical project is to de-link from colonial systems of thought. Instead of only exposing underlying master discourses of power, it attempts to experiment with new theoretical grids. Rather than only seeking to critique dominant knowledge systems "that produced epistemic privilege and authority to Western man's knowledge production and inferiority for the rest" (Grosfoguel, 2013: 86), the discussions that follow seek to undercut them with different hermeneutic pathways. The broad theme of looking for the Congo's influence on modernism is aimed towards actively locating and opening up new, hybrid epistemologies and, in so doing, contributing to a broader theoretical concern with decolonizing the

20. This takes on Bill Brown's (2001: 4) provocation that "we look through objects, only to catch a glimpse of things."

study of aesthetics and design.

The Congo Epic: Literature Review

As this study looks at modernist design, with Art Nouveau as a proto-modernist style, the manner in which the movement has been written about presents the starting point for a literature review. The precedent of broad overviews on the greater topic of modernism, that places Art Nouveau at the forefront, begins with Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*.[21]

Numerous tomes on Art Nouveau, as an international style, exist. They largely follow a set pattern. They present the movement via its geographic specificities (for example, identifying the characteristics that distinguish the Belgian from the Germany version) and prominent figures within this, situated along a timeline (beginning with influences that led to the style and ending with reasons for its demise). In these publications, the sections dealing with Belgian Art Nouveau, mostly represented by Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde, do not mention the colonial regime's commissioning of works or that Congolese raw materials were employed throughout (for some English language examples, see Battersby, 1967; Bouillon, 1985; Duncan, 1994; Fahr-Becker, 2007; Greenhalgh, 2000;[22] Madsen, 1967;[23] Rheims, 1966; Schmutzler, 1962; Sterner, 1982; Waddell, 1977; Wolf, 2011). Contemporary exceptions within these bodies of scholarship are Stephen Escritt (2000: 72–80) and Jeremy Howard (1996: 36–38). These both make reference to the colonial exhibition (Palais des colonies) at Tervuren in 1897 and point out that the Congo Free State was a primary source of financial backing for Belgian Art Nouveau.[24] Klaus-Jürgen Sembach (2007: 42) alludes to the monarch's patronage of the Art Nouveau style and describes his pillage of the Congo as being "unusual," "bold" and "profitable."

21. This lineage has subsequently been entrenched in overviews such as those by Frampton ([1985] 2007) or Greenhalgh (1990).

22. Greenhalgh's extensive catalogue for the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition *Art Nouveau: 1890–1914* (2000) in London follows this format, but provides in-depth contemporary commentary. Relationships to colonial regimes of Belgium and Holland are named as an influence in one line, but not explored further (Greenhalgh, 2000: 9).

23. Madsen's *Sources of Art Nouveau* (first published in 1956) is considered the first comprehensive historical bibliography of the European Art Nouveau movement (Schmutzler, 1962: 279).

24. The notoriety which King Leopold II garnered in the international popular press often overshadows these discussions. This was also the case with his personal life, in particular, his alleged affair with Parisian dancer Cléo de Mérode.



Figure 9: Contemporary view of downtown Kinshasa

Belgian publications tend to follow the same mould, especially focusing on Horta and van de Velde as the movement's primary innovators. Jos Vandenbreeden and Francoise Aubry have authored numerous articles and books concerning the Belgian movement, with a particular specialization in Horta.[25] Likewise, Werner Adriaenssens and Léon Ploegaerts, as well as Klaus-Jürgen Sembach and Birgit Schulte, tend to focus on van de Velde.[26] Across this Belgium-based literature, the fact of major Art Nouveau designers' involvement in the colonial exhibition of the 1897 World's Fair is discussed as a historically important site of Art Nouveau innovation and, as such, a source of civic pride.[27] Discussions concerning Horta's *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*, while mentioning that the design was commissioned by the Governor General of the Congo Free State, are primarily concerned with its stylistic contribution to Belgium's modernist architectural legacy.

The theme of an Art Nouveau object having the potential to embody questionable politics (although not colonial affiliations) was first alluded to by Walter Benjamin, early in the 20th century.[28] Benjamin understood van de Velde's efforts to ensure that every aspect of his interiors fitted in with the overall aesthetic, to be ruled by an all-encompassing individualism that barred outsiders from participating (Benjamin, 1997: 5).[29] Accordingly, he judged Art Nouveau's design strategy of harmonious synthesizing of form, intended as a soothing antidote to the pressures of urbanity, to be an escapist fantasy based on exclusion.

Tackling the political content of the Belgian colonial exhibition of 1897 more directly, essays and chapters in books by Kevin Dunn, Tom Flynn and Johan Lagae all point out the promotional aspect of the colonial exhibition at the 1897 Brussels World's Fair.[30] The manner in which the overriding goal of the exhibition, to promote commercial prospects in the Congo, was superficially coated with a veneer

25. These include Aubry and Vandenbreeden (1994); Aubry and Vandenbreeden (1996); Dierkens-Aubry, Vandenbreeden and Vanlaethern (1994).
26. These include Sembach and Schulte (1992); Sembach (1989); Ploegaerts and Puttemans (1989); and Ploegaerts (1999).
27. This is also true of less well known work on Serrurier-Bovy and Hankar (e.g., Loyer 1986, 1991; 2005; Watelet 1970; 1987).
28. This reference is found in Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project,* first published in 1982, as well as in his notes for this work, stored in the Jugendstil folder, written between 1927 and 1940.
29. He further compares the uncomfortable coupling of art and industry found in Art Nouveau to Futurism's passionate embrace of technology. Today, the Futurist's association with fascism is fairly well established due to the politics of artists like Marinetti (see Bowler, 1991).
30. See Lagae's (2000); Flynn (1998); and Dunn (2003: 34–36).

of a benevolent and civilizing European intervention is the primary theme. In a similar spirit, Sebastien Clerbois' article "The Revival of Ivory Sculpture in Belgium (1890–1910): The Material in Question" (2011) looks at how ivory was collected in the Congo and then utilized in sculpture commissions.[31] Earlier works on the *Palais des Colonies* of 1897 deal with the history of the construction of the exhibition and its commissioned artworks. Maurits Wynants' *Van Hertogen en Congolezen* (1997) provides a great deal of contextualizing information about the exhibition and its reception in Belgium.[32] Limited information about the Congo Free State and its administration is provided.

To date, Deborah Silverman presents the only comprehensive study dedicated to the links between Belgian Art Nouveau and King Leopold II's colonial regime.[33] Crucially, she demonstrates how deeply pervasive "the Congo" is in Belgian Art Nouveau practice, politics and representation. In so doing, she lays the groundwork on which the second chapter of this thesis builds. In a series of articles, Silverman introduces the historical terrain of Art Nouveau in Belgium, looking at Symbolist artists, poets and modernist writers she connects to the movement. In "Modernité Sans Frontières: Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of the Avant-Garde in King Leopold's Belgium" (2011), she discusses Paul Verlaine's visit to Belgium and his encounter with figures such as Henry van de Velde. She draws in the mood of colonial fervour, bound up in strong nationalistic drives (engendered by intellectuals, such as Henri Carton de Wiart and Emile Vandevelde), that was prominent at the time. Silverman describes van de Velde's thrall with the Congo Free State, providing information regarding letters sent by the designer's brother while on a mission in Central Africa with Henry Morton Stanley. Silvermann performs visual analysis on uses the stamps and flags of the Congo Free State in order to expose colonial attitudes towards Congolese people. She reads artworks from this time, most prominently the ivory sculptures that were commissioned by the colonial regime, against the backdrop of the Red Rubber atrocities.[34]

Continuing with these themes, Silverman uses a series of three articles, entitled "Art of Darkness:

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31. Clerbois places these works in the category of Belgian Symbolism, rather than Art Nouveau.
32. This, in turn, builds on Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel (1967), which includes a thorough inventory of the artworks on display. The history of the participation of Art Nouveau artists in the exhibition is a focus.
33. Visual artists who have approached the topic of the 1897 Palais des Colonies and the Royal Africa Museum at Tervuren from a postcolonial perspective include Peggy Buth (2008) and Judith Barry (1992). The latter is particularly critical of Art Nouveau, directly linking the Belgian style to colonial activity in the Congo.
34. The term "Red Rubber," with its allusion to blood, came about during a campaign to discredit King Leopold II's regime, in which atrocities committed during the collection of rubber were exposed.

African Lineages of Belgian Modernism" (2011b, 2012 and 2013), to chart Art Nouveau as a form of "imperial modernism, created from Congo raw materials and inspired by Congo motifs" (Silverman, 2011b: 3). The Art Nouveau motifs Silverman identifies as being inspired by the Congo are those of the whiplash (cruelly administered by the colonial overseers), the vine (rubber plants) and the elephantine (stemming from the elephants that provided ivory). In the second article, Silverman links van de Velde's work to Congolese scarification practices, which she identifies as an influence on his decorative patterning on household objects and clothing.[35] Across a broad range of images, texts, figurative forms, events and exhibitions (some forming part of the Art Nouveau movement and others in its vicinity), Silverman sets out an aesthetics of domination in *fin de siècle* Belgium that demands to be considered.[36]

Silverman's work is seminal for Art Nouveau studies, most especially for bringing the colonial culture embedded in the Belgian movement into the open. Entertaining the idea that Henry van de Velde was influenced by a Congolese body art is an especially significant step forward in adding additional layers to our current understanding of Art Nouveau primitivism. My study follows on from Silverman's, extending her historical lens to locate Art Nouveau forms in the Congo itself. In so doing, it seeks to come to terms with the power of the movement's abstract forms and how these work in conjunction with the effects of the total artwork.

In viewing Art Nouveau's Congo as a highly sophisticated and mesmerizing style of early modernist design, its faculty for subtle persuasion is a key pivot in this thesis. Belgian Art Nouveau's adept mastery over its craft rendered sophisticated forms from the raw materials of Africa, while at the same time propagating an idea of an unmastered, wild Congo. This image ties in with one of the strongest and most enduring constructions of Africa and the Congo, that of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

35. The first article, similarly to those by Flynn (1998) and Clerbois (2011) , focuses on figurative ivory sculptures by Belgian Symbolists, like Charles van der Stappen and Phillipe Wolfers. It also locates both elephantine and whiplash forms in various distinctive design objects by Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde. The third article focuses on van de Velde's later work, as a "steamer style" (alluding to the era of steamships) and also provides a critical history of the Royal Museum for Central Africa's representation of the Congo, ending with the role of historic violence in Belgian national identity (Silverman, 2013: 3).

36. While Silverman's most recent article, "Diasporas of Art: History, the Tervuren Royal Museum for Central Africa, and the Politics of Memory in Belgium" (2015), still deals with the issues mentioned above, it moves into the sphere of museums and the disappearance of violent histories in representations of Congolese culture in museum exhibitions. Silverman (2015: 48–49) suggests that objects be considered "diasporic," and their labels reflect their different exhibition histories in Euro-American museums.

([1899] 1985). This classic novella, based on the author's experience in King Leopold II's Congo Free State, sees its main protagonist, Marlow, travelling along the Congo River (not named as such) to find European ivory trader Mr Kurtz. With dense, psychologically intense prose, the narrative takes the viewer on a journey into the middle of Africa, the heart of human darkness. According to Edward Said, the book captures the imperial position of being locked into its own, circular system of uncontrollable forces (famously described in Kurtz' last words as, "the horror, the horror"), unable to see outside of itself (1993: 23).

Heart of Darkness's huge influence on the imagination of Anglophile scholarship should never be underestimated. The strength of Conrad's analogy, binding Congo-as-Africa and Congo-as-colony to human darkness (which, effectively, locks it into ambiguous objecthood), has its own autonomy, infiltrating all kinds of texts, across scholarly literature (largely Anglophone) concerning the Congo.[37] Conrad's homogenizing abstraction of the Congo, which separates it from Africa's material reality, is thus referenced over and above any Congolese symbolic narratives.[38] Whereas a backlash concerning the racist overtones of Art Nouveau has only recently begun to be broached, those against Conrad came in the 1970s, most prominently voiced by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. In essence, Achebe criticizes the premise of Africa set up as a foil to Europe ([1977] 2001: 1784). It is Conrad's adept writing, being able to create a "hypnotic stupor, while claiming to depict reality" in which the betrayal of the book is located (Achebe, [1977] 2001: 1785). Additionally insulted by Conrad's casual racism, Achebe interprets the ultimate horror at the heart of Conrad's jungle to be that the archetypal white colonial, Mr Kurtz, becomes as savage as the Africans around him ([1977] 2001: 1787).[39]

Within Conrad's self-consciously circular narrative are similar themes to those employed in this study, beginning with Said's idea that immersion within a closed system of imperialism shuts out the full experience of it (1993: 28). Because this fabricated world draws attention to itself, as an

37. As seen in Silverman's title, *Art of Darkness*, the urge to reference Conrad's harrowing vision of the Congo (without taking on the complexities of the book's ambiguous message) is common. In the literature that informed this thesis, alone, this is evident in the work of Arendt (1973: 185–188); Clifford (1988: 10); Comoroff and Comoroff (2011: 35); Fraiture (2009: 44); Mirzoeff (1998: 167–170); and Van Reybrouck (2014: 97).

38. This is illustrated in a book like Wrong (2000), where a book about Mobutu Sese Seko is framed by Conrad's fictional character.

39. Said adopts a different interpretation, reading the horror as the darkness of a non-European world resisting imperialism, which neither Kurtz nor Marlowe can see (1993: 24).

artificial construction, it allows the reader to sense the potential of a reality beyond imperialism (ibid). Further, amidst Conrad's employment of tropes of trite artificial veneers, in the face of raw nature, the theme of ornamentation is drawn in. At a critical point in the novel, Marlowe discovers that what he thought to be decorative elements on Mr Kurtz's barricades (and, as such, evidence of sophistication or domestication) are, on closer inspection, the disembodied heads of people.[40] Conrad thus provides a poignant reminder of the violent reality beneath any attempt to decorate the "ugly business" of colonialism (and, for that matter, the ugly business of beautifying space with imagery of subject African people) (Conrad, 1985: 2008).

Moving through the 20th century, the Congo as a chaotic darkness, beset by poverty, war and disease has followed Conrad's title into countless examples of journalism and popular culture (Dunn, 2003: 15; Mirzoeff, 1998: 170). From coverage of the Ebola virus and child soldiers, the Congo is characterized as "symptomatic of a wild and undomesticated country" (De Boeck and Plissart, 2004: 22).[41] Resoundingly, whether sensationalist or serious, the heart of darkness trope criss-crosses the story of representing the Congo, when told from the outside.

Perhaps the most influential non-fiction book that consciously attempts to consider the real-world into which *Heart of Darkness* is set is Adam Hochschild's bestseller, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1998). In attempting to locate the historical figure/s on which Conrad's Mr Kurtz was based, Hochschild (1998: 140–149) follows what he calls "colonial violence" and "greed." Edmond Morel is posed as the main hero of his title, with its counterpoint being the villainous King Leopold II, aided by his henchman Stanley and other colonial administrators. Hochschild's strategy is to take historical facts (purportedly largely based on Daniel Vangroenweghe's *Du san sur les lianes. Léopold II et son Congo*, first published in 1990) and animate them with shocking detail (both violent and sexual), with no pretense of objectivity concerning his own moral outrage. In a comparable spirit to Hochschild while employing a different method David van

40. "I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen — and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids — a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth" (Conrad, 1985: 101–102).

41. In English literature, narratives set in the Congo are duty bound to pick up on Conrad's iconic tropes, layering notions of primordial nature, human darkness and bounded time over other contexts and plotlines. The most prominent of these are Naipaul (1979) and Kingsolver (1998).

Reybrouck's *Congo: The Epic History of a People* (2014). Similarly novelesque and openly narrated by the author, the history being told is based on the communication of a parade of Congolese informants, across different epochs. The salient feature of these influential works, from Conrad to Hochschild and van Reybrouck, is that their representations of the Congo were made with a specific Euro-American audience in mind.[42]

Taking a firm stance against "horror and humanitarianism," Nancy Rose Hunt dispenses with "catastrophe as a scaffolding" in *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (2016: 3–4). Following a theme of nervousness, Hunt refuses a narrative of a totalizing Belgian colonial state, while looking at specific histories in the region of Equateur (one of the primary sites of King Leopold II's rubber atrocities). In emphasizing flows of history, as opposed to event followed by aftermath, Hunt digs into Congolese poetics, for songs, myths and stories to weave together with historical narratives. Importantly for this study, she insists that an answer to the will to compartmentalize Congolese studies into damning categories (like modern versus traditional) lies in Congolese urbanity, which, by its fundamental nature, implies fluidity (Hunt, 2016: 15).

With the histories described above directing themselves towards Congolese points of view, the arc of the historiography of Congolese art reveals that such approaches are fairly radical. Early documentation of the material culture of Congolese peoples may be located in the earliest reports of European travellers to Central Africa. In Belgium, late 19th century colonial periodicals like *Le Congo Illustré* and *Le Mouvement Géographique* provide evidence of the interest Congolese culture inspired. Each edition included a section, or more, on local cultures, usually featuring their objects.[43] The catalogue to the Art Nouveau Gesamtkunstwerk, *Palais des Colonies* (edited by Liebrechts and Masui, 1897), consolidated much of this information.[44]

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42. The most comprehensive and well-known overview of the history of the Congo (utilized in the DRC) only available in French and authored by Congolese historian Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem. Unlike the bestsellers mentioned above, *Histoire du Zaïre: de l'héritage ancien à l'âge contemporain* (1997) is written in a conventional historical style.

43. Focus tends to be on the more outlandish elements of Congolese culture, with (often factually inaccurate) reports on scarification practices, body art and cannibalism being common.

44. Further information was published by societies such as the Anthropological Society of Brussels. Outside of Belgium, similar ethnographic studies emerged from other Euro-American travellers, especially in the rush for African objects that occurred in the early 20th century. With varied investments and interests, those who made notable contributions to the collecting and study of Central African art in Euro-America were: George Schweinfurth, Frederick Starr, Herbert Lang, Leo

The first attempt to classify Congolese art systematically was in 1938 by F.M Olbrechts and Maesen, to coincide with a major exhibition in Antwerp (Biebuyck, 1985: 19; Couttenier, 2005: 134).[45] The period from approximately the late 1930s onwards saw a plethora of exhibitions of the Africa Museum at Tervuren (known as the Musée du Congo Belge until Congolese independence in 1960) taking place in various European and American centres, generating accompanying catalogues.[46] These books stocked academic libraries across Euro-America, as well as those in Lubumbashi and Kinshasa, as explanatory guides to Congolese culture. With the onset of independence, Mobutu commissioned further tomes. The most well known of these are Joseph Cornet's exhibition catalogue for *Art from Zaïre: 100 Masterworks from the National Collection* (1975) and the earlier, more comprehensive, *Art of Africa: Treasures from the Congo* (1971), co-authored by Barbara Thompson.[47]

Importantly for this thesis, certain works regarding traditional arts of the Congo question the veracity of factual information regarding traditional objects in Euro-American collections. In *The Arts of Zaïre* (1985), Daniel Biebuyck interrogates the authenticity of tribal origins, looking to inaccuracies in the terms of the collection of objects. Curtis Keim and Enid Schildkrout's *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa* (1998) contextualizes how all manner of misunderstandings and assumptions took place, at the point of collection.[48] Another refreshing agentic angle on traditional Congolese art is introduced by Zoe Strother. *Inventing Masks* (1998) focuses on the masks of the Pende people, from a contemporary perspective, charting how the Pende tradition of mask-making is a process of constant reinvention.

Overviews of African art that look to contemporary practice have to separate themselves from ethnographic concerns.[49] Some of this intellectual groundwork was begun in Kwame Appiah's seminal

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Frobenius and Emil Torday.

45. Published in 1938 as *Plastiek Van Kongo*. Their later book was *l'Art Du Congo* (1958).

46. These include Olbrechts (1959); Wannyn (1961); Cahen (1967); and Sidoff (1974).

47. These books and catalogues tend to share the same overarching template. It begins with a few scholarly essays concerning the tribal conditions for which the exhibits/objects were originally intended for. Full-page photographs of single works then make up the bulk of the books. Because of the heavy quotient of photographic images, the effect of these catalogues are overpoweringly aesthetic, reflecting their in-between status as studies in both ethnography and art.

48. As does Schildkrout (1989). Fabian (2000) provides further information in this regard, detailing the day-to-day conditions of early explorers in the area (including Frobenius and Torday).

49. Enwezor and Oguibe (1999) proceed with the premise that the scope of their book is an entire continent, made up of various different socio-historical contexts and diversely complex regional styles. In their more recent work, Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009) adopt the strategy of locating the manner in which divergent groups of artists have responded to change, in order to counteract notions of traditional Africa as a static place. Similarly, Kasfir (1999: 9) sees his subject

article “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” (1991). In delineating how Euro-American categories of “postmodern” and “neo-traditional” tend to speak only to the concerns of its academy, without taking into account the lived experiences of African artists, in their own contexts, Appiah provides an important key through which literature and exhibitions on African art may be read.

In literature on primitivism, the historically liminal position occupied by African creative production — somewhere between art and craft — is further made apparent. The founding work that discusses the influence of African objects (and other supposedly primitive peoples) on modern art is Robert Goldwater’s Primitivism in Modern Art (1986, first published in 1938). While no attempt is made to explicate the artworks that inspired Euro-American primitivist artists (mostly painters and sculptors), Goldwater emphasizes how, in toppling the hierarchy of naturalistic representation, the expressive value of distorted forms found in ethnographic exhibits can signify signs of cultural development and skill in its makers (1986: 16).[50] Unusually for studies on primitivism, Goldwater includes a short section on Art Nouveau, locating the movement’s primitivism in the manner in which it essentializes organic growth to create abstract forms (1986: 55–56).

Outside of Goldwater’s study, primitivism today is popularly conceived of as a 20th century phenomenon of artists taking recourse in the art of tribal people, children and the insane (Flam and Deutsch, 2003: 3; Hiller, 1991: 2). Its traditional starting point is set by William Rubin, the director of painting and sculpture at the Museum for Modern Art in New York (MOMA) from 1968 to 1988. He locates this in Picasso’s visit to the Trocadero, in 1907 Paris, where the artist’s contact with “savage” objects set off an epiphany that was to have long-lasting effects on western representational form (Rubin, 2003: 87).[51] In an important counter to this narrative, Simon Gikandi maintains that Picasso was only interested in objectifying African bodies, with mimetic representations in the late 1890s, and

matter as African, in a “structural” sense, rather than a particular set of styles or mediums.

50. Goldwater sets the standard for focusing on painters, featuring Paul Gauguin, followed by Henri Matisse, the Fauvists, German Expressionism, Pablo Picasso and Cubism, as well as Paul Klee. More recently, critical work on the nature of primitivism in art and its relationship to racially based Eurocentric thought has most notably been taken up by Belting (1987), Connelly (1999), Gombrich (2002), and Hiller (1991).

51. As a 20thcentury phenomenon, primitivism was cemented by MOMA in its 1984 *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* exhibition. Iconic for its claims to the modernist narrative and the aestheticized subject-role of tribal objects within it, this exhibition marked the tipping point in the representation of other cultures in the Euro-American modern art museum.

did not entirely base his later, more radical spatial transformations (that came with Cubism) on African art (2007: 33–35).[52]

As more critical stances towards traditional Africanist studies are opened up, new approaches to museum histories have begun to emerge. Regarding the role of museums, Maarten Couttenier and Sarah van Beurden insert colonial narratives back into studies of Belgium's Royal Africa Museum at Tervuren (RMCA). In *Congo tentoongesteld: een geschiedenis van de Belgische antropologie en het Museum Van Tervuren* (2005), Couttenier provides a detailed history of the institution, including its roots in 19th century Belgian anthropology and its theories of biological diffusionism (in turn, linked to the museum's foundational Art Nouveau exhibition).[53] Van Beurden continues this critical line of inquiry by looking at the relations between Tervuren and the national museum of Zaïre (Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaïre, IMNZ). *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture* (2015) is, to date, the only study to address the uneasy politics of Belgian museum display spilling into the Congo's independence-era IMNZ.

Regarding studies of colonial architecture, across Kinshasa, Boma and Lubumbashi, Johan Lagae's work is prominent.[54] His research into the architecture of Kinshasa specifically has flown into the two architectural guidebooks on the city.[55] More historic, tourist-orientated, guidebooks also exist. For example, Jacques Fumunzanza Muketa's *Kinshasa. d'un quartier à l'autre* (2008) presents the city according to its different suburbs and their histories. In content this enthusiastic guide is partially indebted to a more serious, sparse work by Antoine Lumenganesso, *Kinshasa. Genèse et sites historique* (1995), that attempts to establish a history for the city that precedes the colonial, locating sites that can speak to other histories, amongst more obvious monuments. Except for mentions in

52. Further expansion on this theme has been made in a recent special edition of the *Journal of Art Historiography*, edited by Wilfried van Damme and Raymond Corbey. The European scholarly reception of "primitive art" in the decades around 1900 charts the scholarly reception of the plethora of so-called primitive arts in Europe, rather than focus on its influence on artistic expression.

53. This follows in the tradition of Boris Wastiau, whose *ExitCongoMuseum* exhibition (and accompanying catalogue) in 2000 was openly critical of the museum's colonial past. Similarly, Asselberghs and Lesage (1999) firmly situate the RMCA as a colonial institution.

54. Lagae (2004, 2008), Lagae and De Raedt (2014) and Lagae and Gemoets (2013) provides historical context and analysis of specific structures in the Congolese city space.

55. Both volumes (Lagae and Toulier, 2013; Lagae, Toulier and Gemoets, 2011) present the city's most notable buildings with a photograph and an introductory paragraph, and historical overviews of the city.



Figure 10: Contemporary view of the RMCA at Tervuren under construction

earlier, Mobutu-era publications, there is little work on the built heritage of early Zaïre. Books like *500 Visages du Zaïre* (1975) and *Kinshasa. ce village d'hier* (Molei, 1979) largely serve as vehicles for promoting Mobutu's rule and do not discuss design and culture in any depth. Similarly, coverage in the local press (such as the *Salongo* and *Elima* newspapers or the bi-monthly periodical *Zaïre*) tends to provide background information concerning the opening of new buildings, rather than discuss the structures themselves.[56] Broader attempts at consolidating African architecture across the continent have been few and tend to provide general information and defining characteristics.[57]

In *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (de Boeck and Plissart, 2014), Filip de Boeck pointedly eschews a focus on architectural heritage in favour of tracing patterns and flows of human infrastructures. Combined with photographs by Marie-Françoise Plissart, he provides an epic anthropological portrait of Kinshasa as an almost mythical entity, whereby its urban fabric may be glimpsed coagulating and erupting around human rites of popular culture, religion, witchcraft and entrepreneurial endeavours.

56. A single volume exists on the oeuvre of Clement Cacoub (Ragon 1974); on Eugene Palumbo see Lagae and de Raedt (2014).

57. Nnamdi Elleh (1997) attempts to give an overview of the architectural history of African art. His entry on Kinshasa discusses colonial trends as originating in Neoclassicism (Elleh, 1997: 177–178). Antoni Folkers (2010: 51) represents Kinshasa by its colonial architectural infrastructure. David Adjaye's (2011: 38–42) photographic survey provides a kaleidoscope of images of various major African cities, including Kinshasa.

Importantly, de Boeck deals with the concept of built form by posing bodies as constructions of the self. This approach opens up the arena of exploring soaring mental worlds and spiritual imaginings in a crumbling reality, where bodies replace houses.[58]

In two articles, Dominique Malaquais provides a view into Mobutu-era aesthetics. "Anti-teleology: Re-Mapping the Imag(in)ed City" (2012a) discusses the work of contemporary artists, primarily Mega Mingiedi, by way of a fascination for the tropes of this period, particularly the spectral presence of sci-fi imagery. Malaquais (2012a: 14) highlights how Mobutu's futuristic vision defines the cityscape and reads evidence of a positive Afro-futurism into certain gargantuan forms, which are also discussed in this study. She further provides a detailed analysis of the cultural stakes at play in Mobutu's carefully orchestrated "Rumble in the Jungle," the historic boxing event held in Kinshasa in 1974. "Rumble in Kinshasa" (Malaquais, 2012) delineates the underlying menace of Mobutu's *retour à l'authenticité*, reading a cynical use of Congolese tradition into the massive amount of publicity generated by the regime around the event.[59]

Literature on Kinshasa's art scene in the era of independence is restricted to brief Congolese surveys and press coverage, documenting important events and exhibitions. Badi-Banga Ne-Mwine's *Contribution à l'étude historique de l'art plastique zaïrois moderne*, of 1977, sets the model on which following editions are based. These are slim, paperback editions outlining historical facts and naming relevant artists, with a limited amount of visuals.[60] As concise mappings of different stylistic trends in the plastic arts, they form the only testament to the work of pro-Mobutu visual artists, centred around Kinshasa. The only compendium of modern and contemporary Congolese art, to date, is the catalogue to the exhibition *Beauté Congo — 1926–2015 — Congo Kitoko* (2016), curated by André Magnin. Spanning the 20th century to the present, the catalogue focuses on key artists in prominent Euro-American collections, including Albert Lubaki and Pilipili Mulongoy, alongside well-known names

58. More recent anthropological work may be found in Bob White (2008). Looking specifically at the Mobutu era, White's examination of the relationship between popular music and postcolonial politics provides an important perspective on Kinois culture.

59. Okwui Enwezor (2001) tackles post-independence African aesthetics in the catalogue to the exhibition *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*. The three essays on architecture do not deal directly with Kinshasa, but provide linking themes concerning colonial inheritances and assertions of autonomy. De Boeck and Plissart (2003) discusses Kinshasa.

60. The main works are by Joseph Ibongo (2009) and Bamba Ndombasi (2010; 2014).

on the international scene like Chéri Samba and Bodys Isek Kingelez. Congolese artists who had been endorsed by Mobutu during the period of *authenticité*, like Alfred Liyolo, are not included.

Walking and Waiting: Methodological approaches

This study began as a series of artworks, from 2009, when I was living and working as a visual artist in Brussels.[61] Coming from South Africa, where public representations of apartheid leaders are highly contested, I found the presence of King Leopold II in public statues and monuments eerie. Knowing of the Red Rubber Regime (largely Adam Hochschild's version), I tried to locate further physical presence of the Congo Free State in the visible cityscape, less obvious images I could work with. What I found was Art Nouveau.

On realizing that the timing of Brussels' distinctive design phenomenon coincided with King Leopold II's colony, I investigated further to discover points of convergence and collusion between them. In systematically visiting Art Nouveau sites, which I had begun to see as unusual markers of the early colonial era, and looking at its sinuous forms, the shapes struck me as being somewhat sinister, claiming space with thrusting and grasping lines.[62]

The methodology I follow in this theoretical study has largely followed my approach to artistic research that this beginning sketched. That is to say, while I have engaged in in-depth literary analysis and archival research, a great deal of my information-gathering has relied on me looking at and experiencing the sites under discussion and their surrounds. The research may thus be seen to be "personally situated, interdisciplinary and diverse" (Barrett, 2010: 2). Walking around the cities of Brussels and Kinshasa to locate places of interest has allowed me a better understanding of their changeable diversity. As described by Michel de Certeau (1984: 99), "stepping through proportions, sequences and intensities, which vary according to the time," ensures that experience of these spaces cannot be "reduced to their graphic trail." In cases of historic exhibitions long since dismantled, the

61. The resulting artworks are not discussed here. The series of prints, illuminated drawings and text pieces culminated in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under Seas* (Sacks, 2013).

62. This is unsurprising given that, in popular culture, Art Nouveau has often been used in sci-fi imagery, to achieve unsettling effects. The most prominent example is H.R. Geiger's work, popularized in the sets of Ridley Scott's *Alien* movie franchise (which released feature films in 1979, 1986, 1992 and 2012).

objects and pieces of furniture that remain in collections were as crucial as the literature around them, providing me a sense of how their exhibition display functioned. In the same way, the idiosyncratic nature of the archives I consulted in Brussels, Hagen and Kinshasa and their visible disorder and intense atmospheres, although of very different natures, were highly effective in shaping my thinking around how the Congo has been represented in design and architecture.

The primary methodological work of this doctoral project has been to make links while amassing and piecing together different kinds of information, across various languages. In terms of written and spoken languages, the terrain has necessitated navigating a number of languages, listed in the order of my proficiency): English, Dutch, French, German, Lingala and Kikongo. As a result, I have welcomed the input, editing and embellishments that my various translators, interlocutors and friends have brought to the project.[63] In visiting living sites, looking for signs of their histories and reading in-built stylistic programming off their current circumstances, aesthetic experience has, to a degree, been treated as a language. This approach does not preclude formal visual analysis, but eschews the sole employment of conventional art historical analysis. Given my interest in allowing objects to "speak" for themselves, I have aimed to read them as nodal points within greater networks. Within this realm of converting images into words, the fact that these images — buildings within cities, exhibits in displays — are not texts is important to note. Plastic form and architectural space do not affect viewers via the eyes alone and, accordingly, are more evocative. As a practitioner trained in art history, the manner in which these logics function are at the forefront of my concerns.

Gaining access to buildings like *Maison Horta, Hôtel Van Eetvelde* and *Hôtel Otlet* in Brussels served to convince me of the material seductions that Art Nouveau total artworks are capable of (which photographs do not adequately convey). At the same time, the strangely suspended state of heritage sites, done up in an imitation of a moment in their past, does a great deal to enhance the sense of artificiality that Benjamin first recognized in Art Nouveau. Even more estranged from everyday life, the

63. This process involved conducting interviews and email conversations, as well as reading texts together with others. Rather than reading official translations, the process of reading key texts together with others and comparing our understandings has proved to be richly rewarding (especially when wading through the convoluted German prose of Henry van de Velde with painter Dorothee Kreutzveldt). In Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu, the contribution of my colleague Emery Kalema provided a great deal of nuance that would otherwise have been lost.

RMCA libraries and archives at Tervuren provide a disorientating experience. Beginning with a lengthy and jerky tram journey through a forest, the visitor's state of dislocation from the main city is enhanced when she has to wade through dense mud and rain, since construction began in 2013.[64]

I went to Kinshasa with the intention of locating a counter-narrative to my version of the Art Nouveau story. I found not only a rich seam of fantastical, futuristic imagery in Mobutu-era constructions, but also the faint remainders of Art Nouveau itself in the metal frameworks of what was formerly the *Hotel ABC*.[65] Attempting to come to terms with aspects of the built inheritances of Kinshasa required a great deal of circumlocutory conversations, as well as long journeys in crowded taxis. Visiting local archives and libraries served to prove the extent to which rumours about systematic pillaging during the unrest of the 1990s were true.[66] The few documents, photographs and periodicals that remain tend to represent the colonial era (already comprehensively covered in Belgium). Memorably, my introduction to the IMNC archives involved going through the collection cards and having each missing item pointed out to me. These silences and the lack of documentation necessitated having to pursue interviews with architects, artists, educators and experts for information. The process of securing and conducting meetings with a range of informants not only allowed for a personal mapping of the city, but also its social systems and normative modes of functioning. Similarly, seeking out impressions of the current-day situation of sites of interest, as well as trying to photograph them, provided additional layers to this work.[67] My understanding of my own project has been heightened by having to explain to security guards and officials why I wanted to photograph particular aspects of various buildings.[68]

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64. Curiously, I encountered some of the pieces discussed in my study in unorthodox ways at Tervuren. Georges Hobé's wooden structure, which once displayed Congolese exports products, is now a ghostly presence, recast as an outsized outdoor sculpture (sometimes decorated with fairy lights). In the storerooms of the science section of the museum, I found a large Henry van de Velde table (recognizably a relic from the 1897 *Palais des Colonies*), slowly being imprinted with the weight of a working cocktail fridge and a large concrete cupid sculpture.

65. It is now impossible for me to see the total artworks of Brussels without picturing this fragile building overlooking a logging site on the banks of the legendary Congo River. The connection to the indigenous timber that was sent to Belgium to line extravagant Art Nouveau interiors is one I keep returning to.

66. Often mentioned are the National Archives, the IMNC Library and the RTNC Archives.

67. The seemingly random sets of special rules that are applied to visitors at different sites — where to stand, when to sit, how long to wait, whom to speak to — presented a Kafkaesque picture of random bureaucracy. This was easily matched by procedure at Tervuren (with equally long waiting periods, sometimes outdoors in bad weather) and the thoroughly idiosyncratic processes of identification and form-filling in Belgian and German archives.

68. In both Kinshasa and Brussels issues around entry into key sites and ownership of images, as well as the right to photograph, are fraught. Art Nouveau buildings in Brussels are protected both by the estates of their designers and by the applicable local municipalities. In the DRC, photography of public spaces is forbidden by law and individual permission has





Figure 11: Contemporary images of a statue of Leopold II at *Place du Trône*, Brussels;
Figure 12: Art Nouveau remains of the *Palais des Colonies* in the grounds at Tervuren, Brussels

I believe that the bank of visual, textual, oral and experiential fragments that resulted in the pages that follow would not have had the necessary depth had all of these negotiations and blockages not taken place. Reading off the social fabric, and the actual and intellectual landscapes that house the sites under discussion, allows for a better understanding of their public lives. As much as broad, establishing information is important, so too is detail. It is because of the splintered nature of this research that the importance of otherwise inconsequential detail could rise to the fore. A great deal of waiting allowed for unexpected glimpses into the topic at hand. Fragmented experience of, say, a textured concrete wall, a personal postcard underneath a pile of registered archival prints or an outlandish logo on a hotel coaster stick to this thesis as much as its iconic architecture and exhibitions.

With the above in mind, I found translation of stylistic tropes and contemporary landscapes into the written word only allows for a certain kind of commentary. In order to deal with this, sections of information are provided in visual form. While some of the images are from archival collections, I took the rest as part of my research for this thesis. These photographs are intended to fill in other narratives and potentialities. Finally, thinking around the total artwork and seductive imagery has led me to develop a style of writing that responds to these forms. This study has thus adapted an intentionally stylized form that speaks to the content of the subjects that are analysed. In adding to the corpus of

to be granted to photograph in private spaces.





Figure 13: Contemporary street scenes in Gombe: Outisde the National Archives;
Figure 14: Contemporary view of *Tour Gécamines,* Kinshasa

work that seeks to represent the Congo, the pages that follow aim to allow for multiple viewpoints and alternative commentaries, wherever possible.

From Art Nouveau to *Authenticité:* Chapter Breakdown

The first chapter of this thesis, entitled "Designing the Total Artwork: Art Nouveau at the Start of Modernism," introduces Art Nouveau by way of f*in de siècle Brussels* and its new bourgeoisie. The chapter presents the context that gave birth to Art Nouveau as a turbulent melting pot for the arts. Examples of sensuous dreamscapes and experiments with new technology include works by its major designers, Henry van de Velde, Victor Horta, Paul Hankar and Gustave Serrurier-Bovy. The outlines of a modernist framework are explicated according to early Art Nouveau total artworks that self-consciously set out to defy categories of high and low art. At the same time, the particular primitivism of the design movement is introduced. Discussions concerning the manner in which the style was attempting to delineate a space for itself that was uniquely Belgian pave the way for dealing with one of its main international features: the possession of an African colony that King Leopold II hoped would turn his small and fractured country into an imperial powerhouse.

In the second chapter, "Looking for the Congo in Style Congo: Art Nouveau and the African Colony

," connections between Belgian Art Nouveau and the Congo Free State are made explicit. This begins with the contextualiation of the Congo's early colonial history within a network of links between the patrons, commissions and raw materials of Art Nouveau. Two iconic total artworks — the *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* (1989) by Victor Horta and the *Palais des Colonies*, exhibited at the 1897 Brussels World's Fair and for which van de Velde, Serrurier-Bovy and Hankar were responsible — are then explored as avant-garde practice in the service of the colonial administration. In these examples, the Congo, according to Art Nouveau logics, is transformed into a complicated site of modernization, organic profusion, exotic peoples and a dislocated laboratory for creative experimentation. It is at this moment, on the cusp of the 20th century, that an idea of the Congo becomes entangled with modernist aesthetics.

Chapter 3 then follows the Congolese object from the halls of colonial exhibitions into the 20th century art gallery, in order to arrive at postcolonial Zaïre. Entitled "Objects and their Agencies: Congolese Artifacts as Exhibition Organisms," this chapter takes the premise that van de Velde's Art Nouveau museum in Germany, the Folkwang Museum (which featured non-western art), had a direct influence on the minimalist art museum aesthetics of the archetypal Museum for Modern Art in New York (MOMA), developed in the 1930s. This allows for the opportunity to revisit Congolese exhibits within 20th century museums from the perspective of the implied politics of the total artwork. Key exhibitions of Congolese objects are explored in terms of the exhibits' effects on their surrounds.[69] Across these spaces, those objects that left the Congo to move through changing museum displays — crucially influencing modern art along the way — are seen as vital exhibition components. If the display systems of Congolese objects (and so-called primitive exhibits, in general), from New York and Paris to Kinshasa, reveal one of the possible forms developing out of Art Nouveau's experiential logics, certain metallic structures, sent from Belgium to colonial Congo, encapsulate another off-shoot of the movement.

The fourth chapter, "Brittle Utopias and Lived Remains: Style Congo in the Congo," looks at foundational settler structures from the early 20th century that have formal and ideological ties to the

69. The exhibitions dealt with are the *African Negro Art* exhibition at MOMA (1935, USA), various Surrealist outings in negrophiliac Paris (1930s, France), displays at the settler Musée de la Vie Indigène (Museum of Indigenous Culture) in Leopoldville (1930s, Belgian Congo), *Art from Zaïre* (1975–1976, USA) and *Foire Internationale de Kinshasa* (FIKIN) (1976, Kinshasa).

Belgian Art Nouveau movement. The former *Hotel ABC* buildings, in Leopoldville (circa 1911) and Thysville (built in circa 1897, with an adjacent workers' village), are discussed from the perspective of their contemporary role in the cityscapes of present-day Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu. As appendages to the railway, metal structures set certain depictions of architectonic progress in place, leading to eddying repercussions and cross-references in contemporary Congolese urbanity. Daily renegotiation of structures intended to delineate difference reveal that certain tensions cannot be eradicated, even as colonial remains are worn thin through continued use and as various environmental factors encroach on them.

Chapter 5 builds on the theoretical work of the previous chapters, on how to read of buildings, objects and environments , to talk about the aesthetic moment of independence in Kinshasa. "Congo Style: Congolese Modernism in the era of *authenticité*" looks at the variegated inheritances and invented traditions that fed into Mobutu-era commissions. It also deals with the role of the artworks by Kinshasa avant-gardists that adorned these sites. The combination of architecture and art present an important image of how the future was imagined in the time of Mobutu's policy of recours à l'authenticité. Towering forms discussed include *l'Échangeur* (the exchange) (1974), *Tour RTNC* (1975) and *Tour Gécomines* (1977). The giant enclosure of Mont Ngaliema (circa 1967–1972) is also described, by way of comparison to the mass public housing of Mobutu's *cités*. Across giant forms, a particular aesthetic of opaque veneer and colossal ambition describes new architectures of alterity. The manner in which these built environments have been acted on by surrounding urban forces, and how this differs from other remains that make up the city, allows for a discussion concerning the position that the soaring fictions of *authenticité* still embody for Congolese communities.

In the analyses of imaginariums of the Congo that follow, a lexicon of manipulated forms, spatial practices and materials emerges, each feeding into further utopian constructions. Complicated ideologies encoded into built forms (that intended to seduce and impress) are seen to be overlaid by the effects of the networks in which they are located. Accordingly, as various versions of the Congo are mapped in the pages that follow, their meanings are never static or simple.

Chapter One - Designing the Total Artwork: Art Nouveau at the start of Modernism

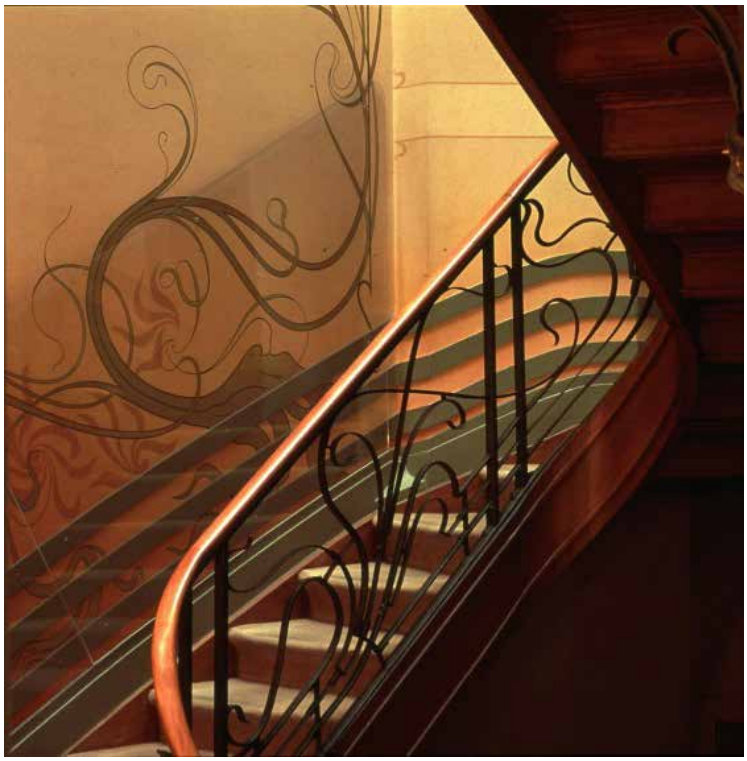


Figure 1.1: Interior of *Hotel Tassel* by Victor Horta (built in 1894)

Designing the Total Artwork: Art Nouveau at the Start of Modernism

The fundamental basis of Belgium's Art Nouveau movement is an unfurling, sinuous line. Tautly weighted at the center and curving outwards, this Belgian line was not only a dynamic expression of structural principle and the embodiment of prevailing aesthetic theory, but would also endure as the defining motif of the period. Belgium's branch of what was to become an international design sensation pioneered a new system of constructing total space. Asymmetrical linear ornamentation, found in decorative details, clasping furniture and swelling into structural support, encapsulated the spirit of an entire edifice, as well as that of the Belgian historical moment. In the musicality of enmeshed lines, its designers aimed to grasp a visionary emerging world that teemed with agency, power, activity and growth. As Art Nouveau marked the young country's coming of age, its sinusoidal line absorbed the deep tensions and unease of the Belgian moment.

Poised at the end of 19th century, and well aware of the beginning of the 20th, Belgium's total artworks were a daring bid for a new kind of holistic design, aimed at capturing the spirit of the era of industry. The movement attempted to harness a revolutionary mood, breaking with the revivalist trends and eclectic tendencies in architecture and interior design that had gone before. Pulsating, electric line formations ushered in a style of the future, while retaining an aura of the Romantic embrace of nature, as a wild and powerful force, from earlier in the century. Abstract vegetal forms, infused with exoticism, swept through Belgium for a short period, re-articulating the terms of European modernism in its wake. At the same time as bringing in avant-garde aesthetics, which were to reverberate across modernist design and art displays of the 20th century, questing and coiling lines also betray profound anxieties about the modern urban predicament. As attempts to capture zeitgeist energies led to agitated surfaces and silhouettes, plastic form also described the turbulent contradictions of an emerging nation determined to assert itself, while straddling highly unstable political and social ground.

Innovative Belgian design activity gave rise to the wildly popular Art Nouveau movement that quickly spread to key Euro-American cities, to then split apart. Despite cumbersome Art Nouveau aesthetics being as hastily abandoned as they were picked up, their long term influences eddied outwards to reverberate in 20th century architecture and design across the globe. This chapter explores the terrain

which gave rise to the particular form Art Nouveau took on in Belgium, from approximately 1890 to 1905.

As a way of understanding the manner in which deep-rooted anxieties are embedded in Art Nouveau's aesthetics, the political backdrop to its inception will be mapped out. The discussion will draw on prevailing theories concerning the natural world, in light of new technological developments, in terms of how they manifested in formative Art Nouveau. The concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork) is defined by new ways of reading the world, which then played out in the distinctively individuated forms of organicism advanced by Victor Horta, Henry van de Velde, Paul Hankar and Gustave Serrurier-Bovy. Part of how these artists experienced the natural environment relied on a sensory response to their rich accumulations of materials in expressive shapes.

This chapter introduces experimentation with the plastic qualities of the wood, glass and iron that is characteristic of the movement, according to what those mediums signaled to society at that time. In continuing to disentangle some of the primary influences on the infusion of styles and theories that informed Art Nouveau abstraction, the pages that follow address the complex primitivism which underwrote it. Patronizing and exoticized Art Nouveau attitudes to both Belgian peasant pasts and Oriental cultures are introduced as being intrinsic to all of the Belgian total artworks, from Horta's *Hôtel Tassel* (1893) to van de Velde's *Villa Bloemenwerf* (1895).

Accordingly, the main argument of this chapter is that the successes and failures of the Art Nouveau trajectory that ensued from fin de siècle Belgium were determined by an intrinsic primitivist urge. Merged with a desire to give the impression of movement and inner energies, these urges gave rise to a particular form of animism. The total artworks and other objects of this period are characterised by a particular relationship between avant-garde design and nationalism and a particular manner in claiming political space. These may be seen as the features with which Art Nouveau forged the foundations of 20th century architecture.

Alliances and Confluences: The *Fin de Siècle* Belgian Cultural Landscape

Some of the groupings around the patronage and intellectual community which allowed for Art Nouveau's flowering shed light on the politics its objects came to embody. From approximately 1890 to 1902, the style was associated with prominent progressive groups, in what was considered a golden period for Belgian culture. Within this, the movement's four primary innovators had differing aims and political convictions. At the helm was Victor Horta, considered a master of the curvilinear style and Art Nouveau's star architect. Henry van de Velde provided the driving theoretical force in his native country until he moved to Germany in 1899. Paul Hankar, a more experienced and older designer, was a pioneer in championing a highly stylized architectural orientalism (until his untimely death in 1901). And so-called "forgotten master" Gustave Serrurier-Bovy was an important voice for his popular furniture that combined regional craft traditions with forward-thinking ideals (Watelet, 1987: 12).[1] What these architects shared was a conscious will to break down the barriers between high and low art, crafting total artworks in which each aspect of design was controlled and considered. Within all of these four innovators' experiments with craft as art, which resulted in buildings as total artworks, the distinctively curved Belgian line emerged.

By 1900, the characteristic Belgian line, also called the whiplash line, was defined as taut and serpentine, with areas of thickness and thinness carefully weighted to suggest potential and inner dynamism (Sterner, 1982: 80). The Belgian line was prevalent in the floral version of Art Nouveau (the focus of this study), while the geometric version was more prominent in Germany and Vienna. Robert Schmutzler (1962: 30)[2] describes the Belgian-line as a path, or linear "surface-body," more distended in the narrow curves where the change of direction is most stressed and slimmer in those curves that swing more wildly. Versions of the line vary, with Hankar's more symmetrical Neoclassical tendencies leading into Horta's tensile Rococo swirls. The same line in van de Velde's hands tends towards dynamic, sinewy knots which seem to thicken in Serrurier-Bovy's elegantly compact woodwork. Many at the time considered the Belgian line to be a shocking and puzzling new trend in architecture and the applied arts (Escritt, 2000: 4; Greenhalgh, 2000: 14; Madsen, 1967: 9).

1 . The work of jeweller Philippe Wolfers adorned many of the interiors created by the four innovators, and was worn by modish fin de siècle women.

2 . Schmutzler's seminal text on Art Nouveau did a great deal to reinstate the largely discredited movement into the canon of art history in the 1960s.

Typically, the art canon describes the new style in Belgium as resulting from the influential artist collective *Les Vingt* (1883–1893), which later morphed into *La Libre Esthétique* (1894–1898). This group of intellectuals, artists and writers were commonly known for their progressive politicswith socialist leanings and for staging lively debates alongside avant-garde art exhibitions.The popular press perceived the group as politically radical, partly because of the increased selection of decorative arts in its shows (Ogata, 2001: 31). Its founding member and facilitator was Octave Maus, working in tandem with Edmond Picard. Both were lawyers, collectors and public intellectuals who passionately promoted anti-establishment artistic freedom (Block, 1997: 3; Ogata, 2001: 15).

Controversial works, such as pieces by Paul Gauguin, were given a public forum in Belgian circles, at a time when they were noticeably refused in Vienna and Paris. In Belgium, artists and exhibitors placed emphasis on integrating the paintings and sculpture with furniture, crafts, books and literary works, exhibiting them alongside each other. Debate, critical discussion and the general public profile of the arts were kept alive in a string of progressive journals, with *L'Art Moderne*, founded by Maus in 1881, particularly associated with the *Les Vingt* circle. These activities did a great deal to put Belgium on the map as a hotbed of sanctioned vanguard creativity (Block, 1997: 3; Sterner, 1982: 38). As leading Art Nouveau figures such as Henry van de Velde and Serrurier-Bovy were prominent members of *Les Vingt*, there has been a perception that Art Nouveau in Belgium was aligned with the active politics of the group and, as such, espoused its radical notions (Flynn, 1998: 193; Sembach, 2007: 43; Wolf, 2011: 161). Horta's iconic *Maison du Peuple* (1899), the Brussels headquarters for the Belgian workers' party, *Parti Ouvrier Belge* (POB), which also served as a community center, did a great deal to see Belgian Art Nouveau associated with *Les Vingt*'s form of socialist politics (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 16). The movement thus presented itself as a progressive aesthetic antidote to Neo-Gothic and Flemish Renaissance styles favoured by the more conservative Catholic elite that had been in power since 1884 (Brauman and Culot, 1980: 82; Culot, 1979: 92; Wolf, 2011: 113). Accordingly, Catholic architecture schools declared the Belgian line as decadent and pagan and off-limits for its impressionable students (Culot, 1979: 92).

While Horta was not directly associated with *Les Vingt*, all the Art Nouveau designers under discussion mingled with and were reliant on the progressive intelligentsia (as opposed to the aristocracy). More



Figure 1.2: *Maison du Peuple* by Victor Horta (built in 1899)

liberal-minded members of the newly wealthy privileged classes in Belgium tended to associate with a form of socialism and with masonic activity (Hanser, 1997: 12; Strauven, 1981: 121). Art Nouveau patrons largely consisted of lawyers, doctors, engineers and industrialists who were also writers and art connoisseurs. Their adherence to socialist ideals, publicly calling to undercut the established societal order, is significant in light of the Art Nouveau mission of breaking down artistic hierarchies. The new elite maintained friendships and creative working relationships with the architects under discussion, which extended across various social groups, collaborations and commissions.

A prominent example was the literary society *La Jeune Belgique* (1881–1897). With an accompanying journal in tow, the society was home to lively debate concerning the role of art in society, especially in developing a national voice. Art Nouveau aficionados were located in such circles. This included its founding member, the poet Max Waller, alongside avant-garde Symbolist writers, poets and sculptors (e.g., Emile Verhaeren and Maurice Maeterlinck). Public intellectuals like Jules Destreé were among its more active participants. Similarly, the legal association *La Jeune Barreau* was given a new lease of life by Edmond Picard and, with *Les Vingt* as a model, became host to multidisciplinary exhibitions and fiery publications (Block, 1997: 185–188; Silverman, 2011a: 720–728). Maurice Culot identifies that, by the 1890s, thoughtful young members of the bourgeoisie chose to specialize in either championing renewal in the arts or embracing socialism and politics; both spaces of active ideas (1979: 92). Advocates, including Jules Destreé, Max Hallet and Emile Vandervelde, were fervent members of the

socialist POB party, as well as supporters of the new design style.

The turn of the 20th century was an intensely turbulent period for Belgium, set up only in 1830 as a buffer zone between warring France and Germany. The artificial cobbling together of Flemish and Walloon cultures increasingly put pressure on national unity. The most extreme rapid industrialization on the European continent added further stress. With labour conditions and relations trailing far behind the demands of technological progress, workers' strikes characterized the 1880s.[3] It was after a major strike in 1886 that the POB, the largest party in Belgium, invited young champions of legal reform like Vandervelde, Hallet and Picard to join the party. They drew heavily on the multidisciplinary work of their artist friends, like van de Velde and Horta, in resulting conversations concerning the role of art in society (Culot, 1979: 90; Strauven, 1981: 121). With Horta already designing domestic homes of this new elite,[4] the up-and-coming architect was an obvious choice for the commission of the *Maison du Peuple*.[5] Horta's popularity was increased by his political affiliation to the POB intelligentsia and by his membership of *Les Amis Philanthropes*, a Masonic lodge of wealthy businessmen, politicians and lawyers that sought to ease the plight of the Belgian working class (Hanser, 1997: 13). Yet, despite these associations, Horta distanced himself from politics, seeing the construction of the *Maison du Peuple* (1899) as an artistic challenge rather than a political manifesto (Dierkens-Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1994: 10). Thus, while the building may have reflected the political programme of the progressive bourgeoisie that commissioned it, for whom it "symbolized an alliance between industrialists and workers towards reform," Horta saw himself as supplying aesthetics (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 16). In his memoirs, Horta muses that, while he generally opposed the conservative politics of the government, he was delighted to rely on a client base of friends, patrons and peers — each with strong individual characters and often conflicting opinions — who supported innovation in the arts (Horta, 1985: 19–20).[6]

3 . Whereas other industrialized nations had confronted their labour issuesdecades earlier, the Belgian government only passed its first labour law in 1889, to be implemented in 1892 (Ogata, 2001: 15).

4 . *Hôtel Tassel*, foundational for Belgian Nouveau Art, was built in 1893 for scientist and teacher Emile Tassel. *Hôtel Solvay*, built for the son of wealthy industrialist Ernst Solvay, followed in 1894 and *Hôtel Hallet* in 1903.

5. The endeavor was funded by Solvay and encouraged specifically by Vandervelde and Hallet (Strauven, 1981: 127).

6 . David Hanser (1997: 11–33) traces an additional Masonic link between Horta's clients, grounded in the liberally-minded *Les Amis Philanthropes*. He locates masonic imagery in certain early commissions.

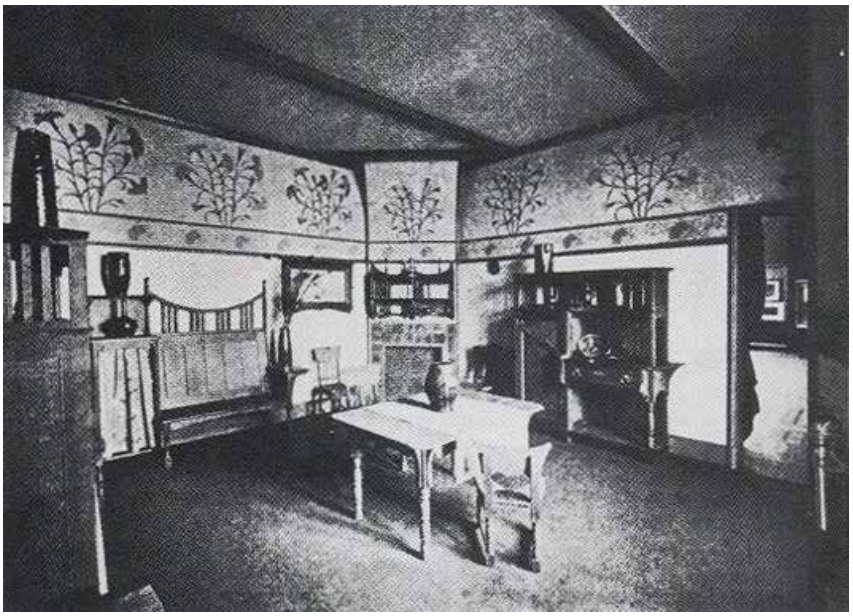


Figure 1.3: *Cabinet de travail* by Serrurier-Bovy (exhibited in 1894)

Art Nouveau was not a socialist style but was visibly given preference by the POB. Though the party was socialist in name by referring to workers, it pursued politics that were more reformist than revolutionary. The POB aimed to develop democratically controlled companies and cooperatives in which workers could pursue common goals and aspirations, rather than pursue the class struggle. The progressive bourgeoisie in the party sought to use its alliances and power to reduce social differences by building an organization that was financed from above (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 16).[7] Art Nouveau artists in the 1890s were thus linked to a very specific brand of left wing, middle-class thinking around how to change society. The implication of the Art Nouveau patron as a wealthy intellectual was to have long-lasting effect on the Belgian style.[8] Alongside Horta, often called the "architect for the people" due to his work for the POB, van de Velde was also associated with the POBas graphic designer for a number of its publications (Tibbe, 1981: 8). Certain pieces, such as Serrurier-Bovy's *Cabinet de travail* (1894), seem to have corresponded to the POB'a policy on the arts, namely the commitment to use simple interiors to make a worker's domestic life a fresh and invigorating aesthetic experience (Watelet, 1987: 17).

7. The *Maison du Peuple* was not built by the people or even for them. Rather, it served to host POB meetings, as well as concerts and book readings for patrons of the working class (Watelet 1981: 34).

8. The prevailing spirit of paternalism towards the workers equally characterized *Les Vingt* and *La Libre Esthétique*, whose members and activities often converged with *Les Amis Philanthropes*.

All of the designers under discussion had their own particular brand of political association that varied across their different practices and also changed over the course of their lifetimes (Ogata, 2001: 34; Tibbe, 1981). Whereas Horta was not much of a theorist,[9] van de Velde was a prolific writer, often delving deeply into philosophical musings. During the late 1890s and early 1900s, when he was heavily under the influence of British Arts and Crafts figures William Morris and John Ruskin, he espoused a similar form of socialism to theirs, in which an idealized conception of the "simple" worker was placed in high esteem.

Van de Velde would later rebuke Ruskin for not putting his theories into practice. Yet around 1900 he praised the work of both his British predecessors as "the seed" from which a revival of the arts could spring (van de Velde, 1955: 68).[10] Morris had a deep disgust for machine-made objects, possibly a reaction to poorly designed products of the industrial revolution, such as that on display at the Crystal Palace World's Fair (1851). He rather exalted the beauty of Gothic architecture and the moral obligation of craftsmen to deal with constructions and their decoration in an honest way (Ruskin 1853; [1849] 2011). Serrurier-Bovy (in Watelet, 1987: 18) similarly embraced the figure of the artisan, strongly evident in his aesthetic of "honest craftsmanship." He has also been seen as a crucial link to England: he began his career importing Arts & Crafts products, particularly wallpaper and furniture, into Belgium.

Van de Velde and Serrurier-Bovy's idealistic brand of socialism later became caught in the dichotomy between the Utopian ideal of making art for "the people" and being bound to economic realities when it comes to realizing projects. Like Morris, they tended to produce luxury homes and goods for artistically-minded businessmen (Sembach, 1989: 40; Wolf, 2011: 269).[11] While the designers intended layment to be able to understand their work, it was seldom shown outside of elitist circles (Ogata, 2001: 22; Sembach, 1989: 10). The reliance on rich patrons thus undermined Art Nouveau's very aims: to turn away from High Art and work as a craftsman in order to make more socially relevant art for the public

9. In his memoires Horta (1985: 18) describes that "We were reds without having thought of Marxist theories, or any other, for that matter."

10. By 1895, van de Velde started to be more concerned with rational and aesthetic harmonies he found in machine aesthetics, moving away from Morris's sense of social justice and Ruskin's religious moralizing (Jacobs, 2005: 56).

11. Jules Meier-Graefe, one of van de Velde's promoters, described the designer's socialism as "sheer dalliance" and that "there is nothing that so aptly bears the symptoms of aristocratic aloofness than his art" (Meier-Graefe in Wolf, 2011: 269).

at large.

The foursome of Belgian designers was by no means homogenous or in political agreement. Art Nouveau, across its many international variants, has often been described as a style in service of the bourgeoisie. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco dal Co (1976: 11) described the movement as marking off a territory exclusively for the upper echelons of society, despite its goal of developing a language that could apply to every situation and class. While Belgian Art Nouveau is primarily known for producing luxury homes for the urban elite, Hankar and Serrurier-Bovy were also involved in social housing projects. Although these were funded by aristocrats and wealthy industrialists, they reveal a generalized, Utopian concern for the future of urban space in industrialized society: Hankar planned a (never-realized) artist colony, while Serrurier-Bovy designed various models for workers' housing that were rarely realised (Ogata, 2001: 161). However, unlike housing reformers of the mid-19th century who developed garden cities or model dwellings to rectify the ills of society and keep farmers and peasants on the land, rural styles of the Belgian Art Nouveau were for the wealthy, with many country homes built for the artists themselves (Ogata, 2001: 146).

As Art Nouveau artists tried to revolutionize art's role in society, they witnessed the irrevocable change of the role of the individual artist in European cultural life: the artists became their own masters, and were no longer ruled by the aristocracy or the clergy (Schmutzler, 1962: 276). In all the commissions detailed in the following pages, the artists dealt directly with the purchasers, ushering in the age of the businessman-artist. No longer in the service of the regime, they became nominally free agents. And yet, in Belgium, the new bourgeoisie became their primary patrons.

The group not only shared enigmatic supporters but, in the burgeoning atmosphere, also collaborated with one another. Hankar passed on clients to Horta and they worked together in their developmental years. Local artists and craftsmen tended to commission their private homes from Hankar and Horta, as in Hankar's *Hôtel Ciamberlani* (1897) and Horta's jewellery store for the Wolfers family in 1909. Van de Velde, in turn, was a strong supporter of Serrurier-Bovy, promoting him in the press as well as drawing him into the creative network of *Les Vingt* (Watelet, 1987: 17; see van de Velde 1902a). In the 1890s, van de Velde was a major presence in various collaborative Belgian artisan ventures. As

well successfully running his own workshops (du Mesnil du Buisson and du Mesnil du Buisson, 2008: 26–29), Serrurier-Bovy had a hand in the Val-Saint-Lambert glass factory of Luik (a collaboration with Philippe Wolfers), Willy Finch's ceramic studio and various printing presses in Brussels and Liege (Baudin, 1981: 198; Marien-Dugardin, 1981: 192; Phillipe, 1981: 164). Yet, despite numerous points of collaboration , the relationships of the artists were marked by rivalries and disagreements. Most prominent were antagonisms between Horta and van de Velde.

The four artists under discussion came to Art Nouveau from different backgrounds. Both Horta and Hankar trained as architects, Horta at the Gent Academy for Fine Arts and Hankar at the Brussels academy, and both were apprentices of Belgian architect Alphonse Balat.[12] Van de Velde, in contrast, started out as a painter and was taught at the avant-garde French Barbizon School. Serrurier-Bovy, in turn, came from a family of cabinet-makers. He studied architecture at the Liege Academy for Fine Arts and, after a short period trading British interior decorations, entered the family company. The varying ethos and styles of these individuals have been grouped together a priori as the designers who stand out as serious innovators in modernist form. What unifies this movement is a discernible basic aesthetic mission, that is common to all of them.

In their respective efforts to break down the barriers between high art and craft, all four designers reached similar aesthetic conclusions. In this space the Belgian Art Nouveau total artwork arose: the designers all shared understandings of appearance and form, motifs, sculptural forms and materials used. In a Belgium that was culturally and politically fragmented and in which industrialization was tearing apart previous forms of social cohesion, a distinctly localized form of the Gesamtkunstwerk was born.

Artificial Ecologies: Fusing the Arts with New Kinds of Nature

In the context of rapid industrialization, Belgian Art Nouveau can be seen as an answer to the perceived ugliness of industrialized urbanity. It was "held up in the face of oncoming technology" (Benjamin, 1997: 36). Even if not explicitly, the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk was proposed as a respite from

12. Balat oversaw royal commissions, amongst other major public works.

the fragmented nature of modern living brought about by the industrial revolution.[13]

As a Gesamtskunstwerk, each total artwork was bound by a unifying aesthetic and was thus a manifesto for melding together high art (primarily painting and sculpture) and craft (such as furniture or architecture). In the Gesamtkunstwerk, each discipline was intended to demonstrate its optimum qualities by working in conjunction with others towards a common goal (Koss, 2010: xiii). Whereas Richard Wagner applied this to drama, and tragedy in particular, which he melded with other artistic disciplines to culminate in operas, Art Nouveau was primarily an aesthetic movement.[14] In Belgium, the designers merged architecture, art and the applied arts to bring forth new models for optimal aesthetic life.[15]

In the Art Nouveau total artwork, a synthesis of the arts was sought through aesthetic immersion that alluded to sensorial pleasure. Living spaces were conceptualized and crafted in their entirety as ornate fantastical enclosures that shielded the viewer from an increasingly mechanized world outside. Instead of capturing their ideas in paintings or sculpture, visual artists sculpted entire environments, with their rampant stylistic individualisms serving as signatures (Benjamin, 1997: 36). Utilitarian objects and furniture, often handmade, just as the buildings that housed them, were rendered in a language of organic inspired ornamentation. Following the logic of a plant and the principles of organic growth, each design was conceived of in its entirety, with all components seen as part of an integrated whole.

Part of the Art Nouveau drive towards aesthetic totality and capturing the spirit of the new era was achieved through setting itself up in opposition to 19th-century traditions. Widespread eclecticism and historical revivalism had come to be deplored by avant-garde Art Nouveau designers as bombastic and lacking overriding unity. In Belgium, nature drives were fused with the strong influence of older

13 . Robert L. Delevoy (1981) was one of the first scholars to label Art Nouveau as a Gesamtkunstwerk. He saw the links between Symbolist literature, poetry and music, andthe general zeitgeist of the time, as integral to Belgian Art Nouveau.
14 . Other branches of the movement, especially those more connected to the “decadent” Symbolists, launched into total sensorial experimentation, exploring scent and sound, as much as evocative, textured aesthetics. J.K. Huysmans (1884) epitomizes the complete indulgence of a sensorial inner life. Van de Velde (1892) dismissed such activities as fetishizing decorative arts.
15. Music was also taken into consideration in Belgian Art Nouveau. The majority of the homes designed by the Belgian architects contained centrally-placed music rooms. Horta, for example, not only designed an alcove for a grand piano at the *Hôtel Solvay* but also designed the bronze and crystal frame for the piano (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 64).

European traditions, especially Medieval Gothic, Baroque and Flemish vernacular to give rise to harmonious spaces. Instead of producing modernized approximations of past aesthetics (as seen in the various revival styles that preceded them), Belgian Art Nouveau wove an array of borrowed structural elements and motifs into new formations and overall environments.

In an era when European conceptions of nature itself were rapidly transforming, these artists took recourse to the natural world, reworking it with fresh, often unusual, artifice. While they embraced organic form because of their aversion to industrialization and the ever-increasing proliferation of that which was machine-made and mass-produced, their art was not entirely a continuation of the European Romantic movement.[16] The vital imagery of Belgian Art Nouveau, inspired by nature but not imitative of it, was also close to the spirit of animism (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 12).[17] Aiming to imbue inanimate objects with a sense of vitality in a similar manner to animism, Art Nouveau forms made allusion to energetic movement. From such passions emerged fabrications of an untamed natural world of growths and forces. The ornamentation on *fin de siècle* furniture, walls and struts exudes a sense of thrusting, budding dynamism, bursting forth from the surface of the object. This sense is captured on the exterior walls of Horta's own house, *Maison Horta* (1898), which erupt in metallic foliage. The decoration is seen to declare war on the sameness of machine products, using industrialization's very materials to create a unique celebration of modern architectonics.

Abstractions of exuberant natural growth (or playful, rejuvenating waters) were bound up in systems of rhythmic counter-movement. Each detail and greater structure thus allowed being read as representative of what van de Velde identified as "cosmic life-energy … the sources of life and power of life to transform itself, eternally" (1910: 43).[18] Typically, these forms would enlarge small details of plants, or underwater creatures, rendering that which was once small — sometimes microscopically so — into human proportions.[19] Similarly, surging currents and storms, impossible to contain pictorially, were

16. The European Romantic movement emerged in literature, music, painting and drama in the late 18th century and was partially a response to the scientific rationalization of nature during the Enlightenment.
17. Van de Velde linked the animistic belief in attributing spiritual qualities to objects and natural phenomena to primal man. He admiringly saw this as fusing primitive man with his environment (Haddad, 2003:124).
18. Van de Velde (in Haddad, 2003: 133) also linked ornamentation to the action of dancing, saying that primitive ornamentation was "like the organs of a human body in the frenzy of a dance." Importantly, it is the inner workings of the body he is interested in, more than outward appearance.
19. This was also popularised in magazines and books, arguably most famously seen in the work of biologist Ernst Haeckel



Figure 1.4: *Maison Horta*, by Victor Horta (built in 1898)



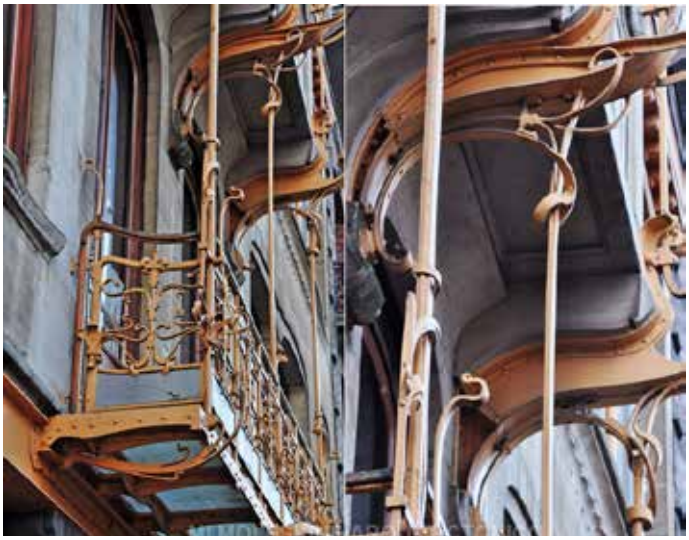


Figure 1.5: Doorknob at *Maison Horta*
Figure 1.6: Balcony at *Maison Horta*

represented in scaled down, gestural ornamentation. In the process of distortion and distillation of multiple sources into ornament, organic form became abstracted and non-naturalistic (in the sense that it was no longer mimetic of the overall, original object of inspiration).

Displaced plant (and simple animal) structures, employed to reinsert the natural world into an increasingly industrialized human life, were, nevertheless, indebted to new technologiesand scientific expansion. Representations of all manner of new plant and animal forms, emerging from expeditions to distant places, to molecular level experimentation beneath the microscope, were becoming increasingly visible in late 19th century cities. Art Nouveau eschewed overt symbols of nature to set up new visions, transforming, expanding and distorting that which had previously been deemed too insignificant to adorn buildings or furniture. By aping a myriad of forms and movements from nature — the sprouting of young plants, the angling of branch to trunk, the proportionate relationship of flower and stem, the swelling movement of waves, or the tug of underwater currents — Art Nouveau set upa new lexicon of organic form. This is stylized according to the individual aesthetic of each practitioner. Horta pronounced that “I leave the flower and the leaf and I take the stalk,” coalescing abstracted tendrils and flowing forms around everyday things, rendering whole objects extraordinary (Horta in Bayard, 1919:

(1899). With the advent of mass printing, images of amoebic activity beneath the skin and the ocean could now be owned and perused as part of the comfort of upper middle class homes.



Figure 1.7: *Six-arm Candelebra*
by Henry Van de Velde (1899)

100).[20]

In the work of Horta, van de Velde, Serrurier-Bovy and Hankar, it is rare to see realistic representations of plants within sculptural architectural features.[21] Instead, dynamic shapes are evocative of plant formations and organic proliferation. In the swirling forms of van de Velde's *Six-Arm Candelebra* (1899), for example, rippling ornamentation holds the candle cups in place. Eddying inwards and outwards in a circular motion around key points in the object, the curves of the overall shape are accentuated, as is the function of the whole object. Similarly, in a typical Serrurier-Bovy piece such as *Cabinet-vitrine* (1899), curved wooden shapes serve as both structural support and accentuate the joining points of the object. The wooden ornamentation of the door to Hankar's *Chemiserie Niguet* (1896) provides a stylized impression of growth, repeating the twists of a live plant into a set pattern. Vibrant decoration frames the doorway in the manner of a creeper trained over an outdoor arch. In Victor Horta's *Hôtel Tassel* (1894), generally agreed to be the first complete Art Nouveau edifice, structural ironwork in the banisters and pillars branch out into fronds of iron filaments, presenting small, sculptural versions of the riotous décor of painted wall murals.

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20. Horta's well known statement echoes the sentiments of Jules Meier-Graefe who in 1896 spoke of the need for a certain kind of linear emancipation. He saw the dominance of the naturalistic flower obstructing the forward-looking path of the pure line (Meier-Graefe in Wolf, 2011: 16).

21. When these do occur, representations tend towards the symbolic. For example, Hankar was partial to commissioning figurative wall murals from local artists, while he merged neoclassical and Rococo forms with abstractions of natural outgrowths in his sculptural architectural embellishments.

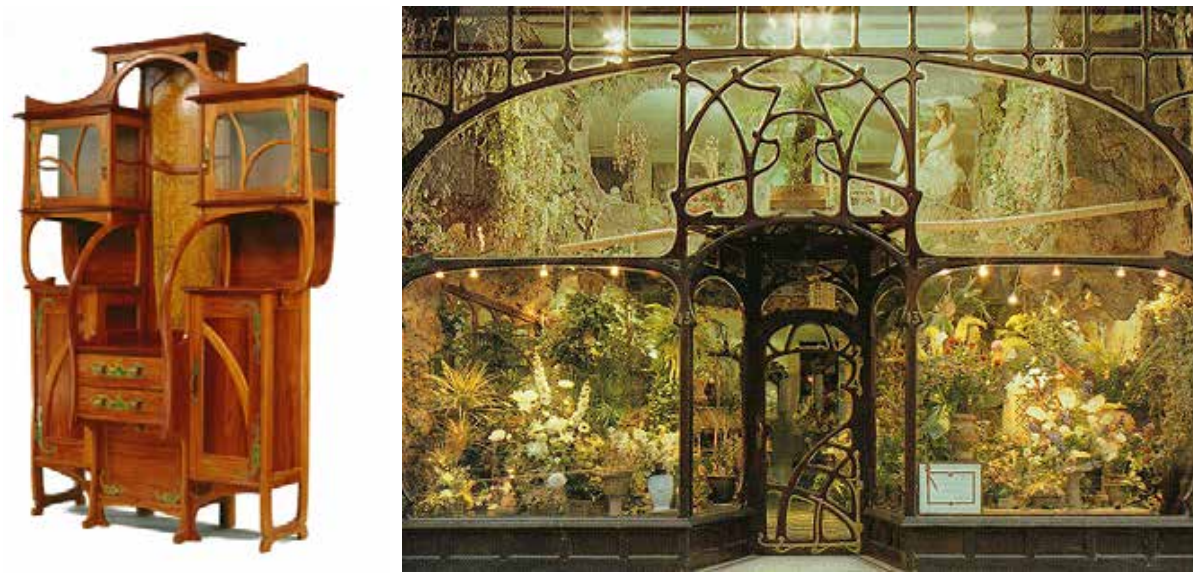


Figure 1.8: ***Cabinet-vitrine*** **by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy (1899)**
Figure 1.9: ***Chemiserie Niguet*** **by Paul Hankar (built in 1893)**

As illustrated in these now-classic examples,[22] decorative forms are not employed unless for a highlighting or supporting function. Thus, a curlicue emphasizing a drawer handle, or the sinewy knotted formation at the base of a stem, will also echo the outlines of the object as a whole. The forms in the works by Serrurier-Bovy, Horta and Hankar are reminiscent of unfurling leaves, buds and tendrils.Van de Velde's flowing, larva-like swells and pulses, in turn, are reminiscent of the simplest kinds of animals and plants, speaking to abstract growth in and of itself. With ornamentation mimicking the act of being alive, objects and buildings, or their features, were intended to represent movement (Madsen, 1967: 15).

The fluid qualities of the Art Nouveau form led Maurice Rheims to refer to it as the "Jules Verne style," alluding to Verne's ([1966] 2013: 3) popular tale of underwater travel, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*.[23] Since its inception, the movement's ornamentation and flowing lines have also been

22. The pieces of furniture are now focal points in the Art Nouveau collections at the Royal Museum for Art and History in Brussels and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The *Chemiserie Niguet* is a functioning florist shop and tourist destination in contemporary Brussels, and *Hôtel Tassel* remains a private home.
23. Verne's book was identified as a direct influence on the glass works of French Art Nouveau designer Emile Gallé (Alistair, 1994:103). Comparisons to the interiors of Verne's futuristic machines are often invoked in Art Nouveau historiography (see, for example, Culot 1979: 96; Borsi and Portoghesi 1991: 3).

compared to sea-anemones, jellyfish, underwater polyps and spermatozoa.[24] Bulbous outlines and flowing tendrils imbued space with an otherworldly quality. Critically, the actualization of nature in this manner renders the inner power of mysterious organism solid fact, more easily contained and controlled than living entities.

Art Nouveau's particular form of primitivism is located in the manner in which it attempts to harness nature's aesthetic thrall in order to furnish bourgeois comfort.[25] Robert Goldwater ([1938] 1986: 270) pinpoints the Belgian Art Nouveau moment as being amongst the first instances of modern primitivism because of its particular attitude to organic forms. Goldwater describes abstracted designs, derived from the lowest forms of life, as a conscious reaction to over-refinement. It is Because Art Nouveau organicism is bound up in locating essential qualities that Goldwater identifies it as a form of primitivism. The Belgian movement can thus be situated in the greater trajectory of European primitivism, by virtue of its mobilization of natural form, even before its fascination with exotic cultures is recognized as such. These attitudes are particularly pronounced in van de Velde's work, where the artist consciously seeks a definitive primal urge in the basis of all forms. Constant themes in van de Velde's writing are the glorification of simplicity and the admiration of children, primeval man and tribal people for their intrinsic sympathy with form and nature (van de Velde, 1910: 41–52). The nature van de Velde laid out is bound up with peoples who are different from adult Europeans by way of their supposed lack of sophistication and innocence. In his sculptural and architectural designs, he presented nature as separate from the bodies it houses, attempting to mark but also bridge the widening rupture between man and nature that he saw triggered by mechanised industry.

It is in the power of the line that van de Velde located primitive, universal energies. Seminal texts, such as "De Linie" (van de Velde, 1910: 45), champion the all-important line for wresting the intrinsic power from external forces, to embody the spirit of vital growth, in its own right.[26] The whiplash line,

24. These comparisons were often negative and pejorative: for example, "eel style," "noodle style," "yachting style" and "tapeworm style".

25. At the turn of the 20th century, primitivists perceived decorative art, craft and architecture of other cultures, but also of European folk heritage, as "primitive" and thus of pure origins (Ogata, 2001: 5). The term "primitivist" did not yet refer to art of Africa and tribal cultures.

26. Theodor Lipp (Wolf, 2011: 106) was an important influence behind the pursuit of the universal principles of construction hidden in natural objects. In his seminal theory of empathy (Einfühlung), Lipp (1898) purports that abstract lines are able to elicit many different emotional responses from viewers.

according to van de Velde, encapsulates the functionality of its own symbolism, while performing a practical function in the role of ornament as much as overall architectonics. Van de Velde conceived of the line, in drawn or built form, as having its own nature, or independent quality, as if it were a living entity.The line, mobilized as a whip that Horta, Serrurier-Bovy and himself cracked over a sleepy Belgium, thus ushered in a new era of change (van de Velde, 1992: 254).

Belgian Art Nouveau's organic language borrows from nature to produce new stylistic themes of metamorphosis and movement (in contrast to the representational conventions of preceding historicist styles). Its bulging, flaming, twisting, nestling and massing of materials (both natural and man-made) set up verdant interiors, in antithesis to the machine object. At the same time, symbols of organic power, suggestive of nature's capacity for renewal, are repeated and modified over different usable objects and environments, presenting an exuberant functionalism (Schmutzler, 1962: 271). Visibly morphing, fluid movement, which appears to be momentarily frozen, was intended to recall the power of nature to continually transform itself. In the writhing vegetal ornamentation of the chair or door handle (seen above), there is thus a dual symbolism at play. Ornamentation that makes reference to organic power at large also anticipates the way in which the object will be used and directs the viewer's gaze accordingly.

Within each total artwork, powerful nature, in the service of functionality, is tamed as part of a greater, harmonious whole. Van de Velde (1910: 42) describes his own mastery over natural forms by observing its inner unity: "Nature provides by continuity, connecting and linking together the different organs that make up a body or a tree, she draws one out of the other without violence or shock." By the time of van de Velde's writing, he was reflecting on the "nature" of the late 19th century as a changing form and, because of its alienation from modern man, an increasingly destabilized force that demanded new kinds of representation.

Advances in microscopic investigations in the late 19th century (and popular dissemination of the resulting imagery) gave rise to new sciences of botany, cell theory, neurology, psychology and — most importantly for Art Nouveau — evolution.[27] Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859)

27. As will be fully explicated across this study, developments in botany were pivotal to European categorization and

purported that humans evolve over the centuries, through natural selection, a process in which organisms that are best adapted to their environment tend to survive and reproduce. When interpreted as a struggle for total improvement, this theory saw humankind, with its superior abilities to other species, at the forefront of the natural world. Effectively, evolutionism offered artists the certainty that progressive arts (especially forward-thinking Art Nouveau) were not simply novelty fashion but part of an advance of culture (Greenhalgh, 2000: 69). This set in motion a conception that design, art and architecture in themselves played a part in the evolutionary process, their inorganic elements ever evolving towards more progressive and improved versions of the built environment.

A contradictory *fin de siècle* construction of nature came to mark Art Nouveau urban ecologies: while the wild, Romantic Nature of the 19th century was carefully retained, as an essential power that was fast disappearing in the onslaught of modernization, the new and alien forms of nature exposed by science were given a similar form of aesthetic representation. In the Belgian examples seen here, exuberance for organic imagery may be seen as part of an international zeitgeist for botanical pursuits in Euro-American cities.[28] At the same time, whirling movement and asymmetrical lines are nervous and tensile, seldom at ease in themselves (even as elements within environments constructed to work together harmoniously). In attempting to represent the new era, Art Nouveau objects and interiors tend to belie deep anxiety within the new terms of man's relationship with— and harnessing of — the natural world. The educated urban body, within profusions of synthetic writhing forms, was a dislocated element. Separated out of his fundamental natural origins, the aesthete Art Nouveau patron was positioned to contemplate nature's molecular make-up in terms that emphasized his own distance from them.[29]

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claims over the natural world and the people within it. While it is seldom discussed in the context of Belgian Art Nouveau, Rudolph Virchell's theory from the 1860s that all living organisms derive from one cell, with all cells being created via other cells, may well have had some effect on the overruling concept of totality that governed interiors. Broadly, neurology and psychology had an effect on Art Nouveau views of the world, particularly its acute sense of interiority and sensorial interconnectivity. Engagement with these new fields varied across different designers and artists.

28. This extended into the private, as much as the professional realm, with numerous domestic hothouses and amateur scientific studios proliferating.

29. The primary viewer and protagonist in the Art Nouveau world was always male. Females were seen as closer to the fertile, organic world taken recourse in. In other national movements the female tended to be merged with decorative floral motifs.

Typically turbulent Art Nouveau forms, captured on the cusp of transforming and moving, draw on the highly fashionable evolutionary tropes of the time. Darwin's theory of natural selection is based on mutation and metamorphosis, seeing life propelled forward by accidental mutations which are filtered through competition with other organisms, or other versions of the species. At the same time the sculptural and graphic renderings of frozen organic process also serve to highlight the increasingly alien quality of a natural world shaped by indutrialization, attempting to lay claim to its inhuman aspect. In Art Nouveau understanding of nature, man is part of nature, as a biological organism, but is also separated from it through an elevated human mind that is able to capture the world in a picture.

Not only was the distorted sense of nature that Art Nouveau imagined rendered exotic and strange against the urban backdrop, but it was also potentially rendered part of a secular universe. The journey into the inner make-up of organic life, like evolutionary theory, could also potentially lead on to the possibility of alternative belief systems. Art Nouveau, as a nature cult and stylistic mechanism, was easily employed in a monistic worldview. Thus, a philosophical (or theological) belief in the one-ness of all living things, unified by underlying natural law (and not necessarily by the patriarchal Judean-Christian godhead), may be played out in the cellular, organic logic of the Art Nouveau Gesamtkunstwerk. Moreover, giving oneself over to sheer aesthetic immersion — as the escapist total artworks of Horta, in particular, encourage — further takes artificial organic forms away from conventional Christian spirituality that is located in a natural, god-given universe (that tends to refuse the implications of evolutionary theory). That is to say, in setting up seductive, inorganic eco-systems within each individuated Art Nouveau interior, a series of alternatives to devout, religious enclaves were set in place.

Art Nouveau organics are not the pretty flower or sweetly curled frond of Victorian wallpaper (including that of William Morris) or the fiery blades of Rococo. In the influential Belgian movement, it is the unknown molecule, the hidden suction cup beneath the gelatinous clinging tentacle, or the swirling undercurrent that sets off a storm, that is rendered into the service of daily bourgeois life. Reinvented nature, outside the confines of historicism, fused man to organic forces, in a quest for modernity that was anarchic in spirit, seeking to reinvent the tropes of history (Greenhalgh, 2000: 69). Further, Francis Strauven (1981: 124) reads quasi-organic form as a highly suggestive image, similar to

the quasi-organic form of community that anarchist theories of the time pursued.

Within each synthetic world of manufactured organicism, the Art Nouveau invention of its own eco-systems was often seen to go against the natural order of things. Its particular glorification of the natural world, man-made environments are contrived to give the appearance of teeming with life, beneath the surface. However, in so doing, they can also emphasize their own lack of actual agency. Art Nouveau obsession with surging form, intended to transform the foundational aesthetics of daily life, presents an ossified three-dimensional representation without its own real dynamism; a series of stage sets optically referring to the real thing, without ever embodying it.

In the Art Nouveau mission to harness elemental, evolving energies, domestication of the natural world serves to control and lay claim to it. Each total artwork may be seen to shape wood, iron and stone into the required, harmonious contours, often without regard for their consistency or innate material qualities. While all manner of experimentation with the tensile qualities of wood and iron take place before our eyes, elasticity and fluidity are heightened across mediums, even in heavy stones and wood. In the example of Horta's work, stone is often carved to give the impression of being soft, even cartilaginous. In attempting to give an impression of actual animation, Horta manipulated inert substances, through use of new technologies as well as intentional plays of natural light, to seem less solid, mixing natural materials seminal to man's most ancient dwellings (timber and stone) with the inorganic and manufactured.

In ironwork, Horta triumphed, visibly testing the tensile qualities of the medium. Whereas his woodwork did not extend past inventive carving techniques, he achieved complete mastery over iron (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 350). He introduced this virtuosity to the *Hôtel Tassel* (1893), where clusters of exposed iron curves in pillars and banisters reach out from a point of fusion, to curl into a whirling motion. The structural ribs become more frothy at the point where they no longer support the construction. In a counteractive movement, ironwork in the banisters intertwines to reveal a hierarchy of components, expressively growing uninterrupted at key joins, but bending and breaking off when subsidiary metallic tendrils meet the main structure.

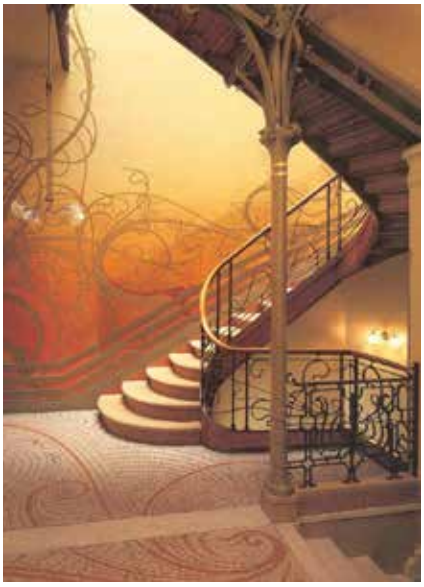




Figure 1.10: Interior of *Hotel Tassel* by Victor Horta (built in 1894)
Figure 1.11: Interior of *Havanna Cigar Shop Horta* by Henry Van de Velde (built in 1899)

By way of comparison to Horta's febrile illusionism, Serrurier-Bovy claimed a conscious materiality in his work. A pursuit of artisanal truth saw his practice relying on acute awareness of the qualities of the woods he worked with, proof of which lay in reports that his intricate joins and woodwork were always perfectly fitted, with the overall objects sturdy, their movable parts gliding smoothly (Watelet, 1987: 54). Both Serrurier-Bovy and van de Velde experimented with bending wood, whose created graphic curves suggestive of tensile strength also demonstrated the possibilities of the supple material. The curves achieved with the help of the springy tension of wood are then woven elastically into the surrounding architecture.

Van de Velde (1910: 12) stresses that animation of material was key to the idea of beauty, based on natural growth. Inner potential for movement across forms is evident in such work as *Havana Cigar Shop* (1899) in Vienna. While the two-dimensional abstract forms adorning the walls illustrate dynamic movement, animating flat areas of space, their shape is repeated in sculptural form in the built-in shelves that burst forth from ornamented archways. Silhouettes bulge out from the point where they join the wall, reminiscent of the billowing of a sail (which, by implication, represent the wind). These points of tension emphasize and contrast the static smooth plaster against wood, carved to give the impression of elasticity. Despite such conscious displays of mastery over the materials employed, Art Nouveau did not always adhere to the Ruskinian insistence on being true to the materials, which would

have precluded the use of materials that pretend to be another (Ruskin, 2011: 35).[30] Indeed, painted surfaces are a recurring feature across iron, wood and plaster in Belgian Art Nouveau. While the painting does not necessarily attempt to deceive the eye into thinking it was another material (as in fake marbling techniques or gilding common to Baroque architecture), a certain quality of naturalness and truth to materials is denied.[31]

The innate characteristics of both inorganic and natural materials were pushed to their limits in Belgian Art Nouveau. Pediments and joins seem to buckle and bend as they bear the weight of structures. In the high Art Nouveau style of Horta's *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* (1895), for example, stone is carved to create a watery, rippled effect, more suited to the texture of wood. Similarly, the swooping forms in many of van de Velde audaciously-curved wooden objects were not made by bending and refining existing branches. For example, the shooting tendrils of the cabinet-vitrines from the 1897 *Palais des Colonies* — where looping accents extend to almost half the size of the piece of furniture — have been cut from a flattened plank (Bruneel-Hye De Crom, 1967: 55). While a dynamic composition has been set up, and the suppleness of the wood accentuated, the manipulation recreates an approximate representation of natural growth. With surfaces altered to serve overall unity (in superficial coloration as much as pushing materials to their limits to give the impression of weightlessness), Art Nouveau retained an air of artifice and illusion.[32] The novel feature of glass domes and walls, held in place by iron ribcages, were the aesthetic of the greenhouse and aquarium, incubators and enclosures that housed fragments of the natural world beyond the city.

As the edges of wood and stone alike are crafted into undulating swells and metallic tendrils teased into outgrowths, light is bounced against glass walls and wooden sheaths, intentionally highlighting areas and textures, but also creating environments of intense theatricality. While natural movement and growth is alluded to and represented in their surfaces, the furniture, walls and flourishes of the style remained immobile.

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30. Ruskin (2011: 35) further forbade the use of casting machines of any kind. To him, even the tiniest action and detail impacted on the overall structure, showing the importance of having a total vision, or "map" (Ruskin, 2011: 6). Such ideas are rooted in his understanding of the unity achieved in Gothic church structures.

31. Wood was the trademark material exposed most strongly to being used as a decorative feature, by having its natural colors and textures enhanced with glosses.

32. Horta was known to employ the Renaissance technique of creating optical illusions in the curvature of building walls.

The Future in Iron and Glass

The environments under discussion, brimming with artificial botanic hybrids, were inundated with symbols of industry. Restless lines that probe foundational forms may also be seen as an attempt to grasp the tense movements of the urban city in the new age, especially the powerful mechanized force of railway. Within Art Nouveau constructions, the seemingly anti-modern gesture of utilizing organic form against mechanization was also intended to express modernity (Jessup, 2001: 4). Modern materials of glass and iron, notably present in the work of Horta and van de Velde, are celebrated as progressive elements within the Gesamtkunstwerk.

Arguably the most famous public display dramatizing the effects and symbolism of modern materials was Horta's *Maison du Peuple*. The architect's solution to fusing workers and their bourgeois patrons was to fuse ironwork, usually confined to the use of engineers, with a transparent skin of futuristic glass. A supple metal ribcage of slender stems, visible from the street outside as well as from within, would allow for light to pour into the great hall of the edifice.In this manner Horta aimed to provide workers with what he assumed them to be lacking, namely light and air (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 18). The translucent material, that up until the mid-1800s had simply been used to fill the small-sized void of windows, now became a see-through skin between interior and exterior (Franck and Lepori, 2007: 80). Apart from the obvious practicalities of glass, the play of visibility and invisibility set up a metaphor between the function of the building — to house progressive activities — and the opening up of space, illuminating and exposing areas of built space in new ways.

Large sheets of glass, now allowed for by the iron frameworks, lightened up space, providing the optimum amount of airy atmosphere into previously darker environments. The use of glass surfaces were of as much use to private Art Nouveau spaces as to public ones. When used for introspective, cloistered environments, shiny glass surfaces could, literally, offer up reflections of the viewer looking out. When rendered opaque through frosting and colouring, crystal-plated surfaces could be orchestrated to function as carnival mirrors, as much as serve functional practicality. This is a feature particular prominent in Horta's work. In the interiors of *Maison Horta* and *Hôtel Solvay*, for example, large mirrors are placed in key places, not only to amplify space, but also to allow light from the skylight to bounce off other glass surfaces and the glossed woods and sparkling metal to create patterns

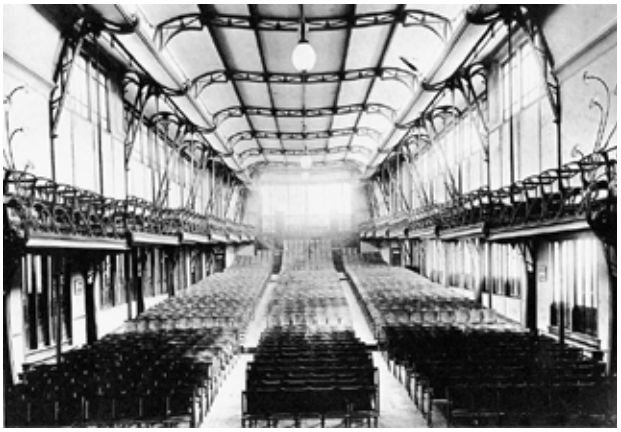


Figure 1.12: Interior of *Maison du peuple* by Victor Horta (built in 1899)

of echoing, repeated forms.

The notion of inner world is illustrated through the reflected self whose presence, when moving through the space, is repeated in rippling and unusual ways. Glass linked back to the open embrace of narcissism in the works of the Symbolist movement, with which Art Nouveau in Belgium was closely related. The fusion of materials in the total artwork that saw metals and wood take on reflective, glass-like qualities further accentuated absorption in self-contained environments.

While metalwork had previously been associated with the building of railroads and bridges, Horta — architect and master designer — coaxed harmonious forms and airy, sunny caverns out of these industrial materials. Such feats were only possible due to fairly recent breakthroughs in the use of these materials (as demonstrated in 1889 for iron with the Eiffel Tower) and, as such, were seen as the style of the future (De Cauter, 1996: 14). Within the context of the workers' party's community center, the modern materials would further be read as symbols of labour (Culot, 1979: 92). In a characteristic Art Nouveau fusion, curlicues and arching iron fibres are also highly evocative of Gothic architecture.

Histories on Art Nouveau highlight the influence of French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc on Horta and other designers. He is assumed to be somewhat of a mentor for Horta and Hankar. Viollet-le-Duc had spent time in Belgium restoring Medieval architecture and had become a vocal protagonist for using modern metalwork to put into practice the lessons of Medieval cathedrals. Art Nouveau floret formations and pointed archways, as well as grandiose use of space (as seen in the *Maison du Peuple*),



Figure 1.13: Exterior & interior of *L'Innovation* by Victor Horta (built in 1901)

may be seen as manifestations of Viollet-le-Duc's influence. Yet Horta's flame-like shapes and dramatic massing of asymmetrical linear form also point towards Baroque sensibilities, his vision of modernity in the worker's hall thus performing a melding of multiple sources that mixed architectural history with cutting edge techniques.

New materials were further put to use according to Art Nouveau sensibilities in the commercial sphere. Horta's shopping mall *À l'innovation* (1901) made a feature of extensive ironwork, echoing towering Gothic structures, as well as the optimum use of glass to display wares. Not only was the internal organization of the building visible from the outside, but the openness could be used to entice people to enter the modern new plaza. Concern for a consistency of form extended to small details, such as Horta overseeing the design of signage throughout the department store, as well as how merchandise was to be laid out.

Hankar's career was peppered with designs for numerous commercial stores, which he infused with a dual air of futurism and classicism via use of modern materials and intricate, historically inspired design work. The swirling facade of *Boulangerie Timmermans* (1896), for example, relies on integrating rectilinear glass windows with elaborate, sculptural and painted wall decorations. Hankar's characteristic application of sgraffito here further demonstrates his concern for the passer-

by in the street. These figurative wall decorations, usually executed by Adolphe Crespin, animated the exteriors both of Hankar's private homes and his commercial spaces. Photographs of the interior of a barbershop in Ixelles (1896) reveal a lively balance of sinusoidal décor, echoing the shapes of utility iron components, against more sturdy built-in furniture that frames shiny mirror and glass surfaces. While a certain modishness can be expected in commercial spaces, to attract foot traffic, external ostentatiousness in private homes was not fashionable in Belgium in this period. The Art Nouveau period saw the bourgeoisie's social life increasingly move indoors and away from the public sphere (Culot, 1979: 96). To provide for this, outré Art Nouveau designers brought expansive displays of iron and glass into the domestic home, to be enjoyed as sheltered space, shielded from the street. Exposed metal structures, even though crafted into sophisticated curves in harmony with the rest of the space, were suggestive of the railroad and the bridge and, as such, shocking to find in a private home. Such daring, best illustrated in the *Hôtel Tassel*, is said to have scandalized Horta's previous apprenticeship master, Alphonse Balat (Culot, 1979: 96; Dierkens-Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1994: 157). Like others of the more conservative preceding generation, Balat felt that glass and iron should be reserved for their proper place as in greenhouses, such as the one he had built in 1879 for King Leopold II at Laeken, for which Horta assisted as junior architect.[33] One can imagine that the glass domes mushrooming out of the side of the *Herenhuis Max Hallet* (1903) that faced the garden would have caused further public consternation. Given Hallet's public persona as a progressive and politicized connoisseur of the arts, an outward embrace of the new would be appropriate. Such patronage ensured that the domain of the private home became a radical arena of experimentation. As high society moved indoors, the modern domestic space became a theatre for a select audience. Within this, virtuoso displays of the possibilities of iron and glass were deliberately employed.

In catering to his wealthy patrons, Horta explored ways of making his townhouses portraits of his patrons. This would entail incorporating particular motifs that related to their affiliations, as seen in references to the masonic symbols in the applied figural ornamentation of *Hôtel Autrique*, home to master freemason Eugéne Autrique (Hanser, 1997: 19–20). For *Hôtel Winsinger* (1897) Horta

33. The greenhouse is based on classical pillars that hold up massive ribbed glass domes, with iron trellises that echo Medieval buttressing. It is likely that the technical knowledge Horta gained in working on projects such as this had an effect on his later, more avant-garde experiments.

incorporated soothing sky motifs for the benefit of the sickly lady of the house (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 12). While this strategy claims to personalize the home, Adolf Loos has pointed out that it draws the public face of the family into its private spaces. In this manner the architect dictates the nature of the entire interior, thus de-personalising it and not allowing it to grow with its inhabitants (Colomina, 1998: 39).[34] These moves also give physical form to the superficial interest in the personal life of clients that is expected of high society businessmen. Horta's rendering of private space may thus be seen as extending his particularized brand of commercialized artificiality into an orchestration of the domestic setting.

Exposed functionalism and use of futuristic materials in new and unusual ways was key for the recognition of Art Nouveau as consciously encapsulating a new era and thus a step on the road towards modernist architecture.[35] The Art Nouveau focus on an all-encompassing harmony of style forged another primary link to 20th century architecture. Paul Hankar was the first Art Nouveau protagonist to craft every aspect of an environment starting in 1890 with his own dining room (Dierkens-Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1994: 177). While many examples of total interiors existed, it is the commissions that allowed practitioners to craft entire buildings — not only their insides — and that have been labelled by art historians as masterpieces.

Horta's urban homes treated the domestic edifice, in its entirety, in a monumental manner, creatively fitting dynamic overall plans onto the skinny plots of land available in Belgian urban cityscapes. Inner structure, reflected in street facades, were important influences on future modernist functionalism. In *Hôtel Solvay* (1894), lines of decorative framework and the contours and placing of the balcony outline the different levels and compartments within. When viewed from a side angle, it is possible to discern in the structural silhouette the same undulating line formations that are repeated in the interior. Similarly, negative space has been strategically manipulated to create an airy atmosphere, suggested via open plan space and transparent glass panes between interconnected rooms. To add to the effect,

34. Loos was talking specifically about the work of Josef Hoffmann, part of the Jugendstil, the Art Nouveau movement in Germany.

35. This, too, was cause for critique in its time. After seeing van de Velde's *Havana Tobacco Company* premises, avant-garde painter Max Lieberman dryly commented that "Nobody carries their colon around as a watch chain" (Sembach, 2007: 56).



1.14: Interior of *Hotel Solvay* by Victor Horta (built in 1900)

furniture and objects were perfectly coordinated in consideration of each other, so that they become ornaments in themselves, augmenting and highlighting the space (Schmutzler, 1962: 11). In these buildings the conventionally "high" mediums of painting and sculpture are subordinated, as the artwork is the entire building; thus the experience of being within the builing is privileged. In a now-familiar modernist metaphor, Horta proclaimed that buildings had to be harmonious "living machines," further stressing the Art Nouveau organic obsession by comparing his houses to bodies, where every small part is important (Horta in Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1996: 42).[36]

Hôtel Solvay is known as Horta's first Gesamtkunstwerk, in which all aspects of the design are controlled via the insertion of his own hand-crafted furniture, cabinetry, carpeting and fittings within a harmonious interior encrusted with precious materials (Dierkens-Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1996: 67; Sembach, 2007: 60; Vandenbreeden, 1994: 82). The townhouse also demonstrates how members of the new bourgeoisie were not afraid to demonstrate their wealth within the confines of their own homes. Robert Schmutzler (1962: 136) describes rich woods and ivory as "dissolving" into slabs of onyx and alabaster, transparent panes of colored glass and ormolu fittings.[37] This sumptuous celebration of organic form was also a showroom for the possibilities of luscious materials.

36 "A house is a machine for living" is the oft-quoted saying of one of the fathers of the Modernist movement, Le Corbusier (first stated in 1923).

37. Ormolu is a kind of gilding using finely ground, high carat gold.





Figure: 1.15: Interior of *Hotel Solvay* by Victor Horta (built in 1900)
Figure 1.16: Exterior of *Hotel Solvay*

In this crystal-walled example of Art Nouveau, all the core characteristics of the style's claim to modernist evolution are apparent. The cutting edge materials of the day, glass and metal, feature abundantly. Iron, combined with wood and stone, is sculpted into flowing contours (regardless of their innate natural qualities). Unlike the 20th century drive towards truth to materials, raw components are transformed into homogeneous wave-formations, fused together to create an underwater-like environment of organic inspired ur-forms.[38] Vegetal ornamentation emphasizes the overall shape as an exposed structure-system, as object and decoration become fused into an organ-like entity (also evident in the support-frame of the glass domes of *Hôtel Max Hallet*). In furniture and architecture alike, massing of flourishes highlight function, to create a dynamic tension within the overall construction. The sensual experience of living within such a space was open only to the privileged. While external casing belied structural organization on the inside — ushering in modernism in the process — its public face was not overtly opulent. Its language, in detail and arching structural support, is that of enclosed, even sheltered, ornamentation. While facade and interior are not separate entities, the public, at street level, are not privy to the full effect of the seductive pleasures of Horta's private citadels.[39]

38. In Art Nouveau representational art the theme of metamorphosis abounds, with mermaids, melusines, dragonfly-women and other hybrid creatures featuring alongside amorphous animals like jellyfish and sea anemones (Greenhalgh, 2000: 54; Schmutzler, 1962: 10, 262).

39. While Horta's townhouses were designed to allow as much natural light to flow in as possible, they did not have the more porous exteriors of his public buildings. It is in his malls where glass and iron mediated the interior with street life outside, strongly pointing towards the 20th century modernism that was to come.

Evoking Tradition: Nostalgia for Belgian Pasts

Different practitioners did not always have the same goals when creating total artworks. Where Horta's work has been interpreted as escapism, van de Velde eschewed the Wagnerian notion of using harmony for cathartic purposes, maintaining that art should influence life, rather than withdraw from reality (Jacobs, 2005: 21). Accordingly, different versions of the domestic home could take on radically varied appearances, depending on the style and stage of development of each practitioner. Alongside their sophisticated townhouses, Serrurier-Bovy, Paul Hankar and Horta also developed a separate cottage style with a symbolism that veered away from the embrace of industrialism evident in their urban aesthetics.[40] Within this category, van de Velde's first family home is heralded as the most influential.

In contrast to the swirling dynamism of Horta's more Baroque sensibilities, van de Velde's initial Gesamtkunstwerk strove for the effect of comfort and functionality. *Villa Bloemenwerf* (1895), situated outside of Brussels city centre does not use the characteristic curvilinear Art Nouveau flourishes, yet achieves a sense of organic harmony with the surrounding landscape and an overall unity in every aspect of its conception (Jacobs, 2005: 62). Van de Velde went to great lengths to ensure that the furniture and utilities — like the heating system and hearth, as well as the clothes worn by his wife and children — were bound up in the overall plan, in the their methods of construction and sense of materiality, as much as in the binding aesthetic unity. With clothing allowing for movement, as did natural elements outside, an overall impression of rhythmic patterning and repeated motifs was set up. At the heart of the conceptualization of works such as this one was an ethical drive not only towards a harmonious overall design, but also towards a model of a way of life. Such design was conceived of as encapsulating the humble morality of a simple peasant existence (Jacobs, 2005: 59; Ogata, 2001: 94). Moreover, he believed the innocent state of "primitive" man, which he equated with peasant society, to be based in an immersion in the rural landscape.[41] He employed popular, traditional crafts that reflected bucolic life, such as padouk chairs or the aesthetic of the cottage itself. The latter was modelled on a historical precedent of medieval techniques in the half-timbered facade and through its three Dutch vernacular gables (Jacobs, 2005: 59; Ogata, 2001: 94).

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40. Ogata (2001) argues that this parallel branch of Belgian Art Nouveau is an important and largely overlooked part of the movement that sheds light on the particular form of socialism practiced in the country.

41. Van de Velde (1885: 13) purports that the hardy yet delicate character of nature offers an answer to boring and frivolously overdecorated rooms.

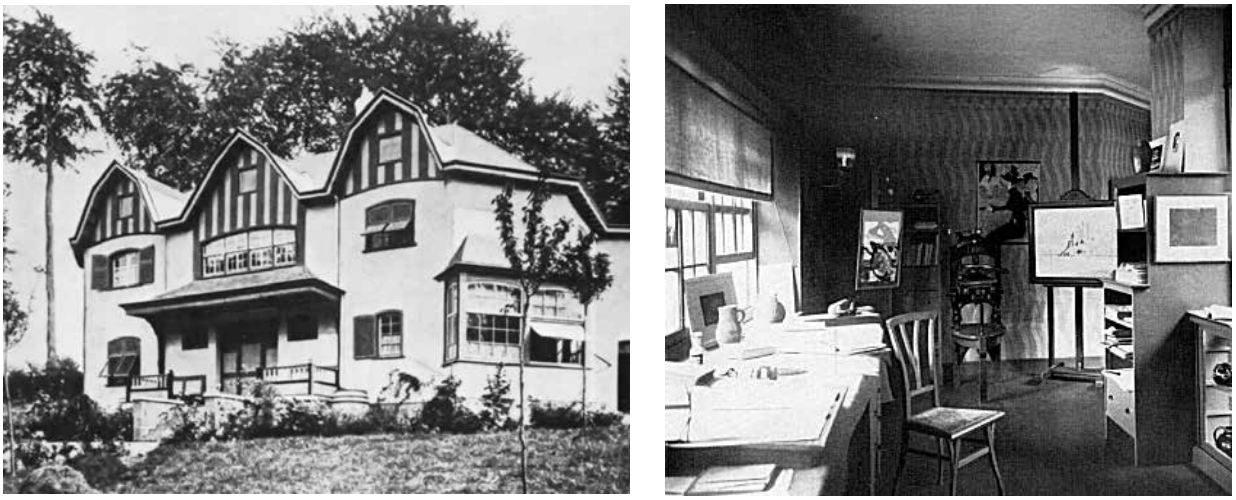


Figure 1.17: Exterior and interior of *Villa Bloemenwerf* by Henry Van de Velde (built in 1895)

Van de Velde's conceptualization of a country idyll, remote from urban ugliness, evokes an aesthetic of ethical peasant life, set up in complete disregard for the real hardship Belgian labour was experiencing at the time. Within the protective enclosure of *Villa Bloemenwerf*, time is fixed in an invented, more innocent past, into which the effects of the industrial revolution did not intrude. In such examples, the Art Nouveau tendency towards culture and class appropriation, achieved through the use of the aesthetics of cultures other than their own, are interwoven with innovative design strategies. In the creation of organic wholes in each total artwork, whether based on conceptions of simplicity or more fanciful outings, the peasant, worker or traditional craftsman featured more as a source of aesthetic and conceptual inspiration than as a tangible human being. In this quintessentially primitivist quest for essentials and pure origins, Belgian Art Nouveau responded to what it perceived as a deficiency in Belgian culture (and especially its aesthetics) by looking both to an imagined past and, within this, to an abstract idea of nature with romantic longing. The form of primitivism seen here thus sought modernity through a reassessment of the past that evoked local and regional heritage (Ogata, 2001: 5).

Bound up in the idea of regionalism, or performing locality, was the propagation of nationalism. In domestic homes like Villa Bloemenwerf, the family — the source of an individual's psychological and physical well-being — was visibly ensconced in a building that appeared to belong to that place through its traditions. This construction of nationality was well suited to the private home, a symbol of privacy and intimacy but also a sign of public identity. Rendered in the Art Nouveau rural style, the house can thus be a site of moral sanctity that stands for the bourgeois state itself (Ogata, 2001: 59).

Architectural allusion to local traditions, mingled with nostalgia for medieval Flemish heroism (and, with this, a simpler life better attuned to nature), was developed as a conscious attempt to generate a sense of Belgian spirit through culture (Silverman, 2013: 22–26). The popular 19th century Flemish Revival style has been seen as part of this intense desire for a sense of local tradition (Dierkens-Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1994: 30). Similarly, Horta's reference to medieval motifs may be interpreted as patriotic, nationalist tendency. In his townhouses and public buildings, such as the *Maison du Peuple*, Gothic motifs proliferate, alongside structural elements reminiscent of the cathedrals and churches greatly beloved by Viollet-le-Duc. Further, Horta's questing after the stem instead of the flower has links to the principles of Gothic art and architecture (Bayard, 1919: 103).

The binding sense of unity across the style, in general, may partially be attributed to comparable harmonies in churches of the middle ages, but a number of further influences came into play. Hankar's asymmetrical rocaille ornamentation, combined with golden edging, has been linked to Gentish Rococo, originating in his home town (Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1996: 176). He also pursued artisanal traditions from earlier eras. This is overtly advertised in his continual use of sgraffito murals. Importantly, these are prominent on his street-facing facades (as much as in ornate interiors), a form of sharing his artwork with the public, as seen in *Hôtel Ciamberlani* (1897).

Pride in the local is manifest in most of Serrurier-Bovy's oeuvre, given his claims to family heritage and, with this, regional wood techniques. As well as absorbing the aesthetic of the peasant, as seen in his *Cabinet de Travail* (1895), he also attempted to set model examples for domestic life, as exemplified in *Villa l'Aube* (1903), his family home in the country. This rustic retreat was designed as an overall entity, complete with vibrant and sturdy woodwork, integration with the plants in the garden outside and artwork provided by August Donnay mosaics. Perhaps one of the best illustrations of Serrurier-Bovy's patriotism may be found in the stylized motif of indigenous red meadow flowers from his home region Liège (Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1996: 116). He repeatedly used strips of the stylized blooms throughout his career, punctuating flat areas of bedsteads, walls and ceilings. On wood panelling, the details of the flowers would often be emphasized by a subtle regional ridging technique creating the gentle sculptural texture à la fleur (Watelet, 1987: 54).

Such recourse to "pure" folk craft that predated the industrial revolution was further related to a yearning for a cohesive national past for the Belgian nation, then — as now — still fraught with disunity (Fraiture, 2009: 44; Ogata, 2001: 8). The binding totality of the Gesamtkunstwerk, read against industrialized urban tensions, may further be understood as an attempt to bring the nation together. Not only did Horta, Hankar, Serrurier-Bovy and van de Velde draw pointedly on regional sources, but they bound them with other influences into a fresh aesthetic, intended to revitalize. In Belgium, such practice was not only part of the international avant-garde reaction to 19th century trends of eclecticism and historical revivalism (leading to bombastic and discordant environments), but also had to do with seeking an artistic identity for the fledgling nation.[42] Within Art Nouveau enclaves, this nationalist drive was developed while also drawing heavily on non-western culture, the focus of the next section.

Art Nouveau's Elsewheres: Orientalism in the Total Artwork

> The whole of Japan is pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.
> (Oscar Wilde, 1905: 14)

If Art Nouveau innovation was rooted in industrialization, Romantic organicism and a nostalgic longing for a shared past, a further layer to its complexity is its Orientalist exoticism. The art of Japan was especially pervasive, with European *Japonisme* becoming more pronounced in the late 19th century.[43] Eastern influence was extensive and infused all aspects of Art Nouveau form, from its emphasis on total space — especially negative space within the whole — to asymmetrical shape compositions and the proliferation of flattened forms and colour fields.[44]

Françoise Aubry and Jos Vandenbreeden (1996: 60) suggest that the foundational tendril-forms of Horta's *Hôtel Tassel*, especially those of its wall murals, stem directly from Japanese prints. They

42. Such practice was coerced by figures such as Picard who fervently promoted the idea of L'âme belge (the Belgian soul) that needed to be forged by smelting Latin and Germanic elements in the arts (Fraiture, 2009: 44).
43. The Japonisme craze extended from Japanese art (especially woodblock prints) to a vast array of fans, screens, porcelains and textiles. While Euro-American fascination with Asian cultures had been a prevalent in the 17th and 18th centuries, extended contact with Japan only came about in the period 1948–1954 when trade agreements put an end to Japanese isolationism.
44. This, too, reaches back to 18th century enthrallment with exotic Chinese culture, called *Chinoiserie*, in French baroque movements.



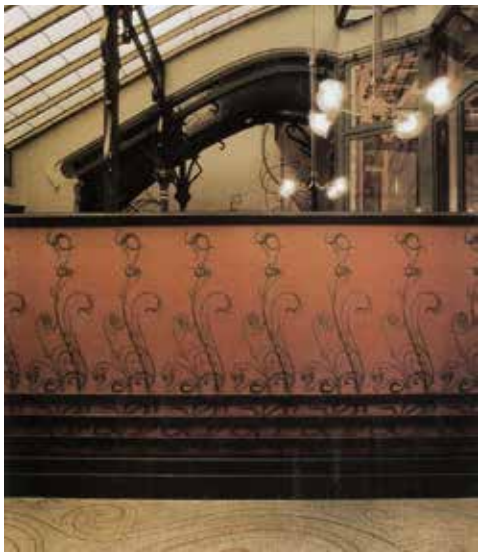


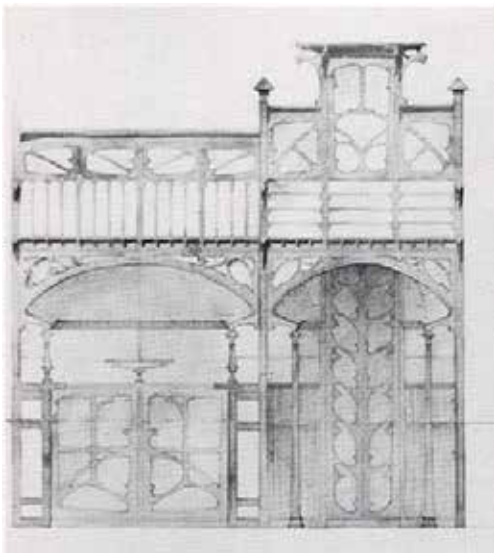
Figure 1.20: *The Wave* by Katsushika Hokusai (1896); Figure 1.21: *Hôtel Tassel,* by Victor Horta (built in 1894)

demonstrate a similarity of line in Katsushika Hokusai's renowned work). Similarly, Serrurier-Bovy, who imported the magazine *Japonisme* to Belgium, was visibly swayed by the aesthetics seen in its pages. With his furniture laced with asymmetrical line compositions and slender, restrained forms, admiration for the Orient, with Japan predominating, is evident in his work.

Klaus-Jürgen Sembach (1989: 27), van de Velde's first biographer, urges the reader to look beyond the obvious influence of Japanese wood prints on the bold outlines and abstract vegetal forms of the designer's graphic work, and on the foaming borders of his furniture and interiors. Rather, he argues that van de Velde's entire practice embodied a fascination with Islamic architecture. He points to the formal richness of features such as irregular horseshoe arches, curving roofs and alien decor as being fundamentally "Moorish" in spirit.

Hankar stands out as the most pronounced Orientalist of the Belgian Art Nouveau branch, drawing on what was known as the *Style Japonais, Style Chinois* and *Style Orientale*. Graphic outlines and temple-like silhouettes pervade his work. In the dining room of Maison Bartholomé (1898), patterning from the Turkish rugs solidifies into a fantastical, yet delicate archway, topped by fleuron formations, which in turn echo the round window that allows light to reach into the room. In further examples, Hankar claimed Moorish design as a direct influence, as in the stair banisters of the *Maison Bartholomé* (Vandenbreeden, 1994: 109). Choice of light fittings and fabrics further suggests a general Oriental





1.18: Exterior of *Hotel Ciamberlani* by Paul Hankar (built in 1897)
1.19: Preparatory sketch for the *Palais des colonies* (1897)

theme. In the restaurant for *Le Grand Hotel de Bruxelles*, he employs the use of screens and graphic windowpanes, reminiscent of Chinese sails (Loyer, 2005: 12). Signature use of figurative murals provides further evidence of the influence of Japanese prints, with dark outlines and flat blocks of colour. Moreover, an undeniable Japanese influence has been read into Hankar's overall simplicity of form and use of decoration to accentuate all elements of construction, which he possibly gleaned from perusing periodicals detailing the principles of this art (Adriaenssens, 2005a: 5; Loyer, 1991: 129).[45]

Exhibitions and show rooms by Horta, van de Velde and Serrurier-Bovy were often seen to make an oriental influence explicit by including Japanese or Chinese prints, wallpapers, vases and *objects d'art* in their ensembles, along with incorporating motifs and symbols into patterning and ornament. Such a declaration of admiration is evident in Horta's dining room installation for the Turin World's Fair of 1902, where the inclusion of Oriental vases (of uncertain origin) and prints heightened similarities between his forms (particularly domed edges and vibrations at corners) and those from the Far East, as it was then known in Euro-America. While less predominant, the Islamic arabesque has also been cited as an influence on the definitive Art Nouveau whiplash line (Greenhalgh, 2000: 19; Fahr-Becker, 2007: 34). Egyptian art has also regularly been named as a source of influence in the work of Horta

45. These periodicals, such as *Japon Artistique* (1888–1891), introduced exotic Japan to a European audience interested in traditional cultures and ancient myths and aesthetics. Commenting on the undeniable presence of the Orient in Hankar's jutting doorway at the *Hôtel Henri Renkin* (1897), Charles de Maeyer (1963: 11) saw its appeal in how it caught up visitors in *Japonisme* and showed them the pleasures of temple-like forms.





Figure 1.22: *Reception Dress* by Henry Van de Velde (1899); Figure 1.23: *Dining Room* for the Turin *World's Fair* by Victor Horta (1902); Figure 1.24: *Table* (1901), by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy

and Hankar, especially pediments, pedestals and pillars, as well as wall murals that recall temples and palaces (Dierkins-Aubry and Vandenbreeden, 1994: 158; Madsen, 1967: 60; Loyer, 1991: 105).

Across the scope of Art Nouveau, conception of space as a unified whole has been attributed to Japanese art just as much as to medieval design.[46] Prior to the 19th century, traditional Japanese culture did not make the same distinctions between high art and craft that the Art Nouveau artists were trying to break down. Moreover, the European craze of *Japonisme* had led to ceramics, porcelains, textiles and prints becoming an important Japanese export product by the time of Art Nouveau. The fact that the influence of Asian cultures is referred to in a similar manner as the reference to medieval influences reveals societal attitudes towards those cultures. In the levelling of cultural time, non-western culture is equated with that of the European past. With the medieval period dating back to the 5th century, the fantasy of Asian and Islamic cultures that is merged with the Gothic serves as a dislocated, timeless presence, mired in ancient rites that exist in a separate time zone.

Oriental art is routinely cited as an important influence on Art Nouveau, yet descriptions seldom identify particular artists or regional styles. The allusion is to exotic forms that are free-floating in time, captured in generalized categorizations such as "Moorish," "Japanese," or "Chinese." These

46. This can be linked to the broad tradition of wabi-sabi, a Japanese pantheon of aesthetic values that sees wisdom and beauty in imperfection. This approach understands objects and environments as integral with natural processes, expressed in simple, asymmetrical form-making.

were intended to convey an Eastern feeling or spirit.[47] These Orientalist urges made generalizations that covered vast areas of the globe, including India, Egypt, Asia and the Middle East. Thus, "a fixed, more or less total geographic position" is taken "towards a wide variety of social, linguistic, political and historical realities" (Said, 1977: 50–51). This fixedness is visible in Art Nouveau's line-language that assumes a general likeness in asymmetrical lines and seamlessly incorporates them into an environment in its entirety. Accordingly, entire cultures become flattened into the smooth contours of the Art Nouveau whole. Appropriation of visual tropes from foreign objects made by peoples who were perceived to be lesser than Europeans leads to the erasure of the original artists.

At the same time, there is no space for contemporary members of these cultures to represent themselves. Oscar Wilde's ([1891] 1905) fictional character Vivien captured this when he scolded a companion:

> I know you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are represented to us in art, have any existence? … If you set a picture by Hokusai or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them.

While Wilde's characters are discussing works of art that portray recognizable human characters and were painted by well-known Japanese artists, the point remains pertinent. The exclusive focus on stylized artworks, or design styles and patterns, ignores the possible similarities between people from other cultures and Europeans. Moreover, the assumption that a few select objects, patterns or prints are representative of an entire culture is certainly illogical (as much as may be insulting). It is clear that the essence of being an artist means drawing on bits and pieces from everywhere. Yet, when consuming art of an exotic other is coupled with colonialism, then influence is linked to power, shaping the way in which that culture becomes visible.

Overall, Art Nouveau fascination with the Orient homogenized impressions of its aesthetics to harness

47. Critically, references to the non-West were often bound up in war and conquest, such as when Napoleon's colonial conquests in Egypt around 1800 resulted in references to other cultures in Central European art (Coutts-Smith, 1991: 23).

its otherworldly qualities. Within consciously fabricated Art Nouveau dreamscapes, it was the alluring qualities of non-western exotic otherness that were sought. This process propagated European myths of a faraway and vastly different Far East whose peoples were bound up in mystical tradition. With the backwardness of other cultures highlighted through modernized frameworks of iron and glass, their aesthetics were made available for the delectation of a sophisticated European elite. Edward Said (1977) brings forward the insidious nature of the essentializing and objectifying act of only seeing a culture in terms of its aesthetics. In so doing, the people within exoticized European knowledge constructions (literary, artistic, intellectual or otherwise) are, by implication, presented to Europeans as passive and available for the taking.

Within Art Nouveau world-making, a self-aware critique of European society took the form of escape into romanticized simplifications of Oriental cultures, as much as past European ages. Despite an obvious enthrallment with fantasies of these exotic places, total artworks communicate a complete immersion in their own Euro-centrism. From within a context that assumed itself to be the epitome of modern culture, their own hierarchical thinking would have been invisible to both Art Nouveau patrons and its designers. In *fin de siècle* Europe, the great civilizations of Asia and North Africa were thought to be in a state of decline, no longer able to achieve their previous aesthetic and architectural achievements. According to the terms of Art Nouveau reference, the contemporary communities of these cultures (and their artistic output) were deemed inconsiderable, compared to the achievements of their ancient arts.

Such thinking is directly illustrated in the Art Nouveau bible, Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* (Swimberghe & Verlinde, 1997: 136).[48] First published in 1856, the British architect's instructive tome was used as an educational tool in Belgian art schools and familiar to all Art Nouveau-era practitioners. Its fundamental counsel to awaken a "higher ambition" in designers and replenish the "half-stagnant reservoir" of borrowing from the past through looking to forms that command admiration because of their "accordance with the laws … of nature" sets an early Art Nouveau tone (Jones, 1997: 16). This popular pattern book presents a cherry-picked selection of the key elements of ornament of

48. Jones' most well known architectural project was London's Crystal Palace, built in collaboration with Joseph Paxton for the iconic World's Fair of 1950.

other cultures, categorized in an orderly manner, so that they can easily be applied to new European buildings. Advisory commentary offered for each culture, from “Savage Tribes” to ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, Arabia and Persia, further reveals the attitudes of 19th century Europeans towards those peoples referred to.

Not only does the ordered nature of Jones’s book and its clear categories suggest a comprehensive knowledge of the cultures cataloged, but also that the complex meanings they hold within their societies of origin have beensimplified to the extreme. Whether their source is architecture, cloth, ceramic tile or ceremonial object, they lose their textures and nuance as they are translated into line and flat colour patches. Part of their agency, as potentially sensorial objects, is thus taken away and given over to the reader of the catalogue. This act of simplification thus removes the patterns from contemporary temporalities and denies their respective weathering, upkeep and role within living societies. Given that none of the Art Nouveau artists never travelled to the countries they drew on, the disembodied quality of the dreamscapes they created may be because they based their designs on mere fragments.

Jones presents cultures such as Egypt and Assyria as having progressed through the ages, culminating in a point of perfection before deteriorating and feeding off its own elements.[49] In the case of Egypt, he claims complete regression has taken place: “the more ancient the monument, the more perfect the art” (Jones, 1997: 39). All cultures covered are placed in a remote past and thus distanced from the contemporary. While those with European roots, such as ancient Greece, Rome, the Byzantine or the Gothic, are presented as being so far removed as to be exotic, non-European cultures are represented as being in a state of current decline, their material monuments seen as remnants of past glories. Jones brings them forward as objects of study, able to rejuvenate European design. The complex cultural practices that gave rise to them are relegated to the annals of a history long past. Jones included patterns and motifs for their apparent reliance on natural principle and untainted artistic impulse, rather than for being created by designers talented in their own right. The overall impression is that it is only the European eye that has the right to judge what is good and bad design and what aspects of other cultures

49. Jones (1997: 29) also includes Polynesian culture as a possible artistic source to be tapped, preceding Gauguin by 30 years. Rather than seeing it as the remnant of a great nation, however, he presents it rather as existing in a timeless state of early evolution.

are relevant for modern life.

These notions of the superiority of the European race are also found in the work of Viollet-le-Duc. In his teachings of merging a proto-functionalist aesthetic with the Neo-Gothic movements of the Romantic era, he places Northern European culture at the forefront of civilization. This idea is explicitly drawn out in his writings, especially *Habitations of Man in All Ages* (1878), where man's built environments are seen to reflect the physical and racial circumstances of culture, as well as its social values. Both Jones's and Viollet-le-Duc's descriptions of the built material and decorations of other cultures provide a glimpse into the manner in which European tradition determined what they perceived to be primitive or exotic (Connelly, 1995: 11). In detailing what a less civilized culture of the imagined other was constituted of, they defined their own sense of modernity. Their work, therefore, presents aesthetic insight into how the Orient and other cultures came to be othered. Art Nouveau environments may be read in a similar manner. By rendering Oriental cultures as homogeneous, Art Nouveau adhered to the evolutionary theories of its time. This saw its practitioners judging other cultures from the apex of the evolutionary ladder.

Yet, while Art Nouveau shared late 19th century conceptions of Western superiority, a close analysis of its forms reveals a genuinely earnest quest to change European art-making. Even if its radical form was unable to break open the limiting confines of Eurocentric patterns of thought, Art Nouveau provided a Utopian vision of 20th century architecture. That this vision referred to other cultures, foreseeing the direction painting and sculpture would take, presents an interesting proposition. By claiming total space — what Walter Benjamin saw as immersive painting — the resulting development of three-dimensional form may, potentially, have led to more generous fusions of styles or even collaboration between Euro-American designers with those from Asia.[50] However, there is something brittle and insular in Art Nouveau form that refuses to accept other cultures on any terms but its own. While this may reflect the hardening of racial boundaries in European societies, inflexibility may further be located in the manner in which total artworks are constituted.

50. As seen in the historical precedent set in Byzantine architecture of the late Roman Empire, for example.

The Rise and Fall of the Whiplash Line

The undulating Art Nouveau line may be seen to draw on exotic fantasies and fascinations, within the act of articulating something that was essential to Belgium. In the moment of the young nation's cultural triumph, its distinctive line also demarcated clear boundaries, separating lush interiors from the outside world and shutting out the voices of those people from whose objects they drew inspiration. In sketching out a vision of their country's modernity, albeit a fragmented one, some of the longing and alienation implanted within Art Nouveau havens may also be linked to late 19th century European thought concerning human beings and their bodies. Thus, while claiming to emplace a new order by constructing utopian space, Art Nouveau solutions replaced old hierarchies with new ones. Its progressive patron, the new European businessman, was bestowed the luxury of being removed from a messy mechanized world. He was placed at the pinnacle of culture, rising above machines, nature and other kinds of people because of his ability to commandeer them in manipulated environments.

The vegetal coils of ornamentation that attempted to grasp a vision of harmony on behalf of the new elite also bore the seed for the style's speedy demise. Across the international movement, factions of Art Nouveau adherents had conflicting aims, themes and alliances. From the utopian German Art Nouveau commune at the Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt to government-sponsored workshops in a Paris attempting to maintain its reputation as the international trend-setter,[51] very different kinds of Art Nouveau emerged. Some lost the sinuous, floral lines to embrace more symmetrical stabilities (as in Germany), while others pushed escapist flourish to the point that its architects were accused of decadence and social decay (as in Austria).[52] In-fighting amongst designers was common, with the Belgian branch being no exception.[53] However, there was more at stake in the Belgian line that rendered its powerful reign notably short.

Art Nouveau's demise, in general, is often attributed to its very popularity: it is perceived to have degenerated into cheap, marketable products, kitsch knick-knacks that were a weak approximation

51. For a study of this period in France, see Silverman (1992).

52. As its influence expanded and abruptly decreased, strands of the style were interpreted in the Orient itself, with Russian, Japanese and Turkish versions coming to the fore.

53. The four designers analysed here had very different motivations and methodologies. The rivalry between Horta and van de Velde was played out in public and is evident in both their memoirs. While all proponents of the new style had to battle with conservative traditionalists, no united Art Nouveau front was ever mounted in Belgium.

of the pure total styles (Madsen, 1967: 156; Sembach, 2007: 37; Wolf, 2011: 262). Certain tropes, especially curling decoration, were easily copied in mass produced trinkets and simplified motifs. In Belgium, its main protagonists had either departed or moved on by 1905. Hankar died in 1901 and Serrurier-Bovy in 1910. Van de Velde and Horta, in turn, both moved on stylistically, with the former leaving Belgium in 1900.

After an intense period in which it reached heights such as the lusciously ornate *Hôtel Solvay* and the rustic security of *Villa Bloemenwerf*, Art Nouveau became internationally fashionable and (in western Europe) perceived to have a distinctly Belgian association.[54] As a result, cheap knock-offs of rarified objects became widespread popular consumer items. In Belgium, a younger generation of architects began caricaturing the styles of the main protagonists, especially that of Horta. Entire blocks of new housing in Brussels were given cosmetic Art Nouveau flourishes, though the underlying structures were made of conventional brick, and bore no commitment to building as an organic entity or to inventive design strategies and experimental work with iron or glass. For a good part of the 20th century, thus, the term "Art Nouveau" came to be associated with cheap trinkets and flimsy added-on décor. This would only be modified after the Art Nouveau revivals of the 1960s.

With hindsight, Art Nouveau in Belgium, in the pure form of its heyday, came to stand for an augury of the modern urban elite (see Introduction). For all its socialist associations, the modern style ushered in the age of the luxury townhouse for the wealthy and an aesthetic of engorged industry that could control nature.[55] The ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk was simply too expensive and difficult to maintain. A true total artwork, ruled by strict aesthetic laws, demanded that any object brought in from outside which did not conform would be out of place and rendered foreign when inside the enclave. Such was Jules Meier-Graefe's complaint at the time. He derided the style because one could not bring a book with the wrong cover into the inner sanctums of Art Nouveau retreats for fear of it appearing garish (Meier-Graefe in Wolf, 2011: 262). A total artwork was a complicated arena for even the

54. This was not only due to the fame of the pioneering Les Vingt, but also due to van de Velde's prominence in the design world, once he moved to Germany and became involved with the Bauhaus.
55. Van de Velde disapproved of the excesses of Horta's version of Art Nouveau and, in later life, tried to distance himself from association with Art Nouveau. This repudiation was also due to the fact that, in the decades following Art Nouveau, the design movement was reviled as decadent, as well as bizarrely hideous (Sterner, 1982: 36).

most dedicated aesthete to conduct the daily business of living, let alone for a person unschooled in sophisticated aesthetic theories. The intention of changing society through artistic design was, thus, a false premise. It led to architects dictating space and deciding on the terms of negotiating daily life within an artwork on the owner's behalf.

Enduring popular criticism of the style reveals that its dreamlike otherworldliness was alienating. Scathing critiques of Art Nouveau railed against its stylistic audacity containing an outrageously strange quality, which accentuated its ambiguous political message. For example, Paul Morand's expression of revulsion at the "graceless" and "illogical" "eel style" of Art Nouveau reverberated across Europe and into the early decades of the 20th century (Morand in De Cauter, 1996: 21).[56] Constant allusions to its underwater qualities emphasized its otherness and separation from everyday life. Art Nouveau's literal and figurative attempt at harnessing new technologies conjured up a closed system of total design (Schmutzler, 1962: 11). Not only do forms work together to enclose and contain, but whiplash line-forms turn in on themselves in what may be seen as an illustration of the immersive, inward-looking experience caused by their encasement within a Gesamtkunstwerk. Within such encirclement, the rising and falling of the sinusoidal line articulates both an "optimism and a pessimism" (Borsi and Portoghesi, 1991: 11). The counterbalances of the aesthetic harmonies of each Gesamtkunstwerk are thus continuously undermined by the nervous linear configuration of its foundation.

Overwrought Art Nouveau aesthetics inadvertently brought forward an inner critique of society by means of the heightened drama of its aesthetic of writhing forms.[57] As a reaction both to antiquarianism and to ever-evolving industrialization, its proposed alternatives to the problems of rapidly urbanized cities heightened self-awareness to the point of discomfort. In Belgium, the style's Baudelairian sensibility of questioning its own modernity — and within this, a new sense of localized urbanity — appears as something tentative, unfinished and not securely formed.

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56. Further insulting comparisons were made to frogs, tape worms and noodles;. nautically themed terms like "sailing" and "wave" implied that Art Nouveau's undulating lines invoked seasickness (Madsen, 1967: 27; Sembach, 2007: 45).
57. Contemporary descriptions tend to locate this restless energy in terms of fin de siècle angst, against a backdrop of the serpents of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (1867) and the deathly pale sphinxes of waifs of the Symbolist movement (Dierkens-Aubry, 1994: 13; Schmutzler, 1962: 15; Wolf, 2011: 132).

The different protagonists of Belgian Art Nouveau proclaimed their work as a revolutionary spark. Such a willful break with tradition can easily be seen to foreshadow the rebellious tone of the succession of 20th century movements that followed.[58] Yet Horta, van de Velde and the others did not set out to shock and provoke the general public on the same level as much of the future avant-garde would.[59] Nevertheless, a perceived strangeness encapsulated in unfamiliar new forms unquestionably did so (Sembach, 2007: 21). The world of new ornament that was set up, in consciously seeking that which was unfamiliar and exotic, tended to alienate the general public as much as more conservative patrons.[60] Such ideas continue into the present, with Art Nouveau commonly perceived as a "failure" for its inability to offer viable solutions for coming to terms with the demands of the machine age and mass production (Madsen, 1967: 46). The Art Nouveau revival of the late 20th century turned this lack into a heroic achievement: a "mighty battle" against the machine that was fought and lost (Watelet, 1981: 24).

Art Nouveau's reliance on ornament, removed from natural principle, was further reviled by such outspoken critics as Adolph Loos. In *Ornament and Crime* (first published in 1910), Loos insists that the more something is decorated, the more primitive it is. His self-proclaimed modernist stance is vehemently opposed to "uncivilized" art, and he likens the urge to decorate to that of animals, children, "Papuans," "Germanic tribesmen," criminals and degenerates" (Loos, 1998: 167–169). Accordingly, the fundamental core of Art Nouveau can be seen to have incubated an early construction of the primitive through its use of ornamentation.[61]

In Belgium, Art Nouveau's chequered career had built-in inconsistencies and contradictions. Caught on the cusp between two eras and never part of either, the movement can be seen to occupy a tenuous

58. Modern art today is recognized as a string of reactionary movements, starting with the Romantics in the early 19th century (Goankar, 2001: 2).
59. As seen in vehemently anti-establishment groups like Dada, which then gave rise to the Art Nouveau-inspired Surrealist movement.
60. The venomous tone of the public response to Hector Guimard's Paris metro stations is commonly cited as an example of the kind of ire that Art Nouveau architectural form could provoke.
61. Loos' main critique is levelled at German architect Peter Behrens, who had different motivations to the Belgian Art Nouveau movement. This is possibly the reason for his disregard of designers like van de Velde who purposely strove to link to primal energies, attempting to use ornament to animate surfaces. While van de Velde's ornament aimed to "put matter in ecstasy," he tended to achieve an organic appearance, rather than actual reconstruction of a natural organism (Haddad, 2003: 133).

position between high-minded craft and commercialized art. While associated with socialist ideals, it was a movement that fed off the Belgian upper middle class. Writing in the 1920s, Walter Benjamin was quick to identify Art Nouveau as bourgeois, its materialistic phantasmagoria generating a language of rampant individualism. Specifically referring to the work of van de Velde, he describes contrived cocoons of undiluted fantasy that blocked out harsh realities of modern urban life for its wealthy bourgeois clients (Benjamin, 1997: 36). This exclusion may be seen to reverberate across multiple layers, shutting out not only those too poor to participate in luxury living or insufficiently educated to appreciate its sophisticated language of vegetal form, but also those from non-western cultures. Other races and cultures — alongside romanticized visions of European pasts — are appropriated for aesthetic consumption; the messy business of real people undergoing hardship and indignities is glossed over. De-contextualised from their original function, the design motifs of a generalized Orient and peasant peoples serve to feed a hungry avant-garde, determined to rejuvenate the European sickness of derogative, weakening design. The resulting visions offered up were of alluring, unsettled beauty, temporary glimpses into fantastical elsewheres.

In the enclosures, arcades, public halls and private mansions of Belgian Art Nouveau, time is made to stand still. Striving to be of its time, non-western cultures and an equally fantastical European past are rendered timeless. The primitivism of Belgian Art Nouveau lay in reanimating an idea of the other — be it nature, the Orient or a Flemish peasant — as the stage scenery in total artworks. At the same time as generating foils for political blindness, however, radical elements were drawn into Euro-American form-making that are of relevance to contemporary pre-occupations with materialities. Objects contain the basic elements of their built environments and animated ornament attempts to speak back to its own function. Buildings and furniture are inscribed with a self-awareness that bears some knowledge of its own physical make-up. While neither mechanical dynamism nor natural growth is ever quite captured, the attempt to pursue them produces fascinating hybrid forms and structures, which are never quite one thing or the other.

Neither entirely devoted to technological progress, nor completely committed to pursuing nature forms in traditional vernacular, the overall effect is one of nervousness. Despite the organic power Art Nouveau designers sought to convey, their tensile harmonies could only eddy within their own

boundaries, seldom managing to interact with the surrounding cityscape. As gilded dreamscapes and rustic retreats belie the restless uncertainties of the era, rather than decree the style of the future, they present an alternative vision of ecosystems of ornament that function within their own sense of time and aesthetic logic. Overwhelming mastery over materials does not equate to conquering the design of the age to come, but it does lay down principles of seductive total architecture and visibly functional forms that are still with us.

Chapter Two - Looking for the Congo in 'Style Congo': Art Nouveau and the African colony

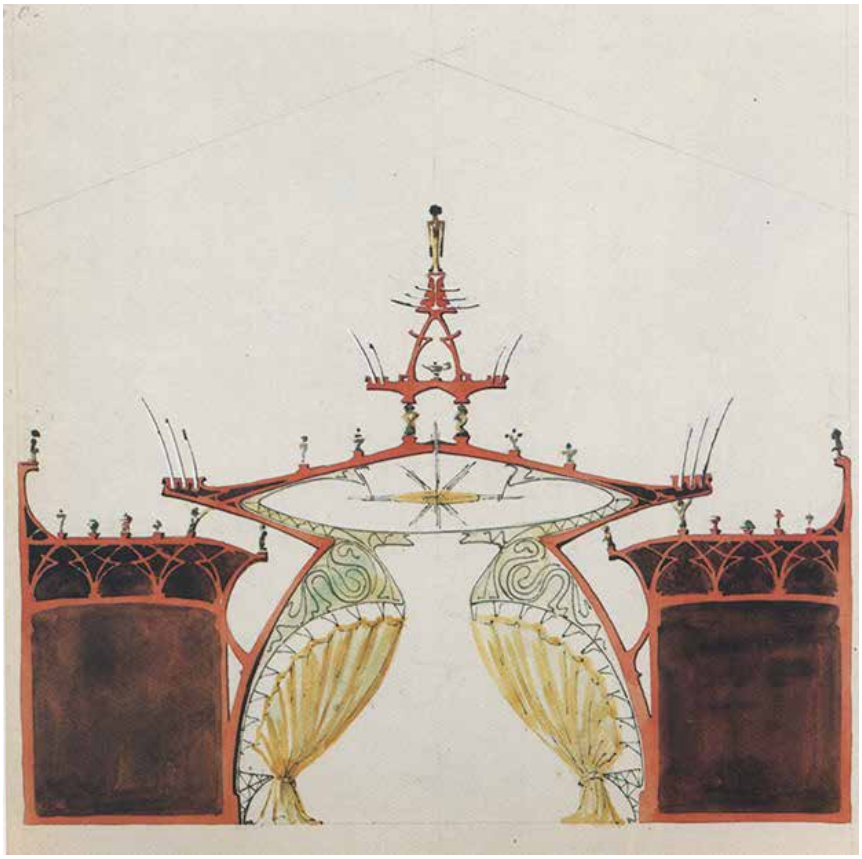


Figure 2.1: Preparatory sketch for *Salle d'Ethnographie*

by Paul Hankar (1897)

Looking for the Congo in Style Congo: Art Nouveau and the African Colony

The roiling curvature and rippling surfaces of Horta, van de Velde, Hankar and Serrurier-Bovy ushered in a new age for Belgium. Their grappling to find a suitable aesthetic for an era of future wonders, while carrying deep nostalgia for imagined losses, was intrinsically bound up with ideas of being Belgian. The Art Nouveau answer to conflicting urges was an immersive total design in which pockets of space could be manipulated into unique system of harmonies. In a troubled young country,[1] in need of a unifying identity, immersive environments wrapped social activity in secluded dreamscapes of organic shapes and new materials, merging visions of better worker conditions and pre-industrial worlds with futuristic ideals. Aiming to set up safe wells of electric beauty within an increasingly turbulent political terrain, the Art Nouveau vision worked as a system of larger and smaller enclosures, only accessible to the intellectual elite and upwardly mobile.[2]

As Belgian Art Nouveau sought to represent its era, the tensions and contradictions of the time crept into its peculiarly agitated space. Sinuous lines and artificial dynamism, when viewed in the context of their making, lead to a particular claiming of space underwritten by internal unease. Luscious private homes and shopping havens, whether of glass and iron or modulated brick shell, hint at the pleasures within and speak to closed off sections of society. The interiority that was being developed within was radically progressive, seeking to build new, emancipatory worlds that would enable a better society. The reference that these constructed environments made to fragments of regional folklore expose, however, how out of touch the Art Nouveau architects were with the pasts that fascinated them. Their use of Oriental exoticisms served to emphasize how distant the peoples alluded to were from progressive European artistic circles. Expressly Belgian total artworks, for all their escapism and idealism, are enmeshed with the messy complexities of their surrounding situation. If certain societal

1. At the time of Belgium's 50th anniversary in 1880, societal unrest was due to a massive swell in population and rapid industrialization which led to a succession of strikes and riots in the 1880s and 1890s. The reigning Catholic party battled both liberals and socialists to maintain power in government, while progressive ideas concerning improved working conditions, universal suffrage and compulsory education were gaining popular traction (Block, 1997: 2). Beneath these factions were divisions between Walloon and Flemish cultures, which had been artificially melded together in the creation of the Belgian nation.

2. Shopping arcades and malls, especially Horta's *L'Innovation* on the prestigious Avenue Louise, attracted only upper class clients; and private homes were secluded spaces. Even Horta's *Maison du Peuple* was not open to the public at large but only members of the POB party.

truths are inescapable in an art that aimed to be of the moment, and they begin to emerge in the kind of forms being produced (whether consciously or not), then a pivotal and highly contested presence within Belgium's pioneering Art Nouveau must be addressed: the specter of the Congo.

Belgium's making of itself, which involved becoming a force in the international arena, was bound up in highly controversial colonial activity. Inevitably the country's crowning design style followed suit, especially as the colonial engagement became a lucrative endeavour. The Congo Free State (CFS),[3] an initiative of King Leopold II, officially existed from 1885 to 1908, when it was handed over to the Belgian government. The king's imperial holding thus effectively stretched from the formative years of Art Nouveau in Belgium to its decline (see Chapter 1). The high period of Art Nouveau in Belgium, approximately 1890–1900, coincides with the time before King Leopold II's colonial endeavours began to be vilified in the international Euro-American community. As imperial inroads in the Congo were described as a progressive and civilizing mission in Belgium, modish Art Nouveau frames were employed to advertise the enterprise, in direct and indirect ways.

When seen in light of the entanglement of the CFS and Art Nouveau, prevalent themes within total artworks take on new meaning. Questing experimental lines and obsessing with the new and strange may be linked to discovery and frontier. Drawing in the world of the microscope, Art Nouveau delved into the layers beneath the surface of a fast-retreating natural world. As the borders of the urban city surged and encroached on rural surroundings, boundaries were being pushed on both a cellular and global level. Internally, early evolutionary theory fuelled various explorations into what constituted being human. Drawing on expanding European penetration of other continents and the ocean, Art Nouveau designers picked up on the aesthetics of what they portrayed as foreign cultures. In Belgium, the minutiae of growing matter were turned into enclosed plastic formations, at the same time as the country's ruler annexed a distant tropical colony. From micro to macro perspectives, the restless Art Nouveau line described the new era in dislocated, energetic spurts, colonial activities notwithstanding. This chapter begins by broadly laying out the extractive means which drove the attempt of capturing the Congo. This resulted in the need to inscribe Belgian power over a vast geographical area. The intensive involvement of the progressive circles around Art Nouveau (see Chapter 1) with colonial

3. In French, known as the *l'Etat Independant du Congo*.

activity established a trail of money that lined key total artworks and the colony. Moreover, colonial patronage led to key Congolese resources of wood and ivory being supplied to Art Nouveau designers. As a result, the particular qualities of these raw natural materials give rise to distinctive Art Nouveau forms. When discussed in light of classic examples, such as the *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* (1895) and the *Palais des Colonies* (1897), both commissioned by the colonial regime, Art Nouveau obsession with both progress and the natural world become fused with representing the colony. The resulting total artworks immerse its viewers in an enveloping fiction of a faraway African bounty, each in a different way. In *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*, the profound danger of inward-looking bourgeois environments that refuse the world outside (first pointed out by Walter Benjamin) is exposed. When the strange, autonomous beauty of this Art Nouveau Gesamtkunstwerk serves as a sanctuary for colonial management, it lends itself to duplicitous imperial narratives with an ease that borders on discomfort.

Located fully in the public arena, the Art Nouveau halls of the *Palais des Colonies* (1897) openly popularize both the new aesthetic mode and the colony. Discussion of this particular colonial exhibition is crucial because of its influence both on future styles of exhibition design (eventually leading into the sparse halls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York), and on the display of Congolese objects in both ethnographic and contemporary art museums. This chapter thus examines the influence that African aesthetics exerted on its Art Nouveau scaffolding, a phenomenon hinted at across the *Palais des Colonies*. This discussion illustrates the full force of Art Nouveau abstraction, and its lessons in cultural essentialism. The fact that this form-making developed in the shadow of, and was hugely enabled by, a widely discredited colonial regime allows for new readings of its total artworks.

Entangled Timelines: The African Colony and the Fabric of Art Nouveau

> We have not thought enough about the colonies as nervous places, productive of nervousness, a kind of energy, taut and excitable. (Hunt, 2016: 5)

Overwrought Art Nouveau, with its heightened drama of restless ornament, was incubated in a Belgium inundated with reports of an African colony. Deborah Silverman (2011a: 744) argues that it is impossible that the promise of faraway adventure and exotic, new nature forms did not seep into the

formative style on a subconscious level. The idea of the colony as limitless bounty, packed with all manner of wondrous raw riches, was disseminated in Belgium to garner support for the king's inroads into Africa. For the public, this message arrived in Europe in the form of numerous periodicals and travel literature (the graphic design for which picked up on key Art Nouveau elements), as well as in presentations and exhibitions discussed in the following pages.

It is possible that some of the inlaid nervousness of the style, which came to champion the nation, is based in colonial anxieties. Reverberations of the limited number of Belgians who operated in the Congo, "energized by dread," and had to oversee the securitization and policing of massive tracts of annexed land must have had some lingering effects on the Belgian psyche (Hunt, 2016: 5). At home, the king's colonial enterprise caused huge political friction. The general populace, stratified by provincial loyalties (amongst others), had little enthusiasm for colonial conquest (Dunn, 2005: 24; Flynn, 1998: 190). Leading Belgian capitalist institutions refused to support it. The only backing that did emerge was given at the king's instigation (Stengers, 1972: 289). Uncertainty about the king's endeavour may well be linked to the general unease of the tensile Art Nouveau line that was used to promote it. However, the roots of the fantasy of Art Nouveau's Congo never entirely matched the colonial propaganda. Even the total artwork constructions directly commissioned by the CFS were seldom a pure illustration of its political agenda. Partly due to Art Nouveau's inner agitation, but also because of a primitivism that wondered at natural chaos and a strong sense of ornamental autonomy in each artificial environment (as a opposed to a standardized aesthetic), the Congo revealed in Belgian total artworks did not follow a simplistic or stable narrative.

The basic premise of the colonial narrative in Belgium, which fed fledgling Art Nouveau, was that the imperial mission was a noble one. The monarch's inroads into Central Africa were posed as a humanitarian endeavour to bring civilization to the Congo, under the guise of his purportedly philanthropic *Association Internationale du Congo* (AIC) (Slade, 1962: 39–41; Stengers and Vansina, 1985: 315). This was linked to an increased propaganda drive from 1885 onwards to increase funding for the colony. Yet the king's claims of spearheading an anti-slavery mission in Africa served as a disguise for a system of ruthless extraction. When the duplicity at the heart of King Leopold II's endeavour and the rapaciousness of its implementation were brought to light, most prominently by the

Congo Reform Movement, he became the villain of the African colonial story. While reports of human rights abuses began to circulate internationally from 1890,[4] the confirmation of them by the Belgian state's Commission of Inquiry of 1904 pressured the Belgium government into taking control of the colony.

The period of King Leopold II's administration in the Congo was predominantly defined by tropes of dislocation and extraction. Material results were demanded, with little to no concern for the Congolese population tasked with procuring them. The Congo was thus defined according to the objects and materials the metropole sought after. The bodies of colonized subjects were treated as an unstable yet expendable resource to siphon off primary products such as ivory, rubber, minerals, wood, cocoa, cotton and tribal artifacts. Belgian scientific experimentation on and public display of actual Congolese bodies, made in conjunction with the aesthetic development of Art Nouveau, positioned these as objectified assets. Ignored as individuals and personalities in their own right, colonized subjects were relegated to tribal groupings demarcated by the state. Only powerful regional leaders, most prominently Msiri in South Katanga and Tippo Tip of the Swahili Eastern region, were identified, albeit as characters in the emerging European adventure narrative of overcoming the Congo and, as such, as decidedly flat ones.[5]

King Leopold II ruled Congo without ever setting foot in the colony and did not re-invest CFS revenue to develop the area.[6] Rather, when the monarch's personal investment in the colony finally started to make a profit with the discovery of rubber, he channelled the income into the Belgian economy by financing monuments and urban developments, garnering him the title of the "builder king" (Stengers, 1972: 249). His imprint still defines the city of Brussels where he undertook the complete renovation of the urban centre in order to install a railway network.

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4. George Washington Williams, an African-American minister in the US, wrote an open letter to King Leopold II in 1890, condemning the brutal and inhuman treatment of Congolese subjects. After the British missionary Charles Stokes was executed without trial by a Belgian officer, Charles Lothaire, in 1895, the CFS came under increasing scrutiny (Slade, 1962: 178–179).

5. The CFS trope of primitive native and civilizing imperial force originated in those of older colonial powers, primarily Britain and France (Dunn, 2003: 29).

6. Leopold II's power over the Congo was, however, far greater than that over his own country, with Belgium being a constitutional monarchy.

The railway network in the Congo, built with the express purpose of strengthening commerce and control, carried vastly different connotations to that in Brussels. The necessity for a railroad in the CFS was first brought up by Henry Morton Stanley (Dunn, 2005: 21; Van Reybrouck, 2014: 84). The self-aggrandizing reporter-turned-explorer was employed by King Leopold II to travel through and demarcate the vast region of central Africa that was to become the CFS (later called Zaïre).[7] As Stanley established trading posts along the Congo River, he secured land rights for the Belgian monarch through contracts with local leaders who were tricked or lied to in order to make them sign the documents (Pakenham, 1991: 19; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2007: 16). This marked the first successful effort in Leopold II's search in trying to obtain a lucrative colony for Belgium.[8] In this, Leopold II acted in his private capacity, independently from the Belgian government (although advised by certain of its officials) (Anstey 1966: 1–2; Stengers, 1972: 252–257). He convinced the participants of the Berlin Conference of 1885 to give him lease to claim the Congo territory as a free trade zone, managed by himself at the helm of his AIC society.[9]

The resulting colony was, essentially, a conglomeration of private trading companies and shareholders (mostly Belgian, but not all) that were controlled by Leopold II as its remote head. The CFS had no more of a bureaucratic state apparatus than the bare minimum needed for business to flourish (Anstey, 1966: 4; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2007: 21). Territorial concessions were given to companies willing to pay for the rights to exploit the land and its people. Local agents demanded whatever they required from the Congolese in their areas, with little to no intervention from the colonial apparatus (Keim and Schildkrout, 1998: 13). In Belgium, the Congo simply existed on paper, in the form of plans, maps and contracts. With stories about the CFS generated mainly by Leopold II and his protagonists, a concerted effort was made to shield the Belgian public from damning first hand accounts of what was actually happening on the ground. Leopold II's exploitation of the Congo was able to continue for the amount of time it did because of how the colony was represented to Belgian society as a distant resource with

7. Stanley was also a master of the grand adventure tale, as seen in his popular travelogues (1871; 1872) in which he portrayed the African hinterland as in need of civilizing forces and his own activities as heroic exploits.
8. Leopold II had shown interest in Dutch Limburg, Constantinople, Borneo, Sumatra, Formosa (Taiwan), Tonkin (Vietnam) and parts of China and Japan, as well as islands in the Pacific and Mediterranean (van Reybrouck, 2014: 39). As late as 1898, he was still looking into gaining land in the Philippines and China (Stengers, 1972: 255–256).
9. The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, also known as the Congo Conference or the West Africa Conference, was organized by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in order to formalize European colonization in the region.

tangible results.

Lack of investment in the actual space of the colony, as opposed to its products, is evident in the lack of contact between Belgian people and Congolese. By 1900, the white population of the Congo was made up of 1,182 people, 1,100 of which were men (Slade, 1962: 173; van Reybrouck, 2014: 68).[10] This tiny minority of European business agents, missionaries and military officers was tasked with holding power over a stretch of approximately 2,600,000 km2 of territory, populated by a complicated array of different polities. Extreme violence was thus exerted to maintain control in the process of extracting raw materials.

Extended extraction and exploitation had already been prevalent in the area of the CFS since the 1500s. The Central African slave trade had spread mass destruction across this part of the continent, which gave rise to new political and economic orders (Keim and Schildkrout, 1998: 8). At the point of colonial intervention, the form its violence took matched and responded to the militarized political hierarchies of the African polities that had developed through the disruptions ignited by slave and ivory trading (Gordon, 2014: 5–6). Leopold II's supposedly civilizing mission appears to have absorbed the war-like behaviour of the very Congolese people it described as savage, mingled with those of the Arabic forces which it swore to eradicate.[11] The tactics of violent intimidation employed by the Arabic slave and ivory trade were the same as those of Leopold II's administration, except that the latter had more sophisticated weaponry (Vellut, 1984: 671–673). While CFS propaganda in Europe presented the Arab slave trade as one defined by violent raids, its system was significantly more complex than this.[12] Arab forces had settled in the interior, with mixed-race leaders setting up agricultural development and organizing large areas of what is now Eastern Congo. This ushered in new hybrids of Swahili-Arab and Sudanic-Arab cultures, integrating Arabs into eastern and northern Congolese societies (Slade, 1962:

10. Given that 62 of the European women were nuns, the number of Congolese women who were in different forms of sexual relationships with European men was extremely high, as were the uneven power relations between the men and their sexual partners (van Reybrouck, 2014: 68).
11. Having had contact with each other for decades in the Eastern Congo, African and Arabic societies were not as mutually exclusive as colonial propaganda would have the European public believe.
12. The CFS's publicity drive, visible in numerous articles and reports, reached its height during the Arabic campaigns of 1892–1895, during which Belgian forces gained political and commercial control of the eastern part of the colony under the guise of liberating its peoples.

84–89).[13] In comparison, CFS rule was a more sudden intrusion, an intervention into all aspects of life in the Congo. Moreover, except for some Catholic and Protestant missionaries, the interactions of Europeans in the CFS were almost entirely temporary.

Under a rule based on profits, previous political power structures fell away, as did complex ecosystems and social structures. As the extraction of resources for the European market proceeded, natural resources were harvested without considerations for their long-term yield. The devastation that ensued over the two decade period of heightened activity — leading to deforestation, near extinction of certain species and degradation of soils — led to increased depopulation (Baeck, 1957: 163–166; van Reybrouck, 2014: 79–80). By 1890, previous long-distance trade routes had ceased and the diversion of food and labour to the invaders caused widespread hardship and frequent famine (Keim and Schildkrout, 1998: 15). Food shortages and malnutrition saw the bodies of hundreds of thousands of people breaking down (Vansina, 2010: 143–144). Mortal illnesses compounded by new types of diseases brought in by the foreigners, most prominently sleeping sickness and dysentery, wiped out large swathes of the population (Vansina, 2010: 143).[14]

On a socio-economic level, the CFS refused to introduce a monetary system, ensuring that taxes were exacted in labour. This forced local inhabitants to deliver rubber and other raw materials according to their area's yield, and saw others having to work as soldiers, porters, construction workers and canoeists (Stengers and Vansina, 1985: 324). Congolese workers who were forced into being bondsmen for the state were, in reality, worse off than slaves as the latter, being individual property, were of more value if they remained alive and healthy. No conditions were set for the health and safety of the masses put to work by the CFS.

Various forms of Congolese resistance emerged from this repressive system, with strategies of "mimicry, appropriation, revaluation and violence" (McClintock, 1995: 229). Violent forms of

13. This is evident in the testimony of Belgian officers from the Eastern front line who expressed great admiration for Arabic centres, especially their bountiful gardens and elegant architecture (ibid). While the terms of Arabic political power were top-heavy, they invested and put down permanent roots in areas of the Congo far earlier than Europeans.
14. In 1901 alone, approximately 500,000 Congolese died from sleeping sickness, spread by tsetse flies (Hochschild, 1998: 249). In areas affected by dysentery, up to 60% of the population could be wiped out by an outbreak (Vansina, 2010: 143). Smallpox and sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and gonorrhea also became endemic.

resistance began at the trading stations first laid out by Stanley and had to be continually quelled.[15] Rulers who resisted were crushed and those who cooperated were pitted against other Congolese peoples who had refused to capitulate. With land rights removed, local leaders could only be retain power and control over land and its resources if they ruled on behalf of the colonial administration. This lead to an extreme heightening of pre-existing ethnic and territorial tensions. Congolese lives were seemingly inconsequential in this system of extraction and exploitation, with random killings for whimsical reasons being the norm, both by colonizers and their African subordinates (van Reybrouck, 2014: 88–90).

Extraction of lucrative produce was, essentially, carried out as an armed pillage. The colonial army, the Force Publique, was central in enforcing a culture of violence. Its methods of discipline were as much part of commerce and trade as military campaigns into the East and repressions of rebellions. The army was made up of African men, numbered at 19,000 in 1900, and led by European officers.[16] Zanzibari men formed the initial militia, combined with mercenaries from Liberia and Nigeria, later to be joined by disreputable elements and insurgents from Congolese villages (van Reybrouck, 2014: 76–77).[17] The high quotient of foreign soldiers ensured that the *Force Publique* had no allegiances to the people on whom violent forms of warfare and repression were enacted.

In areas of concentrated exploitation—in Equateur, Bandundu and Kasai where rubber collection took place —the *Force Publique* committed numerous atrocities. These were sanctioned by CFS officials who were motivated by a system that granted them commissions according to the amount of rubber they delivered (Young and Turner, 1985: 33). This led to enforced production through barbaric means, overseen by the colonial militia.[18] The task of harvesting wild rubber plants was in itself an extremely

15. For a full summary of the historical sequence of Congolese resistance, see Nzongola-Ntalaja (2007: 41–55).
16. Some of the European officers were Italian, Norwegian, Swiss and Swedish (Stanard, 2011: 13). The Belgian majority tended to be lower middle-class youths in search of adventure (van Reybrouck, 2014: 76).
17. Ruth Slade (1962: 18) notes that when larger groups of Congolese were recruited, particular ethnic groupings with reputations for violence were taken on. The Zappo-Zaps, from the Songye region, were particularly feared and purported to be cannibals.
18. Nearby colonies in Angola, the French Congo, French Guinea and the Gold Coast also exported large quantities of rubber. The French Congo followed similar methods of extraction, working with concession companies who applied intense pressure to extract produce through free labour. In the CFS, however, a more thorough harvesting of the plants lead to the depletion of the trees and a decline in tree growth (Harms 1975: 73).

arduous and risky affair. Congolese who had historically harvested the wild rubber were resistant to the work that was now forced on them as taxation for living there (Harms, 1975: 78). In the concentrated reign of terror that ensued around the exploitation of rubber, certain European administrators stood out as primary instigators of massacres and acts of sadism. Figures like Léon Fiévez, the district commissioner of Equateur, was personally responsible for hundreds of deaths as well as the highest rubber count and fed into Conrad's conceptualization of Mr Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (van Reybrouck, 2014: 92).[19] Insufficient rubber quotas resulted in harsh punishments, including flogging, torture, sexual violence against workers's wives held hostage (Harms, 1975: 76–77; Hunt 2016: 2) and murder (Slade, 1962: 180). The latter led to the practice of soldiers removing the right hand of killed workers in order to prove that they had used the bullet to kill someone and not for personal needs, such as hunting for game (van Reybrouck, 2014: 90).[20] The severing of limbs of living victims is also said to have occurred, sometimes to save bullets, but also motivated by soldiers' desire for the copper bracelets women wore around their wrists and ankles (van Reybrouck, 2014: 91).[21]

As these practices ensued in the Congo, the dislocated, materialistic rule of King Leopold II continued to orchestrate appearances so that responsibility for violence and death was deflected. While known protagonists of violence, like Fiévez, were reprimanded, they continued to be reappointed each term (Louis and Stengers, 1968: 185; van Reybrouck, 2014: 93). The king's constant pressure on the CFS to generate more revenue, turning a blind eye to humanitarian concerns, was due to extreme financial difficulties he found himself in. When rubber extraction began in earnest in 1895, he was at the point of bankruptcy, despite receiving a hefty loan from a reluctant Belgian government in 1890 (Stengers, 1972: 273–274). The discovery of rubber in the Congo coincided with a worldwide demand for rubber that came with the development of pneumatic bicycle tires, in the 1890s, as well as an increased

19. Kurtz could also have been based on Léon Rom, a former District Commissioner of Matadi and later an officer in the *Force Publique* who was said to have used the heads of Congolese people to decorate his flower beds (Hochschild, 1998: 81).

20. In a gruesome twist, severed hands were smoked to preserve them for long periods of travel in tropical conditions (van Reybrouck, 2014: 90). The American missionary William Sheppard was the first to expose these practices by making them public in the US.

21. It is photographs that emerged from rubber areas at this time, depicting mutilated Congolese bodies, dead and alive, whose hands or feet were removed, which caught and still hold the horrified attention of an international audience (Hunt, 2016: 2). The photographs were taken by missionaries in the affected areas (De Keyzer, 2009: 5). They thus form an iconic component of representations of the Congo in Euro-America.

demand for industrial uses of the flexible material (Harms, 1975: 74). In dire need of the revenue, Leopold II maneuvred around previous international trade agreements by which all proceeds from rubber extraction should go to the state (Stengers, 1972: 273–274).

At this historical juncture the timelines of Art Nouveau and the CFS become intertwined. Once substantial revenue began to be generated by the colonial endeavour, Leopold II began to invest in major Art Nouveau commissions, giving rise to what is amongst its most breathtaking creations. While rubber itself is not an evident feature of the Art Nouveau story, Congolese ivory and wood feature heavily. In relinking Belgian Art Nouveau to the CFS, the origins of its foundational materials are revealed as products of a deeply damaging extractive system. By using ivory and wood from the Congo, Art Nouveau total artworks are irrevocably implicated in the violence enacted in the CFS. Ivory, initially the primary export of the imperial project, had been valued throughout the world for centuries, especially in Asian and European cultures. The African elephant that populated Congolese rainforests provided high quality ivory, in large amounts, with bigger tusks than other breeds and both male and female animals bearing them (van Reybrouck, 2014: 31). Ivory hunters were notorious for the speed with which they killed elephants, with up to 30 animals killed in a day at the height of the ivory hunting period. Slaughter for the purposes of harvest was indiscriminate, including pregnant females and calves (Clerbois, 2011: 239). By the time the Palais des Colonies was built in 1897, the Antwerp ivory markets in Belgium were the biggest in the world, overtaking London, the centre of the most powerful imperial force in the world (Clerbois, 2011: 239; Flynn, 1998: 189–191). Such was the devastation of elephant life that, in the catalogue for the colonial exhibition of 1897, Théodore Masui (1897: 103) queried whether the species would be rendered extinct.

Traffic in ivory was rendered profitable by trading cheap trinkets for local stocks of the precious material as well as by outright raiding and looting. Those who resisted were flogged or killed and their villages burned (Couttenier, 2005: 105). The colonial demand for ivory thus not only destroyed the existing trade in ivory, but went hand in hand with slavery, whether that of the Arabic trade system or the coerced labour of the European one (Flynn, 1998: 191). The only way to get the massive ivory tusks weighing up to 60kg each to the coast was by human portage, either by slaves who had been purchased

or by labour enforced at gunpoint (Slade, 1962: 84, 90).[22]

Harrowing conditions of transport dominate the story of Congolese exports. The construction of the Matadi-Leopoldville railway line was one of the primary projects of a colonial administration that aimed to extract as many lucrative goods as possible. The railway was a leading propaganda trope, with triumphant articles describing the progress made on the line featured in every edition of *Le Congo Illustré*.[23] Because the lower course of the Congo River consists of numerous rapids, steamboats could only operate on the water system in the interior. The circulation of goods between the coast and the interior thus had to be managed by caravans of foot porters. Navigating the difficult jungle terrain on foot, carrying heavy loads and often shackled together , was a highly dangerous task, leading to a largely undocumented loss of Congolese lives (Slade, 1962: 76). All goods that arrived in Belgium prior to 1898, when the Matadi-Leopoldville line was finally completed, were part of this system, including the luxuriant Congolese woods that are fundamental to the Belgian Art Nouveau movement. When the laborious effort involved in the extraction of dense blocks of timber is considered, their status as high end luxury items is merged with the human cost of their provenance.

It is now established fact that the years of Leopold II's reign in the Congo saw its population drastically depleted, with some estimates seeing half of its people wiped out (Dunn, 2003: 45). Exact figures are difficult to establish because no census of the local population was taken until 1924.[24] Nevertheless, it is clear that millions died as the direct or indirect result of the destructive extractive policies pursued by the state. One of the most salient images illustrating this system was supplied byEdmond Morel, British publicist and member of the Congo Reform Association, who described the ignominy of ships leaving Antwerp harbour stocked with weapons and returning with rubber, ivory and other goods (Morel, 1968: 12).[25]

Although founded after Art Nouveau's climax in Belgium, the Congo Reform Association is largely

22 It is worth noting that the horror at the heart of Conrad's Congo is brought about by the ivory trade, not red rubber.
23. These articles glorified the railroad as working conditions on the railroad claimed the lives of thousands (see Chapter 4).
24. The 1924 census claimed population of 10 million people. However, the results of this poll have been called out as highly questionable.
25. Morel's accusations were published in various articles, including the magazine, the *West African Mail*, he founded in 1903.

lauded for discrediting Leopold II's rule. After Morel's allegations were made public, they were confirmed by Roger Casement, the British Consul at Boma who published a scathing report in 1904 on the systematic and widespread violence inflicted on the Congolese people. As a wave of international condemnation of the regime ensued, the Congo Reform Association was formalized and took action by recording the testimonies of missionaries and other informants in the Congo who were not aligned to the CFS administration.[26] While Congolese accounts were documented in this process, they were interpreted and extrapolated on by their European interlocutors, who were mostly Protestant missionaries. As a result, many assertions were dismissed in Belgium as linked to a Protestant pique for having had to cede the Congo to their Catholic counterparts. Similarly, many in Belgium rejected the reports of the Congo Reform Association (for which Conrad and Arthur Conan Doyle were its more well known supporters) as wildly exaggerated and based on a British jealousy of Belgium's commercial success (Slade, 1962: 200–201; Vanthemsche, 2012: 92–94).[27]

In Belgium, the Anglophile bias of the Congo Reform Movement was used to fuel anti-British feeling, enhanced by the recent Boer War in which most Belgians had sided with the Afrikaners, as well as by long-standing colonial rivalry (van Reybrouck, 2014: 97).[28] The fact that the association targeted the assumed avarice of King Leopold II[29] served to distract attention from the mistreatment of colonial subjects by other colonial powers. Colonial regimes in neighbouring French and British colonies, as well as the Belgian administration that took over in the Congo, pursued their own violent techniques of controlling the African workforce (Stanard, 2011: 10).

An independent international board of inquiry was sent to the Congo to collect depositions in 1904. Although its findings were unanimous, responses to it were mixed in Belgium. King Leopold II also

26. The association published widely and gave numerous public presentations across Britain and America, including a conference with President Roosevelt in 1904 (Louis, 1968: 78).
27. The Belgian press presented the reports as an attempt by English evangelical missionaries to excuse their own lack of success, compared to the successes of the Belgian Catholic missions (Slade, 1962: 200).
28. Similarly, when confronted with specific evidence of incidents of violence, the CFS administration laid the blame solely on the perpetrators and claimed that these were not representative of the colonial enterprise as a whole (Louis, 1968: 185).
29. The presumed personal gain by the "red rubber" king, thought to be immense, was cause for an international scandal (Louis and Stengers, 1968: 199; Stengers, 1972: 262; Young and Turner, 1985: 33). Jean Stengers (1972: 248–275) proposes, however, that the monarch was driven less by personal greed and more by a singular consuming desire for Belgium to have a colony.

set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the matter. It published a report in late 1905, but left out some of Morel's crucial information and presented not a single case of maladministration (Slade, 1962: 201). Nevertheless, internal and international pressure eventually led to the cession of the colony to the Belgian government in 1908 (Anstey, 1966: 2–4).[30] The exposure of the rubber atrocities, however, tended to obscure the fact that all other colonial products were equally sullied by the violent regime. Belgian lawyer Félicien Cattier (1906: 341) described this as being "no colonized state, barely a state at all, but a financial enterprise" (1906: 341).

Fresh Territories for the New Belgian Bourgeoisie

In Art Nouveau circles, the "colonial question" — named as such by Henry van de Velde — was a present and hotly debated topic (1897: 38). As the style crystallized with the completion of Horta's *Hôtel Tassel* in 1904, CFS propaganda aimed to drum up enthusiasm for the Arabic campaigns of 1892–1895, also known as the Belgo-Arab war (Slade, 1962: 118; Vanthemsche, 2012: 38). At this point, certain societies, study circles and lobby groups had been founded to foster support for King Leopold II's less than popular endeavour.[31] While the monarch was able to secure commitment from businessmen and entrepreneurs with financial incentives, he further sought to cast the CFS as a humanitarian cause, which could appeal to philanthropically-minded Belgian society circles (particularly pre-existing anti-slavery drives). Interest from more intellectual circles stemmed from those invested in exploration, notably geographers and well placed journalists (Flynn, 1998: 190).

One of the most prominent pro-colonial organizations was the *Société d'Études Coloniales* (SEC), founded in 1894, with membership including prominent Belgian families, some of whom were Art Nouveau patrons. Responsible for various projects and events, including founding a (short-lived) colonial school, the society was seen to fete Francis Dhanis, leader of the victorious and bloody Arabic campaign (Couttenier, 2005: 123). It also published a practical manual for colonists, *Travaux*

30. While work conditions improved, especially due to the introduction of a monetary system, many CFS officials remained in their positions. Exploitation of workforce and natural resources continued, as did the violent suppression of insubordination. Rubber collection halted not for humanitarian reasons, but because the supply had been exhausted (Harms, 1975: 77).

31. One of these was the *Jeune Barreau* club of lawyers and certain poets, writers and artists associated with it (Silverman 2011a: 740–742). Maarten Couttenier (2005: 60–159) maps the development of anthropology in Belgium, alongside exhibitions, events and organizations relating to the colony and Congolese people, prior to the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) being established.

du laboratoire de Léopoldville en 1899–1900 (1901), based on the findings of a medical laboratory in Leopoldville that it sponsored.

As opposed to puff pieces, designed to bolster support (and, as such, more prone to exaggeration and embellishment), *Travaux du laboratoire* reveals the severe disconnect between conceptions of the Central African colony in the metropole and the actual work of colonists. The introduction sets the mission of the SEC to be entirely scientific (tactfully separating its funders from their commercial holdings in the CFS) and proceeds to lay out information about what to expect in terms of illnesses in the tropical environment, their prevention and their methods of treatment (Campenhout and Dryepondt, 1901: 3–11). Including details of how to construct makeshift accommodation and how to locate and prepare food, the book makes no effort to describe the local population and how best to communicate with them.[32] The effort to control and restrict the circulation of information is evidently in place.

Along with the SEC, various efforts to enthuse a skeptical Belgian public were an eddying force around Art Nouveau. Many in parliament were strongly against the costly venture for the loans it necessitated, but also because the country ran the risk of compromising international relations because of colonial rivalry (Slade, 1962: 193; Stengers, 1972: 262). From the late 1880s, certain parties accused King Leopold II of neglecting major problems within his own country, like worker unrest, in favour of pursuing imperial expansionism and public building projects (Couttenier, 2005: 93). While some segments of the public saw the colonial engagement a an extravagant distraction for the king, others imagined a thrilling endeavour, endowing Belgium with national prestige. However, the various forms of pro-colonial activity generated at the time give the impression that many Belgians were indeed invested in the idea of the colony. Nationalist drives and the creation of a Belgian identity were strong motivators in the works of the primary Art Nouveau protagonists.

Through Horta, van de Velde, Hankar and Serrurier-Bovy accepted some of the CFS's key commissions, they did not become closely associated with the person of King Leopold II. The monarch's personal taste in art and design tended towards the conservative and his major public

32. There is, further, no warning of the everyday violence to be expected in any activity pursued (and no advice concerning basic first aid this would necessitate).





Figure 2.2: Postcard image of *Palais de Justice* by Josef Poelaerts (built in 1883);
Figure 2.3: Contemporary image of Triumphal Arch at *Parc Cinquantenaire* by Charles Girault (1905)

commissions favoured neoclassical styles, especially those popular in Paris. The massive *Palais de Justice* (1883) by Josef Poelaerts, whose eclectic architecture is billed as Assyro-Babylonian, and the Neo-Classical triumphal arch in *Parc Cinquantenaire* by Charles Girault (1905) are, arguably, the defining structures of the era.[33] It was rather through Edmond van Eetvelde, the CFS's chief administrator, that avant-garde design came to represent the CFS. From 1894 to 1900, van Eetvelde oversaw different commissions of Art Nouveau work, most prominently the *Palais des Colonies* at the 1897 World's Fair that was hosted by Brussels.

In nearby countries like Austria, the Art Nouveau avant garde was often perceived to be decadently subversive and anti-bourgeois. In Belgium, however, a close link existed early between Art Nouveau and economic and state power, due to the association of a new, progressive elite with the style. With ancient aristocratic lineages having left for the Netherlands or Austria by 1830, businessmen and entrepreneurs had replaced the upper classes of this young nation (Silverman, 2011a: 717). This new elite chose cutting edge Art Nouveau style for its contemporary palaces (see Chapter 1). The booming climate in which the Belgian movement flourished owed a great deal to the royal enterprise spilling over into lucrative business ventures in the Congo (Aubert and Fraiture, 2009: 44; Jacobs, 2005: 47).

For progressive intellectuals pursuing an idea of *Belgitude* as a way of binding a fragmented nation,

33. Girault was a French architect popular in Paris.

the colony presented a potential common cause. Deborah Silverman outlines how sections of the *Jeune Barreau* and *Jeune Belgique*, especially prominent jurist and writer Edmond Picard and poet Emile Verhaeren, praised Leopold II as visionary in public gatherings (2011a: 738–740; 751). The civic-minded cultural activists of these circles would have been exposed to the idea of a prosperous, exotic African venture through exhibitions and CFS-generated literature. While the first major exhibition dedicated to the colony was at the Antwerp World's Fair in 1894, smaller showings of Congolese materials and lectures by returned colonists were common events in spaces as creative activity. Accordingly, as the artistic circles of *Les Vingt* (later morphing into *La Libre Esthétique*) nurtured a reputation of progressive aesthetics with daring new art, several of its patrons was caught up in the intellectual climate that entertained various forms of pro-colonial activity.

The iconic example of *Hôtel Solvay* (1894), renowned as Horta's first Gesamtkunstwerk, is a celebration of Art Nouveau's luxurious face, with rare Congolese woods mingling with all forms of precious elements, including ormolu fittings and ivory inlays. Here, materials originating in the colony were part of a vocabulary of luxury. Interior decorative elements, such as customized light fittings, carpets, etc., were part of this display of wealth. The seemingly limitless purse that fueled this vision of unbridled opulence had a connection to the African colony. The Solvay family, famed for its innovation in pharmaceuticals and engineering, was a proud benefactor of the Congolese enterprise, including being a primary funder of the SEC colonial manual. Ernest Solvay — the father of Armand for whom *Hôtel Solvay* was built — was an active member of the SEC. Together with van Eetvelde and other colonists, Solvay was one of the benefactors who helped produce the colonial monuments at *Place du Trône* and *Parc Cinquantenaire* (Couttenier, 2005: 316).

Another well known Art Nouveau townhouse, completed at the same time, was *Hôtel Paul Otlet* (1894), designed by Octave van Rysselberghe and van de Velde. Paul Otlet was connected to the Art Nouveau circle via his ties to the Liberal Party, with Max Hallet counting as one of his friends (Brauman and Culot, 1980: 101). His extensive personal means came from his family (which included the poet Emile Verhaeren), his father being the wealthy senator and businessman Édouard Otlet. Also a philanthropist, the elder Otlet was a primary benefactor of expeditions to the Congo. One of the most prominent of these was an ostensibly scientific mission of discovery led by Auguste Linden, as a



Figure 2.4: Interior of *Hotel Otlet* by Henry Van de Velde and Octave Van Rhysselberghe (built in 1894)

result of which Otlet acquired his own private collection of African objects (Couttenier, 2005: 117).[34] Today, *Hôtel Otlet* is well known for its integrated interior, defined by a generous central stairwell that gives up a large section of wall to a striking sheet of patterned colored glass, designed by van de Velde. The distinctive curves found in van de Velde's design suggest the form of an elephant, pointing to a repressed fascination with colonial products (Silverman, 2011b: 17).

The Congo may well have been in Van de Velde's mind as his brother Willy van de Velde joined Stanley's African expedition of 1882 (Silverman, 2011a: 744). However, by the late 1890s, van de Velde was completely preoccupied with changing society through art. Writing about the *Palais des Colonies* (1898), he rejected debates concerning "the colonial question" in favour of exposing the public to good design principles. His brother's experiences in Congo seem to have receded into praise for an abstract idea of expansionism. He lauds King Leopold II's audacity in claiming new African territory as well as the decisive actions of the militant avant-garde and progressive socialists as boundary-breaking for a Belgium beset by inertia.[35] He also suggests that artistic experimentation

34. During this expedition, the majority of Congolese porters had died of pox or dysentery by the time they reached Stanley Pool (Couttenier, 2005: 117).

35. As van de Velde (1898: 38) exults in the freedom engendered by the independent colonial regime, he relates this to the concrete ability to host an avant-garde exhibition unencumbered by the usually burdensome bureaucratic systems of government.

echoes the questing spirit of the colonial venture (van de Velde 1898: 38). Van de Velde thus links the spirit of the "buccaneering scheme" of "individual imperialism" that defined the CFS to his artistic manifesto which, in turn, some commentators have described as a commercial strain of aesthetic individualism (Young and Turner, 1985: 22). With no further mention of the CFS offered in this little known text, van de Velde avoids any direct statement of support for King Leopold II's reign in the Congo. When untethered from his sometimes contradictory words, van de Velde's designs are certainly suggestive of expansion, or expansive energies, although not of any particular kind. His objects and environments, as well as those of his Art Nouveau peers, become unavoidably linked to the Congo in the materials employed to make them.

Ivory Trimmings and Wooden Casements: Giving Form to the Colony

Ties between the CFS and Belgian Art Nouveau can be teased out from a web of interpersonal links and political associations, but a more fundamental connection is apparent in the foundational matter it uses. While ivory was fairly prominent in the Art Nouveau movement as a whole, especially in jewellery and *objects d'art*, it was ubiquitous across all aspects of Belgian production, including the decorative details of interior walls and doors, the lids and handles of furniture, as well as a vast assortment of small commonplace objects (Escritt, 2000: 1896; Madsen, 1967: 162). Ivory is found across high end examples, like the inlays in the staircase of *Hôtel Solvay*, to more mundane usage in letter openers and spoons, as in those produced by van de Velde in 1905.[36] Except for the occasional small piece made of bone and pearl, the "magical" and "elfin" medium of ivory (Flynn, 1898: 189; van Reybrouck, 2014: 67) thus constitutes the only Art Nouveau material that comes from a living animal. Its ethereal, creamy presence, inset in greater swathes of textured curvature, accentuates the more fleshy organic references of the style. Because it had traditionally been used sparingly, its abundant appearance now bestowed a precious sheen over entire scenes.

Ivory was used expansively not only because it was now more readily available.[37] The imperial regime

36. The objects themselves, however, are not mundane, with dynamic asymmetrical patterning that are forerunners of Art Deco styles to come.

37. King Leopold II made this point patently obvious by commissioning Thomas Vinçotte to sculpt his portrait entirely out of ivory, in 1900. The sculptor was responsible for numerous outdoor monuments to the regime, including the bronze equestrian statue of the king found at both Trône, in Brussels, and at Mont Ngaliema, in Kinshasa.

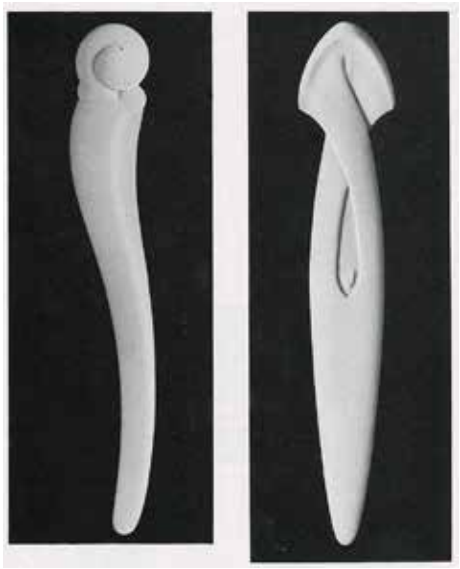


Figure 2.5: Ivory letter openers by Henry Van de Velde (1905)

gave artists free packages of the precious African product to explore the medium's possibilities and to revamp past artistic traditions. Ivory had been a rare and precious medium in European art since antiquity, giving rise to a tradition of chryselephantine sculptures that combined the prized commodity with precious metals, especially gold, and valuable stones, as seen at the Athenian Parthenon (c. 438 BC).

As the initial fruit of King Leopold II's colonial adventurism, tusks from African elephants were donated to Belgian artists from the early 1890s, in an effort to promote the possibilities available in the colony (Adriaenssens, 2005b: 5; Flynn, 1998: 192). In so doing, the colonial regime encouraged the revival of the 17th century Flemish tradition of religious ivory carving. The objects produced were displayed at international trade fairs representing Belgian craft. The colonial exhibition at the Antwerp World's Fair (1894) was the first large scale display of ivories in Belgium. In an overt move to connect them to local artistic traditions, these were displayed in front of Flemish tapestries (Clerbois, 2011: 233). The overall curation further ensured that association to the colony was strong, with the sculptures presented as a product of the Congo, rather than artworks in their own right (Flynn, 1997: 195).[38] An additional layer of association with Ancient Greek tradition is evident with the reappearance of the term

38. The artists did not agree with this and exhibited the objects at another, separate exhibition, expressly under the mantle of art (Flynn, 1997: 195).





Figure 2.6: ***Civilisation et Barbarie*** **by Philippe Wolfers (1897)**
Figure 2.7: ***Sphinx Mystérieux*** **by Charles Van der Stappen (1897)**

"chryselephantine" by way introducing the works.[39] As such, the "nobility" of the material, rooted in a lineage dating back to Athenian temples and long-forgotten regional craft, was wilfully linked to the colonial endeavour (Masui and Liebrechts, 1897: 11).[40] In this way, the chryselephantine commissions were embedded with cultural codes that played into both elevated notions of classical artistic traditions and nationalistic pride.

The link between civilization, as represented by the rational beauty of the arts of antiquity, and the colonial mission is illustrated in certain of the chryselephantine works. Philippe Wolfers' domestic sculpture *Civilization et Barbarie* (1897–1898) depicts a Congolese ivory tusk being held in the metallic grasp of intertwining snakes, birds and bats. These are said to be symbolic of the sinister threat of both slavery and witchcraft (Adriaenssens, 2002: 39). Raw Congolese matter, represented by the ivory tusk, is visibly crafted into a refined object by a cultured European hand. At the time, this heavy-handed use of the symbolism of materials would have been seen to bolster colonial rhetoric (Dunn, 2003: 36; Flynn, 1997: 202; Silverman, 2012: 29). When viewing the object from a decontextualized perspective, outside of its original home (the winter garden of *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*), the fact that the tusk is dead animal matter is accentuated by the fermenting grotesquery holding it in place. Some of the

39. This was, strictly speaking, an inaccurate application as the sculptures used silver and gilded bronze rather than pure gold.
40. Artists struggled to work with the medium. The jeweller Wolfers was the most successful and was tasked with producing a good number of the works for other sculptures (Adriaenssens, 2005b: 7; Wynants, 1997: 101).

dread of the colonial trade appears to be present in this gothic trophy,[41] commissioned as a gift for Van Eetvelde.

Wolfers' sculptural oeuvre is sometimes defined as Art Nouveau, alongside that of Charles van der Stappen, Julien Dillen, Fernand Dubois and Fernand Khnopff (all of whom displayed figurative ivories at colonial exhibitions).[42] Knopff and Wolfers are stylistically the closest, using compositions with serpentine tendril forms in metal enclosing central carved objects in which flesh is usually crafted from ivory, its decorative folds also suggesting structural support. While all of the sculptures were made within the Art Nouveau era and often adorned carefully co-ordinated Art Nouveau interiors, the figurative works were closer to the Symbolist movement and are more often characterized as such.[43] Ivory, a rarity rich in possibilities, with colours that change over time and translucent qualities reflecting light, was an ideal medium for both movements (Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel, 1976: 75). In Art Nouveau, where exuberant form was used to enhance the beauty of the material, the homogeneous texture and glassy grains could heighten the refined quality of an object. When incorporated into chryselephantine commissions for the CFS, it was employed as a symbol of power, with materials from the colony used in the service of furthering western ideals of beauty.

Ivory, along with opal, onyx, agate, silver and bronze were common Art Nouveau inclusions within interiors structured by metal and glass. Moreover, in private homes, the splendour of rare and precious substances was accentuated in order to compensate for the potentially proletarian connotations of railway stations and industry that came with iron constructions (Bouillon, 1985: 78). In Belgium, this hierarchy of materials was enriched with the predominant use of exotic Congolese woods. From the opulent interiors of Horta's townhouses for wealthy patrons, to the more egalitarian furniture of Serrurier-Bovy and van de Velde's William Morris-inspired interiors, rare woods like padouk, bilinga, limba and acajou were a feature (Beeckman, 1996: 141; Watelet, 1987: 31). The "intimate warmth"

41. "Gothic," in this case, refers to the similarity with the distorted figurines and creatures used to decorate Gothic cathedrals.

42. The association is largely because these artworks were produced at the time of Art Nouveau and the artists often exhibiting together with Art Nouveau artists. Maurice Rheims (1966: 181) makes a case for Charles van der Stappen's *Sphinx Mystérieux* (1897) revealing strong Art Nouveau influence, while Norbert Wolf (2011: 75) places it somewhere in between Art Nouveau and Symbolism.

43. Both movements fed into each other, with Symbolism seen as one of the major influences on Art Nouveau (Greenhalgh, 2000: 72.).

of Art Nouveau interiors has been credited to the vibrant hues and unusual textures of Congolese woods (Dierkens-Aubry, 1994: 118). Timber from the colony became a prized and rarefied export to be promoted at trade fairs. The Belgian contribution to the Paris World's Fair of 1900, occurring as rumours of atrocities in the Belgian colony were increasing, the pavilion concentrated entirely on advertising the novel variety of woods available from Central Africa.

Although Art Nouveau is commonly associated with structural flourishes in wrought iron, the taut and supple Belgian whiplash line is fundamentally defined through wood. It is the predominant material used in Serrurier-Bovy's, Hankar's, Horta's and van de Velde's interiors. One of the key innovations they shared was the ability to make a direct link between architecture and furniture when manipulating the constructive possibilities of this natural material (Daenens, 1981: 130). In Hankar's *Chemiserie Niguet* (1896), the allure of the facade and entrance relies on the wooden lattice having the appearance of growing organic matter, endowing the glass shop front with a dynamic structure. Both Hankar and Horta employed wooden panelling to great atmospheric effect. Horta heightened the atmosphere of interiors with backdrops of shiny, flat sheets of Congolese woods. Combinations of wood with bronze, painted iron, glass, patterned wallpapers and fabrics, as well as differently hued woods with each other, were his trademark. The best known display of the expansive, wide-ranging palette of Congolese woods is found in *Hôtel Solvay*.[44] In the panelling of the central salon, a pattern of beige-orange aucoumea wood is accentuated with inset definitions of darker khaya (Beeckmans, 1996: 141). The bedroom door displays an exploration of different colours in a geometric design.. Across the rooms, warmly hued woods were offset by carefully placed furniture in darker mahoganies, especially in the side salon with its delicate timber and glass screens beneath a cross-sectioned ceiling.

Partly from his devotion to the Ruskinian Arts and Crafts movement in England, but also following family tradition of working in symbiosis with wood, it was Serrurier-Bovy who was wholeheartedly devoted to using timber from the Congo. First exposed to them when making work for the 1897 *Palais des Colonies*, he came to rely on them heavily. Leaving his previous standard of Hungarian Oak behind, he appreciated the pale pink limba for its strength, versatility and elascticity and for the ease with which

44. Serrurier-Bovy's most iconic pieces, such as the combination bed piece (now in the possession of the *Musée d'Orsay* in Paris and various *Cabinet-vitrines*), are good examples of this.



Figure 2.8: *Étagere* (1901) and *Cabinet-Vitrine* by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy (1899)
Figure 2.9: *Padouk Chair* by Henry Van de Velde (1902)

it could be obtained in Belgium (Watelet, 1987: 31–32). His trademark combination furniture at the 1897 *Palais des Colonies* took the form of bench-arches, with massive arches ending in benches of bilinga. This impressive and greatly admired display used composition and dynamic form to accentuate the importance of the wooden objects (du Mesnil and du Mesnil, 2008: 250–251). Serrurier-Bovy also changed his aesthetic when he adopted Congolese woods. What began as a practice of simple, rustic pieces became one of increasingly elaborate and glossy suites of furniture made for export (Ogata, 2001: 111). He extended his "homely" style into furniture that contains the shapes of tree branches (Dierkens-Aubry, 1994: 112). When Art Nouveau had passed its prime in Belgium, Henry van de Velde hailed Serrurier-Bovy for remaining sensitive to the essential nature of his materials (1902a: 45). He illustrates his point with limber wooden furniture made by Serrurier-Bovy in 1899–1900, with bulbous plant-like silhouettes in versatile étageres and chairs that maintain a sturdiness, despite the ambitious curves of their supporting frames.

Serrurier-Bovy's work was seen as a modern incarnation of the Liège tradition (Bruneel-Hye de Crom, 1967: 55). Similarly, the now-iconic padouk chairs from van de Velde's first Gesamtkunstwerk, *Villa Bloemenwerf* (1895), merged modern shapes with a nostalgic recourse to regional techniques. For these, van de Velde combined a characteristic curving Art Nouveau framework made of Congolese wood, with ornamentation located in functional line movement, with a woven seat that introduces an element of traditional Belgian cottage craft. In an attempt to set up a new Belgian tradition, raw materials from

the colony were used to meld vernacular elements with modern sensibilities. As van de Velde's style developed, his experimentation with dynamic form tests the limits of the possible effects his mediums. The central cabinets displayed at the 1897 *Palais des Colonies* reveal a propensity for extravagant forms, with dramatically curling handles literally illustrating the extent to which the original timber may be stretched. In so doing, van de Velde also broke free of the more austere lines of the English Arts and Crafts furniture with which he had been associated up to that point (and which an example like the padouk chairs could be tied to), in a forum celebrating *Belgitude*.

In Belgium, working with wood was invigorated by access to new types of timber and thus presented a suitable counterpart for new developments in cast iron. Accordingly, the possibilities of Congolese wood were used as a symbol of the promise of the CFS in a different way to that of ivory. Not only did the distant African forests present a new source of this vital building product (at a time when woods in the European countryside were under threat), but the particular qualities of Congolese woods enabled new modernist forms. Woods like bilinga, acajou and limba allowed for new technical developments, at a crucial moment in Belgian Art Nouveau. The shapes and affects they gave rise to were to have far-reaching influence outside of the country's borders.

The particular forms associated with Belgian modernism were, at this point, heavily involved in making the CFS visible at events such as international trade fairs. For a young nation with a need to prove itself, exuberant branches, spiralling growths and gleaming sheets of Congolese woods could be seen to reveal pride in a country that could command a colony, through virtuoso ability. Such displays were not limited to international exhibition forums, but were adapted in private homes of the wealthy, where extensive private budgets allowed for experimentation with novel materials.

Colonial Manoeuvres from a Gesamtkunstwerk: *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* (1898).

Together with *Hôtel Tassel* (1894) and *Hôtel Solvay* (1894), *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* (1898) is customarily seen as a seminal example in the development of Art Nouveau (Greenhalgh, 2000; 24; Schmultzler, 1962: 126; Sembach, 2007: 45). These are all private homes for wealthy patrons that define the high period of the movement in Belgium. As the country's premiere architect, Horta praised van Eetvelde for having given him the means to let his imagination run riot in the creation of the now iconic townhouse



Figure 2.11: Dining room door and detail of wood panelling of *Hotel Van Eetvelde*

(Horta in Montens, 1996: 117). The family home of Baron van Eetvelde, the Chief Administrator of the CFS, was also one of the locations from which the business of the Congo was managed. Van Eetvelde never travelled to the colony himself and directed all activities from the metropole, often exactly from this prestigious residence. Horta's Gesamtkunstwerk served as the backdrop for business meetings concerning the Congo, as well as for hosting various upper echelons of the colonial administration, including King Leopold II (Vandenbreeden, 1996: 46). The showcase quality of the design suggests that it was made with this in mind.

In *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*, Horta chose to customize the stained glass windows and wall paintings with a personal element of abstracted organic forms that make reference to Congolese fauna and flora (Aubry, 2013: 64). An orchid-like flower in the mahogany fitting above the dining room hearth holds a star representing the CFS flag in its centre. The outline of a stylized elephantine form is hidden in a wall mural, with tusks painted into the corner panelling amidst a cornet of swirling grass-like fronds. The faint Congolese motifs have been merged with a symbolism of electrical abundance. Pulsating lines and colour push a dynamic energy through the room, setting up an interlocking rhythmic pattern that connects with the rest of the environment. Exotic forms, mixed with sumptuous textures and flooded with light, create a tropical atmosphere (Sembach, 2007: 58). The distant African colony thus makes



2.10: Winter garden of *Hotel Van Eetvelde* by Victor Horta (built in 1898)

a fleeting appearance as part of the apparition of natural profusion, denuded of its people, a viewpoint necessarily well suited to van Eetvelde's enterprise.[45]

The experience of guests at the *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* would have begun at the front door with an intricate orange and red mosaic inlay of undulating plant-like tendrils, insulated with wall panels of dark Congolese wood. The guests would then have been led up a broad, gradually spiralling marble staircase circling a glass-domed winter garden to a set of high doors mounted with a stained glass landscape of blues and violets. Inside was a sumptuous dining room, encased in warm orange and red hued woods, enlivened by engraved, painted patterns suggestive of exuberant foliage. They might also have been swept along the balcony circling an octagonal enclosure of deeply veined marble — adorned with real plants, hand-crafted furniture and *objects d'art* — and passed beneath the thrusting network of iron branches holding up a glass cupola into the second entertainment area.[46] This room is held together by a crisscrossing network of brass fittings, whose sinuous endings clasp slabs of onyx and quartz, all situated below handmade floral wallpaper reminiscent of William Morris. The complete journey would have been suffused with light, thanks to the central dome and the open plan floor plan. Glass panes and windows lining partitions between different rooms ensure that the space is interconnected and airy. Horta's virtuosity in manipulating plastic form to shape light and space is shown to its best advantage here. A visitor would not only have been dazzled by the evident use of opulent materials, but also immersed in an enclosed well of merging lines, forms and colours.

Hôtel Van Eetvelde is a seductive performance of the financial possibilities available in the African colony. The possibilities of immense wealth are displayed by the sheer sensual titillation of sumptuous materials. Horta sculpts both luxuriant Congolese woods and shining metals alike in sinuous, budding plant-forms which vibrate throughout the building and are echoed in the structure of the furniture and tiny details of wallpaper motifs and door handles. As raw materials from the colony are put to work as luxury furnishings next to inlays of precious stones, marble and expensive imported glass.[47] Palatial

45. Figurative murals were a common feature in Art Nouveau homes in this period, as most predominantly seen in the townhouses of Paul Hankar, but also in Hôtel Solvay and Serrurier-Bovy's *Villa L'Aube*.
46. One of the prestige objects in the winter garden was Philippe Wolfers' *Civilisation et Barbarie.* A group of Belgian industrialists presented this gift to Edmond van Eetvelde to thank him for the business opportunities he had facilitated (Adriaenssens, 2002).
47. The glass was ordered at huge expense from Tiffany & Co. in America.

luxuries gleam from walls supported by the material of railway stations, mixing the potentially plebeian into a spell of harmonious modernity.

Horta's exotic interior may be seen to provide a canopy under which a particular kind of life could be lived. *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* presented an experience to those fortunate enough to enter. Once inside, the dynamic twist of the entire edifice, studded with exquisite details, maintained a thrilling momentum. The Art Nouveau interior enveloped space, coaxing materials into a lively vision and controlling the movements of people within. In comparison, the outside world must have seemed rudely chaotic and unmanageable. A perfectly stage-managed interior was set up as a space in which the intangible colony could be accessed in plans and schemes. Horta's immersive design embodies the myth of the CFS as a fertile location for ambitious commerce.

Introducing Art Nouveau via the Congo: The *Palais des Colonies* (1897)

As numerous glass and iron arcades across Euro-America would attest, the immersive qualities of Art Nouveau were also employed for the purposes of popular consumption. The beguiling fantasy conjured up at the *Palais des Colonies* of 1897 was intended to draw on these strengths. Art Nouveau was the style of choice because of its potentially fashionable and cosmopolitan appeal, bringing a cache of novelty value to the general public (Aubry, 1994: 148). Hankar, Serrurier-Bovy and van de Velde, alongside Georges Hobé, were tasked with the exhibition,[48] with van Eetvelde the supervisor and Lieutenant Théodore Masui the exhibition director. The result was an Art Nouveau Gesamtkunstwerk. The extravaganza of the exhibition introduced the Belgian public to the new, modern style as much as it allowed the monarch to give his enterprise a public face.[49]

After perusing partially invented traditional Belgian cottage crafts, like lace-making and pottery, at the grand stalls of *Parc Cinquantenaire*, visitors caught a newly-built railway to the village of Tervuren, on the outskirts of the city, for colonial-orientated festivities. The necessary travel was symbolic of

48. Horta did not participate, despite van Eetvelde's obvious admiration for his work. The architect had proposed a highly expensive and ambitious pavilion that the regime felt was unaffordable (Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel, 1967: 56).
49. By 1897, Belgium had hosted two Universal Exhibitions, in Brussels in 1880 and in Antwerp in 1885. The second prominently featured colonial propaganda, with another Palais des Colonies built and various public attractions. While Art Nouveau did not feature explicitly at the 1895 exhibition, the interior of the 1897 *Palais des Colonies* set out to be an Art Nouveau "experiment" (van de Velde, 1898: 40).



Figure 2.12: Posters for the Brussels *International Exhibition* (1897)
Figure 2.13: Binder for the official photographs of the *Palais des Colonies* (1897)

the geographic separation between the European metropole and its African colony (Dunn, 2003: 35; Flynn, 1998: 199). The impressive new tram system was an advertisement for new technologies, demonstrating how Belgian industrial prowess and progress were penetrating the depths of the "dark" continent, connecting it to civilizing forces.[50] As immortalized by Joseph Conrad, a journey to the Congo at this time was seen as a journey back in time, to the primordial roots of mankind. At Tervuren, visitors were taken through a phantasmagoria of King Leopold II's imagined Congo, within a matter of hours, transported by way of Art Nouveau flourishes, furniture and displays (Liebrechts and Masui, 1897: 2). The Congo was reenacted through an artificial experience almost entirely orchestrated by designers who had never been there.[51]

In the foundational exhibition of what would later become the Royal Africa Museum of Tervuren (RMCA), a fantastical version of Congolese culture was laid before the Belgian public.[52] Under the guise of an educational display, the phantasmagoria of raw tropical wealth that was written into being by colonial propaganda was rendered experiential. In the *Palais des Colonies*, Paul Hankar's *Salon d'Honneur* displayed various European objects d'art, including new chryselephantine commissions, alongside Congolese fabrics and objects. In the adjoining *Salle d'Ethnographie*, Hankar constructed

50. The railway line also served to bring modern amenities to Tervuren, which up to that point was not even connected by decent roads(Wynants, 1997: 59).
51. Only the exhibition director Masui had already been in Africa.
52. Outmoded forms of display (that unconsciously make colonial ideology visible) and one-sided, often inaccurate, documentation of Belgo-Congolese history has dogged the institution since (Couttennier, 2005: 9; Hochschild, 1998: 783–785 Silverman, 2013: 16–19). The RMCA is currently under renovation, with the expectation of conceptual revision.

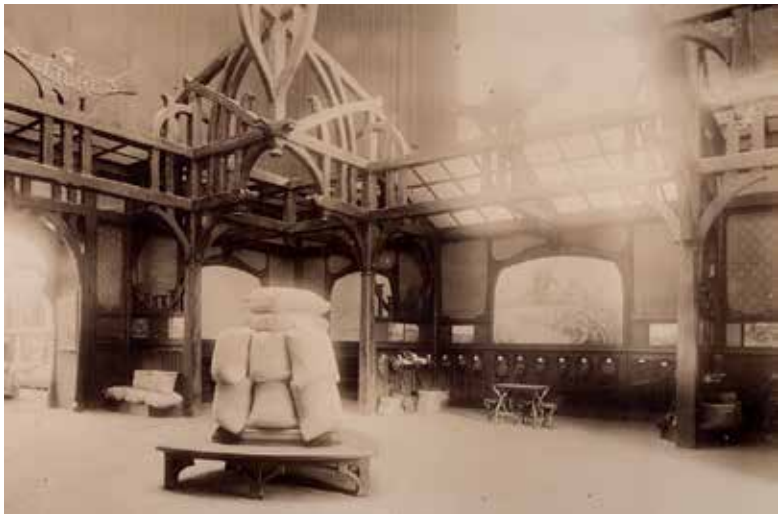


Figure: 2.14: ***Salon des Grandes Cultures*** **by Georges Hobé (1897)**

the African colonial subject in the form of a scientific exposition of different tribes found in the CFS. This led on to the *Salle de Militaire* where a parade of spoils from the Arab campaigns celebrated sophisticated European weaponry and the strength of the Force Publique. Natural fauna and flora of the regions were exhibited in a dazzling aquarium built into an underground tunnel that led into a tropical hot house. Here fantastically melded circular display arches by Serrurier-Bovy continued the celebration of plants and their products. In van de Velde's *Salle d'Exportation*, elegantly curling tables and wall-hugging cabinets of supple Congolese woods offered up a panorama of cheap trinkets, crockery, beads, clothing and cosmetics, produced for the Congolese market. The final space, the *Salon des Grandes Cultures*, displayed imports from the colony. Here, Georges Hobé wrought dense Congolese woods into an all-encompassing structural framework, loaded with displays of various lucrative products from the Congo, including overflowing sacks of cocoa beans and specimens of rubber plants.

This procession of modern frames, stands, vitrines, cabinets and furniture, modulated according to the particular style of each practitioner, introduced different fictional versions of the Congo. This concentrated display of this avant-garde style led to the coining of the term "Style Congo" to refer to Art Nouveau.[53] That the physical structure of the *Palais des Colonies* itelf was designed in Neoclassical

53. The term was suggested in 1903 by Fierens-Gevaert (Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel, 1967: 60). Like so many other terms for the style, *Style Congo* was not necessarily complementary. A highly ironic article in La Nationale focuses on the "fantaisie Congolaise " of the exhibition (A.U., 1897: 7). The *Journal de Bruxelles* dubbed the *Palais des Colonies* as

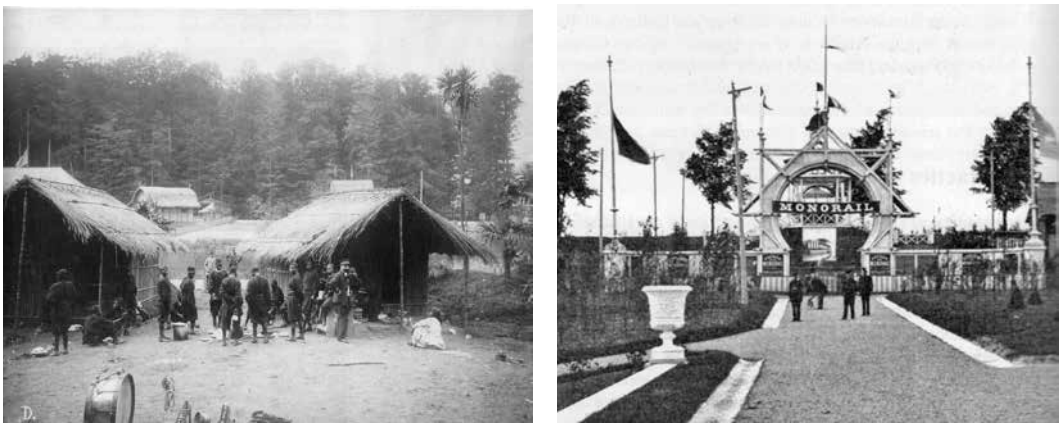


Figure 2.15: *Force Publique* village and the Monorail at the Tervuren grounds (1897)

style (conceived and built by architects Albert-Philippe Aldrophe and by Ernest Acker, respectively) rounded off the overall message. Most of Leopold II's public works shared this conservative style, thus offering a familiar exterior to gently lead the masses into the avant-garde designed interior. Once inside, visitors were ensconced in a total environment of dynamic forms, offering up exotic African riches.

Outside of the immersive exhibition halls, more overtly titillating entertainment was provided in the surrounding grounds. In three villages, Congolese people were placed on show.[54] In two of them, "authentic natives" re-enacted their supposedly simple way of life of hunting and fishing prior to European intervention. Proof of the civilizing effects of the CFS administration were then demonstrated through the inclusion of a third, more regulated village, populated by *Force Publique* soldiers, dressed in Western garb and marching in step. Thus the idea that Congolese people lived in a state of prehistory until the paternal colonizing hand enabled them to progress was encouraged (Dunn, 2003: 36). So, too, was the idea of the *Force Publique* as a benign controlling organization, implementing discipline and order.[55] While the Art Nouveau halls were physically separate from the human zoo, they were unequivocally implicated in its intentions and, to some degree, complicit in carrying out its message.[56]

"Palais de la Réclame Noir" (pavilion of black claims) (Wynants, 1997: 128), possibly with pejorative overtones.

54. These human zoos came to take place not only at exhibitions, but also at zoos themselves. See: Stähelin (1993). The previous exhibition in Antwerp had also followed this path, to great popularity (Couttenier, 2005).

55. At this point, initial stories of atrocities committed by the CFS military, circulated largely by British and Scandinavian critics, had filtered into Belgium. King Leopold IIdenied these and set up a Commission for the Protection of the Natives in a show of concern (Slade, 1962: 180).

56. The arrival of 267 Congolese men and women aroused intense public excitement and interest. The media followed their time in Belgium closely in tones that were highly patronizing and derogatory. Pro-colonial propaganda revelled in the attention, while those opposed to the king's endeavour were critical of the cruelty of the exhibition. The media also

The narrative of advancement in the colony through technology was a second, important layer of meaning inscribed across each salon within the *Palais des Colonies* and in the greater grounds of the exhibition. On the site was a *Gallerie des Machines*, displaying the latest industrial developments, including a generator that fuelled the grounds' celebratory fountains. A new type of bridge over the park's waterways was displayed, with the navy performing mock manoeuvres. In a specially crafted structure in the grounds, an early form of cinema provided moving images of colonial advancement, including footage of the railway being built. The most wildly popular attraction, however, was the monorail. Dubbed the *Express Éclair* (lightning-fast express), the train transported visitors around the grounds at an astounding 150 km/h (A.U., 1897: 24).

With tram tracks and rails framing the exhibition gardens, the medium of iron, so prolific in Art Nouveau, was an integral component of this important public presentation of the style. A symbol of modernity in architecture, iron was also a key motif for the imperial regime. The thrilling displays at Tervuren, eloquently cementing the language of the railroad as one of modernity, happened contemporaneously as the construction of the Matadi-Leopodville line, a fact that underlay the whole exhibition.

Curating the Congo: Inside the *Salon d'Honneur* and the *Salle d'Ethnographie*

Part of the education offered by the "veritable colonial school for the nation" that was the *Palais des Colonies* was a lesson in prevailing evolutionary theory of the time (Charles Lemaire in Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel, 1967: 23). This was a time in Belgium when physical anthropology — the art of using the size of the skull as criteria to determine the state of evolution of a given person — had only recently been relinquished (Couttenier, 2005: 78). Expansion in Africa had provided scientists at the Anthropological Society of Brussels (SAB) with specimens of previously unstudied African people.[57] With fresh samples of body parts of African people (largely obtained by Émile Pierre Joseph Storms in the Congo), Belgian anthropologist Émile Houzé developed the theory of polygenism (Couttenier, 2005: 23). This saw black Africans as a separate species from Caucasian Europeans, evolving along

covered the illness of Congolese due to exposure to the cold, their hospitalization, the tragic death of some and their burial arrangements (with questions regarding baptism of the deceased being a public concern) (Wynants 1997: 124–129).

57. The SAB was founded in 1882, by when colonial activity had begun in earnest (Couttenier, 2005: 23).

different routes. Not only did Belgian anthropology consider black people the least developed in the evolutionary hierarchy, but it questioned their very humanity.[58] With the small amount of ethnographic work that was being done carried out either by military men or explorers with military initiatives, colonial ideology was supported by racist theories. As these were developed into a science by the end of the 19th century — a supposedly objective authoritative source — contact with Africa helped to extend such theories (Mudimbe, 1988: 22). This was played out across the *Palais des Colonies* exhibition halls.

In the *Salon d'Honneur*, Hankar arranged chryselephantine works alongside a small selection of items collected in the African colony. The sculpted vitrines and stands housing the exhibits, designed by Hankar and van de Velde, were defined with robust organic flourish, typical of the Belgian style. The ivory sculptures provided a frame of artistic respectability at the start of the exhibition experience.[59] As if to emphasize the notion of expansion and aggrandisement, certain objects d'art took on exaggerated proportions, the most pronounced being *La Caresse du Cygne* (1897) by Wolfers, standing nearly two meters high, in which a bronze swan holds aloft a lightly engraved elephant tusk.[60] The large, glazed tusk, mostly still in its original state, is thus held firmly by a creature from ancient European folklore, symbolic of the powerful and improving force of Western culture. In a similar vein, allegories of civilization overcoming savage barbarism were emblazoned across the monumental tapestries of Hélène de Rudder that adorned the exhibition walls. These large, embroidered quilts dwarfed the small swathes of densely patterned African textiles, dubbed "*velours de Kasai*" [Kasai velvets] (Masui and Liebrechts, 1897: 8).

Congolese fabrics, knives and figurines (mostly *ndop* figures labelled as fetish) were displayed alongside what the public would recognize as high art (Ogata, 2001: 53).[61] Despite the grandeur of chryselephantine sculpture, mixed with precious stones and metals from the CFS, the austere *Salon*

58. If Houzé's particular theories were not widely known, notions of European superiority were generally assumed, even in the literature more sympathetic to the Congo. In analysing the writing of "professional travellers" of the 19th century, Johannes Fabian (2000: 214) finds that racial and cultural stereotypes (supportive of colonial ideology) were ubiquitous, even in texts by someone like Emil Torday who was known to admire African cultures greatly.
59. The chryselephantine section of the exposition was awarded the Grand Design Prize (Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel, 1967: 80).
60. The elephant tusk was an emblem for beauty in Symbolism and Art Nouveau alike.
61. The latter included the ivory bust of King Leopold II by Thomas Vincotte.

d'Honneur had many of the trappings of the private domain. Most of the sculptures were small enough for home salons (and all found buyers at the close of the exposition) and the space was offset by two large potted palms. Materials and objects from the colony were thus presented as domesticated, collectible accessories that could augment luxurious interiors.

In the *Palais des Colonies*, patterned fabrics, richly-textured baskets, intricate wood carvings and other hand-made objects were prized for their inventiveness and deft understanding of natural materials (Liebrechts and Masui, 1897: 3–8).[62] Hankar's grand entrance hall, a limited array of objects made by African craftsmen was set up in juxtaposition to seemingly more sophisticated figurative works by Belgian artists. In the European objects, the ivory, wood, precious stones and metals were refined into smooth contours, compared to the rougher edges and symmetrical patterning of the Congolese objects. The practical uses of ivory for billiard balls, piano keys, combs and knives in European households were not extolled here, in favour of artworks in pursuit of classical beauty. Thus, the knives and small figurines from the colony had to serve as comparative artistic practice.[63] Under such circumstances, a narrative of difference between "tribal" Congolese culture and European sophistication was woven into the display. At the same time, the undercurrent of notions of progress pulls through the space, with an implied suggestion that the selected collection of skilfully made African objects had the potential to evolve towards the sophisticated achievements of European ones (Ogata, 2001: 53).[64]

For centuries, the juxtaposition of unusual objects, often from remote parts of the world, had been a feature in aristocratic and merchant homes of Europe, exhibited in curiosity cabinets and wonder rooms. The *Salon d'Honneur* differed from this tradition in that disparate objects from different traditions are drawn together, as an Art Nouveau art exhibition where the display cabinet is as important as the object displayed. Art Nouveau stands and furnishings in themselves present distillations of the exhibits. In a van de Velde vitrine, for example, the metallic curlicues that rise from the bounding box and melt back into its square casing echo those of van der Stappen's *Mysterieuse Sphinx* displayed in

62. Conversely, stylized representations of people, especially in small wooden sculptures, were often read as gross distortions of the human form. Realism was understood as the high point of art since the Renaissance (see Chapter 3).
63. Similarly, comparing Kasai cloths to Belgian velvet seems flattering at first, but is skewed as it assesses two very different materials that share few qualities.
64. The exhibition guide further allows for this eventuality by highlighting that certain metal cups by Wolfers were based on African models (Liebrechts and Masui, 1897: 9).



Figure 2.16: *Salon D'Honneur* & *Salle d'Ethnographie* by Paul Hankar (1897)

it. As forms seep into abstraction, enclosing structure becomes the endpoint of where forms could be taken.

In contrast to the unusual game of equivalents being played in the *Salle d'Honneur*, Hankar's *Salle d'Ethnographie* was intended to function scientifically. The long rectangular space, significantly bigger than the others, categorized the different types of African peoples found in the CFS together with objects and structures taken from their lives. The African curiosities were displayed on wooden stands, podiums and furniture that are embellished with ornamentation that flattens and flames up. Because most of the Congolese objects were gathered during military campaigns, weapons were an overriding presence. Seemingly primitive traditional African arms were the most common, including spears, bows and arrows, as well as all manner and sizes of knives.[65] Such a selection encouraged the dual construction of African tribal people as violent and warlike on the one hand, and undeveloped and insufficiently adapted to protect themselves against stealthy, well-equipped Arab slave-traders, on the other. The impression of war trophies being on display was heightened by the incorporation of Arabic flags, with Islamic writing, lining the walls of the adjoining *Salle de Militaire*. The entrance to this hall was framed by two ivory tusks, as high as a human being and facing inwards in a way that accentuated both the elegant archway above and their own sharp points.[66]

65. The exhibit gave the false impression that more sophisticated rifles, guns and cannons were introduced to the Congo by the *Force Publique*. Centuries of trade with Arabic caravans in the east and Portuguese on the western coast from the late 15th century onwards ensured that the most up to date weaponry had been circulating long before Belgian intervention.
66. The manner in which these hunting trophies were displayed would have made the full heft of the elephant's missing body become apparent, reminding the viewer of the animals that were killed.



Figure 2.17: *Salle d'Ethnographie* (1897), by Paul Hankar

Dangerous objects ushered viewers through an overall design that annexed space, via a continued envelope of repeated knobbed and arching wooden beams. Matching furniture of squatting, arched benches and more classical marble-topped tables were placed centrally, amidst exhibits. Enclosing wooden frames further controlled space with very particular arrangements of Congolese exhibits. Riotous displays were aesthetic, with certain types of instruments — knives, figurines, calabashes, bowls — grouped together according to their plastic and visual qualities. The resulting pattern-making merges with the Art Nouveau decoration. De-contextualized African objects were thus incorporated as part of a stylistic whole. The installation displayed these exhibits for their aesthetic values, not for their informative value (as later in ethnographic and natural history museums), nor as artworks in their own right (as in art galleries). Despite the exhibition's claims to educate the public about the Congo, a lack of explanation of the exhibits' original function or social meaning perpetuated the (Clifford, 2003: 380). Within the largely celebratory atmosphere of the *Salle d'Ethnographie*, the public was able to judge Congolese people by means of only a smattering of their material culture.[67]

Closest in intent to an ethnographic museum, Hankar's *Salle d'Ethnographie* followed the information supplied in the extensive exhibition catalogue that accompanied the *Palais des Colonies*.[68] Information is provided on tribal distinctions and geographical distribution, complete with life-size statues of different "types" crafted by Charles Samuel, Isidore de Rudder and Julien Dillens. Each sculpture was dressed in the distinct form of dress of a particular culture and placed alongside a model of the huts of the society being displayed. This section thus illustrates the manner in which ethnic distinctions solidified into racial classifications. The claim of distinct cultural groupings in the Congo, as enacted in the exhibition in parallel to that of fauna and flora, was a colonial invention to aid the regime in maintaining control of the Congolese population. Dividing peoples into set ethnicities, each with a particular culture, and suggesting that they had existed as separate entities for centuries ignored the actual situation of complex political groupings that had close and sometimes conflicting political, social and trade relations (Ranger, 1993: 248).[69] In this manner, Congolese cultural hybridizations

67. In his witty *Philosophy of Furniture* ([1834] 1999), Oscar Wilde mocks the common idea of the time that the study of people's furniture could be used as a measure of civilization.

68. The catalogue provides a compendium of the Congo as well as a catalogue of artworks on display. It is illustrated by Amedee Lyden who applies Art Nouveau flourishes.

69. Later, municipalities through which to control and tax the population were defined on the basis of these imposed tribal affiliations.



Figure 2.18: Mural in the *Salle d'Ethnographie*, by Adolphe Crespin and Edouard Duyck

and transformations, as well as rights to land, were negated and lack of written records exploited to maintain an illusion of an Africa without history.

The idea of Congolese tribal life being suspended in time was further accentuated by murals executed by Adolphe Crespin and Edouard Duyck. Their friezes depict Africans engaged in various activities like rowing, hunting and carrying massive ivory tusks, within a utopian vista of unadulterated natural landscapes. Such scenes key into fin de siècle nostalgia for untapped landscapes. The Art Nouveau yearning for a natural paradise it considered forever lost to industrial progress was here answered in the form of the African colony.[70] Echoing stylizations offered in colonial propaganda, Hankar's *Salle d'Ethnographie* showcased "uncivilized" and pure African culture.[71]

The binding interweaving pattern of bending arches and tendrils that Hankar employed to declare these fictions accentuated its own fantastical aspect. Hankar's evident fascination with combining different shapes and weights, repeating similar display objects for the purposes of aesthetic harmony (rather than providing necessary information), created an unreal, ethereal atmosphere. In aiming to bolster the colonial regime, Hankar's Art Nouveau displays were more concerned with beguiling its visitors than haranguing them with facts.

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70. Narratives from the colony would soon follow suit, with the assumed innocence and ignorance of its people seen as irrevocably marred through increasing exposure to the forces of "civilization."

71. At least one or two articles in every edition of Le Congo Illustré presented "uncivilized" local customs, with cannibalism, tattooing, scarification and elaborate hairstyles described in lurid detail. In a similar vein, the exhibition dedicated a display to African witchcraft that laid out unsubstantiated rumours of certain Congolese practices, as if they were similar to the sorcery of European legends.

World Fair as Medium: The *Salle des Imports, Salle des Exportation* and *Salon des Grandes Cultures*

> The greatest product of the machinery of enterprise to be exploited by Art Nouveau was the international exhibition. (Greenhalgh, 2000: 28)

In the midst of the age of categorization, whimsical Art Nouveau set up representations of the Congo aimed at temporary enthrallment. Its immediate sensory appeal was well suited to grand exhibitions, where visitors would be momentarily awed, before moving on. With the allure of the total interior in place, Art Nouveau was thus also an ideal style for the World's Fair. Already bound up in mythologies of nationhood and progress (see Chapter 2), the manner in which the creators of the exhibits integrated the Congo into the displays shows that their aesthetics easily drew in imperial expansionism.[72] The *Palais des Colonies* expressly claimed the colony as part of Belgium (while still holding it at bay). Intending to be the nation's new design movement, fragmented bits and pieces from distant Congolese locations were woven into harmonious installations of *Belgitude*, giving an overall impression of an indistinct, but desirable possession.

In a trope to be repeated in international exhibitions to come (Lagae, 2007: 82–113), the unified Belgian nation that was envisaged was defined on the basis of the possession of a colony, necessarily sublimating the colonial subject. The style of extended ornamentation was employed to portray the Congo as an ornament for Belgium. The Congo endeavour was, necessarily, posed as a modernizing project. Strong links to the machine era were visible not only in the monorail, but also in the *Salle d'Importations, the Salle d'Exportations* and the *Salon des Grandes Cultures*. In the latter, Hobé displayed Congolese raw materials transformed into dynamic and chic objects.

In *fin de siècle* Europe, the illumination enabled by iron and glass constructions combined with electric lighting were read as another clear symbol of modernity. Engels and Marx (1850: 311) speak of the

72. With the World's Fairs as sites of nationalist showmanship, they were irrevocably bound up in colonialism. The solidification of European nation states that occurred in the 19th century had escalated both colonial activity and the resulting rivalry it set off. The rise of nationalism thus brought with it the need for peoples to be compartmentalized into ethnicities and races, in order to establish hierarchies (Hobsbawm, 1993: 13).

alliance of "opaque iron and feathery glass" abetting the "feast of light and progress" that characterize the commodity fetishism of the universal exhibition.[73]

The *Salon d'Ethnographie* was flooded with dazzling shafts of sunlight, creating an effect similar to that of a greenhouse (Wynants, 1997: 108). The *Salle des Imports*, a wooden bunker that Serrurier-Bovy's bulbous arches made to appear like the interior of a whale, had sheaths of light streaming in from a central shaft and two flanking rows of glass (Dierkens-Aubry, 1994: 117). Within the bunker an illuminated pathway led past shelves laden with samples of wood, gum, textiles, oils and other natural products.

Van de Velde's *Salle d'Exportations* represented 74 Belgian companies whose products were used in the CFS (Wynants, 1997: 117). Compared to Hankar and Hobé's more rustic effects, this display spoke to the sleaker lines of ships and railway stations. The space was held together by patterns of shooting forms, across walls and furniture. These reverberating abstractions served to energize the multitude of products on display. Across an unfolding cabinet setting up the space around a centrepiece of a looping bilinga wood table (discussed earlier), boxes, shelves and compartments were opened to reveal carefully placed sales items. In this instance, the Belgian line was put to work to push seemingly mundane products into a thrusting world of exploratory avant-garde. The principle of ornament accentuating structure, most elegantly displayed in the curling tabletop, is here seen to enthusiastically bolster the colonial framework.

The *Salon des Grandes Cultures* was constructed with a wooden framework shaped in the form of tropical plants such as the cocoa, coffee and rubber, the products of which were displayed in the space thus created (Liebrechts and Masui, 1897: 447). The tangled effect created with entwined acajou and bilinga wood promoted the produce of the Mayombe forest in northern CFS (Wynants, 1997: 99). Pillars of dense Congolese woods were employed in the place of iron to support a pagoda-like roofing made up of elegant arch-shapes offset by steady, square formations. The distinctive silhouette

73. Engels and Marx (1850: 311) are speaking specifically about the Universal Exhibition of 1850 at London's Crystal Palace, which was the first of the international trade fairs. Thomas Paxton's Neoclassical design is likened to a temple dedicated to the "greatest glory of merchandise," "a Pantheon in the modern Rome."

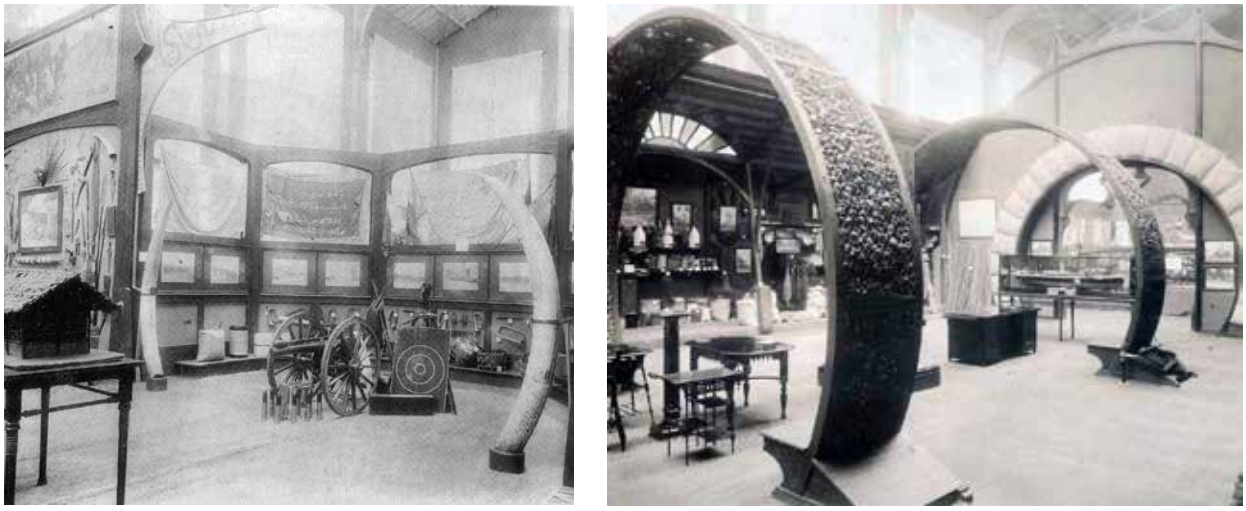


Figure 2.19: *Salle d'Militaire* (1897) by Paul Hankar and *Salle des Imports* by Serrurier-Bovy (1897)

dominated every aspect of the space. It has been seen to evoke African huts, as well as an Oriental marquee (Dierkens-Aubry, 1994: 114; Lagae, 2007: 83). The lasting motif of the interior of the *Palais des Colonies* unequivocally ushered in the exotic as it stage-managed the display of colonial raw materials. The educational journey of the exhibition is thus characterised by the melding of elaborate décor, product and design-as-product.

The Art Nouveau exhibition was highly successful, attended by over three million people and praised by avant-garde artists and colonists alike.[74] German architect Otto Wagner was hugely influenced by the Palais des Colonies and went on to found the Mathildenhöhe artist colony in Darmstadt, Germany, on Jugendstil principles.[75] The strength of the exhibition design may be due not only to the beguiling capabilities of Art Nouveau, but also due to its ability to show off individual exhibits. The unified organic-inspired aesthetic within each grand hall presented a more pared-down form of display than was usual for the time.[76] In describing the exhibition, van de Velde lauds the administration for giving artists the opportunity to educate the public through "an artistic vision located in tiny details as much as larger pieces" (van de Velde, 1898: 39).

74. Stanley visited the exhibition and praised its "demonstrative power" (Wynants, 1997: 54).
75. Mathildenhöhe also became an important platform for trade fairs.
76. For example, the show was favourably compared to the confusion of the colonial pavilion at the World's Fair of Antwerp in 1885 (Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel, 1967: 58). As the movement spread outside of Belgium, melding modernism with distinct cultural identity, it was to become the *fin de siècle* face of World Fairs, reaching its pinnacle as the iconic style of the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900.



Figure 2.20: ***Salle d'Exportations*** **by Henry Van de Velde (1897)**

The theme of idealistic design providing optimum visibility came through strongly in a trade fair pavilion made by the new breed of businessman designers engendered by the designers under discussion here. One possible reading of the installations at the *Palais des Colonies* is that of craft in service of sales. Not only did the exhibition make an audacious pitch for King Leopold II's fantasy colony, but also one for all displays. Hankar's aesthetic strategies were strongly tied to those of showing off wares to their best ability in a shop window. Similarly, Hobé's stalwart framework was billed as a successful advert for Congolese wood. Serrurier-Bovy's spectacular circular-arches cum seating system and van de Velde's stretching table can be seen as leaping forward, drawing in energies that best accentuate the space itself, as much as the display items within it. According to this logic, each hall seems to outdo the other in feats of craftsmanship, giving the impression of competing for attention.

In this new exhibition world of Art Nouveau constructions, utilitarian objects were turned into art, fuelled by bounty from Africa whose means of ending up in Belgium was obscured. While a Congo of growing things, otherworldly people and up-and-coming markets was displayed, the exhibition did not provide information about colonial activities in the CFS. While travel and exploration were celebrated as a symbol of progress, the actual means of acquisition and transportation of goods and people is not featured. As different scenes of the colony, merging with Belgium in various ways, follow on from each other, Art Nouveau systems were overpoweringly aimed at representing themselves, over and above the needs of even their patrons.

As colonial opportunism and entrepreneurial craftsmanship audaciously claimed new ground, they were not a united voice nor was theirs a secure relationship. Both Hankar and Horta proposed designs for the 1897 *Palais des Colonies* that were refused, with the former deemed unsuitable and the latter too expensive (Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel, 1976: 56). Horta's proposal for the Belgian colonial pavilion at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 was also turned down on the grounds of being too "showy" in the face of international criticism of the king's activities (Aubry, 1996: 64). His suggestion was for a portable Gesamtkunstwerk, an apparition of glass and iron, mushrooming glass domes supported by slender temple pillars. The preposterous notion of a traveling hothouse-museum in tropical climes illustrates Horta's complete inability to imagine or come to terms with the African

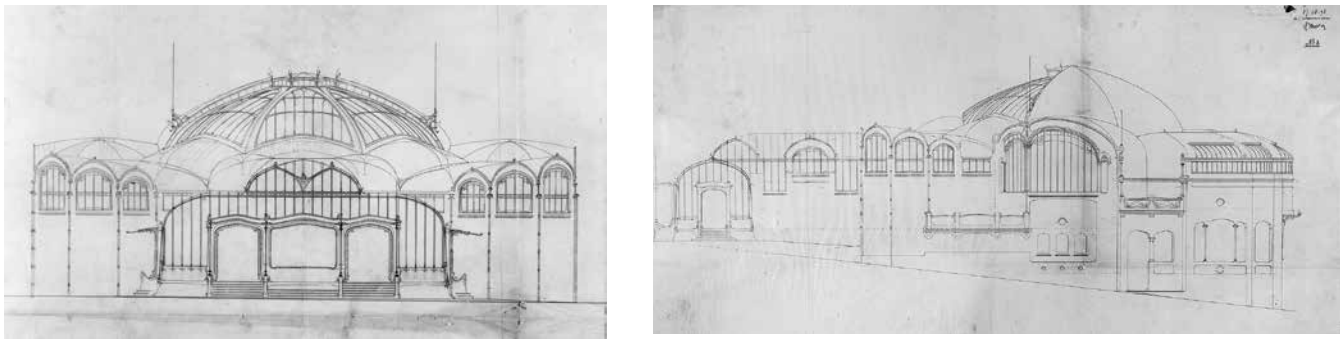


Figure 2.21: Sketches by Victor Horta for the *Congo Pavilion* at the *Paris Exposition Universelle* (1900)

colony in any real way.[77] Evidently, the Congo presented an imaginary of experimentation and wild schemes, to which products could be sent and from which bountiful raw materials would emerge, without real people having to inhabit his light-filled, Art Nouveau "spirit world" of immersive fantasy (Wolf, 2011: 501).

Complicit Form: Elusive African Influence on Art Nouveau

The different halls of the *Palais des Colonies* experimented with new forms of exhibition-making, ostensibly in support of the CFS. Importantly, it is in Hankar's ethnographic hall, which exhibited the bulk of Congolese material culture, that structural and decorative lines take on certain Congolese forms. This begins with the floors, where motifs from Bangalese textiles are directly quoted in Hankar's carpets (Dierkens-Aubry, 1994: 61). This stylized, budding patterning is well suited to Art Nouveau organicism. Less abstract forms are the small, fetish-like figurines that Hankar placed at the tips of his exhibition archways (more pronounced in his preparatory sketches than in the actual realization). Amongst the petal formations that make up the crests of screens and stands, commonly understood to be Neo-Gothic, are thorny protrusions. This, along with the central doorway's spiky silhouette, crowned with a headdress-like tiara, goes against the encompassing logic of Art Nouveau form. Where the binding principle is usually to enclose, here spear-like motifs reach outwards, piercing the negative space around it. This feature could refer back to Baroque sensibilities, though this would be unusual

77. Horta's design and its likeness to a Medieval palace made of glass echoes two iconic structures from English fiction. First is the glass church from Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* ([1988] 1997) that the main character foolishly attempts to transport into the Australian hinterland. The second is the dream of a lost Medieval palace in the Brazilian jungle, pursued by Tony Last in Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* ([1934] 1977). In each novel, the structure serves as a powerful symbol for the folly of settler communities.



Figure 2.22: Preparatory sketch for *Salle d'Ethnographie* by Paul Hankar

for Art Nouveau (Madsen, 1967: 17). Regardless of the meaning of these protrusions, The fact remains that elements of African aesthetics have been thematically integrated into the *Sallé d'Ethnographie*. Moreover, because of Hankar's pursuit of integrated interiors, these new elements were a repeated feature.

Newspaper commentary at the time described the hall as being a "picturesque, lively, novel, and also a somewhat barbaric, whole" (Maus and Soulier, 1897: 92). It continued to read African forms into other exhibitions, even in less obvious instances.[78] This transference of Congolese forms onto Art Nouveau frameworks and, accordingly, the imagination of the viewer complicates the exhibition narrative that is portrayed in rigid sculptures, still photographs and floating, decontextualized utilitarian objects. While Congolese culture was posed as something static, Hankar's halls suggest that it could also be animated through appropriation.

78. For example, Hankar's exhibition benches have been described as having the silhouette of "squat fetishes" (Bruneel-Hye and Luwel, 1967: 52).

With this design, Hankar seems to have been the only member of the Art Nouveau group who responded to Charles Liebrechts and Theodore Masui's (1897: 3) observation that "these models of absolute sincerity and purity may offer an unforeseen aid for the development of modern aesthetic sensibilities." At face value, this appears to be a highly progressive statement.[79] However, the terms of potential cross-cultural reference presented here are highly uneven. As discussed in the previous chapter, the process through which western artists might gain inspiration requires appropriating those elements that are useful, with no consideration of the person who made it and what its original use and value were intended to be. Similarly, praise for the handcraft abilities of unnamed African craftsmen and their use of indigenous materials, in the exhibition guide, place such traditions as timeless and passed down over generations for centuries. At every turn, the objects are assumed to be the production of primitives who are not credited with sophisticated aesthetic logics and evolving techniques.
With the imagined purity of the models on display about to be exploded, through contact with the colonizing machine, it is up to avant-garde art to recognize its qualities. In this way, "modern aesthetic sensibilities" could only further themselves by patronizing the subject people, rather than learning from communication with them (Liebrechts and Masui, 1897: 3).

Hankar's exhibition display may be seen to further such ideas on a subtle level. His convincing pursuit of aesthetic unity ensures that elements of the alien objects on display — portrayed as being from another time zone as much as from another race — were incorporated into his overall design scheme. According to the terms of Art Nouveau reference, a generalized vision of another culture is concocted. Moreover, in this particular denouement of late 19th century primitivist fantasy, the general atmosphere of essentialized "Africanness" is based on aesthetic impressions of a fairly random accumulation of objects, gathered together for the exhibition.

Compared to this fleeting whiff of the Congo, exposure to Japanese, Chinese and Moorish art was far more pronounced across the Art Nouveau movement. Moreover, their influence affected multiple aspects of the use and construction of architectural space, in structural form and contour as well as

79. Maarten Couttenier (2015: 3) discusses several figures, such as Schweinfurth, Emile Storms or the influential, self-styled explorer Henry Morton Stanley, who admired admiring its material products as art in its own right. He thus does not find it surprising that Liebrechts and Masui allow for the possibility of African material culture being artistically viable.

decorative details. While the Gesamtkunstwerk that was the *Salle d'Ethnographie* only hinted at the potential of mobilizing forms from Congolese culture, the *Palais des Colonies* as a whole proclaimed an open embrace of eastern stylistic influence to its new public, with the overall effect perceived as being "oriental" (Lagae, 2007: 83). The more familiar cultures of the East were credited with the ability to develop a sophisticated form of art and visual language.[80] Tellingly, at the site of one of the first meaningful encounters of avant-garde art with African objects, the art movement that sought to break down traditional hierarchies between craft and art was unable to consider Congolese material culture as having a serious artistic language or that its craftsmen could have a sophisticated relationship to the objects they produced.[81]

With the above in mind, the African objects — encircled, held up and absorbed by the curvilinear grasp of Hankar's line formations — are paraded as pure exotica, removed from a savage idyll to form tantalizing parts of his contemplative whole. Unlike ethnographic museums to come, Hankar's exhibition design makes no pretence at objectivity. His ornamentation is exuberant and the atmosphere celebratory. His borrowing of Congolese motif and form on the carpets and screens appears as a display of curiosities, bound up in the greater spectacle.

Outside of the phantasmagoria of Tervuren, Hankar's domestic and commercial interiors make no known reference to Congolese aesthetics. The same can be said of all the Art Nouveau practitioners. While use of Congolese raw materials persisted, its woods allowing for the emergence of more generous forms, a reference to the African colony only continues in possible allusions to its fauna and flora. As acceptable "primitive" influences of Oriental art were flattened into the sensuous embrace of the dreamscape, the future exclusion of Congolese imagery perpetuated the myth of the inferior tribal subject, whose motifs were only deemed suitable for the more bawdy fictions of the public fairground that was the colonial exhibition.[82] It could well be the case that it was exactly the freedom engendered in the spectacle of the *Palais des Colonies* that led Hankar to experiment with forms from Congolese exhibits. His inventive hall has been described as "fun" and "playful," rather than groundbreaking

80. For example, where abstracted figuration in Japanese art was read as an intentional distortion of form (Clausen in Gombrich, 2002: 189), in African art it was judged as a lack of skill or inability to render form realistically.
81. Congolese objects were thus not recognized as potentially presenting new ways of breaking down the craft/art barrier.
82. This may be seen as a forerunner to the same phenomenon in 1930s Paris (Morton, 2000).

(Aubry, 1994: 153). While the *Palais des Colonies* remained long after the other exhibits had come down, African imagery did not leave the bounded fairground halls.

Spurred on by the remnants of the *Palais des Colonies* at Tervuren, Deborah Silverman has sought to locate Congolese influence in the work of Belgian Art Nouveau artists, particularly van de Velde.[83] Seeing the inundation of both Congolese products and colonial propaganda, she proposes that the pioneering ornament-as-essence style is saturated with reference to a displaced encounter with violence in the distant colony, rendering Art Nouveau as a visual form of imperial repression.[84] In numerous examples of Horta's and van de Velde's furniture and décor, she locates the outline of elephant heads (Silverman, 2012: 16–22). She proposes that the pivotal Belgian whiplash line is the result of a fascination with both wealth-bringing rubber vines and the *chicotte* (whip), employed by the colonial oppressor to perpetrate untold cruelty in the colony (Silverman, 2013: 28–34). Tracing tattooing and scarification skills offered to the European public, Silverman further suggests that van de Velde's developed his imagery and motifs in reference to these (Silverman, 2012: 176–186).

Silverman's work is seminal in exposing the links between King Leopold II's regime and Belgian Art Nouveau. Looking deeper than historical circumstances, she attempts to locate imagery from the CFS in items of furniture and sculptures. However, her work shows that it is difficult to pin down finite Congolese sources of classic Art Nouveau total artworks. It is highly plausible that Art Nouveau incorporated Congolese fauna and flora, especially the sinusoidal rubber plants that correspond to other gelatinous, creeping forms associated with Art Nouveau. Yet, while they may well have informed the curling structural tendrils of Art Nouveau, this was never explicitly mentioned by Horta, van de Velde, Serrurier-Bovy or Hankar.[85] The dining room of *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* is thus the only instance where Congolese nature is directly referred to, as Horta himself explained that he had placed an elephantine outline amongst the stylized versions of Congolese plants (Horta in Aubry, 2013: 62). Unlike the

83. She attended the exhibition *La mémoire du Congo, le temps coloniale*, in 2005 (Silverman, 2011b: 8).
84. This refers to the three articles: *Art Nouveau Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism* (Parts I, II and III of 2011b, 2012 and 2013, respectively). Silverman does not analyse Hankar's halls at the P*alais des Colonies*, rather focusing on the chryselephantine commissions and the work of van de Velde.
85. Horta and van de Velde were particularly vocal about the aspects of nature they drew on. Serrurier-Bovy spoke in praise of the materiality of Congolese woods but seldom incorporated any recognizable plants other than his trademark stylized red flowers, symbolic of Liége.

silhouette of chairs and other objects that Silverman identifies in the murals, the animal is well defined and easily recognized.

At the 1897 *Palais des Colonies*, the absorption of all manner of African natural life into exhibition imagery and display systems is explicitly and exuberantly embraced (Masui, 1897: 4).The furniture in the *Salon d'Honneur* has also been seen to have taken on the form of elephants (Dierkens-Aubry, 1994: 142). The unusual exotic animals, dense tropical forests and luscious foliage of the Congo must have appealed to Art Nouveau artists and certainly gave rise to new and imaginative form combinations in the exhibition itself. However, as seen in the cases of Horta and Hankar, outside of colonial commissions, these were absorbed into a broad lexicon of organic language. Art Nouveau abstractions entailed that all manner of mutations of vegetal form were drawn together and distilled, as a means of capturing the regenerative power of nature.

Outside of elusive African nature-forms, the relationship between the particular Art Nouveau whiplash line in Belgium and the punitive *chicotte* of the colony is similarly difficult to substantiate. Silverman points to van de Velde's retrospective thoughts on the Art Nouveau movement, in which he states that his work, alongside that of Horta and Serrurier-Bovy, revitalized art at the time, in the manner of a mighty whiplash biting into the skin of an indolent public (van de Velde in Silverman, 2011: 34). While such tantalizing statements lead to all manner of conjecture, they were not elaborated on in any othknown texts.[86] In a well-documented style such as Art Nouveau, with outspoken practitioners whose thoughts were publicized extensively in books, periodicals and exhibition catalogues, it is unlikely that a major influence on the foundational line would have gone unmentioned. Moreover, given the proximity of colonial propaganda to Art Nouveau circles in Brussels, it is remarkable that so little reference is made to the intriguing land from which the raw materials for the art emerged.

Regarding the question whether patterning from Congolese body art made its way into van de Velde's work, there is, similarly, no definite answer. In the course of his lengthy writing career, Silverman

86. The quote appears to be one of van de Velde's numerous passionate turns of phrase, whose drama relies on an undertow of aggressive action. His retrospective provides no corresponding enthusiasm for King Leopold II's colonial regime (van de Velde 1992: 249).

locates two texts in which van de Velde deals with scarification. In the first, the Belgian designer compares tattooing to ornamentation (van de Velde in Silverman, 2012: 185). The second text jubilantly describes an imagined scene of a "savage" succumbing to vital urges and decorating the body of his baby child with a sharp knife (van de Velde in Silverman, 2012: 183). While permanent markings or scarification may, indeed, have provided van de Velde with the line in its primordial form, his fascination with the exotic other remained general. Congolese imagery, both natural and man-made, was purposefully submerged with a myriad of other sources (see van de Velde 1895, 1955, 1900, 1910). Van de Velde firmly believed that "The line should not represent, it should be about movement; the rustling of the banners that were carried, trumpets blaring, clinging armor, incense, dark churches" (van de Velde, 1910: 62).

Silverman's attempt to drive the story of the Congo Free State into Art Nouveau forms forces one particular historical context onto these works, without allowing them to describe, in and of themselves, what they are saying about the Congo. In so doing, Silverman can only relate the phenomenon of Art Nouveau to events in the same "slice of time" (Felski, 2011: 258). This refuses to see the style within a wider network of artistic language and mutual influence. Attempting to trace only figurative reference and explicit sources in these works ignores the full force of an abstraction that playfully resists direct quotation, for the purposes of greater atmospheric effect. This refined design language celebrates nature by relying on suggestion, distorting organic forms that look similar, or have an analogous sense of movement or growth, to those found in the living world. In warping, blowing up and extracting details from plants, animals and natural forces, van de Velde and his peers rendered them strange. Taking pleasure from these otherworldly qualities, they sought to animate nature's incomprehensibility. When Art Nouveau form is applied to representing the Congo, Congolese culture becomes part of this unknowable nature and is celebrated as such. It is the subtle sophistry of this abstraction that is far more dangerous than any mimetic or symbolic function. Because they are celebrations of form, the primitivist glee of the total artworks, like that of the *Palais des Colonies* and the *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*, immerses the viewer in highly problematic racist undertones.

In the confluence of multiple influence, resistance and experimentation that led to Art Nouveau, it is extremely difficult to tie any one abstracted form to a particular content. In environments wherein all

sources are smoothed into the greater whole, the overwhelming effect is immersive. Abstract form, in its quest for the essential, lends itself to interpretative speculation and may be employed in many services. Moreover, if an art form is taken up by or associated with a regime subsequently deemed questionable — as evidenced in Adolf Hitler's love of Richard Wagner's works, or Futurist artist Fillipo Marrinetti's declaration of support for fascism — it is read differently, according to the prevailing morality of the time (Adorno 1952).[87] In the case of Art Nouveau in Belgium, the fact that studies like Silverman's are beginning to appear, raising necessary provocations, suggests that there is an urgent need to reassess the influential movement.

Art Nouveau from the Outside

This chapter has explored the links between the foundational Art Nouveau moment and early colonialism in the Congo. The intention is not to tether it irrevocably to the short period of the now-iconic violence enacted by King Leopold II's regime. This would provide a one-sided appreciation of the style, with moral outrage inscribing horrific rubber atrocities onto the now-popularized Belgian Art Nouveau. Reading Art Nouveau abstraction rather against a broader picture of extractivism, reaching into other contexts and temporalities outside of the CFS, opens up a deep reckoning with how Congolese materials were obtained and then used within new kinds of designed space. Accordingly, the implications of total space and ornament-as-structure can be addressed as a primitivist urge.

Unpacking the manner in which the Congo is represented by Art Nouveau reveals how a repeated pattern of aesthetic logic can be complicit in embodying uneven power structures and imperial ideologies. At the same time, looking at the manner in which seductive aesthetics were employed as colonial propaganda provides some insight into how an extreme form of exploitation was able to take place, further illuminating how the Belgian colonial project continued into the 20th century, aided and abetted by modernist design strategies. Art Nouveau interiors were able to erupt in exuberant and surprising aesthetics, with extracted Congolese goods in tow and the spectre of violence in the colony in plain sight. Their success serves to highlight how dislocated actual occurrences in the colony were from daily life in Belgium. In itself a style of separation through ornamental annexation, Art Nouveau

87. As espoused by Wassily Kandinsky, the pioneering painter of abstraction, who compared it to certain kinds of music (Finger and Follett, 2011: 120).

works, even outside of colonial commissions, openly declare allegiance to Euro-centric hierarchies, without explicitly telling a particular story.

The movement's ability to build autonomous, artificial worlds bears some affinity to the colonial narrative of the CFS. The late 19th century primitivist mindset that led to curvilinear ornamentation and organic wholes provides a subtle complement to King Leopold II's exploitative scheme. Moreover, the compelling nature of these utopias and their deft manipulation of every aspect of form, drawing together Congolese materials into futuristic imaginings, also speak to the seductions of colonialism. Ethereal otherworldly aesthetics were designed to drown out unpleasant news from outside, rumours of systematic violence and commerce-related atrocities from the distant colony notwithstanding. Art Nouveau's focus on internalized individualism was, ultimately, geared towards cocooning its capitalist entrepreneurs in strange new beauty (whose underlying unsettling qualities were a testament to their self-proclaimed progressiveness and daring).

Encounters with Africa — which for Belgium were, in fact, encounters with the CFS — relied on immersion, at the risk of drowning the viewer with an overload of sensory information and stage-managed aesthetics. Horta's floating, light filled colonial spaces, whether actualized in *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* or refused, as with his proposal for the Paris *Exposition Universelle* (1900), remained inaccessible islands of luxury, as impossible to breach as they were impregnable to common people.[88] When thrown open to the public, the *Palais des Colonies* revealed itself to be divided into segments. As each hall presented its own total vision of the Congo, with its particular version of the Belgian line, they jostled for attention with one another. As vying lines agitated the space, tables overflowed with specimens and products overpowered. There was no unified 'Congo Style' in the midst of the Tervuren fairground.

As the two surging mythologies of the CFS and Art Nouveau came together to underwrite the total artworks of the *Palais des Colonies* and *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*, their mutual experimentation briefly

88. Today, Hôtel Van Eetvelde belongs to a private company that seldom admits visitors. Staff are not allowed to bring any photographic equipment inside. While parts of the house retain their original furniture, the space is far sparser than in the fantastical light-filled home featured in photographs from the Art Nouveau period.

served to enable the other. When they separated, both splintering into factions and dogged by their respective inconsistencies and internal discord, Art Nouveau's offshoots attempted to distance themselves from the legacy of violent exploitation that overshadowed the CFS. Yet, despite shedding associations with the colonial regime, Art Nouveau's formal language retained its underlying primitivist principles. Museum space that followed from the *Palais des Colonies* would carry with it the underpinnings of the total artwork, as well as build on its manner of dealing with exhibits. Similarly, the myriad offshoots of modernist architecture that have some roots in the Belgium movement bear a legacy of exclusion and opacity concerning the origin of materials. Being able to recognize these patterns stems from the process of attempting to locate the early colony in *Style Congo*. Re-linking Art Nouveau to the context of Leopold II's Congo allows it to connect to its numerous other spheres, mutations and situations, putting the otherworldly style back in the world.

Chapter Three - Objects and their Agencies: Congolese Artifacts as Exhibition Organisms



Figure 3.1: Installation image *African Negro Art* (1935), Museum of Modern Art, New York

Objects and their Agencies: Congolese Artifacts as Exhibition Organisms

At the *Palais des Colonies* of 1897, the material culture of the colonized Congolese subject was absorbed into an Art Nouveau Gesamtkunstwerk. The movement, based on primitivist principles and projecting a luxurious allure, self-consciously ushered in a vision for the modern world, coupling itself to the possessions of King Leopold II's colony as it went. With its approach, the exhibition sowed the seed for 20th century exhibition strategies for non-western objects. Cross-cultural displays with aspirations to high art in the *Salon d'Honneur* foretell aesthetic admiration based on assumptions of racial superiority in the Euro-American fascination with sub-Saharan African objects. This was to reach into the privileged space of art museums and private collections in the 20th century. At the same time, the *Salle d'Ethnographie* made tentative claims to the science of natural history museums. Here, Congolese material culture was not the subject of rarefied contemplation, but employed metonymically to describe a European fiction of the supposedly primitive lives of the people that made them. Crucially, it is within Paul Hankar's more overtly informative ethnographic room that exhibition infrastructure takes on the appearance of its Congolese exhibits, with selected motifs and forms adding the effect of its "barbarous" whole (Maus and Soulier, 1897: 90). The express pedagogical underpinnings of the overall pavilion — in the principles of good design as much as knowledge claims concerning Africa — thus demonstrated the ability of decontextualized Congolese objects exuding influence on their surroundings.

Hankar's immersive halls brought all the manipulative trappings of the commercial sensorium into the colonial fair, yet without the accompanying lure of being able to handle the merchandise. The viewer was forced into riotous visual immersion, with the promised "experience" of the colony rationalized into image and text. Not only were Congolese voices silenced but so, too, were the smell, feel, taste and sound of their original context. The visitor was led through a series of visual prompts into thinking about the displays as something both other and ownable. The process of displaying African objects thus rid them of what would have been considered their more brutish qualities, their particular smell or feel.[1] At play in this Art Nouveau Gesamtkunstwerk is the panopticon of control through visuality, combined

1. From the time of Pliny and Aristotle, the sense of sight has been privileged above the more base senses of taste, touch, hearing and smell (Stewart, 2005: 62).

with the force of visual immersion. Unusual and titillatingly foreign forms were thus presented as pouring forth from the direction of dynamic Art Nouveau lines. Nevertheless, in the process of selling the Congo by way of the eye, distinctive aspects of its forms became entangled with proto-modernist design. Taking this as a starting point, or even as a "contact point" made visible,[2] Hankar's display provides a useful way of talking about objects which we, in fact, do not and will never know very much about.[3]

As the 20th century progressed, and the Art Nouveau embrace of Congolese material culture morphed into the slick lines and sanitizing vitrines of modernist museum displays, we should not assume that the reverberations of the African object, made visible by Hankar, are no longer present because they are not immediately apparent. Within the world-making of exhibitions — in themselves deeply indebted to Art Nouveau experiments in visual enthrallment — exhibits retain the qualities of their objecthood. That is to say, while exhibition design and curation changes, the objects' material make-up remains the same (even if their affixed meanings do not). Moreover, the imperial knowledge claims that framed museum objects was never able to cover all aspects of the culture described, thereby weakening its power. As objects are separated from the messy business of everyday life, in order to enter institutional display, they may become a means through which to consider the underlying ideologies of their display systems. Even at early stages of exhibition technology — where the object is subject to having things done to it — exhibits have a degree of influence on the terms of their containment.

Following this line of thought, modernist display can be read not only as a one-sided system of entrapment, but something that developed collectively and in dialogue with other cultures over hundreds of years (albeit according to uneven power relations and from a Euro-centric positionality). Even if we do not see the visible repetitions of Congolese motifs in modernist display outside of reflections in glass vitrines, the influence of the African exhibit is ubiquitous. As this chapter follows

2. Jeffrey Feldman (2006: 255) puts forward the idea that the museum object be seen as a contact point through which to reinstall the lost body into the museum space. This entails considering what the body means and does for the object and imagining how one's own body relates to an exhibit.

3. The exact nature of the origins and use within Congolese society of the objects on display at the *Palais des Colonies* (1897) is unclear (see Chapter 2). While later 20th century anthropological research has uncovered information from local people from which some theories concerning older artifacts may be extrapolated, we may never know for certain the precise circumstances of their origin, not least of which being the names and motivations of the people that made them and their reception within local societies (Biebuyck, 1985: 3; Vogel, 1989: 13).

the Congolese object-as-public-exhibit from colonial Art Nouveau display into the modernist art gallery, it may be seen to display a notable resilience and tenacity within display mechanisms which were incubated with the express intent of exhibiting them.

In the pages that follow, the idea of Congolese objects as actants will be explored. That is, in re-looking at well known encounters between African objects and museal design (keeping the Art Nouveau lessons on total space in mind), the objects under discussion will be seen as part of larger social and discursive networks.[4] The argument will be that rather than being entirely subject to human agency, Congolese exhibition objects have particular vital qualities that imbue them with a degree of influential and mobile autonomy, specifically within the sphere of art. While this line of thinking takes object-centric (as opposed to anthropocentric) ontologies into account, the primary concern is to find ways of re-introducing the potential agency of the missing Congolese craftsman into how we read their creations. Disenfranchised at the point of their objects entering the museum, the original makers of exhibits are silenced, as are their intentions. Accordingly, both the material and relational qualities of the object serve as entry points into trying to understand them. The anonymity of their makers puts pressure on their sociability, forcing them to "speak" for themselves.[5]

As a way of delineating this object-orientated approach, this chapter begins with a brief contextualizing overview of the museums that sprang up to house ethnographic objects. It then introduces the terms under which these exhibits entered the 20th century art museum. This sketch of the broad social and political life of the African exhibit follows Arjun Appadurai's (1986 5) idea that "It is the things themselves in motion that illuminate their human and social context," with their forms providing their trajectory. In this spirit, the process through which Congolese objects were gathered in the early years of the 20th century is explicated in terms of its collective and effective nature. Focusing on the process of exchange found at the root of key exhibition objects sees them as agentic, working in a similar manner to contemporary artworks that are aware of their own intentionality and context. In this way,

4. These ideas stem from Latour's (2005) actor-network theory, an ecology of human and nonhuman elements.
5. The object's specific social history, its material relationship to its surroundings across a span of existence (not confined to the moment of being inside a vitrine, plinth or storage room), becomes of as much importance as its cultural biography (a record of ownership and institutional affiliation as well as the influence it might have had on the creation of further artworks).

the agency of the Congolese exhibit involves not just a full trajectory, or mere motion, but "willed or intended directionality" (Bennett, 2009: 31). When Congolese objects become entangled with Zaïrian nationalism, as they and their exhibitions move into the second half of the 20th century, they are accorded a degree of self determinism in the analyses that follow.

From this contextualizing outline, the chapter turns to look deeply at specific objects within iconic exhibition situations. Each gallery enclosure is broached by viewing both display items and exhibition as parts of the same organism. At the same time as considering the notion of whole objects as potential exhibitions, the idea of exhibitions as whole objects is applied. This precedent is seen to be set by Henry van de Velde in his foundational Art Nouveau museum, the Folkwang (1904). An analysis of the *African Negro Art* exhibition at Folkwang's most famous offshoot, the Museum for Modern Art (MOMA), in New York in 1935 then sees the Congolese object as a vital organ in a foundational point of the institution's making. Because of the importance of African objects to the Negritude movement, the logics of how they are used by Surrealist disruptions in Paris in the 1930s follows. The next situation turns from Euro-America to look at the Congolese object in Leopoldville's Musée de la Vie Indigène, in what was then the Belgian Congo. With the idea of agentic objects being paramount, Zaïrian self-representation is then brought into focus, with an exhibition of Congolese art that travelled the United States, *Art from Zaïre* (1975). Finally, the idea of the museum exhibit as an independent object is explored from its position as prize exhibit in 1976 at the *Foire Internationale de Kinshasa* (FIKIN) in post-independence Zaïre. In this final glimpse of objects that maintain a particular reticence in a web of independence era tensions, key conclusions regarding the origins of their lively social lives may be drawn.

Containers for African Artifacts: Collections Give Rise to Ethnographic Museums

Art Nouveau's fleeting extravaganzas ornately capped the 19th century museum era, providing total design solutions that were to have long-lasting effects on the objectification of culture for viewing purposes. Underwritten by Darwinian fervour,[6] the 19th century urge to categorize the known world led to museums springing up (or fortifying themselves) across Euro-America. As art history — the

6. Darwin's *On the Origins of the Species* (1859) provided an intellectual context for the already existing zeal for collecting, in that multiple examples were required to determine the distinguishing characteristics of a species (Schildkrout, 1989: 153).

story of European art — solidified into the established canon still largely in place today, the layout of art museums illustrated its hierarchical structure. Creative development was judged according to nationality, with separate styles interpreted as starting at rudimentary levels and evolving to a celebrated high point (from which it could only decline). Iconic institutions, such as the Louvre in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the British Museum in London,[7] not only supported these ideological frameworks, but also served as iconic symbols for modernity in democratic states, the zenith of their respective national cultures.

A burning acquisitiveness for colonial possessions led to a huge demand in the metropole for the material culture of subject peoples. This led not only to the ephemeral titillations of colonial exhibitions, but also to the advent of august ethnographic museums. The American Museum of Natural History in New York (1869), the British Museum in South Kensington (1871) and the Musée du Trocadéro in Paris (1878) were all inaugurated within the same decade. The buildings that housed these museums were built in neo-classical style that, by referring back to classical antiquity and its connotations of rationality, offered an acceptable language for governments and civic institutions (Bennett, 1988: 78; Vogel, 1989: 12). In turn, illustrating anthropology's systematic and scientific ordering of other cultures, museal edifice embodied an authoritative presence for ambitious cities.[8] Their power and public appeal relied on the presence of foreign objects, around which stone and concrete fortifications, in themselves embedded with European knowledge claims, congealed. The museum experience was thus brought into existence as container for things outside of (or unseen within) daily city life. Its emergence marks the point where the museal exhibit and its enclosure become part of the same package, with architectural scaffolding relying on its core collections for its livelihood. In the process, houses for othered objects are shaped to privilege rational visuality, correspondingly affecting the lives of its object inhabitants within.[9] Fierce competition between national institutions and private collectors to obtain the best authentic pieces spurred on collecting activities in central

7. While the Metropolitan Museum of Art was established in the late 19th century (1870), the British Museum (1753) and the Louvre (1793) were founded far earlier.

8. Ethnographic categorizing systems set up tribes as impossibly rigid organic entities, ignoring centuries of intercultural exchange and political fluctuations within communities, in favour of convenient categorization of the objects of colonial subjects (see Chapter 2).

9. Becoming an exhibit usually involves being cleaned, fumigated and sometimes dismembered. When the appearance of an object is treated as its most important aspect, only parts of it may make it into the museum vitrine, with little concern for its accompanying apparatus (Ogbechie, 2011: 60; Vogel, 1989: 12).

and sub-Saharan Africa in the early years of the 20th century. The "*Petit Belge*", or little Belgium, always aspiring to Parisian cultural norms,[10] followed suit. With the advantage of decades of control over the Congo, it attempted to match its prominent neighbours' Africa halls, with an entire museum dedicated to its objects. With the colony under scrutiny in Belgium and King Leopold II's stewardship in question, performing ownership of the Congolese object, as well as demonstrating its use to the nation, had become crucial. The exhibits of the 1897 *Palais des Colonies* exhibition were officially consolidated into a permanent Musée du Congo in 1898. Its requisite Neoclassical design, complete with stabilizing pillars and central stone rotunda, was directly based on Paris' *Petit Palais* (1900).[11]

At the same time as the museum served as an authoritative anchor for colonial activity, it was made with an existing conglomeration of Congolese possessions in mind. Vaulted, marble-lined halls, with aspirations to French grandeur, were intended to cultivate the collection as it grew, propagating narratives of control, tailored around those kinds of artifacts that had been acquired and anticipating more of the same ilk. Over the years, as African objects gained prominence in art galleries, they would catalyse various changes to the halls of the Musée du Congo in aid of a more modern public experience of them (van Beurden, 2015; Couttenier, 2005).[12]

Merging with museum space saw the Congolese object losing much of its initial story, including the precise identity and intentions of its maker, to the general categorizations of its new home. As the "provenance and producers" of the museum exhibits were lost, so too were their accompanying histories of the destruction of Congolese communities (Silverman, 2015: 23). With the intentionality of the original creators of Congolese objects on display being obscure and one that carried the heavy burden of the human tragedy that was the Belgian colonial mission, there remained an opportunity to view the highly sociable Congolese object in terms of the different environments its inhabits.[13] While this approach does not intend to ignore the original social function of the object — what we are able to

10. This term was commonly used in reference to the smaller and younger Belgium having to live up to larger and more powerful European cultural powerhouses.
11. Charles Girault's squat edifice was styled on his earlier *Petit Palais*, made for the Paris World's Fair of 1900, at the request of King Leopold II.
12. Van Beurden (2015) details how the aesthetic method of hanging up artworks in art galleries infiltrated more cluttered ethnographic display logics.
13. This would reverse Price's (1989: 69) critique of early 20th century collectors who took pleasure in not knowing an artist's name. According to Price , once the name is found, the objects ceases to be primitive.

speculate about, or can extrapolate from the thing in itself concerning its utility — it seeks to insert the mechanisms of specific experiential display technologies back into the conversation. The behaviour of each exhibit within its museum environment is not necessarily as fixed or rigidly preconditioned as the exhibitions themselves would have us believe.[14]

If these objects are seen as the vital organs of their display systems, sometimes even as singularities, the exhibition need not necessarily be the end point of their long and often colourful social lives that stretch from the time of their creation to the time spent in transit and storage. Across their life-spans, the pieces in question may be seen to agitate the terms of their containment, eluding grand narratives of colonial ideology and their accompanying possession claims. As objects with particular aesthetic appeal, they gather momentum in the fictions of colonial display, pushing against its strictures to acquire prestige as prize showpieces and modern objects of desire.

Refusing Ethnography: Artifacts Move into Masterpiece Status

When the supposedly primitive object sparked daring new experiments in modernist art in the early years of the 20th century, it was already emplaced within its ethnographic enclosure. Exhibits named as tribal wore their layers of interpretation sufficiently well to make contact with the mechanism with which they would shift the terms of its display: the objectifying eye of modern art. In the now apocryphal encounter between Picasso and the exotic objects of Paris' Musée de Trocadéro, they represented that museum.[15] Picasso's epiphany, heightened from spending time with what he deemed to be powerful superstitious objects, was a reaction to already loaded museum pieces (Flam and Deutsch, 2003: 4). While the objects in question were not the relics of savage rites of the artist's imagination, they presented a convergence of the long history of Africa and colonial activity. Accordingly, they bore witness to a different kind of violence than that of primitivist fantasy.

As muse for modernist genius, the formal qualities of ethnographic objects, particularly of free-

14. Museums are not static and, over time and with changing theoretical frameworks, experiment and develop new experiential display strategies.

15. Picasso's experience in 1906 is usually cited as the first important influence of African art on modernist form. The issue is a contested one, as similar claims can be made for André Derain, Maurice Vlaminck and Henri Matisse. For studies that locate non-western influence even further back in time , see van Damme and Corbey (2015).

standing humanoid sculptures and masks, proceeded to reverberate across waves of painterly and sculptural reference. From Cubism and Fauvism to German Expressionism, it was the imagined savage expression found in the plastic qualities of tribal artworks that paved the way for African artifacts to be elevated to the status of art.[16] By the mid-20th century, the optimal viewing conditions for modernist works (primarily paintings) was deemed to be the pared down forms of minimal display space, the quintessential modernist white cube. Coined by Brian O'Doherty (1976: 13), the term "white cube" refers to the pretence of neutrality in art galleries and, by implication, to the white, undecorated walls, artificial light and minimalist environment of 20th century gallery exhibition spaces.[17] With primitivist artworks already laced with elements of African objects, the things themselves soon followed suit. The oddities and ethnographic finds of earlier eras had been recast as features of modern art (Vogel, 1989: 12).[18] As the modernist fable of artistic genius gained currency, so too did the mythic power of the African object, in particular the well-travelled Congolese object.

A particular kind of African sculptural object thus engendered an influential position within the hermeneutic confinement of the white cube. These anonymous African muses are humanoid sculptures and masks, labelled as tribal. Usually free-standing and carved in wood, their myriad versions of abstracted human forms gave rise to the distortions of modernist aesthetics. At the same time as making reference to human bodies, this category of artwork may be seen to embody a particular kind of body knowledge. Whether it be a chief's sceptre, musical instrument or statuette, the objects under discussion have a formed relationship to the body, suggestive of how they were meant to be held and handled. Their strong visual appeal could be due to their being highly suggestive of a sensory experience.[19] As such, they are performance objects, not necessarily performed in the literal sense of ethnographic ritual, but with the logic of the object itself serving as its function. Their materiality is thus very close to their meaning.

16. It is from this point onwards that the term "primitivism" becomes associated with the art of supposedly tribal people, as opposed to its late 19th century implications (see Chapter 1).
17. Because the foundations of the display system were laid out in Alfred J. Barr's exhibitions at MOMA in the 1930s, I apply the term "white cube" to also refer to 20th century displays in art museums.
18. Ethnographic collecting and its attendant displays had never been devoid of aesthetic appreciation, taking on more of this trop once art galleries laid claim to artifacts as precious artworks (van Beurden 2015).
19. That which is seen can be highly evocative of texture, smell and taste (Classen and Howes, 2006: 203).

The Subtle Art of African Agency in Early 20th Century Collecting

Aesthetic appeal was a driving force of collecting in the time under discussion, with visually striking pieces being sought after (Fabian, 2000: 194; Keim and Schildkrout, 1998: 11). Numerous accounts detail outstanding examples of workmanship, especially in the case of supposedly aristocratic Congolese peoples like the Kuba, Luba and Mangbetu.[20] When referring to the latter, collector Georg Schweinfurth expressly uses the word "masterpiece" (Keim, 1998: 11).[21]

Recognition of aesthetically pleasing qualities and placing certain ones over others cannot only be attributed to the taste of now well-known Euro-American collectors.[22] Especially during the "scramble for African art"[23] from approximately 1900 to 1915, various Congolese middlemen, dealers, makers and community leaders who supplied collectors with objects played an essential role in the exchange. Those Africans involved in the gathering process could be canny tradesmen, imminently capable of manipulating the market. While this was a limited agency within the harsh terms of colonial occupation, African actors made conscious decisions concerning what to give, sell or make for collectors, based on their perceptions of foreign travellers' interests (Keim and Schildkrout, 1998: 4–6). In societies whose material culture was deemed to be spectacular, leaders respected by collectors propagated mythologies of them being powerful African kingdoms, for the purposes of European consumption (Miller, 1991: 62). Knowing that their objects would be going to a renowned European museum, they would have overseen the process of collecting carefully, in order to establish an identity of power within an important imperial centre (Fabian, 1998: 95).

With the above information in mind, it becomes evident that, even in their earliest incarnations, so-

20. Explorers saw the Luba and Kuba as superior societies because their objects, notably carved portraits, included naturalistic imagery. Recognizable mimesis of the natural world, particularly human subjects, was considered a marker of civilized culture. In addition, these societies' centralized systems of government were interpreted as imperial kingdoms, comparable to European feudalism and therefore more relatable.

21. The richly decorated symmetries in Mangbetu arts and pleasing music led Schweinfurth to declare the Mangbetu the most evolved of all African peoples, interpreting sophisticated arts to signal a more advanced society (Keim and Schildkrout, 1998, p. 21).

22. Collectors in the Congo whose personal taste affected museum collections include Leo Frobenius (Berlin Museum), Emile Torday (London's British Museum), Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza (Musée de Trocadéro, Paris) and Frederick Starr (American Museum of Natural History, New York).

23. Keim and Schildkrout (1998: 23) use this term to refer to the a frenzy of collecting that took place after King Leopold II ceded the CFS to Belgium, with an estimated 100,000 objects being relocated to collections in Euro-America.

called ritual objects functioned as fully-fledged artworks. This definition lies in the autonomy of artworks, whereby their status does not require the context of an art gallery to bestow them with authenticity. Rather, their embedded will to please or their special distinctiveness is "the very reason that connections are forged and sustained." In order to survive and not fade from view, they need to make friends, incite attachments and latch onto receptive hosts (Felski, 2011: 584). In the case of objects sold under the conditions of the scramble for African art, those human agents making deals worked with the appealing artworks, as much as their makers, to ensure their sociability.

Local Congolese actors helped in shaping ensuing museum collections, with clear choices being made concerning which objects to part with, which were signed and which were created especially for the collector. The latter were considered to be 'fakes' by those taking possession of them, because of the firm belief that the authentic African object, particularly free-standing figurative sculptures and masks, had to have been part of ritual use. Thus, if a sculpture was made to look as if it had aged or been used, or if an artist had copied the style of another tribe, it was assumed that the intention was to deceive. In reality, the artist may well have seen his role as supplying the product demanded, according to his/her understanding of the taste of the collector (Kasfir, 1999: 95).[24]

Moreover, the handing over of objects initiated an important exchange for the production of new things. The response of Congolese makers can be read as an eagerness to adapt and be influenced by contact with previously unknown people. This is evident in a web of mutual borrowings and influences that stretched across the continent which was by no means ever limited to generating suitable commodities for the Euro-American collection (Vansina, 1984: 159).[25] With this in mind, the objects themselves can be viewed as bearing the results of a point of encounter and exchange, rather than something dislocated and estranged within the modernist frame.

Objects that have been produced, or altered, according to the perceived needs of collectors are numerous and make up a large portion of the population of private and public collections. Enid

24. According to most researchers in the field, most Congolese people did not distinguish between artworks and the applied arts (Vansina, 1984: 2; Vogel, 1989: 13)

25. Many traders were responsible for the erasure of artists' names, despite certain individual creators being not only known but famous across extensive regions (Gramly, 1988: 35).

Schildkrout finds a large portion of the centrepiece Congo collection at New York's Natural History Museum to reveal a shift in production to cater to foreign buyers, especially the substantial amount of "visually spectacular" masks and sculptures brought in by Frederick Starr in 1910 (Gramly, 1988: 156). While Starr's documentation of collecting activities in central Africa was sparse, various other reports of wrangling, negotiations and bartering suggest a great deal of business agility on the part of African dealers and makers. Diary entries by Leo Frobenius and Ludwig Wolf, for example, are filled with deep suspicions of being duped (Fabian, 2000: 187–197). The objects in question need not be viewed as scarred by fakery, but rather as bearing the surface markings of contact between dealer and collector. Accordingly, they represent a convergence of two strands of history, doubling their cultural function. Alfred Gell (1998: 8) writes that, in cases where an object has quite clearly been produced for the metropolitan market, it should be dealt with as a "social agent" within this institutional framework. Taking such an argument into account, the art museum exhibit, labelled as authentic, need not be seen as a dishonest tool in a money-making hoax. As the material residue of difficult and highly uneven intercultural exchange — whose intensely interesting visuality was sparked by this very tension — it is the label and adjacent system of categorization that is false, not the objects themselves.

Many of the inconsistencies of the museum label have begun to be exposed. Various researchers have outlined that the majority of objects that are currently in Euro-American museums and that were collected in the colonial period (circa 1880 to 1960) are incorrectly used to represent pre-colonial activity (Picton in Ogbechie, 2011: 209). This study attempts to probe the extent to which the entire package, both label and architecture, grapple with objects that, more often than not, were created for the purposes of museum display. In order to do so, their making needs to be understood as a collective one, involving multiple parties, local and foreign, that aided in the construction of the object's meaning. It is in the resulting self-awareness that the contemporary quality of these exhibits lies, allowing them to converse eloquently with other modern artworks. The African objects' ongoing social life with its Euro-American counterparts, no less intense for its subdued nature, may well have remained unnoticed had modern art not undergone seismic shifts in the later 20th century, developing into an engagement with the objecthood of artworks.

The Restless Congolese Object Adapts to the 1960s

Broadly speaking, 19th century preoccupation with culture as a single evolutionary process, believed to be the outcome of a long development, gave way to a new ethnographic conception of culture) by the mid-20th century. Now anthropology began to recognise the anthropological subject as autonomous (Clifford, 1988: 92–93).[26] At the same time, the concept of what art could be expanded capaciously, with the 1960s ushering in various experiments in distilling objects within art environments and probing their relationship to the everyday.[27] Shifts in art attitudes occurred as civil rights movements across the world agitated for political change, with a string of the former African colonies gaining independence in the early 1960s. While the white cube maintained its facade of neutral stasis, its objects — especially those made in Africa — were the source of deep tensions and forces of change.

W.J.T. Mitchell (2005: 149), who considers the proposition that all western art displays are a form of colonialism,[28] creates a direct link between the end of imperialism and the dematerialization of the art object. Generally understood as parallel events, these two processes were deeply implicated with one another.[29] If the emplaced Congolese object is seen as part of the world-making of exhibitions, rather than a representation that has been manipulated to mirror something from lived experience, it can exist as a living sign, a "second nature that human beings have created around themselves" (Mitchell, 2005: 32). With the kind of object under discussion posed as a subaltern one, whose desire (and resulting appeal to the viewer) is powerful because of its impotence, the intention with this exercise is not only to work out what Congolese objects might want, but also attempt to locate what it is about these objects that led a certain kind of environment to develop around them.

Given that western art history entertains the story of modernism as an evolving march of progress, the arrival of African objects has classically been understood according to their influence on grand masters like Picasso and Matisse. Part of the artists' assumed genius is their enlightening vision, seen

26. Further developments in anthropology have encouraged the anthropologist to see him/herself as part of his/her own specific cultural grouping (Clifford, 1988: 92).
27. For example, the advent of self-aware conceptualism in the United States saw movements such as minimalism exploring the anthropomorphism of objects and forms.
28. Certain objects are deemed worthy of being art, at the expense of lesser things (Mitchell, 2005: 149).
29. Knowledge of the autonomy of objects in exhibitions, in late 20th century contemporary art, is thus a useful ally when attempting to insert the potential agency of African objects into these spaces.

as liberating the African object and changing its museum status, thereby imbuing it with a new aura of dignity and authority. However, such readings ignore that artistic conditions were already in place for the shift to occur, with avant-garde experimentation revealing an increasing awareness of the artwork as object.[30]

Importantly, such assumptions regarding the power of the art gallery and its "grand masters" seeped into black consciousness. Most prominently, Léopold Senghor outrightly claimed Picasso's "Africanist" sensibilities as a victory for the nationalist Negritude movement (Senghor in Ebong, 1991: 132). Nevertheless, no matter how much of "Africa" was inserted into modern art by the likes of Picasso, the terms were uneven. The danger of attributing all the inventiveness and audacity in this transaction to the white, male artist — which is not to say that this should automatically be denied — can blind the viewer to the qualities of the objects themselves. The analysis that follows therefore attempts to avoid the tendency to look through objects in order to read them as facts or symbols, rather than at them (Brown, 2001: 4). Although the modernist gaze changed focus from objects as specimen, or data for research, to formal, visually-orientated consumption, this did not necessarily halt the process of looking through them. In the case of primitivist painters, African objects were used for avant-garde opportunism, a prop for infamously inward-looking artistic theories and needs.

While avant-garde recognition of so-called tribal objects allowed them all the conditions worthy of the title "masterpiece," this honour was seldom conferred back to the people from which they originated. While MOMA director William Rubin (2003: 323) locates content in plastic form and attributes artistry to "the work of genius," he assumes that the original makers had no understanding of their own aesthetic sophistication. In this situation, the honour conferred onto objects via their elevation into artworks was not extended to disenfranchised African people (McEvilley, 1989: 202). Within the enclosure of the art museum, with vague geographic regions or tribal origin given in lieu of an individual artist, an extreme objectification of the exhibit occurs. When their original makers are completely shut out of the art system, the ultimate act of modernist cleansing may be seen to take place,

30. This may be historically mapped from Édouard Manet's thickened painterly surfaces, with paintings visibly made of paint, as opposed to trompe l'oeil windows into imaginary worlds. The dematerialized painted subject was thus described by dabs of light and colour by the Impressionists, moving into basic entities of form with Cezanne and colour theory in the case of Seurat. Picasso's experimentation with abstraction built on such traditions, leading into 20th century modernism.

whereby the object is separated from its original cultures and the physical bodies of those that made them (Gikandi, 2007: 33).

In the official shift from artifact to artwork, bodies fall away to anthropomorphize the artwork itself. The logic of the objecthood of modern artwork sees the object bestowed with some of the structure that human beings are supposed to philosophically possess (Danto, 1989: 29). Within the evolutionary structures of art systems, a certain vitalism has always been conferred onto the object that has managed to maintain a presence, carrying inherent collectible qualities that others did not. Value is not bestowed by the eye of the beholder — the member of the public to whom the exhibition caters — but to the thing that has managed to remain where others have not, in a Darwinian survival of the fittest object (Onians, 2006: 5). Without buying into the mythology of modernist artwork as being the pinnacle of culture, these African exhibits embody sufficient qualities to mobilize between different western display forums and set off a process of shuffling and questioning the labels and theories that bound them.

Moving into the realm of the "complete masterpiece" of the mid-20th century is not a feat granted to random mundane objects.[31] Moreover, the mysterious and elusive qualities of anonymous African objects make them highly appealing, according to a capitalist logic that invests value in objects "that resist our desire to possess them" (Appadurai, 1986: x). Accordingly, enigmatic objects do not have to serve as passive, dislocated witnesses to Rubin's narrative of affinities that locates similarities to western modernists in so-called primitive art. These are artworks with sufficient magnetism to absorb and reflect their own dynamic formal innovation as an embedded component of the modernist museum.

The theme of genius that runs strongly through the story of Congolese objects is, thus, not only one of European painters looking at "primitive" forms, but also that of the genius object, both exuding and gathering the source of its own cultural and sensorial value. Having the necessarily appealing qualities to be selected, bargained for and shipped to the West in the first place, these collectibles then

31. This is the case unless the object has knowingly been selected and placed as part of a self-aware conceptual project of the 20th century. The classic example to cite here is Marcel Duchamp's ubiquitous ready-made, whereby the object is art because the artist declares it as such. "Masterpiece" quality is awarded to the artist's ironic and knowing gesture rather than the plastic and conceptual qualities of the object as object. The objecthood is, in fact, removed, highlighting a listless lack of functionality to art once it is separated out from everyday life.

proceeded to acquire impressive biographies in their own right. Without having a comparative tradition of consolidated stylistic history, the social life of ownership comes to define the object. As works move into the realm of Western private collection, starting in the 17th century (when objects in the museum could still be touched), to modernist public display, cultural mystification is replaced with the prestige of respective environments and ranking of previous owners.[32] Such pedigrees work both ways, with objects becoming status symbols, sought after in order to increase the value of their new homes and emphasizing their aura of modernity. These are hardly surprising results of the life of any object awarded the status of artwork-as-investment, under the commercial logics of the art market. However, the particular mystique and cult around certain African objects, severed from their origins, gives rise to their occupying a special functionality within modernist display that binds the latter to it. As a result, modernist museum formats develop alongside their own artistic artifacts, to the point of being appealing to the new Congolese nation as prestige machines of African heritage myths.

At the time of African independence, Pan-Africanism and Negritude, previously colonized countries placed great stock in the museum aura of their "traditional" objects and called on them to legitimize the nation. Recently-formed nations such as Senegal and Ghana, for example, planned national museums as one of the requirements of modern nationhood.[33] Zaïre attempted to follow suit and based its plans for an Africanized museum culture on Euro-American models. Accordingly, it drew heavily on the Western construction of the Kuba as representatives of ancient Zairian culture, posing them as an equivalent to historic western canons (van Beurden, 2015).

There is a latent quality to any museum piece that can be awakened by the exhibition-makers' understanding of current thinking and trends (Danto, 1989: 18). With this in mind, the Congolese museum object may thus be seen to lend itself to nationalistic purposes. Embedded languages, codes and content of the original society were seldom known or deemed important. In the same manner as Neoclassical architecture was employed for its symbolic value (rather than with the objectives and motivations of the antique community in mind), sculptures, masks and utensils, reinstated as citizens of

32. Contextualizing labels in museums commonly reference the collection to which objects belong, rather than those that made them, as is evident in the exhibition *African Negro Art* (1935), discussed below.
33. Ghana's museum was opened in 1957, the year of its independence. When Senegal gained independence in 1960, co-option of the previously colonial museum was a priority.

new African states, traded on their mystical popularity in the art world. Compared to ancient artifacts of western cultures, separated from the present era by time, the uneasy permanent-contemporaneity of mobile African objects was a de-stabilizing force in 20th century museum categorization. Picasso — and even more so the Surrealists — were able to recognize this and use it to their advantage.

In the same way that the cultures from which the African objects originated were by no means static, the illusion of immobility in museum halls became openly disrupted in late modernist practice. The very catalysts for these changes were then recalled to Africa as official citizens, rendered an authoritative force by their travels through museum display. As revolutionary objects, called on in the overthrow of imperial regime as well as — and because of — modernism's aesthetic revolution, their new role as a binding and stabilizing force in national culture was always fated to be a difficult one.

By the time of the return of select works from the Belgian Africa museum (the Musée du Congo-Belge had been renamed the Royal Africa Museum of Tervuren) to independent Zaïre, these objects could not be viewed as merely passive receptacles of voyeuristic colonial, scientific, artistic or nationalistic desires. In the silencing of their original Congolese makers, they gained momentum as exhibition articles, moving through taut systems of representation to garner particular biographies and effective sensibilities, aesthetic and otherwise.[34] Their remarkable flexibility and ability to fulfil multiple roles (and the desire on the part of artists, curators and politicians for them to do so) suggests that they have a powerful stamina at their core. The resilient qualities they continue to exude within exhibitions on Congolese soil dissuade simplistic readings of objects that are the material result of a series of highly complex exchanges.

When viewing the Congolese museum object as an emplaced exhibit, it is therefore essential to keep the African museum in the frame, all the more so because a purely object-based approach, looking only to material qualities as an intrinsic part of exhibition structure, could potentially be used to justify the underlying imperial ideology of Euro-American museums. In the face of rising public criticism and reclamation demands, highlighting contested objects' sense of belonging within the development of

34. Sidney Kasfir (1999: 94) cautions that insistence on the anonymity of African art denies it individuality, yet we have come to accept it as part of the art's canonical character and authenticity.

modern exhibitions could provide convenient justification for the continuation of dubiously acquired collections.

Alongside assumptions of cultural guardianship, institutions that presume to have the only suitable apparatus to keep objects safe — physically as well as intellectually — could continue to claim that historic exhibits are a necessary organ in the make-up of their institutional beings and biographies.[35] However, the driving aim of the discussions that follow is to highlight the insufficiencies of existing display formats and their inability — from Tervuren and New York to Kinshasa — to ever fully capture these illusive objects. The confident ambivalence with which each object occupies its habitual exhibition territory is read here as an impetus for a fundamental shift in the manner in which museums use them to generate meaning. Accordingly, a deep reckoning with the structural relationship of Congolese objects in museum space, from the metropole to institutions formed around their sites of origin, credits them with the status of full objecthood, in their own right and not only as the victims of colonial plunder.

Examining the exhibition work these objects do further serves to move the conversation away from the potential danger of pandering to primitivist mythologies of a lost world of tribal purity that existed prior to colonial intervention. Such thinking allows for the hermeneutic time of institutional displays encase what are actually modern exhibits, in a substitute perpetuity that supports the fiction of ancient tribal purity. Rather, recognizing the objects as a gathering of irrepressible energies allows them to inform us about each unique display network they fuel. With this in mind, the worldliness of the seasoned African exhibit may be measured according to its ability to keep moving, intact, while its cumbersome and less flexible exhibition body follows with more difficulty. In order to understand the root of museum space rigidity, a brief sidestep to the first Art Nouveau museum illuminates many of the tensions that were to arise between the homogeneous exhibition space and its non-western objects.

35. Indigenous forms of cultural preservation can vary greatly, with certain cultures seeing the freezing of an object's life at a certain point in its natural process of decay as highly unnatural and even disrespectful (Edwards, Gosden and Phillips, 2006: 20) Moreover, if the museums in question were truly concerned with conservation issues for the sake of the greater good of world heritage, they would negotiate a return of stolen goods that included providing sufficient funding and support for suitable storage.

Pure Form in the Live Exhibition: Folkwang Museum (1902), Hagen, Germany

In any discussion about the history of the art museum, in terms of both its homogeneous aesthetics and non-western inhabitants, Henry van de Velde's Folkwang Museum in Hagen, Germany, may be located at its roots. Commissioned by Karl Ernst Osthaus and opened in 1902, van de Velde's museal Gesamtkunstwerk was made with the intention of showcasing the wealthy industrialist's exotic objects from the Near East and North Africa, alongside avant-garde works by the likes of Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Franz Marc (who can all, arguably, be seen as primitivists), ostensibly for the benefit of the local working class population. In order to explain the work on display to its more plebeian audience, van de Velde treated the museum's interior as an organic entity.[36] With each component within the whole playing a vital role, displays were designed in such a way as to anticipate the kind of object that would adorn it. Exhibits are given credit as a functioning organ within the display, through energetic architectural flourish.

In an interior that relied on animating the "living" materials of wood and stone, through sympathetic forms in bounded space, van de Velde's (1902b: 248) anthropomorphic tendencies come to the fore. Abstracted ornamentation comes unusually close to representational art. Crepuscular forms populating the stairwell could easily be mistaken for small sea creatures and the repeated relief forms at the meeting point of pillar and arch are not unlike human faces. These provide cues with which to approach the surrounding material as something organic, emphasizing that space has been formed through natural growth principles. The emotive, communicative qualities of expressive Art Nouveau form thus guide viewers in approaching the exhibits .

Within the very human proportions of the Folkwang halls, van de Velde's line-as-power theory is revealed as a form of animism, relying on lively invigoration of space through pulsating forms. Walls that "bend like people" were combined with evocative shapes to make every aspect of the built environment ascribe power to the object in and of itself, setting it up as living organism.[37] At the same time, the exhibition halls had house-like qualities (Jacobs, 2005: 195). A certain homeliness was

36. Van de Velde (1902b: 249) was called in to bring his Utopian vision to a half-made Neoclassical structure that he publicly decried as "an imprecise and bombastic … carcass."

37. Within this, negative space itself is treated like a living organism.



Figure 3.2: Contemporary image *Folkwang Museum*
(built in 1902)



Figure 3.3: Contemporary images of doorknobs and staircase detail at the Folkwang Museum by Henry Van de Velde

drawn out by the manner in which the structure related to human bodies. Rounded edges and reliance on a central shaft of light — aimed directly on Georg Minne's smooth circle of elongated youths — presented a secure and welcoming environment. To add to the sense of the museum as home, a couch was present in each exhibition space, making it feel more like a room than a grand hall (Schulte, 1992: 90).[38]

Underlying the promise of enveloping form, Art Nouveau systems of control surge through the exhibition halls. As one of the first modern museums in Europe, the Folkwang Museum came in a uniquely house-like package. Van de Velde manipulated architectural space in order to encourage a relationship to both patron and public. In so doing, he made the museum into an inherently modern institution, according to Art Nouveau logics.[39]

As described in the Belgian colonial constructions of the previous chapter, such displays were well suited to drawing together both nationalist and imperial rhetoric. As a passionately nationalistic Osthaus

38. Furthering the concept of glamorized house and hearth as public performance, the typical Art Nouveau ornament of a music room, complete with piano and matching skylight, was present.

39. Beatriz Colomina (1998: 12) defines modern space as occupying an arena that is both public and private, where one conducts controlled viewing through architecture designed as a viewing machine.



Figure 3.4: Installation image, Emile Nolde exhibition at the Folkwang Museum (1921)

oversees the Folkwang experiment with the express purpose of furthering the glory of Germany, anonymous objects of Islamic and Asian peoples are swept into the overriding drive. As a whole, van de Velde conceived of the museum as a laboratory (van de Velde 1902b) in which German workers were brought into contact with the "ancient sentiment" of non-western forms as much as radical modern art (Osthaus, 1898: 13).[40] The exhibition environment as unifying force with its own internal logic was thus used to differentiate the new world of radical and strange displays from the gritty industrial landscape of its surrounds.

Van de Velde created a sense of harmony within the museum by mirroring the form of the permanent exhibits in the ornaments and interior decorations encasing and holding them. He shaped the glass cases for the objects like temples, with stable pediments and squared off roofs. He reflected the vivid colours in paintings by Van Gogh and Gauguin on the surrounding walls. The stands for Asian ceramics reflect the particular angles and dynamics of the ceramics' porcelain surfaces. In this manner, the viewer was guided into the exhibits and immersed in their world.

Further experimentation took place after an important purchase of so-called tribal art in 1915, in the

40. As his travel diaries make clear, Osthaus (1898: 13–14) valued the objects of non-western peoples for being different, by virtue of having originated in less developed societies with purer aesthetic sensibilities.



Figure 3.5: Installations on the staircase inside the Folkwang Museum

form of a collection of objects from Oceania. By 1921, these are exhibited on plinths that are placed on either side of Emile Nolde's paintings. The harrowing colours of the latter are grounded by the flat colours selected for the wall behind. The installation subtly privileges Nolde's dramatic, bright works. With the paintings situated as the main substance of the exhibition, the anonymous sculptures, named as tribal, are positioned as insertions, or decorative props.

Photographs from around this time reveal stairwell plinths in the main hall, holding up figurines of foreign peoples, where previous features had been a dainty nude and a ceramic pot. The rhythmic banisters, that give the impression of buckling under the weight of exhibits, are thus seen to engulf any object of a certain proportion, regardless of its style. Expressive architectonics anticipate a general kind of exhibit for its stairwell, not allowing them to fully differentiate themselves from the busy structures holding them in place. Under these viewing conditions, the inner vitalism of the display objects (non-western and European alike) is overtaken by the lively overall design.

Within the greater organism of van de Velde's Gesamtkunstwerk, all objects outside of the official wall space and central vitrines (awarded to European artists) are grouped together as part of the museum's architecture. Accordingly, the total artwork tends towards a representation of potential harmony, rather than embodying the real thing. It is, perhaps, this failure to ever create a true alternative reality, only

an impression of the organicism of living things, that is carried into the white cube. Nevertheless, the vitalism of van de Velde's Folkwang experiment provides a particular understanding of object knowledge. This relies more on the materiality of the museum experience (the sense of walking through it) rather than written explanations of the origins of objects. At this mercurial moment in museum design (prior to a standardized modernist display system being set), the lessons of building a home for the objects of other peoples provide an opening into how they might make their own meaning.

Always a strong proponent for rationality in design, van de Velde declared his museum to be a whole organism. The process of orchestrating it led him to declare that "all objects that are reasoned and reasonable carry within themselves their outcome" (van de Velde, 1902b: 274). While the Belgian designer and his patrons did not credit the original makers of non-western objects with the necessary rationalism, reinserting it into their narrative can potentially open up a better understanding of the work these exhibits do.

When the city of Essen acquired the Folkwang Musem, it faithfully copied the original museum. It was similarly staged as a community experiment to bring locals into contact with objects from different cultures by displaying them in display cases designed with the help of organic architecture. In this guise, it was encountered by Alfred J. Barr, the director of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The Folkwang's decluttering of exhibition space (typical of Art Nouveau aesthetics), in particular, flowed directly into the new MOMA viewing halls after Barr's visit to Essen in 1927 (Filipovic, 2014: 45; Kuenzli, 2013: 524). As MOMA absorbed the more objective tropes of van de Velde's organicism, the implanted hierarchies of didactic exhibition rationality followed. Unlike the more expressive Art Nouveau predecessor of the Folkwang Museum that revealed its attitudes to other peoples in exuberant primitivist ornamentation, MOMA's minimalist gallery space made bias and ignorance disappear under a cloak of authoritative neutrality. And yet, this gallery's cleaned-out and squared-off interior, reinforcing the abstraction of space, was no less steeped in ideology than the curvature of Art Nouveau.

Into the White Cube: African Negro Art (1935), Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

If the Folkwang experiment is a lesser known character in the white cube story — largely due to the fact that it was difficult for the 20th century eye to spot the move towards minimalism beneath Art Nouveau ornamentation — New York's Museum of Modern Art is undoubtedly the lead character. This monumental measure, against which all other museums are judged, has been responsible for developing modern art, with countless artworks since 1929 generated with its walls in mind.

As MOMA's first director, Barr is held responsible for instigating the white cube concept (Klonk, 2009: 136). His notion of a flexible white display system includes the idea of an expandable series of exhibition halls that integrate space and object organically (Tzortzi, 2015: 51). The walls of the modern art museum became whiter and exhibition space homogenized, according to a minimal hanging scheme, combined with undecorated walls and the floor. In setting up a unified and sequestered exhibition area that allowed for space around exhibits, Barr tapped into Art Nouveau hermeneutics.[41] Far grander and more ambitious than the domesticated Folkwang Museum, the modern exhibition interior was set up in contrast to the noise of the city outside (and in competition with its grander commercial display halls) —a hushed, sparse temple, dedicated to aesthetic wonder and high art. Within such sobriety, lively African art (with a large Congolese component) not only maintained a central position from the start, but outrightly flourished.[42]

According to its Art Nouveau legacy of control, the manner in which the museum's population of exhibits were to mingle with visiting human bodies was prescribed. All exhibits within the perpetually lit moment of display appear as specimens ready for investigation. As such, they also have a certain agency, albeit limited, in their willingness to participate. The removal of decorative distractions thus allows for pure aesthetic immersion and visual appreciation.[43] In quintessential modernist display, with

41. Other influences on the MOMA included the more well-known Bauhaus experiments with display, particularly the work of van de Velde's student, Walter Gropius, alongside interior design trends at the time.

42. The Euro-American category of "African Art" does not represent the art of the whole continent. In terms of modernist art and institutions such as MOMA, the term referred only to the plastic and visual arts of West and central African tribes (Vansina, 1984:1). In late 19th century and early 20th century literature, works from the rest of Africa and Oceania were grouped together as "Negro art" (Flam and Deutsch, 2003: 4).

43. Clear pathways through the exhibits, in conjunction with custom-made stands on which the exhibits were displayed, decreed how the viewing experience was to take place. At the same time, the pathways also set up the perfect opportunity for the displayed objects to return the gaze. While the viewer has limited time and must keep moving on, the artwork is

the art object absorbing all energy, the human body falls away. It is therefore interesting to note that, in embracing African objects at the same time as entrenching exhibition norms, sculptures of people-like things and human-like shapes are centrally placed. In the impersonal space in which only pure form resides, the embodiment of the African object is different to that of the self-aware painting that had a canny understanding of its own potential destiny.

Displaying the independent tendencies of African objects within the modern museum (if not exactly in the manner described above) was the express purpose of Barr's seminal African Negro Art show, opened in 1935 with the declaration that "Today, the art of Negro Africa stands in the position accorded it on genuine merits that are purely its own" (Sweeney, 1935: 11). The 603 "Negro" objects that filled MOMA's display rooms were already part of the Euro-American art story. Having all come from existing museum and private collections, they were part of a particular trajectory that MOMA would cement.

Although MOMA in the 1930s did not yet have the bright white walls of the quintessential cube, most of the classic tropes for modernist masterpiece display were already present. Installation photographs reveal plain walls, covered in light-beige monk's cloth, and uncarpeted floors illuminated by stark, even lighting. In place of the ethnographic display, teeming with objects and (often spurious) contextualizing information, here the only context is the minimized gallery itself.[44] Pediments and stands either have neutral colours or are made from plain wood, and are in harmony with timber floorboards and the predominance of wooden sculptures on display. Figures from Benin, Dahomey, Cameroon, Gabon and what was then the Belgian Congo were given more space than usual to communicate aesthetically with viewers and each other. Neat lines of Kuba textiles and minimalist arrangements of weapons, ceremonial dress and masks were each awarded ample room on clean walls.

In this early example of display forms simplified into pressurizing "the edge," the exhibition organism only allows for edges and angles (O'Doherty, 1976: 20). At the same time, some of the modernity

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static and at its leisure to take its measure of the public, in whatever manner it chooses to do such things. As the permanent feature of a temporary situation, the exhibit has no need to engage the viewer, beyond what its positioning and exhibition trappings allow.

44. Virginia-Lee Webb (2000: 21) notes that small labels can be discerned in some photographs.



Figure 3.6: Installation images, *African Negro Art* exhibition (1935), MOMA

of African artworks is allowed to radiate. When given enough breathing space, the "Negro" exhibits display obviously contemporaneous — and highly fashionable — shapes, planes and distorted modes of representation.

While the exact stories of the anthropomorphic forms of the African exhibits are hazy,[45] the exhibition linked them to particular aesthetic sculptural stories. Figurative sculptures are mostly placed with their backs to the walls. This unusual element of Barr's exhibition accentuates the person-like aspect of three-dimensional sculptures. Humanoid sculptures are encountered as having a back and front (and therefore a right and wrong side). Figures thus always face the visitor, placed at heights that invite conversation as much as contemplation. The sculptures are thus presented in ways that allow the appreciation of both their sheer plastic mass and their most personable and human aspects.

Taking one piece in *African Negro Art* as an example, one can trace how the process of abstracting the object is enhanced by assumption of use. *Polychrome Mask* is attributed to the Belgian Congo, the collection to which it belonged (the Collection Sydney Burney) and its original location (London). The mask presents human form so distorted it does not instantly read as representing a face. Large and sufficiently unwieldy to warrant display on a pedestal in the exhibition, the viewer was invited to compare lunging, squared off protrusions from what were assumed to represent body parts. Formal analysis would have us enjoy the sheer visual pleasure of dynamic lines, accentuating and creating

45. The exhibition catalogue gives only the name of the tribe of origin and a short title referring to possible ritual use.



Figure 3.7: ***Polychrome Mask*****,** ***African Negro Art*** **(1935), MOMA**

an optical illusion of distorted plastic space, as well as suggesting a strong sense of movement. Since the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels first studied Congolese art, we have been informed that such line and form are all geared towards capturing a life force, a power that permeates all natural objects (Tempels in Friedman, 1967: 8). Striking graphic qualities of the piece suggest that such thinking seems plausible.

The stylistic mannerisms seen here are very similar to masks from the Malemba Nkulu area. Even if we did not know that masks in this region were used for particular initiation rituals,[46] the knowledge that this is a mask from the Congo is, on its own, enough to heighten the drama of the piece. Rather than reconstruct the accompanying costume and movements for which we assume the object was intended — as many exhibitions later in the 20th century would do — reconstruction takes place in the viewer's

46. Sweeney's (1935: 20) framing text gives the uses of masks to be myriad, including "fetish men's masks, hunting masks, circumcision ritual masks worn at funeral and memorial ceremonies … in endless combinations of materials."

imagination. The assumption that the mask had been worn puts the viewer in direct confrontation with his/her own body. The heavy-seeming mass, whose material make-up is evidently stiff, relies on pulsating lines to effect movement, tantalizing the imagination to picture how alive it must appear when in motion.[47]

Placed within whitened walls and ample space, the mask is made familiar to the museum-goer because of its implied absorption with itself. Its lines work repetitively and energetically to hold in place breakaway forms, defying the proportions of an actual human face and setting up its own formal logic. As such, it displays that seeming indifference to the beholder that characterized modern art (Fried, 1998: 126).[48] At the same time, it also speaks directly to the human body, entering through the eye to ignite an imaginary sensual encounter. Objects that exude sensory enthrallment, highly suggestive of enjoying being handled, appeal to the bodies of its viewers with a special kind of knowledge of them.[49]

Across the exhibition, the ethnographic currency of a mask, idol or funerary figure, which sets off the emotive thrill of ritual aura, is driven by energetic and vital surface tensions. While modernist pathologies set out to denature the purportedly primitive exhibit, the object responds enthusiastically to museum conditions. Having to work harder in the brightly lit environment, shape and surface (that would do less heavy work in sunlit conditions) optically jump and fizz. Different textures and treatments of fragmented planes vie for attention as artificial light bounces off them, dramatizing the furrows and ridges that each creator inscribed onto the piece.

It is the fact of abstracted form, which allows for fairly free associative interpretations on the part of the viewer, which the exhibition relies on. Accordingly, wilfully leaving unknown the cultural specificities of its original makers and local societal evaluation enhances its attraction. In this way, it is not purely

47. The idea of viewing African art as something to be imagined as moving and active, in its assumed original context, was first introduced by Robert Farris Thompson(1974).

48. Michael Fried (1998) describes the process of pictorial seduction by which abstract art relies on an anti-theatrical absorption with its own internal drama.

49. The predominance of wood lends an absorptive quality to the whole exhibition. Glossy and matt, sombre and reddish timbers return both bright lights and scrutiny in subtle ways, suggestive of inner reticence. Not only is it possible to see the manner in which the artist extracted the object's form from a log of wood, but also how the log was held or approached. What was once living and growing (and thus has some similarity to the viewer's own skin) has been worked with in a manner that is true to the material.

anti-naturalism (and its resultant link to Euro-American modern art) that makes up the complex abstractions of the objects in question. Their initial refusal to illustrate narratives or act out community histories pictorially makes them speak on behalf of their material selves, less than the people they came from. Their appeal, seen here in the MOMA, is to remain ambivalent about the initial intentions of their makers.

Losing the Object to the Subconscious: Surrealism and the African Other (1930s), Paris, France

For all of the obvious innovation on display at *African Negro Art*, in exhibition building as much as recognizing artistic achievement, Barr picked up on strong trends already well advanced in avant-garde practice.[50] His claiming of African art for New York's MOMA was motivated by competition with a Paris infused with fascination for *art nègre*, wresting cultural authority from Parisian dominance of the avant-garde narrative.

Paris in the 1920s had been infused with feverish popular obsession with Africa, from its supposedly primitive objects to the assumed sexual energies and vitality of exotic bodies. Negrophilia permeated all levels of fashion between the wars, with access to African culture seen as a fundamental experience, rather than purely a source for new motifs for art and design (Morton, 2000: 106). After the First World War, French Surrealism's cold, intellectual eye emerged from and in tandem with the Parisian obsession with the popularized African sensations of Josephine Baker's hypnotic dances and the rhythms of jazz clubs. Taking its cue from techniques developed by the larger, literary component of the movement, exhibition formats employed the African object as a powerfully foreign and alienating instrument with which to unsettle a bourgeois reality that was already "deeply in question" (Clifford, 1988: 120). Objects of colonized people were yoked together with other perceived expressions of the unconscious in melting pots of dream-like slippage that also drew heavily on French ethnography to accentuate human difference.

Following on from Dada, the Surrealist object was flawed, its latent power attributed to otherness as negative and disruptive, serving to illustrate Freudian primitivity (Janis, 2008: 12). Divisive aims

50. As early as 1914, Stieglitz 291 Gallery in New York displayed African objects in isolation, for aesthetic contemplation in a minimalist white cube (Vogel, 1988: 13).

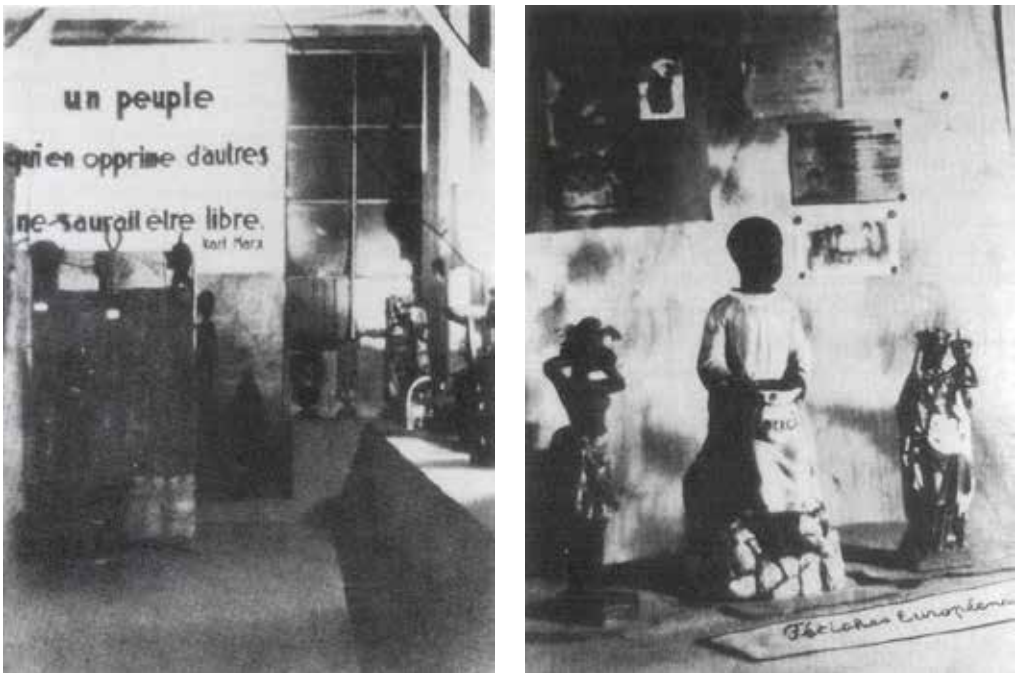


Figure 3.8: Installation images of the Surrealists' *Counter-Colonial Exposition,* Paris (1931)

thus clash with the role convivial objects played in the MOMA exhibition, where they clearly wished to be part of a greater art conversation. As a result, part of the wanton discordance of the Surrealist environment was achieved through selling the supposedly primitive object short, in order to override its more bourgeois appeal.

Surrealist discontent with the warmongering European establishment led into objectified anti-colonial protest. The insurgent artists joined forces with the French Communist Party to stage an installation that attacked the French colonial exhibition of 1931, taking place in Paris. In a former Soviet pavilion, anti-colonial propaganda was displayed alongside an assortment of traditional objects from the colonies. With a canny Surrealist understanding of the anthropomorphic object, finds from junk stores and studios were used to stand in place of colonized people, under banners declaring "the truth about the colonies."[51] Surrealism's understanding of its African exhibits is evident in the few existing images of the exhibition (whose blurred qualities serve to heighten the dreamy mystique). Images show dark faces and silhouettes of unnamed fetish-type figures, mixed with household curios. It would appear that

51. Banners provided the facts and figures concerning the number of colonized subjects killed and called for immediate European evacuation.

the Surrealist urge to disrupt and confront the status quo is far more prevalent than any real desire to engage with the actual colonial subject (reduced to numbers and slogans across the exhibition). Even in the act of recognizing these objects as potentially politicized ones, no engagement with the complex methods by which they were produced, nor the intrinsic values embedded by the bodies that made them, is displayed (Morton, 2000: 108).[52] André Bréton pointedly championed the Surrealist "dream object" over the explorer's "fetishized trophy object" that populated modern art exhibitions (Bréton in Bate, 2004: 192). The quest to make the dream image concrete and objectified was thus a challenge to the rationalist hegemony (Bréton, 1972: 277). The Surrealist oneiric object was conjured up to function symbolically as a constructed manifestation of the artist's dream. Displaying their objects and found exhibits to give form to their own unconscious desire, the Surrealists separated their esoteric use of non-western collectibles from the more material pleasures of the trophy hunter and art collector (Bate, 2004: 194). When they move on to display their own artworks, enmeshed in installations with those of "primitives," the game is no longer one of formal contemplation but individualistic immersion,[53] which strongly draws on the mystical allusions of the ethnographic object.

Documentation of *Objets du Surrealisme* (1936) at Paris' Charles Ratton Gallery confronts the viewer with disparate objects behind a hazy glass wall. Signature collage techniques are employed in installation object play, with a mundane factory produced object (Duchamp's famous bottle rack), 3-dimensional wire line drawings and lumps of female flesh, abutted with sporadic objects of the exotic other float within their casing. A system of juxtaposition and jarring comparison is thus set in motion, with the express intention of disturbing the psychological status quo. The assumed bizarreness of the objects of the other is heavily relied on to create the desired effect. In sublimating ethnographic material, the Surrealist auto-erotic dream is perpetuated. Rendered buoyant via submersive affects, the exhibition space, looking more like a private home than a public gallery, further encourages the idea of private world-making: the artists' subconscious on display. Accordingly, any deep interrogation of the qualities of such objects can only result in the narcissism of self-centred discontent with the powers in

52. Moreover, despite African objects being more prominent in Paris at this time than those of other continents (because of French colonial activity in Africa), the Surrealists favoured Oceanic, Alaskan and North Western American Indian objects in their personal object collections (Cowling, 1978: 484). The objects of the African subject were the ones the writers and artists of the group knew the least about, in terms of physical actualities.

53. As such, their ties to Art Nouveau are evident. Further connection may be found in Salvador Dali's admiration for the style (although Dali was not part of the exhibition activities discussed here).



Figure 3.9: Installation image of *Objects du Surrealisme* (1936), Gallerie Charles Ratton, Paris

place.

It is impossible to pin down the African object and, most especially, that which might be Congolese in the Surrealist dream sequence. Generally speaking, the point of becoming African art within the white cube shifts the object's status from ethnographic specificity to something more superficial, with tribal names and brief descriptions serving more as evocative titles than contextualizing information (as seen in *African Negro Art*). Within Surrealist dream kitsch, however, thinning the object down to a symbol for the pre-rational obliterates material identity.[54] The African object in the arcane Surrealist installation, as in its literary equivalent, is turned into Benjaminian kitsch, whereby the idea within the thing or its psyche is lost to trail its worn-out token in the banal image (Benjamin, 2008: 237). Unintentional kitsch behind subversive drives are, perhaps, part of what lies behind the enduring popular appeal of Surrealism. However, among their more interesting admirers were African leaders studying in Paris. Despite its unsatisfying impressions and inability to represent the colonized, the Surrealist revolutionary spirit served to invigorate the Negritude movement, providing another agitative

54. Man Ray's photographs of exotica, in conversation with feminized objects, may be seen as a case in point here. In his *Noire et Blanche* (1926), for example, the process of flattening is deliberate, with the mask-like head of a woman placed in isolation next to a Baule mask, in a closed, sparse crop. The feminine other is thus equated with the African: both inert objects that lose their individuality.



Figure 3.10: ***Noire et Blanche*** **by Man Ray (1926)**

value to its African object.

The usefulness of the revolutionary African object within Surrealist drives come to the fore as negrophile avant-garde gives way to Negritude, opening up a path to the post-independence African museum. African intelligentsia from the French colonies, studying in Paris in the 1930s, came to absorb various attitudes and aesthetics of the avant-garde, in addition to a discourse of racial awareness. Major figures — such as Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, Alioune Diop and Étienne Léro — were all present at this time, incubating an early idea of African solidarity that was highly reliant on poetic imagery and essentialist drives. The anti-establishment proclivities of the avant-garde were also absorbed. The literariness and literalness of Surrealist objecthood were retained, at the same time as the essentialism of Cubist-era abstraction was taken on board. The Negritude reclamation of the African object thus absorbed the modernist view: that is, as a primitive art, to be celebrated for what its primitivity can contribute to Euro-American form-making.[55]

Inspired by the primitivist ethnography of his intimate friend, Surrealist writer and ethnographer Michel Leiris, Césaire undertook a poetic search for the profound African being, over whom “all sorts of

55. That Senghor and Césaire’s universalism is, in itself, a western construction is inevitable, given their European training.

ancestral layers and alluviums had been deposited" (Césaire in Janis, 2008: 14). The Martiniquan poet-politician's plunge into a dis-alienated Africa adheres to the Surrealist flight from bourgeois existence and compounds the latter with racism and colonialism (Janis, 2008: 14).[56] At the same time, Senghor deliberately engineered a cultural movement in which all black people could revitalize their shared souls (Harney, 2004: 9). While one of his avowed intellectual debts was to Bréton, on becoming the leader of newly independent Senegal it was Picasso's abstraction that he held up as an exemplary model for the School of Dakar (Ebong, 1991: 131). Reading Picasso's formal achievements through the tenets of Negritude, Senghor saw him as loyal to his ethnicity — Andalusian heritage — by adhering to its mythic "archetypal images" (Senghor in Ebong, 1991: 131). The work of the master primitivist, whose sensory displacement in the Musée de Trocadéro contributed to African art being objectified as a tool in his own overblown narrative, was used to further more immediate and practical politics. Senghor's thinking around natural African rhythms, essential energies and sensory forces, which consciously echo some of Picasso's more seductive notions, are drawn into a universal Africanism, underwritten by national cultural specificity. Avant-garde attention is thus put to work as a revitalizing agent for mobilizing a culture of Africanity.[57]

Senghor's provocative proposal emphasizes issues of access in terms of understanding and regenerating objects claimed as trophies and dreams. In attempting to lead the stories of African objects back to an actual place, he reinserted voices previously ignored. Despite Senghor's poetic advance, the museums of African independence were more influenced by colonial ethnography than the self-absorbed Surrealist installation. At the same time, universalist themes of recourse to tradition are seen to bubble up through various aesthetic vehicles, colonial as much as pan-African.

Embedded Autonomies: Musée de la Vie Indigène (1950s), Leopoldville, Belgian Congo

In Central Africa, the site of so much disembodied Surrealist fantasy, a more practical aspect of object autonomy was being pursued. Another kind of laboratory, this time for demonstrating and testing "native" policy, was Leopoldville's Musée de la Vie Indigène (MVI) (Museum of Indigenous Cultures).

56. This notion can be further tied to Clifford's (1988: 123) idea of ethnographic Surrealism, whereby lost sense of ritual experience can be reintegrated by placing art within reach of mass culture.

57. The problems of Negritude essentialism and appropriation are rooted in European sources in complex, multi-layered ways (see Chapter 5).



Figure 3.11: Postcard of the Musee de la Vie Indigene and installation image, Leopoldville (circa 1950s)

It was set up as a container for indigenous resource, from which the local Congolese population could reacquaint themselves with their respective traditional, artisanal styles of production — according to how the Belgian administration had understood it (van Beurden, 2015). Providing a showcase of pieces that also functioned as purchasable craft, colonial custodianship of local culture was thus affirmed. The MVI laid out an experiential illustration of paternalistic desires. In so doing, it placated its European visitors that were eager to act as patrons and supporters. The exhibition focused on objects with dramatic material effects and striking shapes. However, where the museum tried to position objects as guides to Congolese peoples and their supposedly authentic styles, complicity gives way to reticence, emitting similar tensions to those found in more straightforwardly ethnographic hangs.

The museum started out in the post-War period within what was once the Stanley Hotel. Pulling together various private initiatives and missionary organizations, as well as the efforts of the *Amis de l'Arte Indigène* (AAI),[58] Adrien Van den Bossche's pedagogic museum aimed to achieve international museum principles. By the time the institution relocated to the squat arches of a former post office in the 1950s, under the new directorship of Van den Bossche's son Jean, it was displaying some of the "modern museum methods" imported from the design breakthroughs of the 1930s (Van den Bossche in van Beurden, 2015). The hang awarded its objects more space than its previous incarnation had, aesthetically separating them (and itself) from nearby stores and local Congolese suppliers. With

58. The Friends of Indigenous Arts was a colonial organization set up to control and encourage indigenous artistic and craft practice.



Figure 3.12: Archival images of Musee de la Vie Indigene, Leopoldville (circa 1950s)

aspirations to museum design in the metropole, the MVI attempted to consolidate its authority as facilitator of renewed "native" production.

The museum's ambitions for its objects reverberated in the wake of their success in Euro-America, leading to a version of white cube conventions. It aimed to resuscitate cultural values and, ultimately, served as a potential conduit for art galleries and modern-minded homes in the metropole.[59] At the same time, the institution did a great deal to see more "tribal" objects decorate local expat domestic settings.

In a homeliness reminiscent of the Folkwang Museum, the post office interior provides a low, levelled backdrop to neatly arranged objects of Congolese peoples.[60] Sturdy pillars stud the the floor to frame a very house-like installation. Masks are neatly lined up, above eye level, ensuring that any dangerous encounters might be avoided. Smaller ceramic pots and vessels occupy polite, wooden-framed vitrines, more like kitchen furniture than anything else. A length of Kuba textile has been placed on the floor, as a carpet, despite the fact that its intricate system of stair-patterns and diamond-shaped textures are sufficiently rich to deserve careful preservation on a wall.[61] This adds a cosiness usually denied

59. Concurrently, at the RMCA in Belgium, a new "art" room had been installed where Congolese objects were set up in a white cube, thus claiming status as artworks in their own right (Couttenier, 2005: 235; van Beurden, 2015).
60. Further salient similarities to the Folkwang include the occupation of an already existing structure.
61. As a contemporary craft object generated by the Kuba people, the textile was, perhaps, considered more plebeian than the older-looking styles and therefore relegated to the floor. As such, it presents a reversal of the 1897 *Palais des Colonies*.

unadorned gallery floors. Large, well-crafted wooden Kuba figures flank either side of the entrance, introducing the observer to the museum by way of the mythology of its people's superior artistic dexterity.

Proportionately, from a bird's nest raffia mask attributed to the Yaka to an almost-Cubist Holo relief, carved out of wood, the exhibits fit their encasement with a snugness that threatens to lead to clutter. Homeliness, here as elsewhere, conveys ownership, but also home comforts, potentially appealing to visitors' more acquisitive leanings. Located in a post office building, a colonial outpost, further gives the museum's museal identity a makeshift quality. Compared to the grandiosity of MOMA and cool arrogance of the Surrealist reveal (with Van den Bossche most likely aspiring to the former, whether intentionally or not), the MVI's museum and gallery qualities appear unconvincing and second-hand. Its Congolese exhibits bear its parochialism with good grace, but appear to take some strain in the slightly stifling environment.[62]

Being placed into manageable space does not entirely dull the sensuous qualities of very human exhibits, but imbues them with a domesticated nuance. Within the former post office, each exhibit's particular bodily logic is not bathed in special lights, or placed according to exacting and provocative viewing conditions. As a result of mundane lighting, the objects' appeal has to rely more on graphic outlines and striking shapes than subtle, sensuous texturing. The bird's head mask, hung above the figures, retains an immediate relationship to heads and hands, while most of its work is done via its startling silhouette. As an inventive cartoon of bird-like characteristics, evidently intended for human use, its maker's relationship to nature (and implied ritual) is told through dramatic attention-grabbing tactics.

This particular configuration of exhibition plays off qualities of contained alterity with object and museum space collaborating to render alien forms and audacious distortions familiar to a conservative expat audience.[63] While inklings of the prestige awarded to Congolese objects in the metropole is

62. Whereas international Congolese objects vie impressively alongside Euro-American modern art, the more humble terms of the Leopoldville installation displays little knowledge that such sophistry exists.

63. Saleable earthenware, produced in the museum workshop for local consumption, is relegated to the bottom shelf of central glass vitrines. Accordingly, they communicate the institution's top-down hierarchy of age, own-ability and rating of

present, the museum does not use its exhibition strategy to promote its own objects. The MVI is not an art museum; it merely makes some design references to that type of space, compromising to practical solutions wherever possible. The resulting functionality of the exhibits takes on a banal aspect.

Though the objects on display are geographically closer to their places of origin or acquisition, they are separated from their assumed "tribal origins" both by the exhibition framework and by the fact that the museum is located in the area of Gombe, a whites-only enclave in Leopoldville. As will be seen for the era of independence to follow, the role of the object threatens to tip over into the realm of souvenir. The latter is usually considered an insult as souvenirs are cheap, mass produced and technically not as complex as older art forms (Kasfir, 1999: 101).In the somewhat fusty curio-museum, normally confident objects are potentially more duplicitous than their relatives that reside in slick, international art museums. In the midst of the expediencies of Leopoldville, the fact that subject objects — named as tradition — were, more often than not, made for the museum's audience, was constantly in danger of being exposed. While having some aesthetic agency, located in their appealing objecthood, the colonial museum exhibits were not awarded the rights of international modern art. The precariousness of the institution and its lack of either artistic authority or firm grasp on the motivations of its suppliers, are revealed in its exhibition installation.

In the revamped post office, modernist design attempted to settle in around its objects but did not quite fit. The museum thus served to introduce the dual nature of the Congolese exhibit on home soil. In its natural habitat of museum, within its locus of origin, object ambiguity became pronounced. Both traditional and contemporary, the localized exhibit had to negotiate its embodiment of art and craft, while also serving as an educational tool. At the same time, its point of museal display forced a gathering of complex layers of complicity around it.

Diplomat Objects: *Art from Zaïre* (1975), New York, USA

From their limited scope within the MVI, Congolese exhibits expanded into bestowing their ambivalent aura of indigeneity across various survey exhibitions of Congolese art. High-profile travelling shows of traditional Congolese art were generated to promote either Zaïrian or Belgian museums in a

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workmanship.

competition largely played out across centres in the United States.

In light of Congolese independence in 1960, the nature of the Musée du Congo-Belge at Tervuren was reconsidered and was renamed the Royal Museum for Africa (RMCA) with a more overtly scientific agenda (Couttenier, 2005; Asselberghs and Lesage, 1999). Its touring *Art of the Congo* exhibition was sent to different museums in the United States, starting at the Walker Art Center in 1967. The show attempted to reinforce the Belgian museum as authority on Congolese objects, in the face of the former colony's new autonomy. Via rather torturous obfuscation, both exhibition and catalogue managed to avoid acknowledging the colonial conditions under which the objects were collected. Enigmatic objects were not able to perform a function outside of being ethnographic specimens that are also worth looking at. While numerous Euro-American survey exhibitions made claims to representing Congolese tradition before this,[64] *Art of the Congo* provoked Zaïrian leader, Mobutu Sese Seko, to mount a counter exhibition offensive. *Art from Zaïre: 100 Masterworks from the National Collection* (1975) took place as an oppositional gesture to the Belgian museum. In copying many of the tropes and systems of categorization of the Euro-American ethnographic museum (including the assumption of rigid ethnic identities), the exhibition presented many of the problematics that were to dog the Congolese exhibit in its Zaïrian guise.

Further perpetuating the masterpiece narrative, *Art from Zaïre* put its objects to work abroad as eloquent intermediaries for the restitution of further pieces. Symbolically, it began its tour at the African-American Institute (AAI) of New York. With a gesture that played to Pan Africanist concerns, the museum trumpeted Zaïrian self-sufficiency via the tropes of modernist museum convention, with Tervuren's exhibitions being the most salient influence. Accordingly, objects representing lost traditions were co-opted for the purposes of nation-building, now called on to represent both modernity and tradition.

64. Daniel Biebuyck (1985: 16) lists showings of Congolese art at the following institutions: Baltimore Museum of Art (1946); Leiden, Rijksmuseum voor volkenkunde (1947–1948); San Francisco, M. H. De Young Memorial Museum (1948); Louvain, Musée de la Ville (1949), Bern, Kunsthalle (1953); London, British Museum (1953); New York, Brooklyn Museum (1954); Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts (1955); Philadelphia, University Museum (1956); Ville de Malines (1956); Brussels, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (1956); New York, Museum of Primitive Art (1957 & 1960); Brussels International and Universal Exhibition (1958); Besançon, Palais Granvelle (1958).

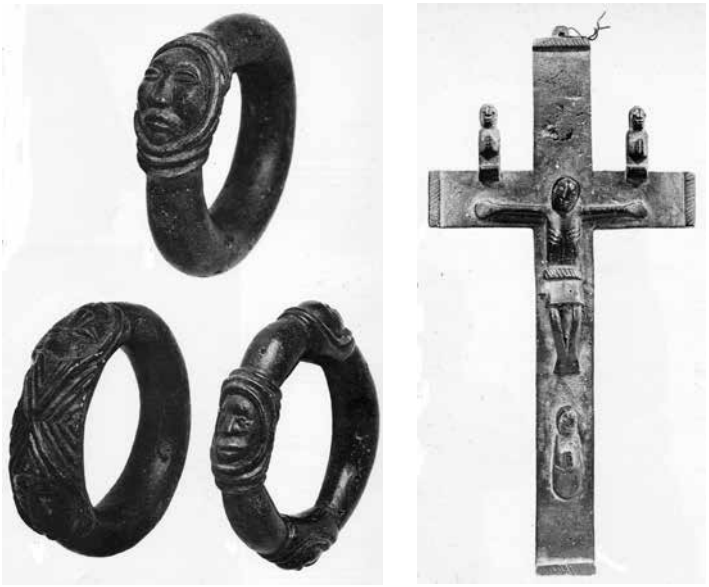


Figure 3.13: Kongo crucifix and bracelets from *Art from Zaire* (1975)

With both travelling collections playing out real-life tensions, the contested Congolese objects on display become subaltern subjects, in the fullest sense. In being objectified into representing Zaïre, exhibits making up the largest-ever loan from an African museum are in danger of being flattened into a purely symbolic function. While they are not stripped of their material agencies, the fact that a museum was being built in their honour in Zaïre overrides how they are read, denying their potential to subtly critique the space around them. That is, their role as handsome indigenous citizens roots them in a certain fundamentalism. This point of view sees art and architecture exclusively belonging to its place of origin and not so much being of the world (Joselit, 2013: 2).[65] As such, the inherent complexities of that place of origin and the terms of the object being made and acquired are simplified into national representation.[66] Echoes of inherited essentialisms of forms of Negritude may thus be seen to emerge in a Zaïre still enthralled by its own youthful confidence.

The travelling display of fetishes, whisks, masks, statuettes, boxes and musical instruments is pointedly put to work as political agent, an eloquent intermediary to demand return of missing "masterworks." This put pressure on the aesthetic value of "literally unique" pieces to be suitably extraordinary

65. This is opposed to the neoliberal view championing a free flow circulation of images on open markets, usually associated with Euro-American art museums (Joselit, 2013: 2).

66. Sarah van Beurden (2015) describes how restitution claims of particular ethnic tribes, most notably the Kuba, were made to various national authorities.

(Hersey, 1976: 15). At the same time, lacunae in the survey exhibition had to be acknowledged, in order to justify restitution claims.[67] In being made to speak on behalf of missing (as opposed to lost) objects, exhibition items are party to the fragmented quality of the exhibition. In *Art from Zaïre*, the logic of exhibition totality relies on what is in colonial collections. A proliferation of utility objects — ornately adorned stools, trumpets and goblets — in place of more communicative figurative sculpture weighs heavily on the exhibition. Moreover, the constant instigation to make comparisons between this exhibition and its Euro-American counterparts emphasizes the extent to which an expected exhibition format for Congolese art had now become the norm.[68]

In two small rooms at the AAI, the exhibition managed limited space and a corridor to present a contemporary, uncluttered hang (despite architectural constraints). Battles around contested objects are thus fought through modernist display mechanisms. Itinerant exhibits bring some of the fragmented energies of tactile wood and brittle metals, teeming with surface energy, to a show constituted of bits of mythic cultures. At the same time, the political turbulence around the objects draws more attention than they do. Any deficiencies concerning aspects of themselves or the terms of their display may be put down to not forming a cohesive group.

Art from Zaïre was trumpeted with flashy and glamorous accounts in the Zaïrian press. Publicly acknowledging the enhanced status of traditional objects — under the guise of the largesse of the Mobutu regime— was a source of pride for a nation plunged into the period of *recours à l'authenticité*, a systematic policy of taking recourse in traditional culture. As will be fully explicated in the chapters to come, the objects and environments of this era played out vital roles as symbols of power wielded in a manner deemed most appropriate to the new age of African independence.

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67. That the the national museum of Zaïre (IMNZ), does not have a definitive collection of traditional Congolese art not only permeates Mobutu's catalogue text, but is also palpable in the physical exhibition experience. Various artistic treasures are missing, especially from those regions highly valued internationally. The act of metonymy so regularly performed by objects, having to act as stand-ins for authentic ritual experience and unknown people, is now extended into pointing to missing works. This very public staging of restitution claims is not limited to demands from Belgium and the RMCA. Mobutu also hints that private collectors and collections in the US could consider returning goods gained in "systematic looting" (Mobutu, 1976, 9, 10).

68. For example, the region of the Kongo is represented by an array of small objects. Crucifixes, figurines and bracelets abound, many in the region of 100–150 mm, in place of larger, more well known *nkisi nkosi* figures.

As a result of *Art from Zaïre*, objects claimed as pre-colonial heritage were reflected back to a new kind of home. The burgeoning nation was not the point of origin that Congolese exhibits had been representing across the 20th century, but its own, complicated cultural conglomeration. Called on to pull together the momentous energy required to inspire new art forms, newly renamed citizen objects do not throw themselves as thoroughly into the embrace of independence as its exhibitions seemed to expect.

Corporate Attractions: Foire Internationale de Kinshasa (1976), Kinshasa, Zaïre

In many ways, the Congolese object of the preceding pages — seen to be most effective within white cube aesthetics — recedes from view when recast as national hero in Kinshasa. While pockets of museum space existed after independence, they were not readily available to the public on a permanent basis. Semi-public display was provided by two small display rooms (at Mont Ngaliema and l'Académie des Beaux Arts) and temporary outings at spaces across the city.[69] It is in the latter where star pieces may be seen to achieve performances that are amongst their most enigmatic.

After an impressive start in the year following the opening of *Art from Zaïre*, marked by symbolically gifting a valued, one-of-a-kind statue of Kuba king Bopa Kena, a total of 700 objects made their way into the possession of the IMNZ to form the foundation of its collection (Wastiau, 2000: 3).[70] Most of the returned items that followed, in deliveries dating up to 1982, failed to live up to the grandness of this initial gesture. The ritual pipes, tambourines, drums, figurines, headrests and jewellery transferred were lesser examples of their type and not likely to be missed from the RMCA stocks (van Beurden, 2015). While the presence of potentially unlovable objects reduced the chances of the IMNZ ever becoming a world-class museum, the mythic aura of the objects, if not their material selves, served as an important touchstone for the kind of modern Africanity that was encouraged by the new, culturally-minded regime. The fact of their physical return gives shine to policies of *retour à l'authenticité* that partially relied on the excellent international reputation of Congolese artistic traditions.

69. With limited opportunity for public display, the objects are locked up or wrapped in storage, often disappearing completely and leaving only catalogue descriptions in their wake.
70. The collection included a large number of MVI objects that had toured Europe.



Figure 3.14: Installation image, *FIKIN* (1976), Kinshasa

At a time when global trade in African art was booming, the *Foire Internationale de Kinshasa* (FIKIN) was an occasion for the *citoyens* and *citoyennes* of Kinshasa to experience these objects first-hand.[71] In 1976, the year in which the statue of Bopa Kena was returned to Africa, the IMNZ organized a temporary exhibition as part of the international fair, celebrating Zaïre. In the remaining documentation of the exhibition (constituted of loose photographs), a lively version of the modern museum may be observed.

The show was housed in a simply-built box container, holding a selection of free-standing exhibits. Within alcoves of temporary display structures, photographs of objects and people in tribal paraphernalia accented the walls. Vitrines and snugly joined display stands gave the impression of potential detachability and reconfiguration. Famously sought after sculptures may thus be seen to warrant sophisticated modern fittings, in themselves seemingly mobile. Over and above the modernist design principles alluded to, the exhibition has a certain corporate quality. Slim wooden vitrines, with lively grain surfaces, alongside pot plants, would not have been out of place in fashionable offices shooting up in the surrounding city. Aspects of chic modern interiors from the outside world are thus seen to be drawn into a typically hermeneutic display system. Able to commandeer top-of-the-range décor, museum objects exude a confidence allowing them not only to be a usable heritage, but also to

71. The FIKIN, located in Limete, a district of Kinshasa, was instigated by the Mobutu regime in 1969.



Figure 15: Installation image, *FIKIN*, Kinshasa (1976)

be part of the modern African city.

Despite its warmer accents, minimal forms, clean lines and a great deal of negative space around each exhibit attest to the distinct lineage of the modernist white cube. Yet the exhibits on display are still being called on to do ethnographic work. The star-status Pende and Luba tribes are recognizable, as are two tall drums from the Kasai region (van Beurden, 2015). Elevated to the status of a statue that a viewer has to look up at, the elegantly proportioned drums demand to be seen as trophies rather than instruments to be played. Flanking a figurative mother-and-child statue looking out over visitors, the Kasai drums have an exhibition face: part of the work the mother-and-child statue and the drums do is to be human-like and personable, relating to each other across blocks of space. While these objects communicate with each other, they are expected to celebrate rich pre-colonial heritage.[72] Unfettered by didactic labels, the object speaks to tradition in the broadest possible sense. The unnamed figurine does not represent the Pende people, but a style from the romanticized past, lending a particular face to a local lexicon of imagined tradition.

From the subjecthood of *fin de siècle* Tervuren fairgrounds to the festivities of Kinshasa's FIKIN 1976, the Congolese object resists being co-opted into serving as a territorial marker of power. As this power

72. Sarah van Beurden (2015) identifies the mother-and-child sculpture in the photograph as a rooftop statue from the eastern Pende region. She locates the maker of one of the statues as Kaseya Tambwe Makumbi, who made it specially for the museum.

is an unstable force, the admired items keep moving. In the 1970s, with the deprivations that violent political unrest brought, countless museum objects, both well-travelled and locally sourced, went missing from the IMNZ. These were seldom random thefts, but more often pointed assaults on the pieces most sought after in international forums (Zola, pers. comm., 16 December 2015).[73] The story of these highly desirable pieces must necessarily be abandoned, just before their paths become impossible to trace in the murky entrapment of illegal activities. As lost objects, they carry all of their old mystique into new and unknown fictitious territory.

What Congolese Objects Want and What They Tend to Get

Over the broad period from colonial times to African independence, distilled and neutered versions of Art Nouveau formats, updated into the stasis of minimalist display, may be seen to reverberate around powerful Congolese objects. As the museal Art Nouveau spirit brings in the basic premise of artwork having the effect on its environment and existing museum collection, exhibits that acquire increasingly colourful biographies and political portfolios can no longer be seen as mere catalysts, MacGuffins to the main plot of the traditions and rituals of nation-states.

Once used as a tool for German nationalism, the physical remains of van de Velde's Folkwang Museum continued to exude influence on modern display design, even if not directly. In an exceptional moment, 1988 saw the new director of what became the Osthaus Museum in Hagen display nothing but van de Velde's structure, emptied of exhibits. Michael Fehr's SILENCE, based on John Cage's 4'33", thus saw the site of Art Nouveau innovation still in line with contemporary experimentation in immersive experience.[74] This methodology of employing emptiness to test the extent to which singular exhibition halls rely on exhibits and bodies can similarly be used to try and understand the Congolese object.
In describing the space awarded to each exhibit, in the above exhibition descriptions, the value of addressing the physical work it does allows for a better understanding of their particular duality.

73. Key pieces also went missing from FIKIN exhibitions (including the one discussed above) during the de-installation process (Zola, pers. comm., 16 December 2015).
74. Michael Fehr (1997: 6) notes that, with all exhibits removed, attention settled on the ornate banisters that remained, which were reconstructions of van de Velde's original handrails, bombed during the Second World War. Many of the older visitors from the Hagen community interpreted the emptying action as a reminder of the museum being emptied of its collection in the 1920s and again during the Third Reich.

If not providing a visible influence on 20th century museum formats as was the case in the Art Nouveau environment, ethnographic objects called on to represent the Pende, Kuba, Luba, Yaka, Luluwa, Tschokwe, etc., occupy such a substantial space in modernist exhibitions of African art that, when they are missing, the lack of their physical presence is felt. Absence and withholding of information are the salient tropes that enable museum objects' artistic currency and modern sensibilities. It is the Congolese objects' ability to resist didactic interpretation, by how it interacts with the exhibition space and the viewer, wherein their appeal lies.

In MOMA, the Congolese traditional object makes no claims to an aesthetic language other than what it, in itself, understands. If absorption with its own "internal drama" is a defining characteristic of the modernist art object, the mystique of foreign-but-modern sculptures is heightened by the aura of ancient custom. In attempting to subvert the art museum, the grip of oneiric, Surrealist whimsy is too loose to stick to the African exhibit. It is because of attempting to observe objects as material beings that the superficiality of Surrealist obsession is revealed. Unable to access exotic Africa through murky terms of display, its objects cannot speak directly to bodies. With actual contemporaneous Congolese bodies coming dangerously close to museal exhibit in colonial Leopoldville, its mystifications are rendered suspect. The domesticated terms of the museum enclosure render it practical and petty, overriding any sweeping mythic status its objects may have acquired internationally. As the Congo changes hands, it is in working for Zaïre that the object's aura is most strikingly put to the test.

Yet, as Zaïre pressurizes its reclaimed objects to do both aesthetic and ethnographic work, tensions bubble and proceed to burst (evidenced in the failure of the IMNZ exhibitions to obtain comfortable longevity). The objects within deflect, if not outrightly refuse, the ethnographic strictures of colonial legacies, through resilient displays of their more obtuse qualities. While they have aesthetics, these cannot be contained by exhibition conventions that require the names of artists. Rather than retreating from the forensics of modernism, they overflow into the modern artworks around them. Across the broad span of 20th century display space, what the primitivist performances of ethnographic and formalist games of aesthetics are unable to draw out are the conditions of the objects' production. Ultimately, what Congolese objects will always speak about is their provenance: the system of uneven exchange between Euro-America and Africa that brought them into being. Their resilience, or elusive

mystique, stems from the inability of exhibition situations to reveal the true conditions of their making. From colonialism and modernism to independence rhetoric, the collective terms of production of the object shift in value. In representing the socio-economic conditions in which it was produced — while still absorbing desires placed on it along the way — the anonymous object subverts the greater architectonics exhibitions try to fold them into. Lack of an individual author ensured that their meaning was made up according to gathered forces of exchange. The resulting object has a great deal to say about these relationships (ranging from ironic, critical and knowing commentaries), according to the particularities of its inception. What the anonymous Congolese object communicates is an African understanding of itself, in relation to its perception of what exhibition space wants.

The display situations discussed above want to control and assert narratives which the Congolese object continually refuses. Designed as an exhibition object, the Congolese exhibit would like to please, but cannot refrain from harking back to the unfair terms of its making. The resulting tension it sets up creates its enigmatic appeal, particularly heightened in the realm of international art galleries.

In independence-era Zaïre, the African modernism these prestige objects are called on to usher in — influencing the aesthetics of the contemporary city around them — may thus be seen to stem from a fundamental instability. As highly particularized remnants of the colonial encounter, their ever-enigmatic object qualities provide an entry point into new ways of reading postcolonial remains (Young 2012). Accordingly, the architectural features discussed in the chapters that follow will be approached with the needs of the resilient Congolese object in mind.

Chapter Four- *Brittle Utopias & Lived Remains: Style Congo in the postcolony*



Figure 4.1: Contemporary image of the former *Hotel ABC* in Mbanza Ngungu

Brittle Utopias and Lived Remains: *Style Congo* in the Congo

The previous chapter showed how Art Nouveau energies flowed into 20th century museum spaces and coalesced into a standardized format around the Congolese art object. The homogenizing space of modernist art exhibitions and experiential ethnographic museums — evident in independence-era Zaïrian displays as much as Euro-American museums — may be seen as a continuation of mechanisms first set in place in Art Nouveau total artworks. It was the exhibition situation in Kinshasa, the place where the art objects were supposed to belong, and the Congolese application of display mechanisms that best illuminated the resilient qualities of these objects. In comparison stand the colonial buildings, the focus of this chapter: they interact with and are acted upon by the African cities and the greater environment in which they were implanted. The chapter focuses in particular on the *Hotels Alimentation du Bas-Congo* (Hotels ABC) in Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu: they were foundational segments of the urban areas they were located in and, in turn, to which they gave rise to. With their origins in Art Nouveau, the *Hotels ABC* are the result of elaborate fantasies, similar to the *Hôtel van Eetvelde* and the 1897 *Palais des Colonies* in Belgium. Both the formal and ideological lessons of these Art Nouveau constructions filtered across to the colony, in the form of prefabricated iron structures.

This chapter examines the sparse remainders of Art Nouveau in present day DRC from the vantage point of their contemporary situation in the Congolese cityscape. It reads them in relation to the dense circulation of people, objects, natural forces and energies in which they are embedded. This shifts the discussion away from the highly concentrated, object-centric discussions of the previous chapter. This chapter views the continually-used remains of Art Nouveau buildings as sites of changeable movement and patterns, across broad temporalities. This requires a more expansive form of analysis than that of the previous chapter (while keeping in mind its argument of the importance of exchange at the point of origin being inscribed on the material make-up of constructed forms). Thus, buildings that were originally built for European use and that have now become part of contemporary Congolese life are explored for what their provenance may tell us.

While the prefabricated architecture of the Art Nouveau buildings is not handcrafted artwork, it stems from the movement's attempt to bridge art and craft, and mechanical and man-made. The factory-

produced iron skeletons that were sent to the Congo made up one part of this bridge. In order to ascertain the qualities of this part and its link to the *fin de siècle* total artwork (see chapters 1 and 2), further strands of Art Nouveau's colonial legacy may be drawn out. In this discussion, iron frameworks are metaphorically excavated for what they reveal about the process of colonization in which they emerged. Tracing how these imperial remains have been used since the colonial period allows for a reflection on the nature of colonial entanglement within the Congolese urban fabric.

In the early years of the 20th century, as King Leopold II's Congo Free State (CFS) was pressured to become the state-owned Belgian Congo, the early colonial buildings of missionaries, military units and administration developed an eclectic aesthetic. Commonly used amongst them all was imported prefabricated metal. The metalwork used in the *Hotels ABC* and their affiliated structures, however, are distinctive and have thus been associated with high Art Nouveau. These buildings thus allow for an examination of the movement's entanglement in Belgium's colonial history. More importantly, the Congolese response to these fragments of Art Nouveau reveals agency that can be used to understand the urban nuances of Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu.

Both material and intangible Congolese adaptations to these structures have provoked a form of colonial nostalgia around the *Hotels ABC* and their related structures. Additions, demolitions and influence on their surrounds (as well as lack thereof) attest to daily renegotiation of the colonial inheritance that refuses to be erased or concealed. At the same time as personal inventiveness and adaptability are evident in how stolid remains are dealt with, they remain repositories of complex associations of modernity.

The Art Nouveau buildings of the Congo, bearing architecture that originated in a Belgian factory, were not made with the conditions of the colony in mind. As practical accessories to the early colonial mission, iron-laced constructions were built for the temporary comfort of displaced Europeans, over and above any efforts to engage with the tropical location of the colony, or its people. These objects were imposed onto existing systems in the Congo and implanted "architectonic points of tension" in the landscape (Elleh, 2001: 234). By tracing how the artificial barriers set up by early colonialists with the help of these constructions were broken may assist with tracing the precariousness of fixed identities in

postcolonial DRC.

Anne Stoler (2013: 5) suggests that the concrete remains of colonial intervention are a form of temporal sedimentation that still affects the psychic and material space of daily life. This chapter focusses on the materiality of the "effects and affects" that these enduring symbols of an extreme imbalance of power have had on their surroundings (Gupta, 2012: 252). The temptation is to see colonial remains as representative of their occupants (see Collins 2013), or as metaphor for colonial structures themselves in what Stoler (2013: 22) describes as a slippage "between metaphor and material object, infrastructure and imagery, remnants of matter and mind." This discussion thus seeks to trace how these buildings can neither escape their immediate and historical context, nor their own material make-up.

The long term effects that the Congolese context has had on the *Hotels ABC* are immediately discernible. The extent to which the original design has remained in place allows for reflection on the complex layering of built space in the postcolonial period. The evident melding of what was considered oppositional —urban and rural, Western/colonial and African/subaltern — exposes the paucity of such categorizations. It reveals the need to move away from the perspective that sees only the ruination that Belgian colonialism wrought. Rather, the fact that these structures have not remained separate from their Congolese context, but that both the natural and man-made environments have responded to them, points to the presence of highly complicated historical relationships, dependencies and intermingling between foreign and indigenous entities.

As settler structures were party to the making of Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu, it is important to test the degree to which colonial architecture and converging trajectories of urban space have influence on each other. The nature of the Congolese city space requires one to confront the insistent presence of that which is not man-made. This is particularly pertinent in light of the debate of industrial Art Nouveau and organicism. Although their primary architectural debt is to Belgian Art Nouveau, the *Hotels ABC* are missing its fundamental feature of abstracted nature forms. The main crux of the total artwork in Belgium — namely its specific relation to the Congo — thus falls away here. In the very environment that the movement took so much pleasure to refer to, organic forms are not present. Natural forms are present, rather, in the burgeoning tropical plant life growing around the structures.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the original function of hotels as part of the building of a railroad through Congo, taking the *Hotels ABC* in Kinshasa and Thysville as examples. Built on the riverbanks of the Congo River, the hotels capture their inhabitants' imaginations of luxury, enclosure and fantasy of the European city. The contrast of the hotels with the workers' village illuminates the imaginations of social categories that existed at the time. Special attention is given to the effect the buildings had on the surrounding environment and peoples. This discussion then forms the historical basis for examining the role that the hotels — with their visible signs of wear and tear — play today. The chapter closes with a discussion of the nature of nostalgia that the old hotels evoke for those who interact with them, with the qualities of their iron skeletons casting particular reveries.

Offshoots Sent to Africa

The original purpose of the two main sites of Art Nouveau-related agglomerations was to cater for Euro-American travellers. The *Hotels ABC* in Leopoldville (Kinshasa) and Thysville (Mbanza Ngungu) were outlets of the *Compagnie Commerciale et Agricole d'Alimentation du Bas-Congo*.[1] The Matadi-Leopoldville railway line (see Chapter 2) was a critical part of colonial commerce, as the Congo River was unnavigable between the Leopoldville trading post and the colonial coastal port at Boma because of cataracts.

Named after Colonel Albert Thys, director of the Matadi-Leopoldville line construction,[2] Thysville began as a station for European railway workers (initially named Sona Qongo). The site was highly favourable, located halfway between Leopoldville and Matadi (Baeck, 1957: 116). Its temperate climate gave rise to plans (in 1907) to develop it into a garden city (Lagae, 2010: 30) and it became known as a fresh and verdant spot, suitable as a health retreat. Further building ventures followed, including modular colonial housing in the late 1920s. These preplanned clusters of country homes have distinct stylistic ties to the rural version of Art Nouveau, in particular its idealization of the bucolic.

1. This was the newly formed extension of the holding company, *Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et de l'Industrie* (CCCI), started in 1886 and owned by Colonal Albert Thys. Other subsidiaries were C*hemin de fer du Congo, Compagnie des Magasins généraux, Société anonyme belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, Compagnie des¨Produits* and *Compagnie du Katanga.*

2. Thys also advised on the running of colonial administration, having made his first expedition to the colony in 1887.



Figure 4.2: Archival image of *Hotel ABC* under construction in Leopoldville (circa 1910)

The third *Hotel ABC* was built in Matadi, at the south-western end of the railway line. Built with rudimentary pillars and stones common to the era, without any exterior decorative ironwork, it has no obvious Art Nouveau references. One reason for this could be that high-end accommodation for Euro-American travellers was less necessary here as it had been an accessible trading post since Stanley's time and was more developed.

Because travellers to Kinshasa had largely been put up in private homes and mission stations, the building of a grand hotel in Leopoldville was announced with much fanfare in 1911. Its prefabricated iron framework was manufactured in Hoboken, Antwerp, by *Grandes Chaudronneries de l'Escaut*, and was shipped to the African colony (Vandenbreeden, 2015: 13). The structures encountered by colonial travellers, starting out in Leopoldville and bound for Thysville and beyond, did not represent the Gesamtkunstwerk once championed by designers like Horta or Hankar, as more practical concerns prevailed. The fact that they were assembled from a pre-packaged kit, however, speaks of a different kind of totality of design. Where the total artworks of Art Nouveau relied on architectural details to embody the basic principles of overall structure, in this case the core of each building was contained in sheets of iron infrastructure. Instead of ornamentation referring to the shape and feel of





Figure 4.4: Archival image of the *Hotel ABC* Leopoldville (circa 1913)
Figure 4.5: Contemporary image *Hotel ABC* balconies

the whole construction, inside and out, portable metal skeletons were the foundations of the building itself, designed to expand into four-story high configurations. They were thus concentrated "units of production" to be distributed and fleshed out, giving rise to greater urban architectonics in settler spheres (Hofmeyr, 2004: 14),with a certain pre-prescribed pattern actualized according to the demands of the site itself, as well as (to a lesser extent) the preferences of the settler community on the receiving end.

Produced by a factory whose product range extended to yachts and steamers, the iron-based buildings presented another sophisticated means of taking the colonial mission further afield. As such, they were highly desirable, specialized items in the roughshod frontier environment of the colony. While there is no known artist-designer behind the metal hotels, they were well-designed and carefully considered as objects in and of themselves. The streamlined design, which looked good on the drawing board and in package form, however, took only the most general environmental specifics of the Congo into account. That is, while consideration of extreme heat is built into the structure, the moisture of humid conditions is not.[3]

When the early Art Nouveau project in Belgium represented the Congo Free State, it was infused by the aesthetics of other cultures, particularly the so-called Orient and Japan. If signs of such influence

3. Compared to Horta's travelling glass and iron palace, proposed for the 1900 World's Exhibition (see Chapter 2), for example, this scheme is far more practical.





Figure 4.6: *Maison Horta* by Victor Horta in Brussels
Figure 4.7: Contemporary image of *Hotel ABC* in Kinshasa

are seen in the iron structures of the colony, they are contracted into a pared down utility. An early image of the freshly-erected skeleton reveals a powerful aesthetic that dominates with balanced surety. It is because of the strength of this right-angled definition that decorative twists in the eaves, and also in the curly point of the weather vane at the rooftop's pinnacle, seem whimsical. Minimal simplicity and functionality of design may be faintly linked to sources like Japanese architecture, but the *Hotels ABC* are nowhere near the dynamic implementation of a lexicon of exoticisms associated with the Art Nouveau movement in the metropole. The reference point for the factory producing the hotels in question was high Art Nouveau itself. Inspiration would therefore not have been taken from the myriad sources that characterized the movement but the work of designers like Hankar, Horta, Henri van de Velde and the next generation of Belgian architects that were influenced by them. Once Art Nouveau had peaked, leaving its general mark on popular culture, the terms of the influence of its early masters were indirect.

In these compacted versions of Art Nouveau, the necessity of representing the Congo falls away in the face of actual space being claimed. So, too, does the (always precarious) question of the potential

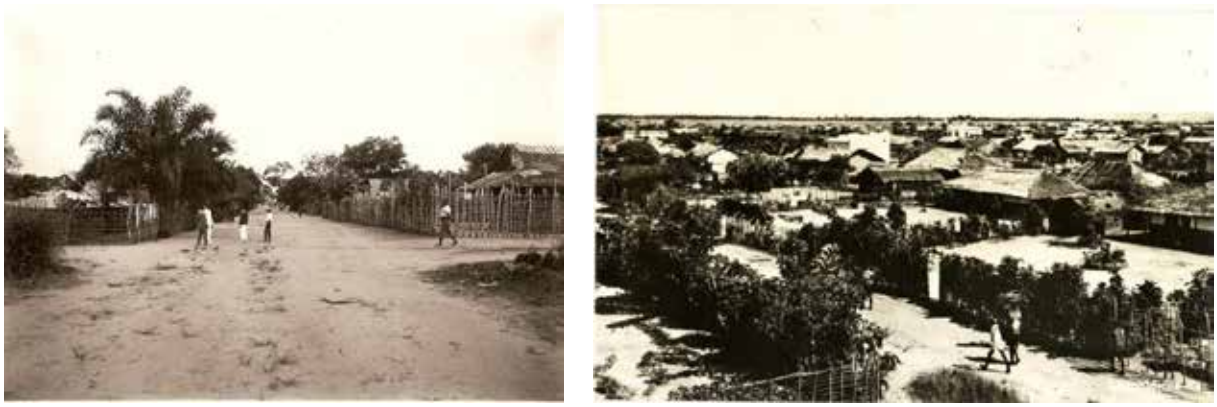


Figure 4.3: Archival image of *Cité Indigène* in Leopoldville (circa 1916)

of Congolese aesthetics influencing Art Nouveau form.[4] Dense layers of intention and interpretation separate *fin de siècle* avant-garde design and the factory-produced hotels, leaving little trace of experiments with African motifs in their outward appearance. This was tacked onto the ephemeral trappings of the Leopoldville hotel only much later, when Parisian Negrophilia spread in the 1930s. What the hotels represent in the space of the colony is no longer a particularly Belgian *Style Congo*, but European comfort.

As hints of curlicued edges ushered in a whiff of ornamental fancy into refined design, they provided a firm contrast to more makeshift settler buildings that surrounded them. Further, unyielding iron exoskeletons would have accentuated the ephemerality of local architectures. With the colonial administration overseeing housing for certain Congolese city dwellers, the aesthetics of the large Bateke hamlet, which was well established by the time Stanley's initial post was built in 1881,[5] was drawn into Leopoldville's first *cité indigène*. At the same time as *Hotel ABC* was being erected in 1911, a large portion of land was assigned to Congolese workers who were registered with the local administration (Mboka, 2011a), paid their taxes and had a clean bill of health. The design of the housing appears to have been based on 19th century Congolese villages documented by colonials.[6] A wide variety of different kinds of informal houses were erected. These ranged from huts made of

4. As discussed in Chapter 2, certain instances in the 1897 *Palais des Colonies*, especially Hankar's *Salle d'Ethnographie*, were seen to respond to motifs from the Congolese textile and sculptural shape formations.
5. This was located in the present day suburb of Kintambo. The land was part of the greater territory of the Bawumba Bakongo people and was also home to a thriving trade centre and markets (Baeck, 1957: 622).
6. The first *cité indigène* was overseen by District Commissioner Moulaert, Albert Thys's partner in developing Leopoldville.

different variations of wooden poles, woven straw, vine and palm stems, and thatched roofs, to those deemed "more evolved," constructed with more durable foundations of brick and cement (Capelle, 1947: 40). Nicknamed Belge, the grid-patterned *citè* gave rise to further so-called native housing settlements, including those in the quartiers of Lingwala and Barumbu (Capelle, 1947: 8–11).[7] The binary structure of a colonial city that was to be highly segregated was thus induced by the colonial order's early social and economic stratification (Beeckmans, 2009: 2). Racial segregation would only be formalized as law in the ordinance of 1945, by which time larger influxes of Belgians had made their way to the colony.

At this point in the early years of the 20th century, the Belgian colony did not boast a large population of settlers from the European centre. The hotel buildings entertained a mixed bag of European travellers, military men and missionaries, a large portion of which were rugged entrepreneurs pursuing potentially lucrative schemes. Setting the tone for a great deal of 20th century colonial architecture to come, the purpose of the hotels was to make the colony attractive to these adventurers Specifically, the hotels were part of a greater enterprise by Albert Thys and George Moulaert to develop Leopoldville as the commercial hub of the colony.[8] The prefabricated structures were foundational in bringing in superficial aspects of popular domestic styles from the metropole.[9] Recognizable fragments from bourgeois European homes and shopping malls were shipped from Antwerp to Matadi, and then sent on by rail to Leopoldville, without any particular aesthetic of Belgitude. With European vernacular touches and the distinctive Belgian line vanished, the presence of a large metal skeleton communicates a direct link to greater European frameworks, transport routes and mobility.

Instead of a dynamic line, linking space across micro- and macro-levels, ornament in the hotels' respective exoskeletons is flattened into blocks of repetitive patterning. In the Leopoldville branch, metal balustrades wrapped around the building's outside are made up of contained sets of curling tracery. Structural support in the eaves take more familiar curvilinear proportions, seemingly of the

7. Photographs of early Force Publique housing from the 1890s show brick walls with thatched roofs. The design can also be located in the subsequent publication *Manuel du Voyager* (Donny 1900).
8. Leopoldville surpassed Boma to become the capital in 1920.
9. The home of the Governor General in Boma was described as poorly furnished and pitiful in appearance, compared to its counterpart in French-occupied Brazzaville (Lagae, 2014a: 176).

same family as work by designers such as Horta. However, when compared to their more sophisticated counterparts in the metropole, which were surrounded by sinuous, sculpted forms, metalwork here is flattened into cardboard-like struts.

The older hotel at Thysville has more mundane, even cartoonish, decorative flourishes of simple stars, circles and triangles. This is not the sophisticated abstracted ornamentation of the likes of Horta and Serrurier-Bovy in the late 1890s. They are closer in appearance to more symmetrical work by later generations of Belgian designers.[10] At the same time, the pre-packaged constructions of the colony may be seen as ambitious enlargements of cheap factory-made products that flooded Euro-American markets in the early 1900s.[11] These were defined as having curlicued ornamentation tacked onto household paraphernalia, rather than employing true Art Nouveau design principles. The hotels under discussion could conceivably be seen as a grander form of an Art Nouveau knockoff.[12]

As luxury objects in themselves, the hotels represent a desirable product of the urban metropole that, with sufficient means, could be transported and partially adapted to different situations. Moreover, their exposed exoskeletons, giving the appearance of whole factory objects (rather than the more eclectic mixes of the early settler colony), aligned them to a modernist idea of machine aesthetic. That is, their form largely determines the way in which they function. Further, abstract decoration was developed within the parameters of the structure, rather than in addition to it (Greenhalgh, 1990: 11–12).

Purchased as an enormous stack of metal parts to be made up, the buildings had no specificity of place or personalized, handcrafted, features, speaking to the mechanics of their making. With symbolism no longer piled onto highly individualized ornamentation-as-structure, the edifice bears its own meaning. As much as the hotels signalled bourgeois comfort to colonials on the railway line, they also served as the ultimate accessory to early occupation. Arriving as a scaffolding of metal poles, they could then be compounded to annex far greater areas of land, as well as the space above it — up to four stories high.

10. The work of architects like Benjamin De Lestre, for example, was highly influenced by the possibilities of mechanized production.

11. Part of Art Nouveau's demise is understood to have been its degeneration into mass produced knick-knacks, furniture and merchandising after 1905.

12. Accordingly, it could also have links to some of the commercial malls and shopping centres across Europe, often seen as lesser versions of high Art Nouveau.



Figure 4.8: Contemporary images of *Hotel ABC* in Mbanza Ngungu decoration on a private home in Brussels (by De Lestre)

Embodying the latest capabilities of industrial materials, the hotels also served as public displays of technological prowess. As seen in the design innovation of *fin de siècle* Belgium, ownership of a colony inspired new spurts of invention and industry. In the occupied African territory, the hotels served to overlay asymmetrical relationships between more scientifically advanced colonizers and lesser subjects. When the most advanced use of iron of that time was paraded in the colony for the exclusive use of white people, luxury dwarfed local dwellings. The hotels were thus instruments of lopsided socio-political-cultural relations, making them plainly visible.[13]

That a prominent material face of the colonial project arrived mostly pre-packaged reflects the early admonitions of colonial manuals. Across the literature provided for new colonists, they are advised to take as many pre-built materials with them as possible.[14] From approximately 1881 to 1923, most structures had some prefabricated element. Influenced by European theories concerning tropical hygiene, constructions with low-hanging roofs, outside terraces and good ventilation were developed by doctors, military men and engineers (Toulier et al, 2011: 35). Yet, city guides and general references still tend to identify hotels as Art Nouveau inspired and different from the eclectic mix of styles that

13. The social Darwinism of modernist design may be seen to be at play here. Machine-linked aesthetics proclaimed a belief in the linear advance of humankind, with heinous implications for non-industrialized societies (Greenhalgh, 1990: 11). With accommodation for the colonizer clearly differentiated from that for Congolese workers, the hotels advanced narratives equating traditional Congolese architecture to backwardness. Allegedly superior technology delineated the colonized subject as primitive and therefore in need of civilizing (Mudimbe, 1994: 105).

14. Albert Donny's (1900: 24–53) detailed manual regarding military conditions in the Congo, Manuel du voyageur et du resident au Congo, for example, begins with this advice, before listing the various materials to be found in the territory and how best to use them to build temporary structures.

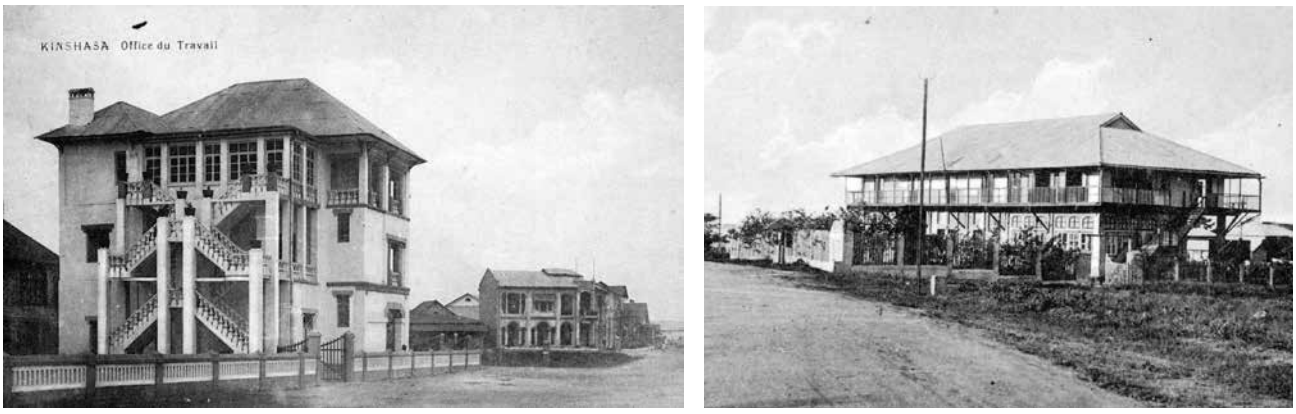


Figure 4.9: Postcard images of typical settler architecture, Leopoldville (circa 1916)

marked the early period of colonial architecture.[15]

Jos Vandenbreeden (2015: 12) identifies the Art Nouveau lineage primarily in the metal skeleton of the hotel in Leopoldville, as a display of form following function. The same principle may be seen in other colonial buildings with scaffolding on the outside, like the Congo Trading Company building in Leopoldville, or the home of the Governor General. These structures, whose metalwork was largely produced by the *Forges d'Aiseau* steel company, were produced with a general idea of the tropical climate in mind (Lagae and Toulier, 2011: 44).[16] However, Vandenbreeden (2015: 12) argues that the Hoboken factory structure has a pleasing sense of harmony as a whole, with all of the metallic elements — from balustrades to columns and ramps — serving a greater aesthetic function.[17]

Another factor that could be seen to give the Hotels ABC an Art Nouveau aura is the grandeur they exuded. Not only are they larger than the more utilitarian examples of pre-packaged housing, but they occupied central positions in the burgeoning colonies, physically and in the popular imagination. Both hotels became the social centres of their respective settlements, home to all manner of soirées and gatherings. They were new and provided shelter to a mixed group of outsiders, all lit by electricity and enveloped by soothing gardens, with the Leopoldville branch also claiming impressive views of the river.

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15. This is particularly the case for the hotel in Kinshasa (see Toulier et al. 2010: 46; Lagae and Toulier 2013: 77; Vandenbreeden 2015: 12). David van Reybrouck (2014: 85) makes a fleeting reference to Thysville as being an "Art Nouveau village" that is now rusting.
16. *Forges d'Aiseau* also exported to Brazil as part of the Belgian exportation enterprise (Lagae and Toulier, 2011: 44).
17. Vandenbreeden (2015) further points out that Horta used to intersperse hand-made with manufactured details. He thus bestows credibility on *Hotel ABC* in Kinshasa, by deferring to Horta.



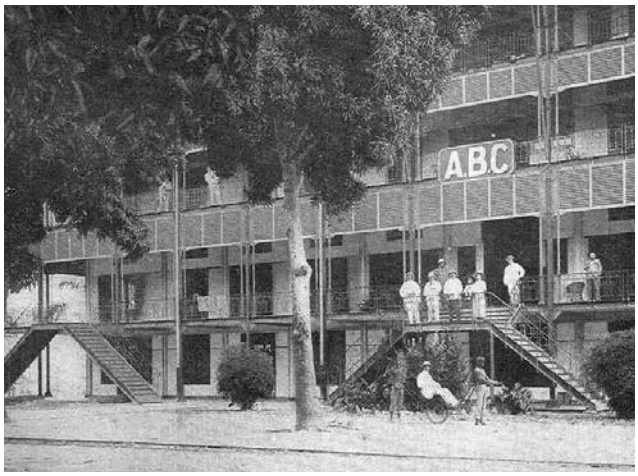


Figure 4.10: Postcard image of *Grands magasins de la Cie* in Leopoldville

Figure 4.11: Archival image of *Hotel ABC*, Leopoldville (circa 1916)

In his travelogue, professional traveller Henri Segaert (1919: 201) celebrates the modern *Hotel ABC* in Leopoldville for its comfort and elegance. He credits the structure, with its exterior of metal beams, yellow bricks and reinforced concrete, as the most beautiful in the Congo Basin. He is especially taken with the luxurious interior spaces and the manner in which the ground floor leads out onto a street front of "charming" European-style stalls and stores where all manner of quality products can be purchased. A historic postcard of the interior of the *Grands Magasins* of the company *Coloniale Belge P. E. K.* gives a sense of these affluent shopping interiors. They are structured as grand halls, with pillars and a generous central staircase, decorated with a simple metal balustrade. Walls are lined with well-stocked wooden shelves and white women serve customers.[18]

Segaert (1919: 202) further describes how exterior staircases lead the visitor to the grand entrance and dining halls within, all lined with elegant furnishings. He praises the hotel's superior bedrooms, as well as the magnificent views onto the gardens and Stanley Pool. In contrast, he depicted the surrounding urban space of Leopoldville as uncomfortably dusty and humid (Segaert, 1919: 200). Evidently, the hotel and its terraced riverbank lawns provided pleasing respite. Dotted with clusters of low buildings and dense copses of vegetation, it formed a slow-moving hub of frontier activity, centred around rail and river commerce.

18. Apart from the label on the postcard (undated), the only sign that this scene is from Leopoldville rather than Belgium is the typical colonial gear of white hats and shorts of the men in the image.

While only a shadow of the fantastical apparitions of interior design in Brussels, Leopoldville's *Hotel ABC* presented a language of luxurious interiority. Even if the hotel was not a total artwork in the true sense,[19] it achieved creating the immersive, revitalizing atmosphere of the Belgian townhouse style by providing a sequestered European space, distinct from its greater surrounds. Instead of Congolese woods and ivories incorporated as displays of wealth, as they were in the metropole, luxury is laid on through familiar European products. Segaert (1919: 202) enthusiastically lists imported fish, meats and vegetables, rarities for the colonial traveller, and extols Leopoldville's outdoor piano parties, casino and top class champagne. Situated in a locality with deep-reaching and sophisticated local traditions of wood-work, the hotel eschews the precious export products of the colonial project for industrial iron.

The *Hôtel ABC* enterprise may be seen as a transportive experience of playing at being in Europe, while passing through the colony. As such, its materials embody an objectification of European distinctiveness and superiority that, both materially and conceptually, separates colonizer from colonized. As a space of comfort and privilege, reserved for Euro-American guests, it set out to alienate local Congolese people. Within these giant appendages to the extractivist mission, Congolese people could only serve as staff. Prefabricated structures thus provided early architectonics for an aesthetic of difference and dislocation. Accordingly, the hotels may be seen as a pivotal symbol of that "most basic tension of empire," an urban grammar of difference that was to be continuously inscribed in colonial space (Cooper and Stoler, 1997: 3).

Iron and Infrastructure

In Leopoldville, *Hotel ABC* was a satellite structure of the metropole, relying on the movement of goods and people in the process of extracting Congolese raw materials. At the same time, it was evidently a tool of seduction, waylaying Euro-American businessmen with a respite from tough conditions, while also impressing local Congolese subjects with its grand promise of Europe. As one of the products of maritime-orientated company *Grandes Chaudronneries de l'Escaut*, it served as another

19. As explained in Chapter 2, a total artwork is one in which all aspects of the interior and exterior, from overall structure to furniture and cutlery, act in accord with each other.

part of the probing machinery of expansion into the Congo. From their positions on the banks of the Congo River and the Matadi-Leopoldville line (along which they, too, had travelled), the hotels formed central axis points for imperial traffic, as much as being early civic space. Essentially serving as giant embellishments to the Matadi-Leopoldville line, the ABC structures were linked to this ultimate symbol of Belgium's export-oriented colonial economy.

An imperial narrative of triumphant progress had been written into a deliberate mythologizing of the line in the metropole, which may be traced via heroic reports on the challenging building process in the Belgian press.[20] As seen in previous chapters, the notion of railway, in general, had particular significance for Belgium, the most rapidly industrialized nation in continental Europe. This saw the country's classic Art Nouveau projects defined by innovative displays of ironwork. Employed as an emblem of progress, the material of the railroad and the factory was bent and twisted into art that a select few lived within. As such, it could serve as an extravagant form of propaganda for an endeavour greatly in need of extensive financial backing.[21]

Fundraising for the massive rail works was further overseen by Thys. He outrightly appealed to philanthropic sentiment in funding drives, framing it as more than a capital venture: "the question will not only interest the financiers. We must also appeal to philanthropists and men of goodwill who are horrified by the barbarities of the slave trade; to men of science who want to discover the scientific riches of central Africa, which previously they had been unable to investigate; to religious and believing men who suffer to see the unfortunate blacks held in the ignorance of fetish worship" (Thys in Cornet, 1953: 381). In the colony, iron's promise of industry was thus a vital component of colonial access, extraction and control. As seen in Thys's rail manifesto of controlling all socio-political aspects of Congolese life, the transport system enabled systematic the breaking down of local infrastructure. Iron was the material of rapidly accelerating irrevocable change in the space it sliced through.

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20. As seen in Chapter 2, periodicals like *Congo Illustré* and *Le Mouvement Gèographique* ran articles in almost every edition for the duration of the construction. This narrative of railway-as-progress was continued until the end of Belgian rule, as seen in displays at the 1958 Brussels Universal Exhibition (Dunn, 2003: 62).

21. The role of railroads and the fantasy of occupation was prominent in the colonizing of Africa. The most well-known is probably Cecil John Rhodes' unfinished British line, intended to run from the Cape to Cairo. The first railway in the Congo, which played such a powerful role in the colonial imagination, was, in actuality, a simple tramway which ran on wood (van Reybrouck, 2014: 85).

The story of the railway, which Belgian propaganda attempted to render as high adventure, was a difficult one, fraught by the rough terrain and constant worker unrest. Construction work on the line from Matadi to Stanley Pool, like the porterage system that preceded it, came at great cost to those forced into manual labour.[22] Local legend, according to missionaries in the region, had it that each tie along the railway represented a Congolese life and each telegraph post a European one (Axelson, 1970: 204). While the actual death toll is difficult to ascertain, official reports from 1890 to 1898 were that 1,800 black workers and 132 white officers had perished.[23] The line that was created to implement mass extraction of resources (strongly linked to the rubber trade) put great financial strain on the backers of the colonial mission in Belgium (Ndaywel è Nziem, 1997: 327–328). The tracks also garnered mobility to various colonial operators, including ethnographers and scientists, whose tribalizing gaze was to have indelible consequences for local cultures. In a broader context, the railway signalled disruption and destabilization of power for the existing peoples of the area.[24]

The full implementation of colonial forces further altered clan-based systems of government in which work allocations had already been severely disrupted by the slave trade. Existing land rights and ancestral authority were undermined as power was awarded to those chiefs who were most sympathetic to the colonial cause (Anstey, 1966: 47–49; Cornet, 1953: 81; Baeck, 1957: 137).[25] Colonial penetration, primarily the railway, impoverished local living networks and broke down existing systems of political power.[26]

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22. Adam Hochschild (1998) has outrightly called the rail project a “human disaster” and detailed the many dangers involved for workers. Conversely, David van Reybrouck quotes Étienne Nkasi, whose father was one of these workers, saying that it was not “the worst” work that a Congolese person could be made to do. The company culture of incentives, which came with joining the monetary system, was appealing (van Reybrouck, 2014: 85). Because the Congolese workforce was still involved in the porterage system, men were hastily recruited from far afield, including Accra and Sierra Leone (Cornet, 1953: 390; Slade, 1962: 75).

23. Hochschild (1998) insists that official reports must, necessarily, be too low.

24. The densely populated area was made up of branches of the larger decentralized Bakongo kingdom. This was the tribe first subjected to European colonial incursions from the late 15th century, when they intercepted early Portuguese travellers along the coast.

25. Recruitment drives for the railway construction took a quota of men from each village, thus leaving women to pursue agricultural work. This contributed to driving forward the industrialised economy over the existing agricultural one (Baeck, 1957: 137).

26. The new political and economic system was made more complex by Congolese investments into it, with certain elites buying into the colonial idea of modernization.



4.12: Postcard image of railway station and the *Hotel ABC* in Thysville (circa 1930s)

The Matadi-Leopoldville line carried vastly different connotations in the Belgian press when under Belgian rule than during the Congo Free State, and its hotels appear to have promoted its brighter aspects. According to Segaert (1919: 238), the hotel experience was indelibly part of the railway journey, as well as a delightful interlude.[27] The hotels in Leopoldville and Thysville were visibly connected to the line via their exposed ironwork. Their external iron structure was constructed in the same manner as the utilitarian railway stations. Where the train infrastructure ran horizontally, sharply cutting the land, the decorated hotel in Thysville served to some extent to mask the underlying terror of iron. Its design ensured that, from within the hotel, the viewer would not see the human and natural turmoil the hotel and the railway had created.

In fledgling Thysville, station and colonial accommodation shared sloped corrugated roofing and iron strut work. The showpiece hotel, in particular, takes on decorative edges, with elegant swoops at the edges of roofs and more elaborate decoration than any other buildings in the town. Exposed guttering and structural support is part of a curtain of repeated circles, squares, triangles, lines and stars. Flat symmetries, visibly cut out from sheets of metal, mark the hotel space as different and separate from the practical lines of the neighbouring station, trains and workshop. As in Leopoldville, ironwork serves

27. The experience began as travellers disembarked at the Thysville stop. They were greeted by the staff who led them to an enclosure as comfortable as its counterpart in Leopoldville. If the train arrived at nightfall, the resting house would present a glowing electrical testament to encroaching modernity, amidst dense vegetation (Segaert, 1919: 238).



Figure 4.13: Contemporary views from the balconies of *Hotel ABC*, in Mbanza Ngungu

as an exterior symbol, marking the building as a modern element in the countryside. As well as creating an intrinsic connection to the railway, the iron scaffolding speaks to the insular system being imposed on the greater colonial project, in terms of issues of access and viewing. In both hotels, a network of balconies, decorative balustrades and stairwells ensconce the overall structure in an interactive skin, wherein certain kinds of public activity can be played out. This protective layer served as a buffer zone between the comfortable furnishings of the hotels' interior and the outside. Once inside, no exposed beams are to be seen, only plain boxed off rooms and larger halls. Iron trellises, an outward declaration of progress, mediate the interaction with the outside. Although the interiors of the hotel rooms are not visible to us,[28] the fact that Segaert remarks only on comfort, rather than beauty, suggests that, except for luxuries, there was nothing out of the ordinary in the interiors.

A language of exteriors thus emerges in the hotel design, whereby the guest, once inside, would be sealed off from the permeable balconies and gardens of the outside layer. Thus, a very different interiority to that of Art Nouveau in the metropole is produced. Highly concentrated settler versions of the movement appear to drive the style's controlling aspects into tight systems of enclosure and surveillance. Shutting out the surrounding world appears more as a securitizing measure, insulating its occupant inside a European bubble, with few aspects of the Congo present. With Art Nouveau

28. No photographs have, as yet, emerged.



Figment 4.14: Contemporary images of *Hotel ABC*, Kinshasa

organicism lost, so too is its sense of a strange and wondrous nature. In the midst of the Bas Congo, the iron frameworks seem to shield its incumbents from the Congolese forests and grasslands made lush from seasonal flooding and the local inhabitants, rather than leading them closer to them.

From the hotels' elevated enmeshment of metal terraces, visitors could looked down upon Congolese at leisure. By The staging segregation in this manner, these compact panopticons (the tallest built structures in the area) introduce a Foucauldian system of control and surveillance, imported from Europe.[29] Hierarchical structure presents an early form of colonial exhibitionism, whereby architectural space is used to remind those on the outside of who is in charge.

Colony in a Landscape: Leopoldville's Vegetable Garden

With the *Hotels ABC* in Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu being more linked to an Art Nouveau aesthetic of control than organicism, their relationship to the ever present natural abundance of their surrounds takes an interesting shape. Looking outwards from the Thysville hotel, luscious vegetation animates the view. In a region of abundant rainfall and rich alluvial soils, the installation of this building marked the colonial claiming of what the colonizers considered an agricultural haven. Yet the aesthetic and spatial language set at controlling this environment does not, ultimately, success in achieving the desired effect.

29. That is to say, the system resembles an outward-looking version of Foucault's panopticon (1995), used as an analogy for societies that normalize disciplinary measures. This is not to say that European systems applied to African situations have the same effects and results.



Figment 4.15: Postcard image of *Hotel ABC* in Thysville (circa 1916)

The Bas-Congo was renowned for its vegetal opulence and the Thysville settlement became an important hub for colonial agricultural programmes. Dubbed Leopoldville's "vegetable garden," existing Congolese practices of working the land were thrown into chaos by colonial approaches to agriculture. This overburdened the capacity of the land (Baeck, 1957: 139). Colonial drives of agricultural improvement systematically devastated pre-existing farming, distribution and trade systems.[30] As a nodal point for industrialization, Thysville's early iron structures represented not only privileged enclosure and mass dispossession, but also the start of rural underdevelopment.[31]

Across Africa, colonization was achieved once untamed nature had been brought under control. Subject people were part of this, in a system where "cutting railroads, draining swamps and ignoring existing political frameworks of the native people are all one and the same thing for the colonizer" (Fanon,1963: 182). The Belgian Congo was particular in that it placed full responsibility on the territory to fund its own administrative, military and other expenses. As a result, assertion of power was far more comprehensive, penetrating further into Congolese society than was usually the case (Young and Turner, 1985: 32).[32] To counteract the turmoil caused by the violence such a system required , it was

30. According to the Belgian State Decree of 1885, almost all Congolese land was appropriated to be used or sold by the colonial administration, or given as concessions to commercial companies.
31. With the status of Congo being the second most industrialized colony in Sub-Saharan Africa also came an agricultural population that was amongst the poorest on the continent.
32. Its regulation and labour recruitment for agricultural concerns was, according to its legislation, as tightly regimented as that of mines, population movements and the other features of its intricate web of restrictions (Young and Turner, 1985: 32). This was especially true from the 1930s onwards in the Bas-Congo, with colonial farming drives (Baeck, 1957: 35).

necessary to maintain the illusion of order. Early colonial architecture was thus part of a larger project of covering up the inherent messiness of prolonged conquest.

With railway-building largely completed, imagery sent back to Belgium insistently illustrates an orderly, rural idyll.[33] An early photograph of Thysville reveals a picturesque scene of a pathway meandering up the hill to the village and train station that, with different arboreal silhouettes, could be mistaken for a European countryside. A gentle copse of elegant trees frames a collection of pointed roofs and houses, nestled in a thick blanket of grasses. No people or Congolese settlements are visible, giving the impression of a settler fantasy.[34] In the closed circuit of Belgian occupation, architecture and its representational imagery were entirely for European consumption. Within this, Congolese life was simply not considered particularly important. The landscape photograph of Thysville, like the view from a *Hotel ABC* balcony, highlights the colonial urge to see the Congo as landscape, rather than place. Based on a philosophical tradition in which the objective world is separated from the viewing subject, landscape is not a place of interaction (Ashcroft et al, 1995: 391). Unlike places, which are inhabited, landscapes are there to be looked at (Cresswell, 2004: 11). Settler attitudes to African landscapes and natural scenes, in general, were forged on notions of removed contemplation (Wenzel, 2016: 15). In focusing on the shape and appearance of rural vistas, its inhabitants could be undermined.[35]

Art Nouveau in the metropole created a fantasy of symbolically fusing nature with industry and colony with metropole. When Congolese bodies and cultures were represented, they were blended into this artificial nature. In the colonial outpost, sharp edges of metallic decoration now formed both a barrier and a domesticating frame against surrounding vegetation (and, by implication, the people living in it). The stiff shapes of the hotels have none of the vine-like, irregular flows of earlier Art Nouveau

33. One early postcard of the Thysville *Hotel ABC* flaunts sculpted gardens on its front slope. The amount of work that must have gone into scooping two circular paths out of the grass, to echo the semi-circular patterns of metallic ornamentation, must have been fairly extensive (particularly during the rainy season).

34. Imagery of the empty landscape, a predominating motif common to all colonial cultures, justifies the occupier's right to be there. In this example, Thysville village is used to domesticate unfamiliar terrain, rendering it a possession. Ownership is implied according to who has the power and technology to control the production of convenient representations. By depicting colonial settlements and ignoring the land'spre-existing history, meaning and social practices, the natural landscape is used to describe an imperial sanctuary.

35. As outlined by Mary Pratt, the language of natural history imposed a language of order and ownership on a raw global nature, whose redeployment as a new knowledge formation is valuable because of its difference from the chaotic original (1992: 33).



Figment 4.15: Archival image of *Hotel ABC* in Thysville (circa 1916)

enclaves. Accordingly, their brittle artificialities, within voluptuous, living foliage, are heightened.[36] Bourgeois framing techniques, as seen from decorative balconies and mediated documentation, declare the viewer's ownership of what lies beyond. The implication of the constructed vantage point was that its guests could feel like overlords, even if they were from social classes that would not have had access to Art Nouveau circles in Belgium.

However, even in the early days of the hotels, the attempt to stage manage the Congo, via ordered design techniques, could not have been entirely convincing. In rejecting organic forms, the factory-made exterior refuses any attempt to bring colonial structure, surrounding culture and natural elements together. While the manufactured silhouette squares off against mossy wood, creepers, grass and mist, it is natural elements that have more influence over its metallic matter. The regulated curves and bent roofs simply cannot compete with enveloping plant life. Verdant colours and bulbous forms, dripping with moisture, exceed the effects of the metallic framing techniques of the balustrade and trellises, making them appear flimsy and frail. From their inception, the saturated air began its work on metallic surfaces, generating damp, rust and decay. The strong message of implanted hotels, despite the confident threat of their technological prowess, reveals a failure to fully prepare for the conditions of their context. Appearing as ready-made apparitions intended to impress, these structures implanted a material inflexibility that could not come to terms with its surrounds.

Villages and Cottages: Thysville

A similar logic may be located in the design of the Thysville workers' cottages, dating back to the inception of the hotel. With a prominent component of prefabricated metal parts, the housing came in a few basic models, repeated across the village. More iron is incorporated in the central, grander buildings, flaunting decorative sheets of metalwork and more elaborate staircases. Around these are clusters of smaller, simpler bungalows. Except for those on metal plinths, only a few metalwork details are to be seen in banisters and eaves. The entire early township is aesthetically connected through corrugated iron roofs, topped with the metallic flourishes of weather vanes. Whereas similar bungalows

36. A comparison of historical imagery of the colonial hotels with Belgian Art Nouveau buildings shows the marked difference in the role of the surrounding nature. Where the Belgian buildings are seldom represented alongside actual nature, the Congolese buildings are always depicted in the presence of large trees and dark clumps of plant matter.



Figment 4.16: Contemporary images of a manager's home and a workers' cottage in Mbanza Ngungu (built circa 1900)

may be found across the colony at this time, these stand out as having a sophisticated design: not only is the visible metalwork more refined than in the average colonial home, but the clustered housing and the hotel were conceived as a whole.

Pre-planned living space in the European workers' village had to be negotiated in particular ways. Grander homes were reserved for railway company managers. Smaller cottages, some not much more than a couple of rooms on stilts, provided for the single colonial worker. Inherent hierarchies in social structures are thus seen to be shipped down from the metropole in material form. Early 20th century European socio-spatial ideas that workers should be allocated domestic areas in line with their position in the railway company hierarchy were inscribed into the fabric of the young town. Certain homes were clearly designed with the single male worker in mind, with no room for a family. Tight spaces in shared dormitory houses and elevated huts would have served to insulate the men from their surroundings, as well as literally to set them above and apart from Congolese workers. The iron-augmented village was intended as an enclave for white Europeans, with the local workforce forced to live in makeshift shacks on another side of a cleft in the land. As with so many other early colonial towns, racial distancing and segregation formed Thysville's basis . Unified aesthetic, in the space of the colony, stands for an attempted closed circuit, resistant to the influence of the surrounding peoples.

As the industrial town grew, further cottages for white settlers were built in the 1930s. Made of stone



Figment 4.17: Archival image of Thysville cottages (circa 1930s)

and cement, these exude a more permanent aura than the earlier structures closer to the railway line with their more delicate lines of iron constructions. A formula of squat houses, topped with sloping roofs that extend over rounded walls and domed arches are repeated across the crest of the central hillock around which the colonial town coalesced. Aesthetically, these uniform homes have far more in common with Belgian Art Nouveau's rural theme.

The Art Deco[37] solutions to housing colonists in Thysville appear to have strong ties to *fin de siècle* country homes, such as Henry van de Velde's *Villa Bloemenwerf* (1895) and Serrurier-Bovy's *l'Aube* (1903) which, in turn, were rooted in the English Arts and Crafts movement (see Chapter 1). When the English cottage style migrated to Belgium, regional features (especially Flemish vernacular) were incorporated. As discussed earlier, their underlying purpose was to encourage a way of life closer to an imagined peasant past, living in communion with nature. On being sent to an unfamiliarly hot and humid environment, these homes are suggestive of a different kind of sanctuary, where its inhabitants are shielded from the natural elements, rather than taking refuge in them. Unlike utopian social housing schemes in Belgium, which were seeped in nostalgia for pre-industrial times, the Thysville experiment ignored local "peasant" aesthetics. No reference was made to Congolese vernaculars and building

37. Art Deco, short for *Arts Décoratifs*, replaced Art Nouveau and flourished in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. It waned with the Second World War. As eclectic as its predecessor, it was known for lavish decoration that combined craft techniques with machine age imagery and materials. While certain Art Nouveau characteristics fed into Art Deco, the latter distinguishes itself through bold geometric design, which tend towards symmetry and rectilinear form.



Figment 4.18: Contemporary images of Art Deco cottage and the Kongo University administration block in Mbanza Ngungu

traditions.[38] Instead, European aesthetics were applied, in an overall system that interrupted existing logics of lived environment. As such, these pocket references to generalized European traditions usher in colonial design packages that came to represent the modernist movement.

In contrast to the built-in inflexibilities of imported iron imposed onto the landscape, Congolese forms of architecture, in all its myriad variations, reflects local sensitivities to working the land. Made of different combinations of natural grasses, leaves and earth, Congolese built movable homesteads that followed cultivable farming areas. Common practice saw new homes built on top of an old field, in a system that allowed land to lay fallow (Prussin, 1974: 205). Flexible design ensured that each structure within a complex could provide for different purposes, serving as kitchen, lodging for guests, or as bedrooms, and also reflect social hierarchy (Prussin, 1974: 191). While versions of this vernacular system are still in place today, the contrast between these forms of construction and prefabricated colonial packages is marked. The Thysville structures, constructed from portable parts, have never moved since assembly, indelibly imprinting the land with imported materials.

In the above examples, sequestered colonial space was conceived of in the metropole as an attempt to control that which could never be homogenized or contained. Pre-packaged forms that do not

38. Terence Ranger (1993: 211) argues that no settler in Africa saw himself as a peasant, whereas in Europe the invented traditions of the ruling class were somewhat balanced by those of an invented “folk” culture.

take local conditions or people into account present the material embodiment of universalist colonial policies, with all its inherent contradictions. Preaching Enlightenment ideas of civilization and morality — mapping out a correct way to live — leads to a sectioning off and partitioning of space that disenfranchises local people. Moreover, demarcation of the future city led the way for reading urban space with the colonial presumption that European contact marked the "beginning of history for African societies" (Mamdani, 2001: 21). With modernist design as the visible base structure for urban materialities, the myth of colonialism animating local communities culturally, economically and politically is perpetuated.

With the colony as a laboratory for architectonic experimentation, modernist forms come to be associated with the colonial policies of control and power. If Art Nouveau has not directly been named as a colonial style in Belgium, the same can never be said of the structures it inspired in the Congolese areas it occupied.

Colonial Style: Languages of Occupation

The metal hotels and Thysville village usher in an aesthetics of progress and technological power that attempts to suppress segmentation and deep insecurity. Ultimately, they signal the start of systemic violence and oppression of subject people and their existing infrastructures. Preempting International Style and Art Deco strands of architecture that were to have a strong presence in colonial Congo from the 1920s, modernist aesthetics became another language of control. Like the ubiquitous French language, once taken hold, it would continue to define the outward parameters of postcolonial life, imposing certain strictures while constantly being redefined according to Congolese localities.

Early buildings associated with the *Hotels ABC* ushered in the grids and formations that were to be applied across urban space, heralding "geographies of difference."[39] Colonial logic was behind the neutral zones and *cités indigènes* of future urban space embedded in the original iron skeletons.[40] Accordingly, areas demarcated for the privileged and wealthy are still imprinted on the contemporary

39. David Harvey (1996: 320) references urban spaces where mortgage finance is rife and people are written off, in a similar manner to "much of Africa."

40. Colonial urban areas were seen as ordered and clean, native ones were seen as messy and prone to illness.

living environment, even as the material circumstances of built space fluctuate. Similarly, separations between countryside and city are set up in brittle metallic frameworks. Such early constructions pave the way for the artificial breach between urban and rural space that was to be fostered in postcolonial Congo. The colonial construction of traditional rural societies as being at odds with the city and, as such, mired in "sterility and inertia" is imprinted (Fanon, 1963: 65).[41]

Yet, despite this early discourse of refusal, the material city made itself as a system of overlapping circuits of interaction, mixing rural with urban on micro levels. The wear and tear of the metal hotels, present from very early on, suggests that the city has always been informed by — and blended with — the village. Visible incursions of natural forces and informal rhythms of use speak of a multitiered city space that contradicts strict narratives of separation.

The iron-based structures are enmeshed with and defined by that which grew up around them. The manner in which they were added to, subtracted from and penetrated underlines that their continually drawn out lives do not allow for the maintenance of clear boundaries. The will to separate colonists from subjects, while furiously attempting to bend nature into supposedly civilized formations, was confounded and confused, both by (sometimes deliberate) human traffic and through environmental conditions.

Aging *Hotel ABC* buildings are beginning to sag from bearing the ever-expanding weight of daily activity. Combined forces of pounding temperatures, damp air and tropical storms on the buildings, as well as their effect on the ground that bears them, suggest that while they are now of the place, there is a visible degree to which the greater environment rejects them and the greater colonial systems for which they were once placemakers. By 1957, supposedly fertile soil across the Thysville region was recognized as unsuited for colonial agricultural systems. Irregularities of the terrain led to the dispersion of fertile soils and erosion was a constant threat (Baeck, 1957: 145). Leopoldville's foundational grounds, too, proved precarious. During the rainy season, erosion is still a significant threat to whole neighbourhoods, with poor drainage cutting through sandy hills to create spectacular

41. Further, connectivity between city and rural areas and between nearby cities (like Kinshasa and Brazzaville) is far weaker than cities' sizes might suggest (Myers, 2011: 53).

abysses in its urban tissue (De Boeck, 2004: 229).

Honing in on early modernist buildings in themselves, holes, rents and seepage in their built material contest the possibility of their being hermeneutic havens. Moreover, mutual uses and dependencies, set in motion with the initial assemblage of metal frameworks, question the idea of pure form, or overruling design. Ultimately, the insidious idea of modern form as being of Europe alone — something that happens elsewhere first — is shown to have been set in motion on unstable ground.

From the first point of disembarking, to being assembled, painted, furnished and added onto — before they were firmly claimed as postcolonial places — these industrial Art Nouveau components became embedded in "other rhythms and temporalities" than the factory that made them could have anticipated (De Boeck, 2004: 228). Their making was achieved in more than the processes that decided on the location of each foundation and the view each balcony should look out on. The greater political infrastructure that these buildings enabled started to slowly degenerate from the moment the first iron poles were sunk. With the actual earth showing signs of slow rejection, the greater political field underwent seismic shifts.[42]

Over the years, the language of these buildings became one of repair and ingenuous bypassing. At the same time, they speak eloquently to a general urban state of material resignation. The former hotels are never merely the voice of the conqueror, absorbing the blows of history. Neither are they entirely spolia, the objects of the previous regime triumphantly claimed by its successor. The longer the original *Hotel ABC* structures get reused, the fact that they are the active creation of various players is made more overtly visible in small details set into larger socio-political vistas. The metal hotels and their satellite structures are clearly usable remains.[43] In complicated nostalgic efforts, the old structures

42. The Congo played a crucial role in the Second World War, with thousands of Congolese troops being sent into battle and remaining independent when Belgium herself had fallen to the Nazis. Soon thereafter African nationalism emerged, eventually leading to massive riots in Leopoldville and Stanleyville (now Lubumbashi) in 1959. The Belgians were unable to maintain control and granted the Congo its independence on 30 June 1960. The short-lived Republic of the Congo was in place until 1965, a time during which its first president, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated and unitarian and federalist forces were locked in combat. In 1965, General Mobutu Sese Seko, commander in chief of the national army, took control and named himself president.

43. Few structures are not reused in a Congo where financial problems caused by World Bank and IMF demands burst the bubble of independence optimism. However, unlike other colonial situations, the *Hotel ABC* complexes were not

remain actively inhabited. Constrictive capacities of the metal-based buildings are stretched to new uses and forced into contemporary times, despite not always being quite up to the task.

Variegated activity mobilizes the old hotels and housing, leaving traces on its exteriors. Thus, when a used clothesline continued to be seen on the first-floor balcony of the former *Hotel ABC* in Kinshasa, rumours of it being an informal slum arose. But these were soon quashed when it was opened as an office building, operating at a steady hum (see Mboka, 2011b). In the former Thysville, the hotel has been turned into courthouse. The grounds around it are bare from grass from the human traffic. Pungent burnt-out grass, goat droppings and a lone cockerel attest to outdoor cooking for an ongoing stream of people.

Despite their ghostly presence in early photographs and their ominous boding towards a system of extreme inequality, there are no ghosts in the old hotels. They are signifiers of greater violence, rather than sites where bodies went missing. By comparison, the ruins of Mobutu Sese Seko's palaces at N'Sele and Gbadolite are rife with stories of unquiet spirits.[44] Although distorted and exposed to conditions they do not entirely understand, the industrial offshoots of Art Nouveau are firmly occupied and lived in, by the most expedient means.

Lived Remains: Mbanza Ngungu

> The impulse to reuse, as opposed to destroy, the built infrastructure of colonial regimes seeks to impose political continuity and order under a new system of control.(Petti et al., 2013: 20)

Entering present day Mbanza Ngungu, the remains of Thysville's colonial accommodation on some level affirm Petti, Hilal and Weisman's statement above. When the Belgian colonial regime was overthrown, certain evacuated structures were certainly "often seen as the legacy of modernization and, therefore, an economic and organizational resource" (ibid). At the same time, their current state

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dismembered for the reuse of their iron components in other constructions.

44. As will be fully explicated in the following chapter, Mobutu Sese Seko's rule saw the Congo, renamed as Zaïre, as a one-party state, until he was ousted by Laurent Kabila in 1997. His regime has been accused of committing mass human rights abuses in maintaining and consolidating power.



Figment 4. 19: Contemporary image of *Hotel ABC* in Mbanza Ngungu

underscores the extent to which early manifestations of modernism quickly became inadequate to the galloping needs of 20th century living in the Congo. With some modernisms being more useful than others, the brittle logics of Art Nouveau legacies were quickly exposed.

By the late 1960s, the Second Republic under Mobutu Sese Seko was in place.[45] Complete with railroad, hospital, stores and colonial villas, Thysville was given over to the transport company of Zaïre, the *Office National des Transports* (ONATRA), and became known as DG ONATRA. In so doing, the Zaïrian regime could be seen to recreate similar spatial hierarchies and continue policies of separation. However, there are moments when the needs of the town that became Mbanza Ngungu can be seen to subvert certain programmes and make concessions — albeit limited ones — to other possibilities. At the sidelines and fissures of the original structures, different kinds of people, enterprises and materials mingle with the remains of the colonial apparatus. Furthermore, with increasing numbers of people ebbing into urban surrounds, and fashion following new technologies, the old metallic frameworks no longer describe the most highly prized spaces.

While Thys's name was removed from the town's appellation, the building most strongly associated

45. As will be fully discussed in the following chapter, renaming was part of Mobutu's *recours de l'authenticité* by which the government legislature endorsed African culture and traditions.



Figure 4.20: Contemporary image of *Hotel ABC* in Mbanza Ngungu

with the instrumental colonist, *Hotel ABC*, remains. No longer a dislocated European railway appendage, the hotel structure and the cottages clustered nearby make up the heart of Mbanza Ngungu, around which the formal, built face of the town has developed, absorbing certain qualities and rejecting others.

Today a slow-paced university town of approximately 100,000 people, Mbanza Ngungu has featured in the timeline of major events in the history of independent Congo. Home to a major garrison of the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), it saw the jailing and brief release from captivity of Patrice Lumumba, prior he was moved to Katanga where he was murdered (Young and Turner, 1985: 178). Apart from housing the army, its major function is still as a centre for the railworks. The cottages of the colonial hote are assigned to ONATRA workers, with the grander homes assigned to managers and their families. A portion of these were sold to government to house officials and army leaders. The Art Deco homes further up the hill serve as residences for the more well off. Like the large faux fortress which they flank (*Maison Kitala*), they tend to be connected to the Kongo University and are often residences for its associates.

The former *Hotel ABC* still occupies a central position, recast as the courthouse serving the entire region. Its distinctive decorative ironwork system declares its new allegiance by sporting the bright hues of the national flag. The less ornate offices of the area's municipal leader are next door. With the railway line no longer in service, the courthouse stands as a lone edifice in its own right, a branch of local governance rather than one of colonial extraction. That which was privatized and geared towards

temporary occupation is now communal, employing some of the trappings of permanence. Moreover, the courthouse is a particularly convivial environment. Groups of people mill around, chatting. And, unlike the tight spaces in in bureaucratic offices in the capital, it is spacious and offers ease of movement without interference.

The manner in which this choice marker of colonial land-claiming has been given a new function highlights, to a degree, the institutionalized relations between people and things they brought with them. The appropriation of a symbol of colonial inequality (if not decadence) as a court of law accentuates an irrevocable entanglement of identity. There can be no return to pre-colonial conditions of diverse commonalities and communities. Place is now divided into state-controlled ownership, whether private or public. The courthouse thus represents successive ruling regimes.

The old settler building appears to have taken on its new identity with some reluctance. While it is relatively well kept, it has been palpably battered by heat and dampness (factors which have not had the same effect on buildings built in the later colonial period). Signs of stress and rust are most obvious in parts of the ironwork that is not coated in enamel paint. An iron bridge connecting the courthouse to its neighbouring structure has been declared unsafe and off-limits. The civic institution holds the bustling daytime traffic of bureaucrats, various advocates, judges and their clerks, as well as clients and witnesses, within a neatly serviceable interior. Plain white walls, with streaks of moisture and buckling, frame piles of paper and various forms of filing systems. Offices are furnished with solid, elderly wooden desks, mixed with mass-produced plastic chairs (ubiquitous to most Congolese social activities). Most people who work in the old hotel tell of discomfort. Insufficient space and leaky walls are unpleasant factors, with the main complaint being its shabby appearance, deemed unsuitable for its supposedly august function. Sculpted grass lawns have long since vanished and only the outlines of the perimeter walls remain. The institution gives an impression of accessibility to anyone who walks past. Once breached, security is slow to approach, to ascertain the purpose of the visit.

The goats, chickens and fires of the female informal traders who camp outside, serving food during the daytime, provide a lively presence. Judges and advocates, in full regalia, talk to visitors while office workers and messengers queue for food. A thatch roof has been erected to accommodate lunchtime



Figure 4.21: Contemporary images of workers' cottages in Mbanza Ngungu

traffic. From the outside, the atmosphere is not that of official space or grounds strictly separated out for the work of the court. Balconies are seldom empty of groups of men and women chatting during the working day. Even after hours, the building gives the impression of being integrated with the street. Where the courthouse is regularly patched-up, the iron-laced cottages are in various degrees of decay. Metal parts are rusting, leaving motley concoctions of reddish streaks on once-white walls. Nature's appropriation of the structures, through rust, signals the bleeding of boundaries between land, nature and artificial constructions. Structures fall down, especially those assigned to retired staff who are less able to invest in maintenance. ONATRA tenants are upset at being forced to live in aging relics especially because they sag and flood during heavy rains.

A senior worker, assigned to a cottage since 1965, complains of "cracks everywhere … Even if the frame is metal, this house is already on the ground. So it is with the grace of God. Tomorrow or after tomorrow, it could crumble. I am not of heart to stay in this house. If I could leave today, I would" (ONATRA tenant, pers. comm., 17 December 2015). The foundational houses of Thysville are mired in the past. Still a halfway point, they now house people wanting to move on. Not only does their size and external decoration belie the status of its inhabitants, as decided by the ONATRA administration, but they do not cater to the perceived needs of contemporary Congolese lifestyles. The inflexibility of the initial designs sees that the patched up smaller bungalows have more in common with the corrugated iron of informal settlements than other modernist designs in the town. Unlike more malleable shacks, whose alterations may potentially be negotiated, there is no space for larger families in the ONATRA homes. Occupants have to make do with flimsy walls and cramped rooms. Renovations done to larger

homes, and the grievances that the inhabitants of the smaller ones voiced, suggest that inhabitants in particular felt the absence of garages. The colonial workers' village was conceived of as railway-oriented (and, as such, only concerned with its linear, Europe-orientated circuits). Larger homes often house more than one family and it is common for their gardens to be utilized to grow maize and tomatoes. The countryside is thus brought into the town.

Up the hill, colonial cottages from the 1930s present more cheerful, sought-after accommodation. Although also unsuited to the customary large families, the more spacious interiors have been filled with contemporary comforts and fresh coats of paint that declare personal whimsy and taste. The sturdy stone shelters and working firesides are prized by their owners (as are their garages). These cottages and the town demonstrate a strong Art Deco element. Prominent buildings lining the small city centre and the hill above display its characteristic bold stripes and geometric patterns, in particular the the *Heilig Hart Church* (1930) and *Hotel Cosmopolite*. Far from being contagious, the aesthetics of the Hotel ABC and its accompanying cottages were not repeated in the urban space that developed around them. The Art Deco wave of colonial style, symmetrical and machine-loving, came directly from the metropole and did not emerge from the colonial precursors of the early garden city.

In the old railway village, additions to the dilapidated homes tend to be informally patched with scraps. Aesthetic unity of the early village is now replaced by natural profusions, interspersed with stained walls and rusting metal details. Offshoots of Art Nouveau (distinguished as such, despite not sporting decorative plant-forms) now give the impression of being slowly subsumed by nature.[46]

The railway line itself, as a symbol of industrial colonial power, has fundamentally shifted in meaning. Since a new line was built to replace the colonial-built one, the site is no longer an active station. Riotous creepers and succulent plants engulf abandoned, rusting train carriages. In a reversal of Art Nouveau logic, living sinuous forms grasp husks of iron matter, adding to its decay at the same time as the metal provides disintegrating structural support. This is not nature controlled or channelled into industry, but one that overtakes industry, adjusting to toxic levels of iron. In a literal entanglement, growing plants are bound up with colonial debris. Stained soil around piles of metal clippings provides

46. David van Reybrouck (2014: 85) calls them "Art-Nouveau-style colonial homes."



Figure 4.22: Contemporary image of the remains of CCCI trains at the former station in Mbanza Ngungu

a reminder of what the deep foundational metal of the early buildings are enacting under the surface of the ground.

Only one building is till used, the old workshop for rail repair and manufacture that still operates as before. With the old railway line no longer in use, train parts are sent by road. The interior of the workshop is a mix of activated areas, where ONATRA staff are busy, and obsolete machinery, all punctuated by pools of water leaking from the roof. Neither a stagnant ruin, nor an energized workplace, it is a place of reordering and practical compromise. In Mbanza Ngungu, the colonial apparatus has been absorbed into the greater, slow-growing circuitries of its surrounds, constantly renegotiating early promises of modernization.

Shadows of Grandeur: *Palace ONATRA*, Kinshasa

If a network of cumbrous greenery, official activity and pockmarked metal are the defining images of the former *Hotel ABC* complex in Mbanza Ngungu, its lone counterpart in Kinshasa occupies a splintered compound site. Fragile and isolated on a slip of riverbank, it is visibly threatened by the hard angles of downtown Gombe, on the one side, and the industrial frictions of haphazard river industry, on the other.



Figure 4.23: Contemporary image of *Palace ONATRA*, Kinshasa

From within what are now shared ONATRA offices, water breezes usher in fresh rain smells, alongside odours of rotting vegetable and human waste. The river opens up a big space, with cranes, rusting containers and chains in a rickety relationship with permanently docked, blighted ship parts. Across the water, the distinctive skyline of Brazzaville is a reminder of recent war. Despite being so close as to be visible, the territory is off-limits to all but highly regulated water passage. The trickle of river traffic reminds the visitor of the massive tracts of unnavigable river that led to building the railway. The most active presence on the water are clumps of grass eddying through currents, coalescing around small islands. The larger of these is haunted by rumours of disappeared people whom Mobutu is said to have sent there. This is a silent patch of town, blocked off from busy streets. Whereas the courthouse in Mbanza Ngungu is embedded in the town circuitry, the previous centre of colonial high society in Kinshasa is severed from public street life. Dwarfed by massive high rises (as much as its own previous reputation), the former *Hotel ABC*, now known as *Palace ONATRA*, appears elderly and unexceptional. Beneath fresh coats of paint — a combination of white and pale green that is highly susceptible to damp — slow deterioration seems only momentarily delayed.

Part of the ONATRA building's neglected quality stems from its lack of participation in its locality. It gives the appearance of having been edged out of the burgeoning suburb of Gombe, home to ex-pats, diplomatic embassies and the wealthy elite, which feeds intense street level activity of traders, taxis and hawkers. In the lonelier street in which the ONATRA riverfront buildings are located, there is no room

for pedestrians. Cars speed past boarded up lots and one has to walk far down the road to access the busy Ngaliema Beach, where clamouring human traffic negotiates the flow of goods and people in and out of Kinshasa. At the *Palace ONATRA*, circumvented by the transportation system, the most lively activity seems to take place stories above, as a Chinese-funded behemoth of steel and glass is rising close-by to take its place in the Kinshasa skyline.

From having functioned as the central point in a fashionable street, providing access to choice shopping, *Palace ONATRA* is now partially boarded up and guarded, with access to curious passers-by firmly denied. Surrounding streets are punctuated by the curling pillars of early colonial era buildings. No longer participating in river life by means of bank-side gardens and terraced landscape, the parcel of land that *Palace ONATRA* occupies is awkwardly severed at the edges. In a suburb where official buildings have well-tended gardens, with sculpted embankments, *Palace ONATRA* has only a fringe of greenery surrounding its aging metal work and parking lot. In a city where surface values are highly prized — especially that which is new, expensive and clean — the old hotel no longer counts as premium space.

Having served as a popular hotel for Euro-American visitors in the first half of the 20th century, *Hotel ABC* underwent extensive renovations in the 1920s, increasing its capacity to 120 rooms. It was then that it garnered Art Deco flourishes. It enjoyed its most celebrated period between the world wars, especially in the early 1940s under the auspices of private investor Joseph Damseaux who had taken over from the *Compagnie ABC* in 1937 (Mboka, 2011b). Its current configuration of Art Deco base with Art Nouveau-esque trimmings and top embodies shifting allegiances in Belgian colonial architecture. Where spindly pre-fabricated metal frames mark the period before the First World War, Art Deco geometries form a large bulk of built colonial legacies in Kinshasa.

Alongside public buildings like *l'Hôpital Reine-Élisabeth,*[47] *Collège Boboto* and the church-school complex of *Sacré-Coeur*, which still endow distinct character to their surrounds, private colonial

47. Richard Lequy's *l'Hôpital Reine-Élisabeth* for colonial patients (as opposed to *l'Hôpital Mama-Yemo* in the *cité indigène* for "natives") was inspired by Victor Horta's Art Deco *Brugmann de Bruxelles* (1926), in which different hospital pavilions were placed within generous gardens.





Figure 4.24: Archival image of Palace ONATRA (circa 1930s)
Figure 4.25: Contemporary image of *Sacre Coeur* in Kinshasa

homes further displayed different styles of Art Deco. Pleated blocks, rectangular stripes, flat roofs and domed entrances of colonial elites in the colony spoke of Belgian admiration for Parisian trends of the time.[48] While Art Deco resulted from a confluence of influences and varied according to individualistic manifestations — as did Art Nouveau — overriding Deco influences are commonly understood to be the "ancient" arts of Mesoamerica, Egypt, East Asia, the Classical world and Africa. The latter's markers are usually bold, abstract and geometric zigzags, hatch marks, circles and triangles of African textiles, as well as shields and sculptures. Stylized African figures were a common part of its repertoire, usually seen in friezes, murals and other forms of decorative wrapping of buildings and objects.

In Leopoldville, as in Thysville, colonial Art Deco reached its height in the 1930s and 1940s.[49] The post Second World War period saw some Belgian architects experimenting with different strands of modernism and an expressive Art Deco was a large part of this. However, unlike the laboratory situation in Algeria, Morocco or Libya, there was no concerted attempt to create a vernacular style that incorporated local aesthetics (Lagae, 2005: 65).[50] Whereas concerted efforts were made to bring Art Deco — modern architecture — to Elizabethville, the climate in Leopoldville did not suit direct importations.[51] In the colonial capital, hot and humid conditions demanded overhangs, awnings and

48. The name "Art Deco" came from the 1925 international exhibition in Paris, *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, which cemented the flamboyant new design style in the applied arts. It was only in retrospect that the term was applied to examples outside of France.
49. Belgian architects only fully invested in projects in the colony from the 1920s onwards.
50. The buildings were, largely, for the benefit of the colonial elite, rather than the colonized masses.
51. This was most obviously demonstrated by the lively Art Deco design by Raymond Cloquet and Julien Caen at the

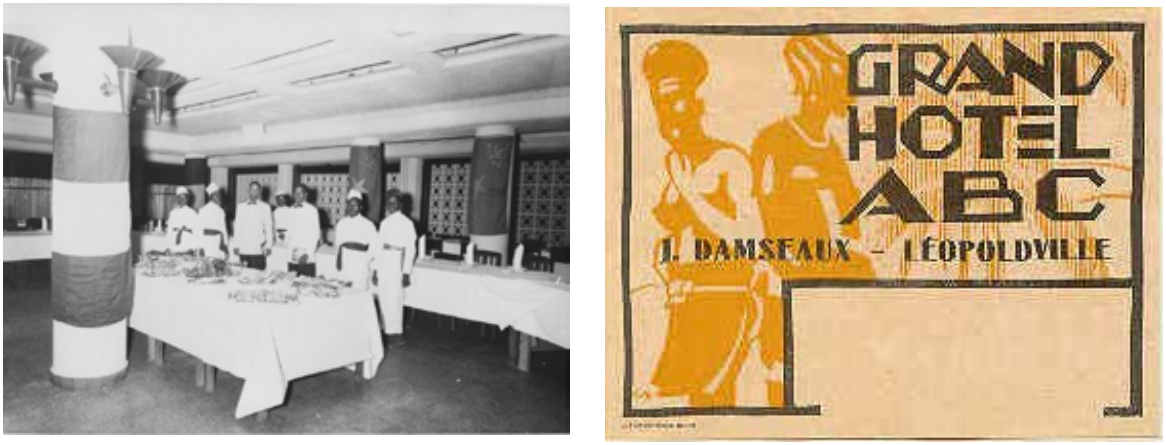


Figure 4.26: Interior of *Hotel ABC* in Leopoldville and luggage tag (circa 1930s)

other forms of stylistic "contamination" (Lagae and Gemoets, 2013: 133). Tropical architecture in Leopoldville (as opposed to tropicalist architecture) only engaged with the issue of climate, rather than with local communities and cultures (Lagae and Gemoets, 2013: 135). When decorative reference to Congolese imagery could be found, it tended to be limited to architectural surface patterning that copied textiles and artworks (rather than structural features).[52] Aesthetic notions of Africa thus appear to have arrived in colonial Congo via Paris.

In mementos from the interbellum heyday of the grand *Hotel ABC*, it is evident that a dislocated African sensibility was invoked for decorative purposes. A photograph of Congolese staff waiting tables reveals Egyptian-inspired interior décor. Lotus flowers crowning a pillar are a common Art Deco motif. Hotel tags from around 1930 sport sketchy silhouettes of bare-breasted, figurine-like women wearing indeterminate tribal headgear. Such imagery was typical of the Art Deco fascination with the ethnographic African object, inherited from modernist art trends. During the height of its popularity, the go-to hotel in the Belgian Congo casually promoted the extreme exoticization of the African body. At the same time, the actual Congolese bodies within the hotel were present as servers, chefs and cleaners. From giving form to colonial high times, the hotel's star waned. After being handed over to OTRACO in 1946, its second wing was demolished and its Art Deco lower regions coated in stucco (Mboka,

Exposition Internationale d'Elisabethville (1931).

52. Johan Lagae has written about potential "Africanisms" in the work of Claude Laurens. While the Belgian architect was active in Leopoldville in the 1950s, his attempt to work with African architecture and tropes tended to be limited to international expos in Euro-America. For example, see: Lagae and Laurens (2001).



Figure 4.27: Contemporary images of *Hotel ABC*, Kinshasa

2011b).[53] Newer hotels, like the Memling, Stanley and Regina, provided more fashionable forms of entertainment and sported trendier looks. In 1983, what had been known as the *Hotel Palace* became the P*alace ONATRA*, a grand name for one of the many buildings housing government transportation offices.

The Art Nouveau husk is not well suited to the needs of a contemporary office. Desks and people are squeezed into small rooms, originally intended as hotel bedrooms. Being one of the many ONATRA outlets, offices are sparse, decorated with the trimmings office workers themselves see fit to provide. The fact that some members of staff believe it to always have been an office block suggests that expectations for more convenient contemporary office arrangements in the CBD are low. Use of the colonial edifice is marked by expedience. The family of an engineer, who also serves as the caretaker, resides on the 2nd floor. Children's games and family chores played out on the balconies make a stage of informal domesticity, squarely in the centre of office work. The narrow strip of land around the building is populated by guards and a lone gardener, who sit outside, largely managing the car park for the office workers

The former hotel now presents a multi-layered ecosystem of different kinds of people that test the limits of its built matter. Its external face is well outside of the language of prime property of the area.

53. In the same year, Kinshasa's first skyscraper, the Forescom building, was completed. Filip de Boeck (2015: 85) describes this boat-like, 10-storey structure as the start of global modernity in Kinshasa, "pointing to the future " while still embodying "elaborate technologies of domination, control and surveillance."

On the topmost floor, a corner balcony sports a lone, large wooden table. This is said to have belonged to the former colonial governor and used for meetings (presumably chairs are located accordingly). From inside, the remainders of colonial industry are visibly part of the scenery, not quite working, but not yet ready to be discarded. Metallic overhangs frame a functioning lumber yard and a defunct railway line. In its contemporary situation, that which was mass produced is now characterized by highly personal occupations and activities. Similar slippage between contexts sees semi-public office space merging with the domestic. Pragmatic layers of reusing the former hotel reveal various forms of immediate agencies being inscribed on once oppressive constructions, which alienated Congolese people by only intending to cater to European settler needs.

Inherited Debris: Colonial Nostalgia

In an attempt to re-inscribe Kinshasa with its ancient villages and hamlets into his guide to the history and early sites of the city, Antoine Lumenganesso (1995) traverses colonial areas via ancient trees. The former *Hotel ABC* and *Palace Hotel*, today *Palace Onatra*, are first mentioned in relation to the baobabs found on nearby Ngobila beach, standing in for the location of the old market of ancient *Insasa de Ntsulu* (Lumenganesso, 1995: 144).[54] In prioritizing ancient natural entities, Lumenganesso attempts to emplace a long-reaching indigenous sensibility, over and above the ruptures imposed by colonial "foreigners." He aims to reclaim city space as fundamentally rooted in the age of its entities. And yet, in doing so, Lumenganesso accentuates how the built matter of Kinshasa cannot be separated from its colonial heritage.[55]

Lumenganesso's approach allows for a rather touching tribute to ancient trees, crediting them with their own personalities and venerable status. At the same time, however, he puts faith in their .permanence and staying power. In using ancient arboreal characters to stand in for pre-colonial culture, the value of the actual built matter of those cultures is negated. Accordingly, he entrenches imperial teleologies that see temporary structures (which, for all their obvious downsides, did see human life far more generous and open to their surrounds) as less civilized. With the foundations of urbanity still placed at that which

54. The market's former names are listed as Ngobila, Nsuvila and Tsubula (Lumenganesso, 1995: 144). The trees themselves have been mostly destroyed in renovations.

55. Such is Lumenganesso's (1995: 5) respect for heritage and history that he makes a case for retaining the colonial monuments that Mobutu had removed, on the basis that they were part of the city's history.

remains the longest, the roots of Kinshasa are laid at Stanley's initial intervention, rather than any cosmopolitanism or alternative modernisms being sought in the communities King Leopold II's mission interrupted and commingled with.

Stanley's first outpost, founded in 1881 at what he named "Stanley Pool," is thus still cited as the beginning of Kinshasa as a city.[56] Existing villages and settlements of the Humbu and Bateke,[57] which had served as trading centres long before the intervention of King Leopold II's agents, are mentioned as accessories to the greater narrative of early Leopoldville.[58] With modern urbanity understood to originate in colonization, the postcolonial subject is left with the difficult task of having to pick apart what aspects of its accompanying myths of modernization to accept and which to negate.

When Lumenganesso lists *Hotel ABC* as a relevant heritage site, its style of metalwork is linked to the construction of the "popular" Eiffel Tower of 1889 (Lumenganesso, 1995: 149). The value of the iron hotel is, thus, seen to lie in its association with one of the most famous buildings in the world, a symbol of technological prowess and national showmanship.[59] No matter how much connotations of modernist architecture as progressive development are bound up in a foundational colonial ideology of conquest, they are part of the postcolonial cityscape and urban imagination. Cityness, as read in postcolonial guides and retraced histories, is mapped out according to individual fragments and sites within the built environment. Accordingly, the overriding idea of a lack of cohesiveness comes to be inscribed across a Kinshasa overlaid by dense histories. This privatized fragmentation, sparked by the early standoff between imperial architecture and local ways of living, is seen to be exacerbated by Congolese elites, who wish to adhere to colonial styles. Part of this legacy was to pit the aesthetics of modernization against the cliché of the rural African. Such thinking does not take into account the

56. For other examples, see Fontaine (1970: 10), Lumenganesso (1995: 12), Molei (1979: 15–16) and Pain (1984: 11).
57. The Bateke had two main villages along the river bank where the nucleus of Leopoldville was to be located. Nshasha, later Kinshasa, was an important trading centre. Further north, Kintambo was headed by the Bateke chief, Ngaliema, who is said to have accorded Stanley the right to found a colonial outpost. The Humbu chieftain Kinge protested that Ngaliema had no right to cede the land, as he was overlord of the territory. After further negotiations (and strong competition from representatives from France who also wanted the land), the arrangement was confirmed.
58. In only recognizing colonial occupation as the start of urbanism, such histories further ignore the great African cities of precolonial times.
59. There is no link made to idiosyncratic Belgian Art Nouveau (on whom Eiffel's industrial achievement was an influence). Recent guides, produced by Johan Lagae and Bernard Toulier, make this point. See: Lagae and Gemoets (2010) and Toulier and Lagae (2013).

complex cosmopolitanism of Congolese people, whose localized sense of style, displayed in their actions (if not aesthetics), are based in mixing the inherited tradition with urbanity. As described by James Ferguson, under industrialization most Africans insist on conceptualizing daily life in terms of tradition versus modernity, essentializing old against new (1999: 90–93). While such ideology may be found at the root of the *Hotel ABC* structures that we have followed into contemporary Congolese urban space, responses to these colonial remains reveal varying experiences, memories and reactions, some of which are visible.

The iron roots that secured the hotels laid literal and figurative foundations of the idea of modern form in Kinshasa. These would give rise to far more ambitious skeletons, leading to the towering high-rises now piercing the skyline, but also long-lasting conceptual coupling of modernity to machine aesthetics. One of the more toxic aspects of colonial architectonics is the continued separation of that which is perceived as European from what is seen as African. Determinedly clinging to origins, buildings which look the most modern are still, largely, perceived as being "European" on the streets of contemporary Kinshasa.[60] Even as urban spaces have overtaken the *Hotel ABC* structures, it would appear that part of their dislocating work is still in place.

Within a Kinshasa that, at surface level, seems obsessed with newness and visible prosperity, the elderly colonial relic of *Palace ONATRA* still receives some praise. On being asked about working its grounds for the past 23 years, the in-house gardener states that "A colonial building is a legacy. It is good that we inherited it from colonization. And it is our pleasure. It reminds us of that time" (pers. comm., 17 December 2015). Such an example of Congolese colonial nostalgia can partially be read as a sign of how deep-rooted imperial mythologies of progress were embedded in urban aesthetics. Since independence, Kinshasa has been subject to soaring inflation and continuous threat of further upheaval, in which "getting by" has been a main preoccupation of the majority of inhabitants not fortunate enough to be part of the elite (Fontaine, 1970: 3). Waves of symbolic and physical violence brought by colonialism were followed by those of the Mobutu regime, causing extreme alienation and uncertainty in the average Kinois, leading some to look back to colonialism as a time of order (De Boeck, 2004:

60. As will be fully explicated in the following chapter.

34).[61] Moreover, the nostalgia expressed here might be a longing for the illusion of order. Glossing over the fact that major destructive cycles currently affecting daily life were put in place by colonialism in the first place, it was a time when things "looked right" on the surface, that is desired (Bissell, 2005: 217). If nostalgia is fuelled more intensely by rapid shifts, as Svetlana Boym (2001: 11) delineates, an African metropolis of massive and variegated change may well evoke yearning for a regulated past that never existed. However, a fondness for *Palace ONATRA*, as a colonial inheritance, refracts its meaning into far more individualized pieces, emphasizing that the colonial subjecthood was never a faceless mass, but made up of different people whose individual suffering, resistance and complicity with the regime were experienced in different ways.

Jacob Dlamini (2009: 13) introduces the idea that thinking about an aspect of an oppressive regime with fondness does not mean to suggest that it was not evil. Rather, nostalgic remembrances serve to emphasize how there were many aspects to repressive pasts, "some petty, many structural and, therefore, embedded in social relations" (Dlamini, 2009: 14). Experience or memories of subjecthood were varied and uneven. Even those urban évolués who benefited from the system, and seemingly admired its forms, did not necessarily support it. Moreover, it is the current state of the former *Hotel ABC* in Kinshasa that provokes pleasurable memories for its imperial legacy. For a person whose life's work has been invested in maintaining the appearance of order in the locus of the former hotel, his respect for what it stands for could well be bound up in its particularly fragile qualities. As a worker on its increasingly threatened sliver of land, generally viewing the old structure from the outside, the groundsman sees its need for physical care and attention. Unlike office workers, who tend to only see the building's cramped conditions, this more sentimental, holistic view talks to mutual dependencies. For all its initial, domineering connotations, the now weakened structure still provides work and shelter to a community of people and, as such, is a potentially binding symbol.

Ultimately, to take pleasure in the colonial relic is to accept it as part of Kinshasa's shared history. This act of translating an elderly structure that, in its time, was part of an architecture of assault, reveals an intimacy that comes with a form of ownership: the agency of being able to repair and maintain. By

61. As will be discussed in the following chapter, nostalgia for the Mobutu regime is another common feature of the complex heritage to be negotiated in contemporary Kinshasa.

contrast, the longing inspired by having to live within early colonial-era bungalows in Mbanza Ngungu is channelled towards an escape to a future that takes place elsewhere. The indignity of having to negotiate damp and decay on a daily basis does not give way to romanticizing an imagined past where things worked. In the case of both the ONATRA tenant and the groundsman in Gombe, the desired era is othered, something "kept at bay from present life" (Boym, 2001: 12). That the built material provoking this sense of loss is of a distinctive colonial time reveals the extent to which it remains part of the urban imagination. As the inescapable material facts of certain Congolese daily lives, the early iron buildings have not served purely as transmitters of colonial ideologies. More than the physical formation of imperial doctrine, they have been kept alive as the object of melancholic projections. As everyday decisions and practicalities clash with nostalgic reverie, the former hotels and cottages have determinedly been made to function. As their inappropriateness to certain tasks comes to the fore, underlined by the overall instability of metallic skeletons in the tropics, their material make-up continuously speaks back to uneasy relations, in both the past and the present.

Outside of nostalgic yearning, the former *Hotel ABC* buildings further occupy space in the highly practical realm of government sanctioned heritage. The municipal museums and monuments board in Kinshasa has engaged with the possibility of making *Palace ONATRA* an official heritage site (Zola, 2015, pers. comm., 16 December).[62] Further, at a recent conference in Mbanza Ngungu, Yves Robert proposed that all the historic Thysville buildings be recast as a museum or heritage district.[63] The idea is that such a tourist destination could add to the appeal of a region already rich in game parks and cultural attractions.[64]

As historic sites, colonial legacies could generate credibility for government bodies. Underlying the assumption of heritage, as a source of income for depleted local municipalities, is the possibility of the story of the buildings being retold according to a triumphant narrative that bolsters the current regime. Should the early colonial buildings become state-sanctioned heritage, they would then be

62. There are, however, insufficient funds available for the endeavour to be more than a discussion (Zola, 2015, pers. comm., 16 December).
63. This was the conference *Le patrimoine au service du dévellopement du Kongo Central*, which took place in June 2015 at Mbanza Ngungu.
64. These include botanical gardens and spectacular caves, home to a rare fish (Caecobarbus geertsii) not found anywhere else in the world.

frozen within a particular political history. In essence, cleaning and restoring sites to represent an early moment of urban space would sever them from the context of the built fabric that produced them (Bissell, 2005: 228). If these built remains were "purified" into heritage, they could only tell linear narratives of colonial occupation and how railroad and industry gave shape to contemporary cityscape. The latter would, most likely, be treated as a triumphant story of progress privileging technological advancement.[65] This would see a master narrative in which the pre-colonial past, the colonial era and postcolonial regime changes would be presented as distinct wholes, without allowing for the complexity of interplay and seepages between them. Their current situations, with all their imperfections and reluctant solutions, present more circumlocutious and nuanced narratives.

Renegotiations

All cities have architectonics of dominance, separating certain, more powerful elites from the masses (AlSayyad, 1992: 5). Nevertheless, the manifestation of architectures of difference in colonial city space is especially blunt. More than simple territorial delineation, racial segregation and subsequent policing, it involves producing and attaching meaning to physical space (Dunn 2005: 37). The manner in which the *Hotels ABC* and their adjacent structures in Mbanza Ngungu and Kinshasa interacted with and were acted upon by existing environments tell of the daily renegotiation of the "intricate entanglements of the earliest colonial frontiers" (Nuttall, 2009: 2).

Small pockets of Art Nouveau influence were initially sent out to frame the local environment. Instead, capsules of dislocated colonial space were encroached upon by vital flows of greater urban circuitry. Inflexible iron of railway, rendered unreliable through years of rust, set out cramped conditions and outdated assumptions. As such, they disprove the promise of the early railroad, at the same time as they describe outdated ideas around social space. Self-assured, rational design was evidently unable to find solutions to the tropical environment.

Importantly, the buildings are used, not memorialized. According to the specifics of their locus,

65. This makes for an interesting comparison with the way Art Nouveau is now being increasingly protected as "heritage" in Europe, after decades of destruction and neglect between the 1920s and 1980s. In Belgium, Art Nouveau sites, such as the *Maison Horta*, have become popular tourist attractions.



Figure 4.28: Contemporary image of *Palais ONATRA*

no structure, or infrastructural condition, is without attempt at some form of adaptation. In their metonymical function of standing in for the era of early colonial inroads, the hotels are irregular organs within physical and temporal circulations of the city. At their most inflexible, where the space delineated for domestic life is inappropriate and often unpleasant — as in the smaller ONATRA homes at Mbanza Ngungu — they give material form to some of the indignities and constrictions of the early colonial mission. The buildings now speak to the failure of dislocated solutions to the management of people, as much as the impossibility of total control.

While their material constrictions fail the contemporary needs of their inhabitants, imaginations around them are rife with artificial mythologies of spatial power, in the face of robust organics happening all around. As much as these early architectonics serve as reminders of the smallness of vision, as well as the indignities of exclusion of their period (combined with new exclusions of contemporary Kinshasa), these relics of early industrialism are able to evoke complicated longing for other times. Further, viewing them from a contemporary aspect reveals individualized reactions to them, decrying the notion of the experience of oppressive regimes being the same across different strata, regions and classes of Congolese society. The practicalities of their being continually lived in, combined with visible environmental inroads, illustrate intricate systems of mutual dependencies, resulting in ongoing renegotiations of space and usabilities.

Colonization was never a purely top-down affair, but one that set off ebbs and flows across continents and cityscapes. In focussing on the lives of these specific buildings, they may be seen to lodge further, long-lasting damage concerning ideas of what it is to be modern. Within the many visions of modernism at play in contemporary Congolese urban space, certain polarizing categories, such as European/African and traditional/modern, are still visible and spoken about. The hotels and adjacent railway apparatus that descended from Art Nouveau set in place artificial mythologies of spatial power that still echo across the contemporary cityscape. While their specific iron traceries did not take, machine aesthetics and the materials of progress are generated in multiple and increasingly gigantic formations across the city.

Ultimately, as much as these early colonial structures serve as reminders of the smallness of vision of

the period they represent, they can also speak of a time of ordered appearances. Where their high Art Nouveau ancestors in the metropole indulged in primitivist nostalgia for imagined pasts, these relics of early industrial enthusiasm are able to evoke longing for the promise of an era of order, where things work. At the same time, their chequered histories speak to a multiplicity of stories and experiences and memories. Both pragmatic and reflective responses to colonial debris, which are based on looking at their current material situation, provide ways of revealing Congolese agency in the face of an oppressive regime. Accordingly, this approach can further be applied to learn more about Zaïrian self-representation in the time of independence.

As Congolese urban space passed into the postcolonial era, its physical environment looked like that of the colonizer, inheriting colonial institutions along with its built material. Mobutu's policy of *retour à l'authenticité* consciously set out to separate Congolese culture, rechristened as Zaïrian, from the colonizer. Difference, as a political resource, is thus used in struggles against homogenizing universalist policies (Nuttall, 2009: 31). While this came with certain affects of modernist narratives, essentialist ideologies are never occupied wholesale, but complicated through overlays of reassessed culture. Colonial remains in the layered conglomerations of urban space have left indelible marks, at the same time as they are constantly reused and renegotiated.

Chapter 5 - Congo Style: Congolese Modernism in the era of of 'Authenticité'



Figure 5.1: Contemporary image of *l'Échangeur* in Kinshasa

Congo Style: Congolese Modernism in the Era of *Authenticité*

Across book covers, magazines, social media and official websites, the defining symbol of Kinshasa from the Mobutu era is the towering edifice commonly known as *l'Échangeur*.[1] Straddling the major traffic interchange that inspired its nickname, its gargantuan arrangement of four concrete poles emerge from a rounded base of futuristic ramps, domes and outlines of garden terraces. A floret of unattainably high balconies juts out over the vast stretch of the city. This monolith's summit dominates the skyline between Ndjili, home to the airport as well as a large commune, and the city's various centres. Its life story can stand in for a portion of the Kinshasa imaginarium, that of Mobutu Sese Seko and his policy of *retour à l'authenticité*.[2]

Mobutu seized power from the government of Joseph Kasa-Vubu in a military coup in 1965. As head of the MPR (*Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution*),[3] the military leader became the ruler of the Second Republic of the Congo, soon to be renamed Zaïre. Over the next five years, Mobutu instigated a *regime d'exception* (state of emergency), during which he assumed sweeping powers and dealkt harshly with insubordination. By the early 1970s, he had commenced ambitious construction projects, of which *l'Échangeur* is one of the most prominent. The policy of *retour à l'authenticité* came about in 1967, with the N'Sele Manifesto.[4] All manner of political and cultural projects were guided by this political document, which was entrenched as a state ideology that sought to establish a unified sense of national identity. In the first half of the 1970s, *authenticité* was firmly in place as the system whereby private and public projects were governed by the premise that real progress and economic development could only be achieved through mobilizing a vast repertoire of traditional cultural practices and knowledge (White, 2008: 65). Although the architecture of *authenticité* only started to become a major feature in the cityscape a decade after independence from Belgium (in 1960), it is during this time that a culture of independence was consciously cultivated as a mechanism to counteract the toxic effects of decades

1. *L' Échangeur* is short for *Tour de l' Échangeur*, meaning "interchange tower." It makes reference to the traffic intersection at the centre of which it sits.
2. *Retour à l'authenticité* is closer in meaning to "recourse in authenticity" than the common translation "return to authenticity."
3. The political party, meaning "Popular Revolution of the People," was founded by Mobutu in 1966.
4. While the first manifesto was relatively vague as to cultural policy, a later N'Sele Manifesto, written in 1972, discussed artistic production in more detail.

of colonial rule. Under this banner, Mobutu was able to consolidate power about his person and control the country through militarized authoritarian rule, known for dealing harshly with any threat to his power.[5]

L'Échangeur's brutalist aesthetics were called into being by Mobutu in the early 1970s. Despite its dominance in the skyline, the building — a testament to the ambitions and contradictions of *authenticité* — was never officially completed. It was designed by Franco-Tunisian Olivier-Clément Cacoub, the "architect of the sun" who serviced other African nations with similarly expressive landmarks.[6] Built with cement made in Kinshasa's new job-creating factories, such projects marked the international aspirations involved in designing a new nationality. The tower was initially intended as a museum and monument to former Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba (in whose murder Mobutu played a part). A bronze statue of Lumumba, standing in front of the tower, waves stiffly down at the oncoming traffic, an afterthought to the surging cement and iron extremities it fronts.[7] Over the years, it has been used as a police headquarters and prison. Plans are currently underway for it to become a museum again.

The perpetually domineering "Eiffel Tower" of *l'Échangeur* is an architectonic hyperbole, overshadowing broad swathes of city space.[8] Like the iron hotels of the previous chapter, impressive in their time for their height, the tower's thrusting, patriarchal language is one of progress.[9] Declaring futuristic space in no small proportions, it also serves as radio tower for the airport. The tower punctuates various urban flows, literally communicating with air traffic while looming over diminutive rooftops, bearing the memory of the Mobutu's era of *authenticité* all the while. In this historical moment of national optimism, a balance was sought between cultural self-determination and

5. Public executions were common, as seen in Kinshasa in May 1966 with the execution of three former members of cabinet in front of 30,000 people (Young and Turner, 1985: 57). Mobutu set up various military forces to protect his person and harsh policing of the populace ensued at the same time.

6. Cacoub's oeuvre of prestigious monuments in Ivory Coast and Tunisia, as well as Zaïre, earned him this title (Ragon, 1974: 10).

7. The massive complex is called the Monument Patrice-Emery-Lumumba or the *Monument aux Héros-Nationaux*. De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 89) observe that the statue resembles Mobutu more than Lumumba.

8. Another common term for the tower.

9. Dominique Malaquais (2012a: 7) sees all the overarching symbolism of the regime in these terms, locating its source in European narratives of progress.

international modernism. Accordingly, its determined edifices and their accompanying artworks, with all their disproportions and external references, are as uniquely Congolese as Eiffel's icon is French.[10]

Like the now-rickety iron hotels, the aesthetics of Mobutu's modernism discussed in the following pages have some debt to the early Art Nouveau total artworks that emerged in *fin de siècle* representations of the Congo. Within Belgian constructions, overall design was used to control the viewer's passage through and experience of its interiors. The rounded shape of *l'Échangeur*'s giant curving shell, as well as the inclusion of its gardens and terraces, could be seen to represent a further development of Art Nouveau principles of organicism. In an external declaration of power, it claims its place within international architectural trends of the era by drawing both on postmodernism's more playful forms and on Art Nouveau revivals of the 1960s.[11] If there is something of *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*'s circular grasp of central space at *l'Échangeur*, other sites marking the period of Zaïre's *authenticité* (to be discussed in the pages that follow) all hold some similarities to the *fin de siècle* Belgian movement.

This chapter analyses key buildings in Kinshasa, along with the artworks attached to them, that characterize Mobutu's period of *authenticité*. While the Mobutuist construction of *authenticité* as a doctrine of independence began to wane from 1974 onwards, certain late 1970s sites of power are analyzed as continuations of the overriding theories of the more optimistic period dating from the late 1960s to the early 1970s (when construction on most of the sites began).[12] This early Mobutu era under discussion is looked back on as the time of booming cultural optimism, despite its harrowing reputation of violence. The political and economic autonomy declared in the rich, textured exuberances of this era still has resonance in contemporary Kinshasa. Although large tracts of the foundations for the Zaïrian modernist project were rooted in the final years of the Belgian Congo, Mobutu's vision was never a perfect replica of previous Belgian overseers. Neither were *authenticité* aesthetics entirely in the hands of the dictator and his cronies, as they were incubated within political doctrine. While progress

10,. Perhaps Gustave Eiffel's other global icon, *The Statue of Liberty* (1886), is a better comparison. Designed for Americans, its message is of uniting a large country (and former colony) of very different peoples.

11. By the 1960s the term "organic design" referred to any building that had sufficient fluidity to relate to the body and mind of modern man, in opposition to the static and rational straight lines of international style modernism. Parallel was the revival to integrate nature in interior design, and the turn to psychedelism, most famously commandeering Art Nouveau curvature to its most outlandish effects in poster design.

12. Mobutu's government structures were enveloped in crisis by the late 1970s, starting with economic decline in 1974 which soon permeated state and society (Young and Turner, 1985: 30)

according to Mobutu may have been partially bound up in the package of colonial inheritance, other players were active in the creation of these sites. In the foreground, the architects, designers and artists — whether the former were imported or not — had their own ideas concerning how Zaïre should be constructed.

The chapter opens with a consideration of the features that Kinshasa's defining sites of the era share with Art Nouveau. The section that follows examines Mobutu's consolidated, state-run effort to implement a national culture through the policy of *authenticité*. The following section introduces the Kinshasa architecture commissioned by Mobutu's government. Names of architects that come to the fore at this time are a mix of imported architects, like Cacoub, as well as Sante Ortolani and Eugène Palumbo, who were then joined by internationally trained Congolese architects, primarily Fernand Tala-Ngai. Because the artworks adorning the sites under discussion represent an important aspect of Mobutu's *authenticité*, the Kinshasa art world brought forth by the force of Mobutu's cultural policy is then discussed. The work of artists Alfred Liyolo, Bamba Ndombasi Kufimba and their fellow state-funded avant-gardists from this era speak directly back to notions of primitivism and invented pasts that are also seen in Art Nouveau representations of the Congo in Belgium. Further, the buildings and artworks discussed in this chapter were all, in one way or another, used to promote an idea of the new nation: a further echo of Art Nouveau energies. As Mobutu's grand overriding project edges towards outright totalitarianism, its aesthetics reveals a further development in the urge to essentialize and revivify narratives about the past.

After analysing the implications of both architecture and art-making in Mobutu's most productive era, authenticité's key commissions in Kinshasa will be addressed. The revamped colonial structure of *Stade du 20 Mai* (renovated in 1974), site of the legendary Rumble in the Jungle (the boxing match between Mohammad Ali and George Foreman), introduces how Mobutu's grand vision of African nationhood began to take physical form. The looming towers of *Tour RTNC* (1975) and *Tour Gécamines* (built from 1969-1977) join *l'Échangeur* (in use from 1974) are then introduced, along with the Africanized artworks adorning them. The presidential complex at Mont Ngaliema is then discussed in relation to massive complexes of workers' housing also built by Mobutu (these include *Cité Salongo* in Lemba and *Cité Verte* and *Cité Maman Mobutu* in Mont Ngafula). Following from previous chapters, these sites

are addressed from a situated perspective within the contemporary cityscape. As the patriarchal state is brashly celebrated, the manner in which the overarching mesh of *authenticité* splinters and is retained within the greater body of Kinshasa is exposed.

Tower & Enclosure: Mobutu's Commissions in Conversation with the City

Kinshasa is a metropolis defined by growing ever outward, in western and southern directions. Taking on an expanded view in order to hone in on its authenticité era monoliths, these sites of power are seen to be pressurized. Across various material manifestations, cracks and rivulets of stress are visible. It is on the aesthetic of slippage embodied in these edifices that the crux of this chapter rests. Between once-bright determination and hard necessities, the authority of Mobutu's commissions rubs up against the haunting insecurities of surrounding urban life. Despite the conscious Africanity played out within the various complexes and sites constructed by the Mobutu regime, it is not cultural cohesion that is sought so much as total control.

In the still-prosperous era of the early 1970s, the capital of an intensely self-reflexive Zaïre flaunted its appellations of *Kin-la-belle* and *Kin-la-moderne*, while flirting with international cosmopolitanism. This was an aesthetic constructed to not only compete with and impress Euro-America and its former colonizer, but global powers in general (its ally China notwithstanding). These were design strategies forged within a crucible of political associations that animated inter-African relations as it extended into global negotiations.

Kinshasa herself was one of the most powerful protagonists in the making of major sites. The built formations discussed below were developed out of and in conversation with the existing metropolis. The city, with all its constituent parts, is a living conglomerate of that which is Congolese, from self conscious Zaïrizations and generalized Africanisms to all manner of imports and translations of modernism from beyond its borders. From the perspective of the city, the colonial era is an anchored sector of groundwork in the greater reach of its corpus, long since digested. By contrast, the set of ambitious mechanisms, protrusions and embankments that the early Mobutu epoch built and took occupation of have not been subsumed. Although weathered and stressed, their core personalities



Figure 5.2: Contemporary views from *l'Échangeur* and *Tour Gécamines*

remain the same.[13]

The sites of *authenticité*, brought to the fore in the following pages, take the form of towers and enclosures (usually combinations of both). Their combined forces present the crowning moment of an expressive Congolese modernism, setting the bar for design that still holds sway over Kinshasa today. The pervasive towering qualities of *l'Échangeur, Tour Gécamines* and T*our de la Radio-Télévision Nationale du Congo* (RTNC) speak of might in the most obvious way. Their massive frames declare the power to afford masses of largely imported materials and architects, as well as mural and sculptural embellishments. On a greater level, monumentalities enforce self perceptions of government and its hierarchies (Vale, 1992: 8).

In a similar logic to the warning of colonial "verandas of power"[14] as discussed in Chapter 4, higher vantage point can suggest heightened surveillance. The more dominating a building's scale — in relation to other buildings, as much as human beings — the more it renders that which is below impotent. For the average passer-by, awe-inspiring architecture serves to accentuate their frail human ordinariness. The view from towering prominence sees the non-iconic, toy-like structures of below from the outside only. From great heights, their individualized interiors and inner character are denied

13. Unlike the variegated repurposing of the original *Hotels ABC* (seen in the previous chapter), the *Tour Gécomines, Tour RTNC* and *Mont Ngaliema* are still used for the same function they were built for. Change occurs gradually as the needs of that function change over time.
14. This refers to the title of Garth Myer's (2003) book on the topic of colonial architecture.





Figure 5.2: Aerial view of Mont Ngaliema
Figure 5.3: Mont Ngaliema Kinsunka entrance during a parade (circa 1970s)

(Stewart, 1984: 64). Diminished in terms of individuation, they become parcels within the urban mass (from which the tower itself shears away, never quite breaking off). Panoptic views from a tower allow for the possibility of the complexity of the city to become a readable text, immobilizing its opacities into an "immense texturology." (De Certeau, 1984: 92) The most intimidating counter to this macroscopic view is the city itself: a giant blanket interwoven with the greater surface whose intense energies easily topple the hierarchy of built height.

Tapping into the power of horizontal logics, more complicit with the creeping mass of Kinshasa, walled off enclosures are another major feature of Mobutu's architectonic lexicon. *Stade du 20 Mai* declared this through its prominent reputation. Both glorious and terrifying, the sports stadium where so many displays were performed also served to demonstrate strict control, wherein crowds could be monitored and individuals marked, overseeing the terms of public experience. At the centre of Mobutu's vision, the complex of Mont Ngaliema performs a different kind of publicity and public-ness compared to the showmanship of sports arena skyscrapers. In its time, segmented formations allowed for gusts of largesse to blow over them, momentary celebrations of *authenticité*. As guarded receptacles of propaganda, entry points require delicate negotiation. The city, at large, enters and departs in trickles or surges. Street and enclosure glimpse each other at face value, with iron and makeshift fencing distorting their view.

In viewing historic sites of tower and compound as interlocking parts of the cityscape, they set up

compartmentalized containment. The manner in which these new frames, walls and caps appear to have been altered and adapted by the turn their material lives have taken can provide some insight into their underlying ideology. As initial ideas of upward-reaching progress are undermined through ongoing expediencies, still heavily guarded areas speak to uncertainties. Meaning is made in the enforced borders, ambivalent authority and differing reactions to the environment that these semi-private spaces now incorporate. Among the "contradictory movements that counter balance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power" are those of the natural world (De Certeau, 1984: 94). Plant-life creeps at the sharp corners of glass and steel, warping in the sun. At some points, leaves and soot are swept away from well-tended statues. In others, cloudy coatings and dark, glutinous filigree builds new overlays on concrete and tile. Warped but present, the frameworks of Mobutu's now-tarnished modernism are rendered organic through the supine forces of the city. The urban mass is a shifting force that tests the boundaries of spaces marked out as separate.

Whether imprinted on the skyline or ensconced within the landscape, the giant tower and compound formations of the Mobutu era (that are to be explicated in detail) are enclaves. The implications of such manipulation of space reach back to the controlled interiors of colonial Art Nouveau. With the hindsight of history, under the weight of both the Belgian and Mobutu regimes, the connotations of enclosed architectonics extend beyond the illusion of containment and controlled stasis. Once inside, the foreign element is not only made other, but it cannot easily escape. If the gigantic projections of *authenticité* were always only accessible in parts, never able to be wholly consumed, the reverse does not apply to human bodies sufficiently seduced or coerced into entering.

In battling the alienation of colonialism, Mobutu oversaw the development of a pattern (rather than a distinctive style) of modernism that was exclusive and excluded the majority. The exterior logics that piled so much expansion and ambition onto their surface value denied individual humans a place outside of being obedient diminutives. With nationalist rhetoric giving rise to massive constructions, unifying cultural pride was not denied but paraded in terms that could only overwhelm. In privileging novelty over actual innovation, in built form as well as its decoration, picturesque Africanisms were pasted over the opportunity for an aesthetic revolution to match the enormity of the political moment. Reaching upwards while propagating top-down solutions to deal with the bodies of Zaïrians, material

displays of the triumph of independence rested on international goodwill and a buoyant economy. In Kinshasa today, their partially-animated husks remain, in various stages of connection to surrounding power circuits. Laid out amongst colonial and rural substrata as well as the myriad other trickles, flows and adhesives that bind the urban conglomerate of Kinshasa, the structures of *authenticité* still carry the aesthetics of a claim to the future, without the ideology or power to keep them fully animated.

Gigantic Gesamtkunstwerk: Thrusting *Authenticité* into the City

In the relative stability of the early 1970s, Mobutu was able to make a spectacle of massive construction projects and grand gestures towards infrastructural development. In the capital, major traffic arteries were carved out as sports stadiums, mass concrete housing areas and hospitals were laid down. Concurrently, lush private homes — the leader's palaces being the most extravagant of all — and looming edifices on Kinshasa's "Wall Street" pointed towards the corporate and governmental monoliths that fed them (*Visages*, 1975: 213).

To great fanfare, across magazines, newspapers and radio, as much as at orchestrated public events, key components of the public face of authenticité were implemented. In paeans to progress, extensive press coverage celebrated the inauguration of the first Inga hydroelectric dam in 1972 and the building of the TRICO nuclear reactors at the CREN-K institute[15] as African triumphs.[16] The regime's ambition saw Zaïre briefly joining the space race in the late 1970s, with a rocket launching programme in the Shaba region.

According to the N'Sele Manifesto of 1967, the initial document defining the era of *authenticité*, the reconstruction of traditional Congolese culture was not intended as a parallel activity to the image of global-scale high-tech feats and jousts. Culture was touted as a vital force within the overall surge: not only a source of national pride, but the "motor" of economic development (Kangafu, 1973: 6).[17] The

15. Work on the nuclear reactor was begun in 1958, in the last years of Belgian colonialism. It was the first of its kind on the African continent.

16. Periodicals included Kinshasa newspapers (originally, l*a Progress*) and magazines *Zaïre, l'hebdomadaire de l'Afrique Centrale* and *Afrique Cretienne.* These avidly covered all public activities, especially new government projects and developments and Mobutu's statements about them.

17. Bob White (2008) explores how popular music was used as a direct instrument to access the public and promote Mobutu's person within *authenticité*.

manner in which art and design were mobilized within the massive endeavour of *authenticité* belies a more superficial engagement.

Tropes of prosperity were both borrowed and invented in an ongoing act of cultural populism. Within the machinations of the new elite, aesthetics — especially claims to a universal Africanity — were, more often than not, a superficial mechanism. This may be evident in the base message of architectural proportions as much as in artworks generated as props within theatres of Africanity.

The objects of *authenticité*, whether a newly instigated space programme or a commissioned public sculpture by Maïtre Alfred Liyolo, set up new regimes of aesthetics. Certain practices, styles and designers were privileged over others. Given that artists and designers had gained their initial training in the Belgian system, as had all the leading Zaïrian elite, repetition of certain of their overreaching structures were the order of the day.[18] Aspects of colonial culture had to be employed in order to appeal to a public which had assimilated colonial modes of communication. Similarly, existing hierarchies within the city layout were taken over. Those areas reserved for white colonials became the domain of wealthy Zaïrians.

The Chief of the Nation himself was in many ways a product of Euro-America, having been put in power and kept there by virtue of Euro-American forces. Initially, the Belgians played a prominent role in trying to maintain their commercial stronghold on the ex-colony. At the same time, the US, via its CIA, bankrolled Mobutu as a key player throughout the cold war on the African continent.[19]

While certain colonial structures were taken on and renegotiated, a consolidated attempt to claim their symbols was in place. As decried by Antoine Lumenganesso (see Chapter 4), colonial monuments were removed and new symbols generated to stand in their place. Photographs in the local press spanning the time of removal and replacement may be seen to summarize sanctioned attitudes of the time. Gleeful

18. The initial government was largely made up of those évolués who had received university education. Unlike his predecessor Lumumba, Mobutu had not undergone this process, resulting in his attempts to style himself as more of a man of the people.

19. Mobutu's aid in the effort to contain Soviet influence in Africa, and his country's status as a repository of immense mineral wealth, earned the Zaïrian leader direct contacts, unmatched by any other leader of black Africa, with every American president from Dwight Eisenhower to George Bush (French, 1997). For his part, the dictator oscillated between superpowers, soliciting alternating support and cancelling trade agreements from either side, up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. His power after this was tenuous.

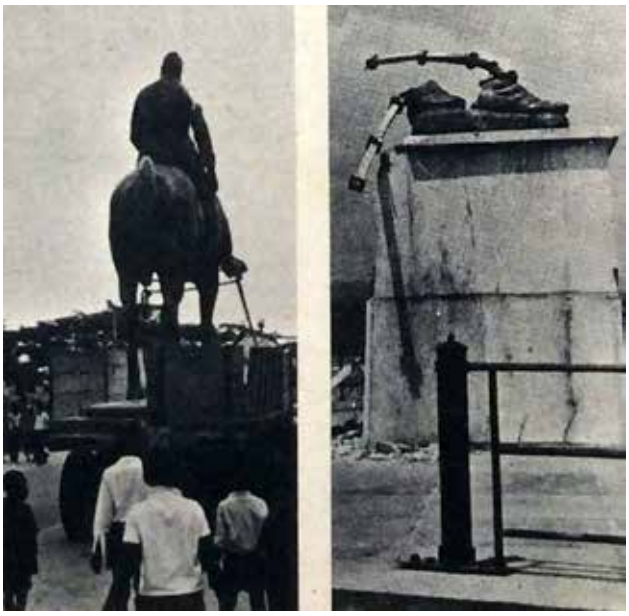




Figure 5.4: Colonial monuments being removed in Kinshasa
Figure 5.5: The statue *En Memoire des martyrs de l'independence*, by Wuma, Gombe

reporting on pulling down an equestrian monument of Leopold II, as well as Stanley, are represented in two photographs in a January 1972 edition of *Zaïre*. The former is captured in transit, from a disrespectful view of its behind. In the next image, Stanley's removal is represented by a pedestal holding only his shoes. The rods previously holding his giant body now stand exposed and impotent in the air.[20] The photographs also emphasize a more subtle message. Seen from ground level, looking up, the objects of derision remain elevated above the people milling around, occupying almost all available pictorial space. The new histories to be written will be set up in direct response to that of the previous regime. Its monuments will act as substitutes, replacements to fill existing mounts.

Underlining this message, an article in *Salongo* features new public artworks set up "in the shadow of the monuments." Monumental, abstracted human forms are featured as upholding the solemn task of "representing the nation's history" (*Salongo*, 1974: 11). By way of sculptures, the reader is taken on a tour of the city's most exclusive areas, from Wuma's statue *En mémoire des martyrs de l'independence* in Gombe to the artworks amidst the fountains of Mont Ngaliema.[21] The primary subject, Wuma's

20. The accompanying article (printed long after the fact of the actual demolitions) declares the need for new histories (Zaïre, 1972: 8).
21. Further works deemed suitable to represent the Congolese public are found at the *Academie des Beaux-Arts* and then, on the outskirts of town at N'Sele (Salongo, 1974: 11).

sculpture, is hailed as representative of superior public art. The sculpture, a stylization of an enlarged and weeping female figure, is situated in front of a newly commissioned Court of Supreme Justice and presents a general mourning symbol. With no actual names mentioned or real people represented, the artwork is denuded of specific politics. Such broad generalizations, rendered three dimensional in marble, could bolster any regime that happened to be in power. At this point, Mobutu's powerful propaganda machine tended to collapse all manner of national attributes into a slogan. A country of disparate peoples, forced together by Stanley's initial demarcations, was now delivered an imaginative unifying operation that appealed to the public as Africans. The combination of intimidation and enticement that made the regime so powerful was difficult for even those people with the strongest political convictions to resist (Lye in White, 2008: 226).

Still in conversation with the immediate past, those projects preoccupied with representing Zaïre drew on symbols of ethnicities, traditions and industrialized progress, all in antithesis to the degrading colonial yoke. Approximations of external ideas of what things should look like were artfully mixed with urgent local desires to be an Africanized global power. The Mobutu regime's style of political leadership strategically exploited the extreme alienation of colonial domination, aiming to "decolonize … culturally and mentally" (Verpoorten, 1985: 9). Within the decolonizing act of self-representation, however, certain forms of imitation and repetition of cultural constructions that had been entrenched over decades were unavoidable. This was most prominently played out according to the limits of claiming pre-colonial culture for Zaïre, staged as a reclaiming.

As much as traditional pasts, national ground and built space also needed to be performatively asserted. Various aesthetic declarations, in the form of buildings combined with artworks, were overlaid on top of land that needed to be symbolically returned to its inhabitants. The citizens of Zaïre had, through different forms of violence, been dispossessed of both their homeland and their sense of selfhood. Making the citizen at ease in his own country, under *authenticité*, meant setting up clear signage pointing towards new freedoms, while still controlling public space and movement.

Hierarchies of public and personal space were based on those favoured by the Belgian regime in allowing for an African ruling class to replace the colonial one. Affluent areas, like that around

Mont Ngaliema and Gombe, were occupied and added to by the new elite who invested pre-existing architectural norms with Zaïrian trappings. In comparison, new government mass housing schemes for working class families clearly maintained colonial divisions of allotting a limited portion of living space to that class of family. While swathes of land for the general public and workforce included pre-planned, modular living and entertainment arrangements, wealthy suburbs were still defined by individuated luxury homes and private gardens. In these examples, the greater architectonic system set in motion by the previous regime was not questioned. The identities of its occupants were simply replaced.

European names were done away with, in favour of more African ones. The name of the country and its major water mass became Zaïre (in itself a corruption of a Portuguese mistranslation of the original name for the river).[22] All aspects of the landscape, from streets to mountains were assigned new appellations. Christian names were banned and accompanying honorifics of "*Monsieur*," "*Mademoiselle*" and "*Madame*" were done away with, along with hair straightening and skin bleaching. The bodies of the *citoyens* and *citoyenne*s of Zaïre were further controlled according to a particular dress code deemed most appropriate to national culture. The men wore the abacost,[23] a pants and tunic outfit based on China's Mao-suits. Women wore the *pagne*, a wrapped cloth, to replace western style trousers or short skirts. Divisions between this neo-traditional style and Euro-American habits (staged as good and bad, respectively) were clearly drawn out in the Manifesto of N'sele. In 1967, political centralization of the new nation as a one party state, under Mobutu's MPR, was made policy.[24] The ruling philosophy behind the law was to negate colonial acculturation and to tap into indigenous, collective culture, led by a chief in the traditional mode. All manifestations of culture were thus set the work of "being oneself and not how others would like one to be, thinking by oneself and not by others" (Mobutu in Adelman, 1975: 134). The legitimating myth of *authenticité* was thus developed and employed to substantiate a monolithic MPR. Beneath this facade, power was patrimonialized (Young & Turner, 1985: 30).

22. The Kikongo word "*nzere*" or "*nzadi*," meaning "the river that swallows all rivers."
23. From "*a bas le costume*," meaning "down with the suit."
24. This is the origin commonly attributed to authenticité's cultural policy: it was covered in one paragraph of a declaration on the authority of the national government, the financial stability of the country and the social justice provided for every citizen (Dubois, 1973: 5).

Political rhetoric and sloganeering for pride in national culture plastered over the fact that a clear split between Zaïrian/African and Western/colonial was not possible, even in government sanctioned situations. The strictures concerning the outer garments of Congolese people was not extended to the sites of *authenticité*, whose public faces flaunted allegiance to international modernist design styles (which, in Kinshasa, would be interpreted as "Western"). While the work of architects, European and local, looked to the future, Zaïrian bodies, both physical and in painted, carved and sculpted representations, were locked into revivified, invented tradition.

The parties and parades thrown for the "great Zaïrian family," on the occasion of opening new sites, or the cultural weeks and fortnights that preceded the National Festival of Cultural Animation,[25] further tapped into an idea of jubilant aesthetic commonality to fill in the fissures of colonial division. Such lavish gestures enlarge on images of success across different generations in the private domain (Mbembe, 2001: 48). This regime of social complicity extended its range to public forms of self expression. For example, Bob White details how popular concerts were used as political propaganda and psychological manipulation (2008: 78). Through employing and supporting hugely influential figures like Franco and Papa Wemba to praise *authenticité* and Papa Mobutu, the leader literally mobilized the masses, controlling that most highly personal form of expression: singing, dancing and self-expression through movement (ibid).

A conscious attempt to animate culture within the individual Congolese psyche was bound to enforce the power of the ruling regime. As the postcolonial government manifested itself, it invested its arsenal of objects, symbols and behavioural codes with "a surplus of meanings" that could not be contested, by law (Mbembe, 2001: 102). Boundaries were placed on Zaïrian identity, freezing it in a moment of reclamation. As described by Homi K. Bhabha, no identity is ever a finished product (2008: xxx). In setting up a total identity, as seen in the control of even the leisure time of newly independent citizens, a spatial splitting takes place. In the process of its representation, the present is always temporarily deferred (ibid). With *authenticité*, the "indigenous past" — negated by the colonial voice of assumed superiority — is elevated in various forms of public imagery (Fanon, 2008: 9).

25. This took place in 1974 and included "all the tribes of the country, including the city of Kinshasa and the Zaïrian armed forces." (Botombele, 1976: 46)

In *500 Visages du Zaïre*, an MPR coffee table book extolling the virtues of the country, the nation's 500 "faces" are seen to range across industrial projects, farming initiatives, peasant life, natural bounty, mining initiatives, contemporary artworks, hotels, banks, boulevards and Kinshasa's jagged skyline. The MPR manifesto renders all 500 as aesthetic embellishments to the ruling power.[26] As such, their underlying purpose is to maintain control, invoking clichés of both fixed pasts and directed futures in each frozen moment of closed representation, in glossy tourist photographs with minimal text. Such disproportionate displays may be seen as attempts to affirm a power in need of constant maintenance.

Control over nature, under such treatment, renders it highly artificial. *Visages*' imagery only portrays the natural world as a resource to be harnessed in tourism for westerners (cultural as much as game parks and hiking), mineral bounty or to generate electrical and industrial power. Such material, common to the era, fixes a power hierarchy concerning what kind of natural world the government demanded of its environment. When separated out from notions of the tribal (in itself an untrustworthy essentialism), nature is bound up in representing teleological progress. Power over who gets to image the Congo is wrested from the hands of the colonizer but no attempt is made to change the language used.

Having to generate an artificial culture necessitated grasping the various languages of the previous regime even in the process of repudiating its legitimacy. That the languages employed came with embedded hierarchies and limited possibilities is made visible in certain Africanized occupations of modernist formations. At the same time as dismantling parts of certain monuments, the greater monument of French remained fairly intact. As the language in which *authenticité* was articulated, it represented only a small, ruling elite in an conglomerate population whose prevailing languages in the 1970s were Lingala and Swahili (Bokamba, 1976: 105). Repossession of Belgian administration buildings, including iconic sites like the former residence of the governor-general (now the *Palais de la Nation*), also took place. Once the flag and military badges had been changed and new monuments initiated, there appears to have been little urgency in pursuing further visible transformation. In Mobutu's early years, the juridical and institutional shell of the colonial state was used as a vessel for a seemingly plausible replica of the Belgian administration (Young and Turner, 1985: 30). Growing from

26. See *500 Visages du Zaïre* (1975)





Figure 5.6: Archival image of Mobutu Sese Seko (1974)
Figure 5.7: Press image of Mobutu Sese Seko (1974)

this fundamental premise, it took the various aesthetics of defining colonial languages with it.

The rhetoric of *authenticité* claimed to be all-embracing with "no branch of knowledge … beyond its scope" (Mobutu in Botombele, 1976: 54). With the state's entry into culture collapsed into the person of Mobutu, *authenticité* was turned into a "synonym" for Mobutuism (Botombele, 1976: 49). Cramming the concept into Mobutu's person weakened the power of a theory regarding African authenticity that had existed before the Second Republic and its self-proclaimed warrior leader.[27]

Mobutu's self-construction revealed a literal embodiment of his ideas. Press images of his corporeal form from this early, optimistic period seldom show him outside of a general's uniform, leopard skin headgear and a large wooden chieftain's cane. Bearing many a legend of its own, the ornamental stick was smoothly carved to allow for a serpent to snake around its upper main shaft, crowned by two birds, said to be eagles (Wrong, 2000: 47). The stick itself attracted fantastical tales, including that it was too heavy for any other than the leader himself to carry (ibid). As superstition soared, Mobutu played on rumour and tribal myths around his objects of power. In his constructed world of objects and subjects, artworks and regalia in his immediate vicinity were tools applied to entrench power.

27. If not named directly as "authentic nationalism," Eyamba Bokamba (1976: 109) locates the basic tenants of culture as a unifying force (and an antithesis to the alienation of colonialism) for Congolese elite, from the 1950s onwards.

From his home at Mont Ngaliema to other official state rooms and entertainment areas, the leader's taste in objects was well documented. Interior design pointedly privileged local artists' paintings, sculptures and murals. Animal skins, especially zebra and leopard, were flung over furniture and floors. As props to political theatre, these were choreographed appearances intended to be emulated across Zaïre. With culture increasingly amassed around one man, individualized self-styled autonomy — that freedom of individual consumerist choice much touted in the US as the antidote to Russian socialism — was eschewed for a show of modernity that delved into the tropes of tradition, according to that man's whim.

Appropriate to the theme of total control, Mobutu began to claim his full Zaïrian name as being Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu waza Banga, meaning "the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake." An alternative meaning is, "the rooster that watches over all the hens." The hyper masculinity that drove the cult of his person was thus constantly highlighted. In turn, the phallic columns and resolute strongholds produced under his authority tend to emasculate the more fragile human bodies within.

According to the watchtowers and giant hen coops of his making, there was no particular design style that Mobutu favoured. His own lavish palaces around Kinshasa — from the sleek minimalist turntable structure of *Palais de Marbre*[28] in Ngaliema to his gaudy *Palais Chinois* at N'Sele — show a hedonistic lack of commitment to any one design language.[29] According to the director of urbanism at the time, Mbuyi, manly bravado invested in the metaphor of size, more than any other, rendered his public works inescapable. The built legacy of a man who had worked as both an army administrator and a journalist was driven by creating the impression of control (Mbuyi, 2015, pers. comm., 9 August). Its resulting largenesses, as well as largesse, gave rise to massive edifices whose very size rendered them more vulnerable. The more concrete matter and stories added, the more its latter-day disconnect from a city-wide power source became visible.

28. Built in 1973 by Fernand Tala N'Gai and Eugène Palumbo.

29. Of all his homes, it was Mobutu's mansion in Gbadolite that he eventually retreated to. Erected at his ancestral home in the Nord-Ubangi Province, the palace was serviced by a hydroelectric dam on the nearby Ubangi River and the Gbadolite Airport, both built specially for that purpose.





Figure 5.8: Contemporary image of the entrance to *Palais Chinois*
Figure 5.9: Press image of *Palais du marbre* (1974)

Mobutu's hyperbolics left Kinshasa with an impoverished level of symbols, and tepid developmental powers. From 1974 onwards the Mobutuist construction foundered, enveloped in a crisis whose first symptoms were economic (sparked by the fall of copper prices) and soon permeated to state and society. A strong ideology of economic nationalism led to the government takeover of foreign-owned industries and plantations, most prominently Belgian ones (White, 2008: 219; Young and Turner, 1985: 64). The initial spike set up a class of Zaïrian nouveaux riches whose objects, domestic and otherwise, still occupy a large amount of space in the Kinshasa aesthetic, particularly for the visual arts and design communities.

Architectural and artistic commissions from this time generate solutions to the demands of *authenticité,* by mixing personal ideas concerning image and space production with the fancy of its overarching patron. Despite the homogenizing brush of nationalized culture, the disciplines of architecture and visual art veered apart from each other, leaving interior design to piece together the international modernist aesthetics of the former, with the hand-made primitivism of the latter. The greater objects of *authenticité* were, in their characteristic optimism, made up of international style shells housing Zaïrian eclectics. Smoothed surfaces of glass, steel and concrete, combined with multiple textures of the hand-crafted — wood, fur, raffia, clay, paint, etc — presented their own forms of cultural generalization. In their respective vagueness and allegiances, they stood alongside other formative nations, whose parallel aesthetics were coagulating over unstable political and economic terrain.

Nesting Nationalities: Indigeneity in Zaïrian Architecture

During the early years of independence, moving into *authenticité*, Zaïre was in a position familiar to all states embroiled in the project of nation building. Performing the torturous acrobatics of turning existing, ancient and upcoming material culture into shared heritage was a rite of passage. Institutional ritualization of culture was established by major European nations in the 19th century, as observed in Belgium's cobbling together of essentialisms in the name of national unity.[30]

The first two chapters of this thesis dealt with how a great deal of national self-definition relied on ascertaining that which is other, in order to differentiate itself. In design, particularly that of Art Nouveau, this was achieved through a combination of corralling fragments of regional inheritances into triumphant traditions. These were then gathered, together with new materials of progress, to be used by way of comparison to decry the backwardness of other cultures, including that of its colony. Moving in the opposite direction, the establishment of various independent African nations in the late 20th century saw the process of cultural assertion having to reject European assumptions of superiority. New formations required a different set of ideological tools for the subject culture, even though it was economically still dependent on its former master state. In a parallel act of piecing together a unified sense of cultural pride, a teleological notion of progress remained entrenched. Thus, the Congolese postcolony under Mobutu maintained and cultivated the languages and symbols of a modernity that the colonizers laid claim to even as Mobutu celebrated the local.

Mobutu's built legacy set out to compete with various different nations and their nationalisms. The imagined community of a fragile Zaïrian "nation-ness" had more in common with other recently independent countries than 19th century Belgium (Anderson, 2006: 48). 1960 saw sixteen African countries breaking free of formal colonial rule.[31] Each newly liberated country had to perform acts of philosophical and symbolic compromise in dealing with immediate colonial inheritances that came with a Eurocentric attitude to culture. While these were dealt with via different means — depending on the ruling regime, its political structure and economic allies — similar tendencies took place across their

30. This process has been analysed by Anderson ([1983] 2006).

31. Amongst these, allies of the Zaïrian state included Ghana (1957), Senegal (1960), Nigeria (1960), Kenya (1963), Tanzania (1960) and Guinea (1958).

built environments. International modernist standards, with its easily generative aspect of reaching for a progressive future, had its grip on urban space across the globe.

In Africa, the stylistic markings of the new regime's capital city in Joseph Nyerere's Dodoma (Tanzania) and Leopold Senghor's Dakar (Senegal) could be compared to those of Mobutu's Kinshasa. Amongst neighbouring giganticisms and constructed ambitions, Mobutu wanted Zaïre to lead. Laying down the cultural theory of *authenticité* into political doctrine, which could then be enforced by law, was intended to set as an example to other nations (Adelman, 1975: 134). The equals Mobutu aspired to were Global South powerhouses, primarily Brazil and China. Architects from the time often refer to the aesthetics of Kubitschek's Brasilia, particularly the work of Oscar Niemeyer, as an important source of influence (Lagae et al, 2011: 18; Kanene, 2015, pers. comm., 10 August; Mbuyi, 2015, pers. comm., 9 August). Furthermore, open admiration for and aspirations towards Mao's China were reflected across *authenticité*'s aesthetic codes, often as a result of direct exchanges.[32]

Impossible feats of doubling up and distilling the culture of more than 300 distinct ethnic groups into les *Zaïrois* were plugged into global acts of stitching cultural continuity into national formations. The process of formalizing and ritualizing references to an appropriate past through the imposition of repetition was set in motion to give a warm and vibrant personality to the state which had gained power (Hobsbawn, 1993: 1; Turner and Young, 1985: 13). Existing cultural entities, like the Kuba sculptures found on coins and stamps and the chieftain's staff carried by Mobutu, were "raised out of their particular contexts" in order to be politicized (Geertz, 1973: 252). At the same time, buildings called into being at crucial times (and in key locations) can exude the flat self-awareness of a structure that anticipates its own caricature through re-imaging. As its superficial surface value was brought to the fore, the rich mysteries of the object itself fall away.

As in Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Tanzania, many of the new constructions for Zaïre were produced by international architects (Lagae and De Raedt, 2014: 178). Given the rapidity of Belgian flight from the colony at the dawn of independence, the regime that stabilized power (after the first years of

32. For example, the prescribed national attire for men, the anti-western abacost, closely resembled a Mao suit and is thought to have been inspired by Mobutu's trip to China.

uncertainty) had no choice but to use existing infrastructure (Mbuyi, 2015, pers. comm., 9 August). Further extensions of the colonial legacy included an education system that had only deemed it necessary to start architectural training for locals in 1958.[33] In order to be able to begin with building immediately, Mobutu's regime had to draw on foreign architects , in the 1960s mainly Belgians , and then predominantly French designers (Lagae and De Raedt, 2014: 187). In 1974, the Zairianization of commerce was put in place. This was a nationalization of all foreign business interests in the country. Congolese partners thus needed to be located for international architects such as Eugène Palumbo and Cacoub — who were well entrenched with the elite by this point — to continue to sculpt designated areas of the cityscape. The Zaïrians who emerged from this are Fernand Tala-Ngai and Magema, both of whom had trained in Europe.

A building that formed a central motif of this period may be found in the *Bank Nationale et Hôtel des Monnaies*. Belgian architect Georges Ricquier began building the main, monumental grid structure in 1953, to be completed after 1960. It was in 1978 that two architects, Italian Eugene Palumbo and Zaïrian Tala-Ngai, made a sculptural extension to the original box formation. This expressive modern form, made up of a series of sweeping arches beneath a bridge, linked directly to international trends, particularly Brazilian *tropicalisme*.[34] Enshrined on Zaïrian currency from the time, the well-proportioned design has the efficient distinctiveness of a corporate logo.[35]

The texture of tiny beige tiles on a nearby Unilever apartment block on *Boulevard du 30 Juin* further attest to Tala-Ngai's penchant for Brazilian *tropicalisme*. While there is no signature style that can be pinned to the Belgian-trained architect, those buildings of his that are more sculpturally expressive, with recourse to curved lines, have been likened to the architectural imaginings of 1960s Brazil (Kofi, 2015, pers. comm. 28 July; Kanene, 2015, pers. comm., 10 August). This decorative aspect, laid over the straight lines and right angles of modernist rationalism (often all in the same building) may also be seen as a form of playful individuation. However, in Kinshasa, unlike in Niemeyer's Brasilia, these tend

33. This was started by Father Marc Wallenda at the Saint Lucas Art School of Kinshasa.

34. Its similarity to Niemeyer's decorative outer skin of *Palátio do Planalto* (1960) in Brazil is striking.

35. Lagae and de Raedt (2014: 180) make the case for Palumbo's practice to be sufficiently rich to transcend being purely illustrative of Mobutu's *authenticité*.



Figure 5.10: Zairian 500 dollar bill with *La Banque du Congo* extension by Palumbo and Tala-Ngai

to define the personality of a particular building rather than that of the city, or the architect concerned.[36]

Links to China may be located in the structure of the *Palais du Peuple* (house of parliament) built in 1974 courtesy of the Chinese government.[37] The seeds of the building, however, may be located in Mobutu's trip to China in 1970, after which he was a firm proponent of their ideas of public space (Mbuyi, 2015, pers. comm., 9 August). While the ordered and elegant pillars of *Palais du Peuple* speak a universal language of the stability of government, a later structure, built via an exchange with the Chinese authorities, draws in an ambiguous message. The enormous, squat sport stadium of the then *Stade Kamanyola* (building started in 1988),[38] visible from the major traffic thoroughfare to the CBD and nearby *Palais du Peuple*, exhibits an exposed structure of its seating system to the outside, through giant slices of its repeated concrete struts. When viewed from street level, they look very much like masks, or crosses, according to who is viewing.[39]

36. Tala-Ngai was involved in various building projects, with different ruling stylistic principles.
37. The chief architect was M. Cheng Pin-San. After negotiations took place, building began in 1972 (Biwandu, 1974b: 49).
38. At the time of its construction, this was the biggest stadium in Sub-Saharan Africa, seating up to 80,000 people (Lagae and Toulier, 2013: 175)
39. The motif of the mask is associated with Kinshasa's artistic practice (Kalama, 2014, pers. comm. 14 December; Ibongo, pers. comm., 2014, 11 December). Because the stadium was the site of the public execution of alleged enemies of the Mobutu regime, others have attributed the forms on its sides to be memorial crosses, more fitting to its renaming (under the Kabila regime) to Stade des Martyrs (Mabiala, 2014, pers. comm. 8 December).



Figure 5.11: Contemporary images of *Palais du peuple* (built in 1980), *Palais du justice* (built in 1957) and *Stade Kamanyola* (built in 1988)

Mobutu's *authenticité* sketched out clear ideological boundaries so that style and its meanings could only be seen in terms of indigeneity and nationalism. In an article from 1974, Palumbo makes the following observation: "We currently witness a period of transition that runs the risk of enduring eternally. One is confronted with a hybrid architecture that is not African or European, for the simple reason that local architects, be they from Zaïre or elsewhere, are not being consulted" (Palumbo in Biwandu, 1974a: 40) While two local architects were soon to be consulted, there is little that is distinctly "Congolese" in their work.

Magema's *Office de la Dette Publique* (OGEDEP), generally cited as a distinctive and audacious piece of architecture from that time, did not set a stylistic trend to be repeated across the cityscape. The building's aesthetics of raw concrete, exposed construction and fortress-like effect seem well suited to a regime that ruled by force. However, these characteristics also align it to the greater genre of Brutalist



Figure 5.12: Contemporary image of *OGEDEP* (built in 1980)

architecture, which the architect would have had ample exposure to when studying in Belgium.[40] The impact of its formidable exterior — including a disarming diagonal arm over the front entrance, resembling the mechanism of a giant piece of inner clockwork breaking loose — is tucked back from the street and securely barred off. OGEDEP's particular dramatization of imported construction techniques does not interfere with the serene symmetries of nearby edifices like the *Palais de Justice* (built in 1953 by A. Gernay and Ch. Simon), or the decorative indulgences of the outsized corrugated roofing of Palumbo's *Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* (1974).

However, the self-aware aesthetics of government buildings, in general, tend to stay in their own, anonymous time zone; the silence of headquarters echoing that of the bank in miming of corporate relations (Stewart, 1984: 2). For all their individual eccentricities and clichés, Gombe's eclectic gathering of buildings thus shares the same transcendent temporal state as any state bureaucracy. These tightly policed zones may not be the most ideal to trace visual evidence of a policy that sought to make the Congolese citizen feel, "at home in one's culture and country" (Adelman, 1975: 134).

Direct references to traditional Congolese homesteads came from Italian architect Sante Ortolani, author of the only existing manifesto for applying the principles of *authenticité* to architecture.[41] Ortolani's idea of traditional African architecture is as something dynamic and unfixed. He stresses an

40. Brutalist architecture flourished from the 1950s to the mid 1970s. Its name came from the French word "brut," meaning "raw." The most well known early work in this style is probably Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* (1952).
41. The slim *Manifeste de l'architecture Zaïroise authentique* (1975), made up of drawings and an essay on traditional Zaïrian-built culture, was followed by a book of plans for buildings (See: Ortolani, 1976).

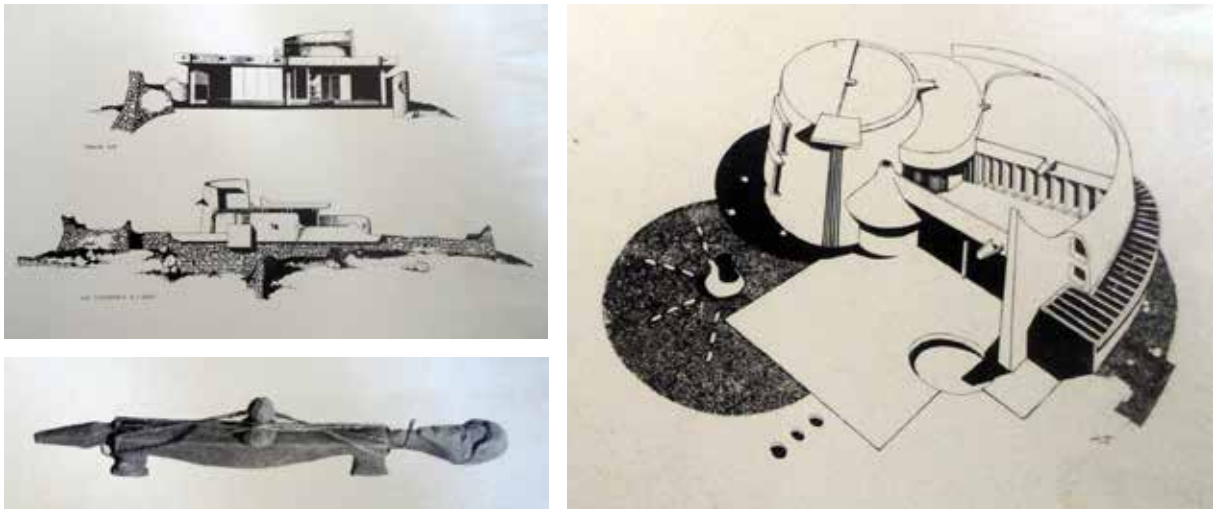


Figure 5.13: Plans for buildings by Sante Ortolani (1976)

African concept of form that is spiritual, like a bird or tam-tam. Compared to European rationalism, African built matter is posed as closer to nature, while not being a copy of it (Ortolani, 1975: 38–39). When rendering these essentialisms — which easily link to the contradictory Eurocentrism of early black conscious movements like Negritude (see Chapter 3) — into plastic form, it is on the traditional sculptures and ritual objects of 20th century legend that he models his overall architectural plans. Designs for villas, homes and an entire village are thus seen to render the silhouettes of museum-sanctioned wood carvings and ceramic reliquaries into three-dimensional form.[42] Expressively curved outer walls are seen to unfurl around smaller hut formations and open plan rooms. The architect's self-assigned task of constructing forms that "reflect humanity" literally objectify the traditional African object (Ortolani, 1977: 15). As such, the temporary architectures of particular ethnic peoples are not studied seriously, in favour of a general notion of that which is tribal. The architectural relevance of Congolese heritage is thus denied, giving way to romantic notions of an ancient and expressive art of creating objects imbued with a general sense of African spirituality.

Despite his open enthusiasm for *authenticité*, Ortolani left no discernible mark on Kinshasa's public face. His tribal artifacts rendered habitable in concrete and brick remain the exclusive domain of the wealthy. Those that exist in actuality do so behind high walls. Nevertheless, the Italian architect's legacy of circumventing Congolese architects and builders is still felt in the architectural school of

42. As seen in *Residence à Binza* and *Residence à Kisangani* (Bokelenge and Ortolani, 1976).

which he was director for several years. *L'Institut superieur d'architecture et urbanisme de Kinshasa* (ISAU)[43] teaches only European architectural history. All instruction refers to classic examples of European heritage, with Africa only visited via the example of Ancient Egypt. The idea of Europe (or the west) being the home of modernism is thus sedimented into a city that openly looks to China and Brazil. Ironically, with this entirely Eurocentric system in place, contemporary Congolese architects tend to insist that Tala-Ngai and Magema were not truly Congolese because of their training in France and Belgium (Kofi, 2015, pers. comm., 28 July).[44]

Rigid adherence to categories of European/African or Zaïrian /foreign denies the architecture of the *authenticité* moment the trademarks of modernist innovation: being open to other influences. The overall concept of a local or national culture not only exposes the antithesis between rooted culture and universal civilization, but ignores the fact that all cultures, both ancient and modern, have depended on cross-fertilization with others for their intrinsic development (Frampton, 2007: 314–315). As stated by Okwui Enwezor (when speaking about African cities), all modernities are simultaneously inward-looking, while at the same time being "open to all influence and receptive to rich dialogues" (2001: 14). The indigeneity of notable structures like OGEDEP, *l'Échangeur*, or the Tala-Ngai's Unilever apartment block tends to develop in accordance with the extent to which they are overlaid by and entangled with the surrounding city. The rich dialogues offset by Mobutu's sites of power thus seems to lie more in their interaction with surrounding urban space and people than with mimetic comparisons to the styles and forms of other countries.

The ambitions described in these sites all follow the logic of self-contained wealth that does not spill into the surrounding streets. Such messages are underwritten by the bundling and sectioning that occurs as they are securitized, with gardens rendered empty and unused as they are closely guarded. With energies poured into designated allotments, huge pressure is placed on their symbolic value.

43. This was established as a separate school from the art academy in 1962 (Badi-Banga ne Mwini, 1977: 72).
44. The "actual" Congolese architect, Mukadi, who was trained at ISAU, did a lot of work in the later Mobutu era. Responsible for the building in which ISAU is now housed, his work is often discredited as being poorly made, due to funding constraints. Apart from pursuing rounded formats which could be interpreted as referring to traditional huts, his "architecture of the belly" is born of necessity and reflects no discernible vernacular traits (Kofi, 2015, pers. comm. 28 July).



Figure 5.14: Contemporary images of Unilever apartment block by Fernand Tala-Ngai

With Kinshasa refusing to be reduced to neat borders, its new architecture functioned more on the level of individuated symbols than providing adequate infrastructure. No strong sense of a Kinshasa style of architecture emerged. In contrast to fragmented architectural commissions, a group of visual artists associated with Kinshasa's *Académie des Beaux-Arts* (ABA) rose to the challenge of representing the artistic *authenticité* moment. In pointedly catering to Mobutu-ist architectonics, their works bring to the fore inadvertent commentary on its methods of control.

Avant-garde under Mobutu: *Authenticité*'s Artworks

The official visual artists of *authenticité*, visibly promoted as part of the paraphernalia around Mobutu's person, sought symbols of unity. Visual artists, including Alfred Liyolo, Bamba Ndombassi, Lema Kusa, Mokengo and N'Damvu, formed a school (largely formalized within the ABA) that set out to illustrate the spirit of the time. This relied on imagining collective independence within the greater project of nation-building (Ndombasi, 2010: 57; Tshibungu, 1977: 11). Autonomous artistic activity claimed the right to take liberties with any traditions of their choosing. With the figurehead of Alfred Liyolo at the helm, the group's philosophy referred back to Mobutu's *authenticité* for its theoretical bulwark. In so doing, they tapped into broader, pan-Africanist and decolonizing movements, via Zaïrian legislation. The resulting state-sanctioned artworks tended to seek harmonious scenes to the point of an insularity of scope. This limited locus was seeded in attitudes espoused by both the new regime and the

colonial one.[45]

Following *authenticité* guidelines, the underlying premise of this art was to use a general idea of tradition as a baseline inspiration, while pursuing the kind of modernist formal solutions in paintings and sculpture that had been introduced by Belgians such as Marc Wallenda.[46] Faith was placed in those constructions of traditional Congolese art that were most useful to *authenticité* concerns, especially drawing on its international prestige. At the same time, recognition from abroad for contemporary art was also trumpeted with exhibitions of contemporary Congolese art in Senegal, Belgium and Switzerland (for example) proudly announced (Ndombasi, 2010: 52). Prominent figures like Liyolo wore European training and international accolades as a badge of honour.[47] While such attitudes are the standard fare of most contemporary art worlds, the time of *authenticité* had a reputation for putting on a grand show for powerful international audiences.[48] Nevertheless, local press coverage of overseas exhibitions suggests that impressing Zaïrian audiences was an important component in establishing high-status international relations.

By the early 1970s, Mobutu was poised as a great philanthropist in the Zaïrian art world of the time (Badi-Banga, 1977: 99–101; Ndombasi, 2014: 16). He supported the visual arts in private commissions, public works and mass purchases. An apocryphal act of buying out an entire exhibition of Liyolo's work on the opening night is still alive in Kinshasa's imagination. Despite these acts, the president of the Second Republic was more invested in classical Congolese culture, privileging traditional arts and folklore (Badi-Banga, 1977: 94; White, 2008: 34).[49] As seen in Chapter 3, the late 1960s and

45. The interim period between the end of the colonial period and Mobutu's coup was turbulent and, while the artists and schools discussed here were active in thinking around aesthetic strategies for independence, a defining artistic agenda was not set in place.

46. Wallenda, working in Léopoldville, as well as Pierre-Romain Desfosses in Elizabethville, are respectively considered responsible for nurturing modern Zaïrian art. Wallenda was a Catholic missionary who founded a sculpture school in Gombe Matadi, which received the attention of the colonial government, under whose subsidy it moved to the Kinshasa district in 1949 as *l'école Saint-Luc* (Badi-Banga ne Mwini, 1977: 63–64). This would be renamed as *l'Académie des Beaux-Arts* (ABA) in 1957 (Ndombasi, 2010: 52).

47. A tour of Liyolo's home includes a room dedicated to his achievements, largely in Austria where he studied. Various local newspaper articles cover his international career back home. These are particularly enthusiastic about his success in Japan and China.

48. For example, Dominique Malaquais (2012a: 13) sees Mobutu era largesse as more concerned with impressing internationals than catering to local needs.

49. This is evident in his parallel support of traditional music and performance over popular culture, as outlined by Bob





Figure 5.15: Sculptures by Alfred Liyolo: *Le Militant* at N'Sele
Figure 5.16: *Musicienne* by Alfred Liyolo (circa 1970)

early 1970s further saw his demanding the return of those Congolese objects populating international museums (particularly Belgium's), organizing travelling exhibitions of indigenous works and planning for a grand national museum.[50] Tellingly, the national art museum (IMNZ) only invested in a small amount of local modern art, while predominantly focusing on internationally sanctioned objects representing tribal pasts (van Beurden, 2015).

In line with his pointed looking back to a set idea of tradition, Mobutu's taste in contemporary art steered towards the conservative. The accessible communicability of the giant abstracted human forms of Liyolo's *Militant* and Wuma's *Mémoire des Martyrs*, for example, may be seen echoed, in small scale, in Mobutu's official interiors. Visible in news coverage of the president entertaining important guests, sculptures like Liyolo's *Musicienne* speak the direct language of the public monument.

With proportions scaled down to fit restricted space, the domestic sculpture suggests an easy reproducibility that functions readily as a prop to the presidential media stage. Claiming to aim for universality, such works hint at generalized formal solutions to representing a traditional cultural

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White (2008: 34). Van Beurden (2015) points out that, compared to Senghor's support of the Dakar School of visual arts in Senegal, Mobutu's contribution to contemporary Zaïrois art-making was "timid."

50. Although not quite as grand as *Art of Zaïre* in the US and Canada, other touring exhibitions of traditional Congolese art were organized in China, Austria and other countries.

act (in this case, playing a string instrument). State sanctioned art thus constantly skirted on the edge of catering to the amenable demands of decor. Domestic sculpture, occupying an ambiguous space between craft and high art, only comes across as unusual when its makers lay claim to being "avant-garde" and "revolutionary," according to the meaning attached to those words (and the radical experimental artworks they are linked to) today. Looking at the artists' intentions within the context of the Zaïrian decolonizing project reveals an alternative use of contemporary terms for the urgent needs of an *authenticité* in a state of limbo. At the same time as trying to deny the power of previous regimes (primarily the colonial) and cementing a new one, the Mobutu regime demanded an art that only told pointedly unambiguous stories.

The first showcase of Zaïre's leading modernists was held to coincide with the *Association Internationale des Critiques d'Arts* (AICA) conference of 1973, which took place in Kinshasa. While the exhibition was mostly representative of the Kinshasa artists that were to become the self-proclaimed "avant-gardists," some paintings from the Lubumbashi school, like those of Pili-Pili Mulongoy, were included. Van Beurden notes that international art critics attending the conference were notably underwhelmed by the exhibition, which was small in comparison to the more lavish display of traditional art at the IMNZ (2015).[51]

Such external judgments dog the group closely associated with authenticité up to the present day. Auto-didactic artists, especially the *peintures populaire* (popular painters),[52] have received extensive international academic and artistic attention.[53] So, too, have early modernist works by Congolese painters of the colonial era, such as Lubaki and Djilatendo, whose works toured Europe in the 1930s.[54]

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51. The contemporary work was accused of sins such as "totemic exoticism," "greeting card Africanism" and artists were urged to locate their own style "beyond imitation." It was only Pili-Pili's stylized nature forms that were singled out as having a "sophisticated-primitive" style (Canaday in van Beurden, 2015).

52. Ndombasi (2014: 12) notes that key artists preferred the title *populaire* to the more derogatory art *naif*. Arguably, Cheri Samba has received the most international acclaim.

53. This is evident in the work of French curators Jean-Hubert Martin and André Magnin. Martin publicly dismissed "academic art" from Africa for inclusion in his highly influential *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) at the Pompidou in Paris, claiming that it was a poor copy of European modernism (Martin, 2014, pers. comm., 4 July). Magnin played a large curatorial role in *Beauté Congo* (2015), which summarizes the Congolese painting story while leaving out Mobutu's artists (such as Liyolo). Extensive scholarly works by Bogumil Jewswiecki focus on *peintures populaire*.

54. They were exhibited as "indigenous" art from the Congo across cities in Belgium, France and Switzerland (Badi-Banga ne Mwini, 1977: 32). These artists were encouraged by Gaston-Denys Périer and Georges Thiry (Ibongo, 2009: 54). Périer (in Ibongo, 2009: 46) located their modernism in mixing European elements with African art, in the same moment as

Similarly, other Congolese artists are known in Europe through exhibitions, survey books like *60 Ans de peinture au Zaïre* (1989), and the recent exhibition *Beauté Congo* (2015). These focus on those painters initially patronised by Europeans and now featured in European collections. As seen at the AICA conference, credit for embodying a modernist spirit has been awarded to the likes of Pili-Pili, Bela and others of the Lubumbashi school (instigated by Pierre Romain-Desfossés, in the late 1940s). While many of the Kinshasa artists under discussion, who branded themselves "the avant-gardists," follow the same timeline, they are sidelined in European forums. Crucially, these painters and sculptors are widely celebrated in the city of Kinshasa where an entire suburb named after Liyolo ensures he is a household name. Liyolo and his peers were lauded for years as established authorities, with Lema Kusa, Bamba Ndombasi and others.

In general, the overarching reason given for the perceived paucity of the Kinshasa school, or the avant-gardists (and their resulting lack of representation in Euro-American versions of Congolese art history), is said to be their lack of originality. Such blanket criticism assumes a linear, top-down relationship between African artists and Euro-American modernism. The Kinshasa avant-gardists' difficult relationship to international modernism may be seen to be bound up in the complex system of criss-crossing allegiances defining their time. Kinois avant-gardism, operating in the wake of the particular form of colonial schooling it had been subjected to, mingled with the immediate demands of the patronage of a powerful military leader, whose power base was only several blocks away.

In the aftermath of the AICA conference, a firm artist band was formed around key practitioners associated with the Kinshasa academy. The self-proclaimed avant-gardists included the likes of Bamba Ndombasi, Lema Kusa, N'Damvu and Liyolo.[55] Announcing an artistic revolution, their manifesto lays claim to matching the political moment of defiance, joyfully aspiring to be the mouthpiece of the regime (Ndombasi, 2014: 16–17; Badi-Banga ne Mwini, 1977: 118). The claims of the avant-gardist manifesto placed their revolutionary goals in transgressing the colonial cultural yoke, rather than that of the ruling power. Avant-garde's associations as a dissonant voice within the status quo and are thus

African art was flowing into European works.

55. All taught at ABA, with Liyolo serving as director. The avant-gardists officially disbanded around 1977, over disagreements concerning what constituted being avant-garde (Ndombasi, 2014: 19).

applied retrospectively, looking back to the greater imposition of colonialism in the Congo, after 13 years of tense independence. Although declaring to be dedicated to breaking free of European strictures, modernist hierarchies are still very much present in the group's work, as seen in their privileging of easel painting and sculpture. Moreover, their adherence to certain styles further reveal clear allegiance to Euro-American ones. The freedom they ascribed to is, thus, the right to pick and choose to use the previously dominant culture as they wanted to.

Further liberties may be located in the *beaux arts* mimicry of western art that was so often decried by external critiques. The appropriation of those early modernist forms the artists had been exposed to is not necessarily an act of weakness that repeats the lessons of colonial paternalism. Postcolonial artists are seldom credited with a voluntary mobilization of these forms and, accordingly, cognizance of their radical potential (Okeke, 2015). For instance, Ndombasi takes a wide view of avant-gardism, in general equating it with modernism. He reads avant-gardism as part of a modernism that, according to his interpretation, is "a repudiation of all alienation" (2010: 8). He thus places emphasis on unifying connectivity, rather than revolutionary, anti-establishment connotations, allowing for a smoothing of aesthetics to soothe sensitive state egos.[56]

The avant-gardist manifesto calls for a "total recovery" of the autonomy of the arts that could "animate hearts and spirits through the idea of Zaïrian humanism, thanks to their genius creator" (Ndombasi, 2014: 17; Ibongo, 2009: 43). Mobutu's *authenticité* is thus placed at the pinnacle of creativity: the ultimate artwork. The resulting paintings and sculptures thus claim to draw on artful policy and seductive promises for their source of momentum. With this official base overlaying a biased colonial one, certain artificialities creep into the work of Kinshasa's academy artists. Aimed at the urban elite and their buildings, this art can give the impression of construction and crafted artifice. This sense of superficiality may, in part, be due to the manner in which their cultural doctrine made a monument of the homogenizing fiction of pre-colonial heritage.
Through allowing *authenticité* to take the lead, artists inherit its idea of traditional past.[57]

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56. This argument further exonerates the artists from the charge that, for all their claims, their practice did not change before or after becoming avant-gardists in 1973. Joseph Ibongo (2009: 74), for example, comments that their "personal evolution" was almost entirely unbroken.
57. A second N'Sele Manifesto, from 1972, pledged to subsidize all the arts (categorized into painting, sculpture, music,





Figment 5.17: Advertisement for Zaire Cigarettes (1974)
Figure 5.18: Contemporary image of mural by Mokenge at the *Institut National de Securite Sociale*

An advert in periodicals and newspapers from the time, for Zaïre Cigarettes, sums up the official attitude to the plastic arts. Two crisp, foregrounded boxes of "*La Première cigarette authentique de Prestige*" (the first authentic cigarette) are backed by a wooden carving of the head of a woman in traditional garb. The sculpture is monolithic, hovering in smudged semi-darkness, bestowing its instant blessing of authenticity from centre stage. The classic art of Africa provides good advertisement fodder: "luxury packaging … for all tastes." In this prominent image, good taste is rooted in the authentic seal of universally acclaimed tradition.

The logic of recourse to tradition within the practice of Liyolo and other members of *authenticité*'s self-proclaimed avant-garde, places this tradition in the same central position as the advert, hovering in a halfway state of inexact pedigree, with no acute ties to specific ritual, tradition or ethnicity. The currency of African culture functions as a signifier of authentic Africanity, while remaining disconnected from the signified social experience.[58] Zaïrian modernism was based on repudiating a colonizer whose overreaching modernity negated African tradition, while at the same time collecting its objects (Enwezor, 2001: 13). However, in maintaining the illusion of cultural purity, the new regime

dance, theatre and literature) and begins with a dedication to a national folklore that the state would "protect or restore" (*Manifeste* in Badi-Banga ne Mwini, 1977: 94). The investment is thus in a complete heritage package, something that can be enclosed and made whole again.

58. As seen in Chapter 3, those objects that were in the IMNZ were neither the best of their kind nor particularly accessible.

did not allow those objects any social function outside of the frozen vitrine of museum relic. It was this objectified representational value that the artists of ABA took recourse. That is, as fragments of a lost past, they attested to an ancient human system perceived to be dying out (van Beurden, 2015; Zola, 2015, pers. comm., 16 December). In looking to highly contemporaneous objects as ancient resource, their vitality and liveliness is seldom discussed because it is their authority as authentic tradition that is being sought. At face value, they made for ideal tokens of the new state. At the same time as representing African tradition, they were modern, thanks to their influence on primitivist giants like Picasso. However, the authenticity of these objects — their pure tribal origins — is in question.[59] As wells of heritage to be drawn from to give rise to complex new artworks, they are therefore unreliable.

With only a stuttering link to an elusive bounded tradition, the avant-gardists' position on heritage was thus undermined. At the same time, their confident appropriation of modernism carried an earlier (often unwitting) betrayal from their art education. When Marc Wallenda started his school for "indigenous" artists, which was to expand to become postcolonial ABA, the European modernism introduced was that of the early 20th century. It was the primitivism of the likes of Picasso that was deemed most appropriate to nurture the creative urges of Africa, especially the seemingly Africanized abstracted forms of the Cubist period.

While deeply invested in developing local talent, settler-colonial teachers tended to be autodidacts in their understanding of art. Wallenda and others were bound up in protectionist ideas, initially made public by Gaston Périer, in which the dying practice of Congolese art-making needed to be revived as something "natural," unhampered by the history of western rules of perspective (and, by implication, its accompanying philosophies) (Cornelis, 1998: 150).[60] Congolese contact with the art of Picasso and other similar artists was thus disconnected on several levels. Housed too far away to be experienced in real life, Euro-American art was only exposed in books and documentation (which are lesser substitutes for the real thing). Moreover, these sources elevated the remote Euro-American gallery as the highest point in art. A further detachment may be located in the teachers' own understanding of the art they

59. In addition, the traditional referred to was never static. Zoe Strother (1998: xvi) describes how cultures such as the Pende relied on continual reinvention, in the past as well as contemporary production.
60. At the same time, development of marketable crafts was a strongly encouraged, with the 1951 version of the school including "native crafts" like basketry, lino-cut and ceramics (Ndombasi, 2010: 51).

were propagating. Settler-colonials based in Leopoldville, whether missionaries like Wallenda, or part of art appreciation associations, were seldom steeped in art history and its contemporaneous currents. Thus, the modernism they propagated was not likely to have been well-informed by either the artistic trajectory that gave rise to Cubism, or the variegated ways in which contemporary practice had reacted to a strand of Parisian avant-gardism, which had taken place decades previously.[61] Similarly, with settler understanding of local art also commonly operating on severely uneven — if not outrightly superficial — terms, foundational referents that were taken into the postcolonial moment are unstable, based on a system of copies, second-hand experience and subterfuge.

Moving into independence and then *authenticité*, the Kinshasa academy held onto the names of Picasso and Arp as a primary reference. To this day, professors like Liyolo still invoke their names as the measure by which artistic merit and creativity may be judged.[62] In claiming the postcolonial moment, looking to Picasso was a common trope, visibly propagated by the Negritude movement. As discussed previously, in its goal of autonomy, this philosophy tended towards Eurocentrism. However, the postcolonial state had different needs to those schools of thought developed during imperial rule. This applies to its relationship to Euro-American role models (artistic and otherwise), as much as the manner in which the potential of traditional culture was used.[63] In the increasingly insulated Kinshasa of the 1970s, the urge towards cultural homogenization was thickly applied because of the will to illustrate a "transcendent" aesthetics of "universal humanism" in direct and accessible ways (Badi-Banga ne Mwini, 1977: 118–119).

A work by an avant-gardist painter originating in Wallenda's school, *Personnage* (character) by Zowa (presumed to have been made in the late 1960s/early 1970s) presents some of the questions posed by an

61. The Cubist movement occurred from 1907 to 1914, spearheaded by Picasso and Georges Braque.
62. Based on interviews with Alfred Liyolo (9 December 2014) and Henri Kalama (28 July 2015).
63. The artistic movements across newly liberated Africa responded to earlier decolonizing movements in different ways. While all were, in some way, bound up in the project of representing their respective emerging nations, relationships to African tradition varied greatly. In Senegal, the 1960s saw Negritude morph into an idea of universal civilization, to which all cultures could contribute (Harney, 2004: 9). Comparatively, Chika Okeke-Agulu (2015: 430) notes that schools in Egypt, Ghana, Algeria and Ethiopia focused on the artistic heritage of specific peoples, rather than generalized references. In Nigeria, he separates those artists trying to capture a "black essence," based on the tenets of Negritude, from the artists of the Art Society whose work he reads as quintessentially "avant-garde." Two of the reasons he gives for this label is their invention of formal styles unlike any that had come before them, as well as their critical analysis and commentary on the postcolonial state.



Figure 5.19: *Personnage*, by Zowa and *Marché*, by Mavinga (circa 1970)

art incubated under Belgian ideology that still lingered under the official policy of *authenticité*. Zowa's practice, developed in the late 1960s under the tutelage of Joseph Cornet (the Belgian director of the Kinshasa museum), was considered radical. Highly influenced by Cornet's classes on *l'Art Negre*,[64] Zowa was criticized for eschewing classic academy art styles for a "marginal" aesthetic (Badi-Banga ne Mwini, 1977: 110). Employing a formal technique that was shortly to become one of the accepted academy styles, the painter claims his right, as an African, to access the universal tropes of abstraction claimed by early 20th century European modernism. At the same time, abstracted human form links to distortions reminiscent of certain African sculptures. A disjuncture creeps in here, whereby there is no specificity of any particular ethnic tradition. While European artists and styles may easily be named (as seen in the criticisms of such work seen above), no more than an African essence, or spirit, is perceptible.[65] Accordingly, in tapping into ideas of universal human collectivity, the painting loses an individuated voice. Continually generalized forms, seen repeated across the Mobutu aesthetic, thus veer in the direction of pictorial cliché.[66]

64. This term largely refers to those "Negro" art objects that became popular in Paris after being brought in from the colonies.

65. This is accentuated by the fact that the Kinshasa group do not name specific traditional artworks as an influence. Congolese art history books by Badi-Banga and Ndombasi mention only European canons.

66. A similarly clichéd style is evident across examples from ABA at this time, as seen in Mavinga's *Marché*. Other stylistic tendencies exist across the group, with most painters (notably Zowa, Lema Kusa and Mavinga) given to putting their hand

Picking up on the formal characteristics of modernist works, under these conditions, discards the complex respective ideologies fuelling them in favour of new ends. Such artworks appropriate forms associated with earlier European plastic experimentation, without the element of internal critique that characterizes these works.[67] With Congolese tradition picked up at a point of ossification that served the national agenda, the lively inventiveness of these museum pieces, as well as the subtleties of their shifting formal experimentation over the years, was also forfeited. As *authenticité* manifested in artworks, the spirit of essentializing and exoticizing African culture, within modernist Eurocentrism, is reproduced under the banner of unity and cultural pride. Having initially been trained as "African subjects," the now-independent artist-students of colonial rule were stating their world view as they understood it, according to their tutelage in a distinctly limited "colonial library." (Desai, 2001: 7)

In leaning into *authenticité* rhetoric (in itself, a product of decades of colonial intervention), the modernism advocated by the avant-gardists is limited to accessing pasts that tell a specific story. Their stylistic repertoire comes across as an amalgamation of what was available in an aggressively urban centre still reeling from the constraints of the previous decades. The painterly and sculptural conclusions drawn by the Kinshasa modernists, when compared to their more internationally renowned Congolese counterparts, seem more concerned with looking to other artworks (both those being made at ABA and early strands of European modernism). Comparatively, their precursors, like Lubaki, as well as parallel activities in Lubumbashi, are overridingly concerned with drawing on the natural world.[68]

Across all accounts (from Cornet and Magnin to Badi-Banga ne Mwini and Bamba) the story of Congolese modernist painting is seen to start with the watercolours of Albert Lubaki, coupled with that of his wife, Antoinette (to be followed by Djilatendo).[69] Lubaki began painting after being encouraged, initially by Georges Thiry, to translate imagery from local dwellings into paint (Cornet et al, 1989: 166). The most circulated examples of his work are filled with animals, people and plants (all labelled

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to a variety of them. These include more realistic scenes, as well as overtly early Cubist outings.

67. That is to say, waves of Euro-American avant-gardism set out to contradict what had gone before, within the discipline of art.

68. The knowingly urban tradition of the *peintures populaire* were, by definition, of street scenes, caricaturing daily city life. While they are recognized as important influences on Congolese art, they are not named as modernists by art historians such as Badi-Banga, Ndombasi and Ibongo.

69. Lubaki was born in Thysville, but lived mainly in Kasai.





Figure 5.20: ***Sans Titre*** **(1929) by Albert Lubaki**
Figure 5.21: ***Sans Titre*** **(1955) by Pili-Pili Mulongoy**

Untitled and made in the 1920s). It is the former that are an overriding presence, with enigmatic elephants, leopards, birds of paradise and crocodiles, as well as unnamed, toothy creatures, invigorating the surface of the page in pale, coloured lines; most often accentuated by blank paper as a backdrop. The vital sense of play and freedom to experiment that these works convey may well be due to the energetic joy of translating one form of practice (Lubaki started out as an ivory carver) into a new medium.

A similarly vital quality may be found in the work of Pili-Pili and Bela, working out of Lubumbashi since the 1940s (under Romain-Desfossés). The latter encouraged the artists to look to their tradition, while stimulating their creativity through studying the surrounding nature (Bayet, 2015: 73). The resulting paintings overflow with natural abundance. Bela's distinctive system of fleshing out form with electric coloured dots reveal scenes of teeming activity, with plants and animal forms intertwining. Rich colours and recognizable biological detail on fauna and flora are employed to indicate a sense of geographic specificity. Often more dedicated to determining organic patterns, Pili-Pili combines different kinds of brushstrokes to set up organizations of interwoven animals and plants marching across richly textured surfaces. Those that depict scenes of animal life are enlivened by a background of outlined spots, suggesting charged activity in the surrounding atmosphere. The fantastical plant and animal motifs that agitate across the whole of each painterly surface activate each other to give the

impression of an animated and expansive natural world.[70]

Pili-Pili's work evidently made that of the Kinshasa artists seem rigid and artificial, when shown together (from an outsider's point of view).[71] Similarly, when compared to earlier autodidactic artists, such as Lubaki, the effect of the avant-gardist's work is not entirely the impression of European copy (as accused by the international press) so much as a lack of deep connection to, or concern with, the natural world. That is, across the different styles of Lubaki, Pili-Pili, Bela and others of their schools, the nature depicted is sure of itself, with a clear sense of its own organic order within the picture frame. With this in mind, it seems fitting that the contemporary art Mobutu favoured opted for tame, soothing scenes. When the dictator adopted a natural image, its function was to serve his power alone. The prominent emblem of the leopard was intended to announce the leader's fearsome potency, not that of Zaïre's abundant natural holdings. His image is indelibly imprinted on the popular imagination with a hat made from the dead skin of his signature animal, rather than the charged creatures of the paintings described above.

According to *authenticité*-era propaganda, nature was promoted as a tool in the service of industry or tourism. When translated into the figures of Liyolo and Bemba's sculptures, Zowa and Mavinga's paintings or Mokengo's mosaics, the human figure, and especially mask-heads, predominate (more than animals or plants). These seldom appear to have developed from observing the living world, but within a particular ecosystem of artistic referents developed in Kinshasa. This was a conscious act of autonomy that deliberately affected not to appear naive, as the child-like, autodactics often were.[72] In striving for sophistication, this was a modernism bound up in being urban. Across expressions of the ruling cultural policy, the rural is relegated to hazy, traditional scenes, while the artists positioned themselves as being of the city. Thus, colonial divisions of rural and urban, traditional and modern are inscribed into the work.

70. The most well known bodies of work described here are dated at 1950s.

71. As was played out at the AICA exhibition, where Pili-Pili was praised and the group that would become the avant-gardists were not.

72. Ndombasi (2014: 12) explains that the fantastical style of the autodidactic Wattists (painters of Mami Watta) was considered unconsciously unsophisticated.

With the natural world deemed picturesquely inexact, the avant-gardists' work can often lack a sense of its own, intrinsic nature. This is especially salient when they are held up to their greatest competitor in international arenas: Congolese traditional artworks. The surety of form which Congolese figurines and masks embody is one which, if not describing an external natural world, has a sense of its own, inner organicism. With access to these works forever tethered to the early 20th century moment of Picasso's admiration for a frozen idol, the paintings and sculptures of *authenticité* are mired to their immediate, temporal environment.[73]

According to often makeshift responses to an art scene grasping for stability, the display of modernist works were very rarely in white cube conditions. Documentation from newspaper announcements to highly complimentary articles in local periodicals of the time reveals that art was exhibited in hotels and banks, usually installed in the cluttered manner of shop merchandise, rather than the respectful wide berths of international gallery space.[74] Kinshasa's modernist artworks thus adopted a language of individuated artistic modernism, without the support structure of commercial galleries and art museums their European counterparts relied on to keep them buoyant as artworks (and distinct from merchandise and tourist curios, in the eyes of an international audience).

When the objects of *authenticité* were produced, they were highly desirable to the new elite being cultivated. As prices could be escalated (within a still-soaring economy), artworks provided visual props to the private dramas of new wealth played out behind high walls and tight security. In accord with placating its audience, imagery and its messages remained as drained of politics as they had been under colonial oppression. Under the pressure of a military state increasingly called on to enforce authoritarian rule, critique and subversion were violently silenced.[75]

As the avant-gardist group solidified its position as the establishment, its stylistic norms and subject

73. Accordingly, these art objects may be read as answers to immediate and urgent postcolonial questions, which were not intended to cater to outsiders.

74. Alongside ABA and *La Banque du Peuple*, the towering, tinted glass box of *Hotel Intercontinental* is listed as the prestigious exhibition venue of the moment (Ndombasi, 2014: 12). This was to have a direct effect on the kind of art produced.

75. While the *peintures populaire* were able to maintain a somewhat more critical position, this was more concerned with moralizing daily life than social commentary. Criticality was extended to Belgian rule, but not to the government in power at the time.

matter became entrenched. Individual styles were cemented along lines that proceeded to be enforced at ABA over the ensuing decades, with an authoritarianism that echoes that of the totalitarian government: an inevitable result of having to operate under the surveillance of Mobutu's military regime. Spheres of influence remained in the locus of the Kinshasa academy, circulating increasingly exhausted motifs and themes, rendered safe in content by referring back to sanctioned works from the postcolonial era.[76] With technique and style following meaning, conservative and closed rules for art-making gave rise to a Kinshasa tradition of the still scene and pleasing universalism. Little attempts were made to forge new paths, connect to international movements and currents (African or otherwise) and challenge the artistic status quo.[77] In catering to its buyers' needs, rather than *authenticité*'s idealistic call to actively strive for a new order, there is a notable lack of independent, experimental practice in the official art of Mobutu's independence.

When viewed from an outsiders' perspective, the avant-gardist's art appears to point to a system of dependencies and restrictions. This is accentuated when it is observed within the tightly controlled environments commissioned by the early Mobutu regime. Nevertheless, in the context of the 1970s, insisting on generating messages of prosperity and peace (in the face of external criticism) tell of the surging, autonomous optimism of the now-tarnished moment of *authenticité*. Prior to the total calcification of Mobutuism, paintings and sculptures illustrating harmonious promise may be read as one of the regime's constructed incentives, especially when placed within its towering new edifices.

The World Watches Kinshasa: Stade du 20 Mai

The audacious, multi-tiered flatnesses of Mobutu's sites of power, working together with their artworks, coalesced to operate as breathtaking spectacles. In currying favour with populism, they tend to rely on the public-ness of press packages, setting up grandly orchestrated spaces to reiterate the messages of newspapers, magazines and state-sponsored television. The built remains of the *authenticité* moment produce a language of superficial sloganeering, repeated over gargantuan space and Africanized interiors.

76. In contemporary times, ABA has undergone major changes and continually revises its curriculum.
77. Sarah van Beurden notes that, by 1977, Badi-Banga despaired of the avant-gardists "intellectual conformism" and its lack of desire for international exchange (2015).

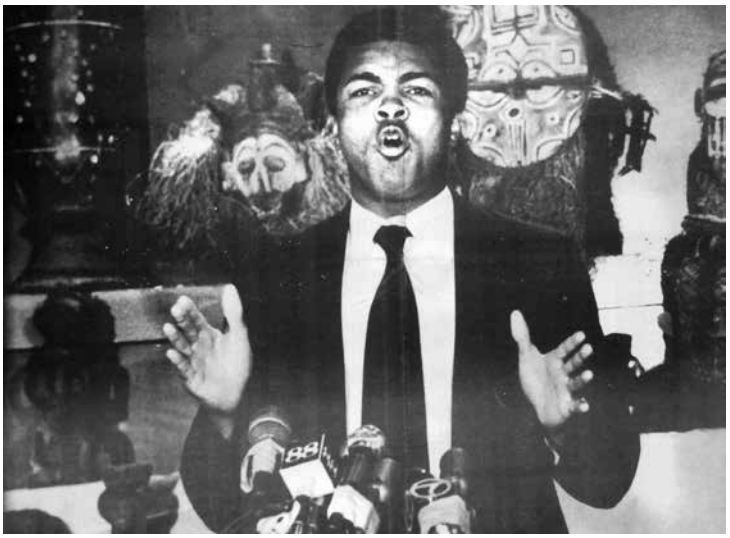




Figure 5.22: Portrait of Mohamed Ali in *Elima* (1974)
Figure 5.23: Press image with *Le Militant*, by Liyolo (1974)

As Dominique Malaquais (2012b) argued, a rich starting point for coming to terms with the Mobutu regime may be located in one of its greatest fables: the Rumble in the Jungle. Malaquais sets up the iconic 1974 fight in Kinshasa between African American boxers Muhamed Ali and George Foreman as one of the Mobutu-era monumental gestures, arranged under a peaking economy and comparable to grandiose architectural follies, such as Mont Ngaliema (2012b: 234). As various public displays and carefully controlled arenas attest, Mobutu's construction of Kinshasa was very far from being a jungle.[78] In sifting through the various stage sets of the massive orchestration of the now-fabled boxing match, the project comes across as a sophisticated, media-savvy cultural coup.

Malaquais (2012b: 238) details how Mobutu tactically played the press to align his presidential person with that of Ali, the Black Power champion who took a public stand against racism and the Vietnam War.[79] With Foreman posed as an apologist for America, the boxer's imaging in the press may be seen to expose the use-ability of African art forms of the time. A portrait of Foreman in the Sunday edition of Elima depicts the reigning champion against a neutral backdrop, with his back to the camera, while Ali — the people's champion — is explicitly posed alongside a Tsaye mask, a Kuba mask and a Luba

78. If the jungle represented riotous vegetation of tropical Africa, as opposed to the sophisticated urban technologies of Ali's native USA.
79. Ali himself was no stranger to sloganeering for press purposes, owning a number of catchphrases including the "Rumble in the Jungle."



Figure 5.24: Images of the interior of *Stade du 20 Mai* (1974)

sculpture (Malaquais, 2012b: 239). Similarly, another press image sees Ali posing alongside Liyolo's Le Militant. Such brash staging of *authenticité*'s policy on traditional art and cultural progressiveness may further be extrapolated from the physical remains of the site.

Kinshasa's *Stade du 20 Mai* was constructed over the colonial *Stade du Roi-Baudouin* of 1952.[80] Huge machinations went into play to imbue the original construction by Marcel van Hentenryck and René Reygearts, with its connotations of missionary-sponsored sports and scouts (Lagae and Toulier, 2013: 149). This included visible patterns of ventilation bricks on the outside, and small windows. In addition to rebranding, the stadium was renovated in order to render it sufficiently extraordinary. International media competency was ensured through the addition of 500 telephone lines, darkrooms for the on-site development of photos and towering light pylons, all the better with which to bring the luxury of colour TV to Zaïre (Elima, 1974: 6; Malaquais, 2012b: 237). On the big night, imagery of the packed stadium reveals a line of military guards at the front, framed by a massive backdrop with Mobutu's portrait. With hindsight, the bright lights and intensive surveillance facilities carry more sinister connotations than purely those of big media glamour. The decorated outer walls now have the effect of a barricaded container. Built with local stones and bricks, the structure follows the common solution to tropical architecture employed by the Belgian regime (Toulier et al, 2010: 12). These included thick walls,

80. The stadium was named after 20 May 1967, the date of publication of the first N'Sele Manifesto. Today, it is known as *Stade Tata Raphaël*.





Figure 5.25: Images of *Stade du 20 Mai* under construction (1974)
Figure 5.26: Press image of the crowd on the night of the fight (1974)

visible patterns of ventilation bricks and windows being either skinny slots or protected by shady overhangs and concrete boxes. The resulting view from the outside is of a structure whose interior is not easily accessible.

Ceramic mosaics, including those by Beaux-Arts artist Mokengo, coat the outside walls of the main entrance. This trademark décor, which is used on the outside of a large number of Mobutu's buildings, depicts Congolese men actively engaged in sports, from cycling and boxing to football.[81] Mokengo's work, necessarily stylized by the constraints of his medium, creates illustrations through flat, colourful fragments. The confetti effect is celebratory and populist, introducing the public to a decoration of exteriors populated by looming, faceless characters whose activities are intended to be recognizable from a long way off. With the language of tile drawings being one of addition, their relationship to the existing structure is that of something tacked on, not quite belonging to the original edifice. As a result, the painted figures that accompany the ceramics echo the overriding impression of superficiality.

Hidden from view, the interior of the stadium speaks to enclosed comfort. A cache of photographic documentation, found in the *Stade du 20 Mai* storeroom, shows Congolese workers busy with

81. The *Stade du 20 Mai* marks one of the rare examples of Mokengo's abstracted figures engaged in contemporary activities. His other work is characterized by depictions of women in undistinctive tribal garb, engaged in rural activities. The division into women as traditional and men as urban is thus clearly delineated in the examples seen here.

renovations, including images of its seldom-seen interior chambers. Alongside the state-of-the-art latrines and changing rooms is the luscious *Salon d'Honneur*, complete with fresh new furnishings. Shiny checked floors, a wood-lined ceiling and a rustic stone-and-cement bar counter with furniture and décor speak to *authenticité* tastes. Tribal-esque masks on the wall are also the motifs adorning hand-carved chairs and woven raffia lampshades. This secluded space is framed by a circular inter-leading archway. Colours and patterns link to similar taste in interior design to the president's interior environments, as seen in numerous press images. As such, they suggest an interior of projected exteriors. The well-used motif of the mask is, once again, employed to bear an exotic rhetoric of masculine bravado.

Private and privileged Africanisms coat the interior and speckle the outside shells of the stadium that, after its large-scale international debut, would continue to host Mobutu's rallies, speeches and parades, as dark rumours concerning the site were circulated from the president's office. Prior to the "fight of the century," word went round that all local criminals were rounded up and executed at the stadium. Further whispers told of a network of prison cells underneath the arena. With this threatening undertow continually present, the Stade du 20 Mai maintains the spatial tactics of a Zaïrization laid over colonial architectonics of domination. As a site of power and a citadel, it is defined by brash displays that hint at what is unseen. The stadium is conceptually constructed with the thrill of international pomp, combined with the intense danger of one of the most violent kinds of sporting events, mixed with throbbing crowds and an ever-present menace of military force. Its success relied on controlled press and carefully monitored public passage. At the same time, its physical construction is that of airy public areas that serve to separate and define the outline of its unseen compartments and pathways. The Mobutu aesthetic of showy outsides and superficial veneers, with all its undeclared secretions, was intended to seduce and thrill local *Kinois* en masse, as much as the all-important internationals.[82]

Kinshasa Climbs: *Tour RTNC* and *Tour Gécamines*

In the image-building endeavours of *authenticité*, a language of amplified exteriority is employed. Part of the Mobutu regime publicity declared its ambitions through allusions to the sky. The dictator

82. At the same time as the sports ground was spruced up, so too was high class accommodation at the Hotel Regina and the Intercontinental.



Figure 5.27: Contemporary image of *Tour RTNC* by Arsac & Dougnac (built in 1975)

was seen to descend from the clouds at the beginning and end of every news broadcast, in a godly fashion.[83] The metaphor of claiming the sky was extended into sculpting Kinshasa's skyline with the commissioning of various skyscrapers.[84] Two of Mobutu's most iconic iterations were the *Tour Radio-Télévision nationale du Congo* (*Tour RTNC*, 1975) and the *Tour Gécamines* (1977) containing the offices of the *Société générale des minerais* (later known as *Sozacom*).

Tour RTNC, built by French architects A. Arsac and M. Dougnac, is a shooting curve of blue-grey glass clasped in concrete. Separated out from the cluster of skyscrapers that signify the central business district, its limber mass, the tallest in Kinshasa, stands alone as a beacon to the broadcasting that takes place in the quarters squatting adjacent to it (and less visible from street level). The once-sleek tower's

83. Such actions were then repeated in the work of artists. The popular musician Koffi, one of the promoters of the Mobutu regime, placed himself descending from the clouds on the cover of one of his albums (White, 2008: 233). Cheri Samba also employs the motif when he descends from a balcony for the documentary *Maîtres des Rues* (1989).

84. In discussing a contemporary, home-made tower in Limete (the subject of a video by Sammy Baloji), Filip de Boeck (2015: 84) sees proximity to the sky not only as being closer to god and a respite from the city, but also as "a continuum between corporeal and mental matter."



Figure 5.28: Contemporary images of *Tour RTNC,* lower deck & *Messagers*, by Liyolo

lower floors are accentuated on the outside with a structural pattern reminiscent of whalebones or the hull of a ship, and grounded in a system of a curving, raised terrace and staircases. The overall design is suggestive of a streamlined office-machine, separated from the actual broadcasting houses. With television and radio being an important armature of the Mobutu apparatus, the skyscraper made a bold attempt at convincing the public of the various potencies of the regime.

The surface of the tower's curl cusps away from the street, like a giant sail about to be set in motion. Glass curtains veer back and upwards for 22 stories, to leave the job of human-scale communication to its accompanying sculptures. With no permanent Africanisms within the marble-lined and tiled interior surfaces of the office block, outdoor sculptures herald the call to Zaïrian tradition. While two stand-alone abstract concrete monoliths around the entrance area to the building (by an unnamed artist) have some formal affinity to the building's soaring curves, a tableau of bronze cast figures in its lower grounds jar with the modernist tower block. The metal men, made by Liyolo, are rallied around a central hero figure that calls the public to arms with a bugle. The sculpture was intended to allude to noble humanist form (Liyolo, 2014, pers. comm., 9 December). Stylized, enlarged figures speak to no specific cultural tradition nor do they set up sympathetic shapes with the surrounding architecture. Liyolo's attempt to access a golden age of pre-colonial imagining lacks any sense of unity with its built surrounds. The platform of bronzes pushed towards the ground by the towering perspectives behind it sets a hierarchy of form in place. In the face of the tower block's self-contained teleology, the sculptures and their message are diminished. The Africanisms of Liyolo's sculptures are relegated to

decoration to the main event of modernist internationalism.

In contemporary times, the frontal view of Liyolo's potentially grand sculptural stage is severed from the street by extensive security measures. Its surrounding gardens are similarly out of bounds, except to patrolling guards. The sculpture is thus unable to fulfil its public function as intermediary between the daily life of passing people and that of the building. In a further retreat, the opaque surfaces of *Tour RTNC* deliver a cracked and dusty face to its surrounds. Many panes are broken or missing and all are coated with dirt. The outrageous confidence of a glass building (and its cleaning bill) in an increasingly economically vulnerable Kinshasa, links to the impossible claims of the state that commissioned it.[85] Clouded over and pockmarked on the outside and similarly run down within, the implications of glass as transparent and modern are replaced by a narrative of dysfunction. Moreover, the imposition of a building that insists on European terms of maintenance in the tropics speaks to the inflexibility of design elements drawn in from outside.

A tour of the RTNC television centre includes the sight of bullet holes in the walls, from a violent interlude in 1993 when the station was held to ransom by insurgents. Certain high windows that remain lit throughout the night serve to emphasize the greater urban darkness of an unreliable electricity supply, not to mention the building's own inefficiencies. Its meagre power supply is insufficient to operate a lift. Those who wish to reach the building's upper echelons, including the CEO's office, have to use the stairs. With something nautical in the building's billowed silhouette and aquamarine tints, contemporary conditions emphasize its landlocked status. In the *Tour RTNC*, the more the initial design plan rejoiced in technological progress via height, the further it has to fall. The Congolese adage "when the building goes everything goes"[86] thus takes on an ominous tone when applied to sites no longer operating according to their original intended circuitry.

From afar, the *Tour RTNC* is no transplant or dislocated limb, separated from a modernism happening elsewhere. As a pinpoint in the landscape, it easily slots into the hunkering mass of the surrounding city and its desire for the airwaves and ambitions emanating from it. It is only with first hand experience of

85. Drawing in echoes of Art Nouveau glass constructions in their wake.
86. Quoted by Seke Lukombo (1974).

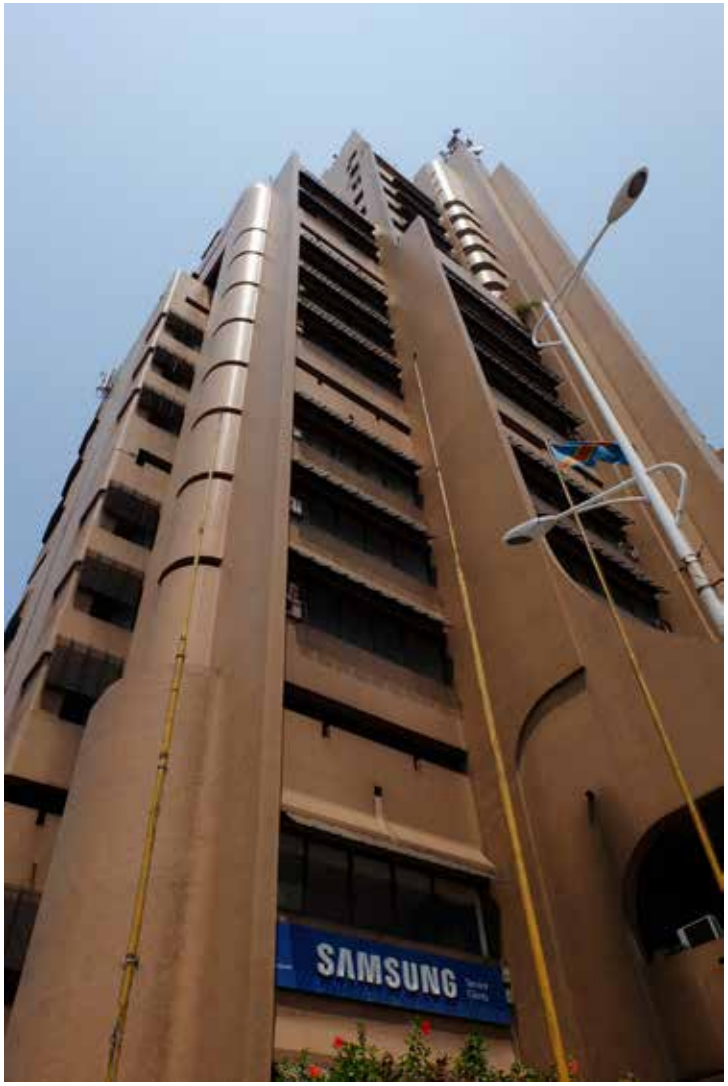


Figure 5.29: Contemporary image of *Tour Gécamines* by Strebelle & Jacqmain (built in 1977)

the site's disproportions that the building's aesthetic contradictions become evident. Elements like the scale of building's ambition, compared to its physical disappointments, as well as the disunity between Liyolo's sculptures and the greater structure, expose the inadequacies and carelessness of top-down architectonics.

With discord evident at the foundations of the *Tour RTNC*, its more bulky counterpart, the *Tour Gécamines*, sports a different kind of disjuncture, a lopsided conversation between outer shell and interior. The *Tour Gécamines*' external exaggerations were intended to embody the mineral riches of Zaïre, in both its copper colour and mountain-like proportions and contours (*Visages*, 1975: 217). In many street scenes of Kinshasa, this built ode to a once-soaring economy achieves mountain-esque status by being depicted in the background to contemporary city scenes from Gombe. It is through its sculptural volumes that architects Claude Strebelle and André Jacqmain sought to illustrate African modernity (Lagae and Toulier, 2013: 113). The building's tiered exterior reflects a sincere attempt by foreign designers to adapt a language strongly tied to Art Deco (and therefore in accord with older city elements) to the needs of the commissioning Zaïrian corporate. Modernist tropes have been adapted to try to generate a new language that is both appropriate to context and sufficiently unusual so as to be memorable.

With such optimism encoded into its outer crust, the building's cavernous interior presents a series of whimsical counterpoints. Appropriately for a monument to mining, *Tour Gécomines* has a vast, multi-caverned interior. Its (sparsely populated) levels of parking bays reach deep under the ground. The whole is controlled by dark tunnels and control rooms whose resident engineers attend to its system of pipes, pumps and switches, in order to keep the whole in working order. A beautifully proportioned core, starting with an elegant hall, topped by shell-like spiral ceiling, ushers visitors to bronze and wood lined lifts that deposit them at reception offices with shiny finishes. The textures lining these show areas include flat, grainy woods, tiny, serrated tiles and shining marble. From its enclosed organic shapes to luxury linings, echoes of early Art Nouveau are more prominent in the *Tour Gécamines* than anywhere else in Kinshasa today.

Unlike its predecessors described in earlier chapters, the massive edifice is not concerned with glass




Figure 5.30: Contemporary images of the entrance foyer of *Tour Gécamines*

fronted conversations with light. Its body is heavily padded, with covered horizontal slits for windows. Light is thus angled in from outside, flooding the interior, while denying any views within for outsiders. The fortress thus offers only its heft to the surrounding city. From inside, generous office windows, as well as an external system of service balconies and ledges, render the urban landscape pictorial, its people barely visible. The tower, insulated from the rest of Kinshasa, is concerned solely with its own internal ecosystem.

As a self-contained world with its own power supply, the *Tour Gécamines* also has clear hierarchies of space. Surrounding the sanctioned lobby area and small upper reception area, the mass of the interior are floors of offices whose plain walls, plastic chairs and chipped wooden desks echo those across the working city. While seemingly more slick from its outside and show spaces, the building in actuality holds all the dull aesthetic disappointments that characterize bureaucracy in Kinshasa. This typical block of stacked offices, held in place with rich disguise, is also testament to a bizarrely novelesque biography. Once luxurious apartments on one of the top floors of the tower now stand deserted and dirty, with the carpeting ripped up. A pile of abandoned furniture, topped by a mounted moose head, occupies most of a small darkened room said to have been occupied by Mobutu's son. The adjoining hall, with high sloped ceilings and elegant proportions, was once the scene of opulent balls where high society danced while overlooking the river and seeing across to Brazzaville.

Set up in conversation with the futuristic skyscrapers of Brazzaville, the *Tour Gécamines*' outer shell now sports large holes from being fired at from its rival capital city. During one of the skirmishes



Figure 5.31: Contemporary images of the old ballroom and apartments of *Tour Gécamines*

between Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville, this most distinctive of the Congolese riverbank structures was a target. Because only its outer shell took strain, the building's effectiveness in warding off attack serves to emphasize its fort-like nature. In setting up a symbol of economic power, its designers also created an impregnable building that is well equipped for a siege in real-life warfare.

If the *Tour RTNC* gives the impression of a giant marooned yacht, certain parts of which are still usable, the Tour Gécamines is a docked ocean liner whose hermetically sealed compartments can take a puncture. While the former is far more vulnerable, the casings of both towers draw on strong modernist traditions, providing particular personalities to the Kinshasa skyline. In a celebratory newspaper article from the time — *Kinshasa climbs to the sky!* — Seke Lukombo refers to the grand realizations of the new regime as "economic barometers" (1974: 11).[87] In so doing, Lukombo only looks up at the outside of Kinshasa's towers as something to aspire to. On closer inspection, the city's two main skyscrapers may be employed as a means of measure, but not only in terms of the square meterage of skyline they occupy. Once their interiors have been breached, the manner in which their ambitious volume dissipates into a system of besieged control comes to the fore. Within increasingly deteriorating conditions, an impoverished and faulty teleology is apparent. Inside the towers, a creeping internal decrepitude is caused by negligent and hardened top-down processes. With their insides rendered inaccessible to the majority, Kinshasa's most characteristic silhouettes are only party to the traffic of street life as outer shells. Yet, as they etched out new silhouettes, Kinshasa surged to fill the spaces between architectural

87. Lukombo refers primarily to the banking district in Gombe, but includes *l'Échangeur*.



Figure 5.32: Contemporary views from *Tour Gécamines,* including a hole made by a canon ball from Brazzaville

outlines.

Authenticité and Authenticity: Mobutu's Citadel (Mont Ngaliema) alongside the *Cités*

From the punctured compartments of monuments to a once-stable economy, a different system of packaged space may be found in *authenticité*'s enclosures, typified in the site of Mont Ngaliema. This iconic site provides a central example of Mobutu's *authenticité* constructions.[88]

The act of claiming Mont Ngaliema, previously Mont Stanley, can be described as an *authenticité* ritual. The hillock overlooking the Kinsuka Rapids, which had been the location of the grandest of colonial homes, was annexed as a presidential complex with various official buildings and a public park. A triumphant bronze statue of Henry Morton Stanley that had been erected by the colonial regime at the top the hill was removed by Mobutu in 1967. It was replaced with Liyolo's *Le bouclier de la revolution* (the shield of the revolution). A new system of looped, sloping gardens — French, English and Zaïrian — was built to envelop the hill, with indigenous fauna and fauna being the most abundant and breathtaking (van Beurden, 2015). This *Parc Présidentiel* (Presidential Park) surrounded a new Zaïrian museum complex (IMNZ), one of the president's own homes, as well as the *Cité de*

88. The other iconic example of an authenticité enclave is the N'sele compound, outside of Kinshasa. Serving as both entertainment site and a military barracks, the complex has witnessed the initiation of the 1967 MPR manifesto as well as numerous celebrations and MPR activities. Its architecture demonstrates sleek white modernist boxes, including pools, large dining halls and a tower, alongside jaunty uniform housing, all decorated with artworks by Mokengo, Liyolo, and others. This aesthetic formed a marked contrast to the flamboyant design of Mobutu's *Palais Chinois* located nearby.



Figment 5.33: Images of the gardens at Mont Ngaliema and the OUA building (circa 1970s)

l'Organisation de l'Unité Africaine (OUA).[89] As a performance of reclaiming, the complex as a whole was not only renamed after the Teke chieftain, Ngaliema, but also symbolically designed as a place of African power. The site holds colonial corpses at its centre, with the graves of early settlers flanked by a small stone stadium for outdoor performances.[90]

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the hill purposefully blanketed with spectacular forms of contained nature. Gardens were known to be dear to Mobutu's vision. Those of his *Parc Présidentiel* at Mont Ngaliema included caged animals and mini zoos, making a show of controlling Zaïrian fauna and flora while, at the same time, appropriating selected European landscape tropes. This ambitious "theatre of greenery" was overlaid with a system of snaking footpaths, elegant round lampposts, ancient trees, ponds and cages for monkeys and birds (Kanene, 2015, pers. comm., 10 August). Wide roads sectioned the park into different areas and securitized barriers served to stem flows of visitors and control staff. Photographs from that time reveal that the summit (strictly out of bounds today) overlooking the river was constructed as a magnificent show of marble fountains, official buildings and a rose garden, all peppered with outdoor artworks by the avant-gardists. At night the flower bed fountains were lit up in searing colours. One was decorated with blue tiles and creamy marble slabs, featuring ceramic mask-reliefs by Lemda Alexis and Kisengwa spitting water through their mouths. The figures point to the stylized forms of traditional Congolese masks, but to no particular ethnic origin. With its lively eclectic aesthetic, imported plants and bursting effects, the hilltop set a joyously artificial stage for celebrating *authenticité*. The Zaïrianized palatial effect was one that mixed such jazzed up references to

89. The OUA building was erected for the 1967 meeting of the Union of African Leaders.
90. Designed by Anabel Bado and Daniel Visart, in 1971.



Figment 5.34: Postcard images of Mont Ngaliema (circa 1970s)

tradition with sharp modernist architectural accents. The nearby OUA building, one of Cacoub's early commissions for the regime, was designed as an interlocking play of right angles, blocks and thinner crossbars. The building was off-limits to the public, making its exterior the only experience for them. Relief work by Mokengo fills up the stark wall space with mosaics of giant, faceless Congolese women carrying fruit and babies. In the surrounding gardens, sculptures by Liyolo and Bamba show similarly enlarged and abstracted African female figures, reclining and linking arms with each other in the artists' respective styles. These OUA commissions of 1967 were considered an important assignment for the chosen artists (Badi-Banga ne Mwini, 1977: 102). However, as part of a grand, overall design intended to impress, the ambition of the overall spectacle of Mont Ngaliema far outweighs any impact the sculptures could make. In shuffling Zaïrian artworks into a central position, their use as props to the greater theatricalities of *authenticité* is accentuated.

In their conservative character, the sculptures, gardens and closed architectural features form part of a material performance of Mobutu's mainstream nationalism. Clusters of objects employed to describe his power include simplified bronze animals and masks on the gates and giant stone leopard sentinels. Such bravado, billed as cultural pride, was commissioned with the express purpose of counteracting colonialism. As such, it enacts a replication and appropriation of certain European tropes. Explicitly based on Louis XIV's Versailles (Wrong, 2000: 45), Mont Ngaliema picks up on some of that famed tourist attraction's excesses.[91] In its showy mix of triumphant jets of water, combined with sculptural frivolity, the pageant, as a whole, descends into an impressively brash kitsch.

91. Similarly, Mobutu's Gbadolite palace is said to have been based on King Leopold II's royal enclave at Laeken (Wrong, 2000: 45). Such comparisons attempt to draw parallels between the decadence of both rulers.



Figment 5.35: Postcard images of Mont Ngaliema (circa 1970s)

When Belgian settlers erected monuments and luxurious enclaves, they did so for themselves. In contrast, Mobutu's early constructions made a concerted effort to reach the local public during the period of *authenticité*. Sites like the *Parc Présidentiel* at Mont Ngaliema mark the postcolonial moment that aimed to appeal to "the common man as much as the intellectual — something for everyone" (Bokamba, 1976: 8). The landscaped gardens and fountains, all displaying a kind of Zaïrian -ness, were designed for popular appeal. Yet, the will to entertain has been rendered bizarre by the fact that the public park has ceased to function as such. It was closed to the public in the late Mobutu era (Lagae, 2013). This turned the gesture of opening up prime colonial property to Kinshasa into one of momentary largesse, and the park's ceramic and stone symbols into empty fairground attractions. The failure to provide continued civic service serves to emphasize the insularity of the site's foundational material: by tracing earlier foundations on the hill, the design of the landscaped gardens and entertainment areas had a built-in form of securitization, making it easy to block off and secure. Set up as a guarded compound, relying on open outdoor stretches, mingled with pockets of luxury, it presents a closed memoir to the Mobutu regime. The hilltop citadel once mapped out utopian space, fencing in reclaimed ancient heritage with modernized nationalist overlays. As the garden site was initially posed as a gift to the city, it stood in as a potential miniature for much greater urban architectonics. This can be seen in its corralling together of disparate formations as well as controlling all movement within.

In Kinshasa today, the independence-era postcard image that so often featured Mont Ngaliema is a thing of the past. Now a secure enclave, this fallen Eden remains separate from the city. Carefully monitored groups of schoolchildren and the occasional foreign visitor are allowed to access its small,



Figure: 5.36: Contemporary images of Mont Ngaliema, showing maize farming and a statue of Leopold II

makeshift museum rooms, whose initial temporary status has been prolonged.[92] The controlled greenery that went with Mobutu's design specifications now defies all but the most basic management. The lower lawns have given way to natural eruptions of soil and creepers, which often threaten the stability of the metal poles of its fencing. Open ground that was once used as an open air theatre and zoo lawns is now used to grow maize for the impoverished military guard. Isolated washing lines hang not far down the slope from the reinstated statues of the likes of Leopold II and Prince Albert.[93] With such pockets of domestication dwelling alongside Ozymandian remains of deluded grandeur, glimpses of the more informal areas of the city creep across the enclave.

The counterpoint to the mighty towers and tight compounds of Mobutu's sites of power are the kilometres of mass housing that Mobutu oversaw, during the same period of construction. In comparison to the loud individuations of the elitist enclaves, which only allowed for limited public access, massive tracts of ground-space were apportioned in places like *Cité N'Sele* (outside of the city),[94] *Cité Salongo* in Lemba, and *Cité Maman Mobutu* and its neighbouring *Cité Vert* in Mont Ngalufa. In plans initiated by the Belgian administration, kilometres on kilometres of simple housing grids were laid out to define mass living space. Mobutu's legacy thus ascribed modernist formulas to

92. Plans for a large ethnographic museum for the centre of town are, once again, underway (Zola, 2015, pers. comm., 16 December).

93. The statues were resurrected some time during the last four years. Rather than returned to the summit of the hill, they are placed around the IMNC showroom, propped up without plinths or great fanfare.

94. Separate to the MPR riverside resort, the large scale living complex, built for fishermen and farm labourers, was constructed in tandem to nearby chicken and pig plants.



Figure 5.37: Contemporary images of *Cité Vert*

the problem of housing ever-multiplying citizen bodies. As seen in numerous comparable examples across the globe, the set designs of urban planners, with fixed square meterages set for various sizes of families, are pushed to their limits, exploding into extensions, compartments and multiple informal cannibalizations.[95]

Families spill into makeshift solutions, rooms are cut up and whole areas are annexed by different social clans. Across changeable formulations of living hierarchies, informal forms of trade are apparent and utility gardens are cultivated. Available open ground is often tilled or utilized as dumping grounds, in variegated degrees of organizational coherence. Mass planning formulas cannot comfortably remain fixed in communities with constantly changing identities and overlapping systems of associations and exchange that defy modernist binaries (Ferguson, 1999: 172–177). The original concrete boundaries soon buckle under the weight of shifting needs and usages. As they are built upon, cut away from and adapted, the original designs of Mobutu's *cités* are rendered porous, with only occasional pockets of the intact original designs still to be found. The crisscrossing circuits of different people swell and overwhelm inital designs realised in concrete. Each human layer and texture has its own, internal set of frequencies and logics that are applied on the man-made environment.

What the multiple, overlaid textures of the *cités* delineate is that it is in the sediments of meaning overlaying architectural form that the complex rhythms defining the city are made.[96] The lively density

95. J.S. Fontaine (1970) describes the mutual impositions of pre-planned housing and its inhabitant communities on each other, at the point of Congolese independence.

96. Naming these as "invisible," de Boeck and Plissart (2004) eschew discussing Kinshasa's built matter to chart and



Figure 5.38: Contemporary image of *Cité Salongo*



Figure 5.39: Contemporary image of *Cité Salongo*

of the cités thus highlights the comparatively simplistic message of Mobutu's sites of power, whose remains display guarded and slow decay. In the process of ruination, they can only allude to vertiginous potential. Reflecting the city's upper extremes while caricaturing its own base ambitions, decorated modernisms lose the actual authentic experience to the uncontainable *cités*.

Authenticity, if understood as an original and legitimate experience, may thus be seen to peel off from the luxury sites of *authenticité* (the political doctrine) and its language of veneer and bravado. Although not without its own wilful stereotyping and fantastical imaginaries, the aesthetic of the cités relates to a different side of the Mobutu legacy: that of human proportions and everyday aspirations.

The Exchange: Nostalgia for *Authenticité*

The obvious bookend to any aeroplane visit to Kinshasa , *l'Échangeur* makes a striking silhouette at all times of the day. Built as a calculated object of nostalgia, its exaggerations serve to accentuate those of the city. The major traffic ring at its base (from which its name of 'the interchange' stems) is heavily congested. The traffic and nearby construction generate debris, dust and exhaust fumes that hang over

analyse its human networks, especially its otherworldly involvement in the occult.



Figure 5.40: Contemporary images of *l'Échangeur*

the complex's denuded grounds. High above, the glass windows in the tower twinkle as the business of controlling aeroplane traffic continues within. This Utopian architecture includes a spaceship-like structure at the base of thickly ridged concrete ramparts and tower.[97] Futuristic aesthetics fulfil their functions, but not in accordance with Mobutu's initial ambitions.

Both island and enclave, the brutalist concrete lines of the *l'Échangeur* tower and its adjacent buildings are unforgiving to delicate human bodies. The main thrust of the tower makes a violent, clasping gesture into the sky, dwarfing its surrounds. Perhaps more than any other *authenticité* commission, *l'Échangeur* personifies the Mobutu regime. While the tower's priapic heft continually threatens, the pools and plants decorating the surrounding grounds present the incentive of isolated leisure spots, separated out from the noisy surrounds. Once within its domed interior, space is compartmentalized and constricted, giving the impression of being inside an architectural flourish. That is to say, the design of *l'Échangeur* seems more concerned with its outward appearance than the comfort of human bodies inside. Sharp edges and course surfaces inside the tower's halls and passageways seem to encroach on

97. That is to say, the base of the tower resembles depictions of UFOs from science fiction aesthetics of the time.



Figure 5.41: Contemporary images of *l'Échangeur*

the body. This sense of menace continues into the present, unabated despite the inroads of pollution, neglect, time and use.

The overpowering threat of *l'Échangeur*, visible from afar and even more prescient up close, is suggestive of the regime of terror whose beginning it heralded. In this case, expressive design, while purported as an aesthetics of commonality and populism, openly pays tribute to the top-down approach that gave rise to it and ultimately led to totalitarianism. In making use of dramatic outlines and enclosures that overtly speak to spatial power and domination, these sites draw in a particular formula of form-follows-function. The modernist idea, first seen to emerge in Art Nouveau total artworks, sees aesthetics being pared down to reveal as much information about the use of the object as possible. From the spines of *l'Échangeur, Tour Gécamines* and the *Tour RTNC* to the barbed fences of Mont Ngaliema and fortifications of the *Stade 20 Mai*, the function being described is that of control. The *authenticité*-era enclaves and towers, for all their stylistic individuation, set up a common lexicon of domination within the city.

Looking down from the summit of any of the Mobutu monoliths, the burgeoning supine creep of Kinshasa's urban stretch unfolds, exposing its many inheritances and aspirations, the colonial among them. In the enclaves of *authenticité*, the solid secretions and protuberances of the independence-era boom continuously re-inscribe the confidence of a never-quite-realized autonomy. Walled off and policed, the highest towers are the least self-sufficient and the shiniest citadels, the most noticeably



Figment 5.42: Contemporary view of *l'Échangeur* from FIKIN with *Tam-Tam* sculpture by Wumba

tarnished. The power of which they speak, while made of disparate parts, demands a controlled connectivity to a promised infrastructure never fully put in place. Vertiginous ambition reenacts how it once attempted to circumvent the horizontal city. As Kinshasa grows and agitates the different sites in various ways, these assertions of power speak to the instability of the regime that was constantly in need of reasserting its rule.

Today, the built legacy of *authenticité*, in itself reaching back to colonial systems, is repeated and distorted across the city. Ever larger massive glass monoliths, like *Cité du Fleuve*, are set to overtake Mobutu's towers in the skyline. Unequivocally looking to Dubai and Shanghai, rather than the Global North, they heighten the already searing ruptures between rich and poor (de Boeck, 2012: 320). Similarly, as the Kabila regime returns to *l'Échangeur* as a symbol worth rehabilitating, plans for renovation reveal an impossibly polished amusement centre sealed off from its surrounds. From the perspective of these inheritances, the objects of *authenticité* appear as tools of difference. Used as a wedge in the city space, they enforce the inequality of the inaccessible extraordinary over more mundane life. The pressure of the work these enclaves and towers were intended to do did not break them but left their compartments cracked, leaking vital juices.

Zaïrian modernism under Mobutu cloistered an African elite in place of a Belgian one, rendering a language of shared heritage into places of unattainable privilege. With sites of power functioning as place-makers, holding power in the hands of the elite, the tenseness of their securitized grip tends to override all the disparate designed fragments that make them up, further blurring the already softened impact of individual paintings or sculptures. Within a language of giganticism, imaginings of fantastical African pasts were rendered ever more remote. The high drama of each enclave discussed relies on the direct message of surface value that tended to function like billboards. While making imposing impressions from a distance, close up views of décor and details reveal them to be generalized and lacking in complexity. The ever-elusive Africa described in paintings, murals and sculptures is a blurry one, easily outshone by the dense contrasts, absurdities, beauties and messiness of daily life in the surrounding city.

Authenticité's art of pictorial essentialisms never made any great effort to obscure or challenge the overriding hierarchies of structure. Moreover, sheer walls of glossy giant boxes — glass and steel, thick white paint and glazed ceramic alike — easily allow for their lumpen appendages of mosaic, sculpture and canvass to slide off, leaving sheer ambition exposed. The Zaïrian avant-gardists, in trying to forge ahead with an aesthetic for the postcolonial regime, provided props to its patriarchal power. In contrast to the fragmented effects of authenticité, the European avant-garde designers from the earlier chapters of this thesis sought unity across total space. In their pursuit of toppling the hierarchies of painting and sculpture, their form-making flattened outside elements, homogenizing all cultures in a manner that was convenient to the colonial administration of the time. From the total artworks of Nouveau Art to art in the service of totalitarianism in Zaïre, the tropes of flattening and essentializing emerge.

Within the *authenticité* hothouse that pitted images of strength against weaker ones, chasing the fundamental source of buildings and their artworks is not necessarily the best way to understand the culture which birthed them. Mahmoud Mamdani (1996: 250) suggests that the question we have to ask ourselves about the political culture of regimes like Mobutu's is not whether its roots are to be found in traditional Africa or in colonialism but, rather, to understand how it is that one particular style of leadership came to be accepted as the ruling order of the day. This chapter has outlined how Mobutu's early buildings capture the seductions and threats of the style of leadership and formulation of power



Figure 5.43: Contemporary images of Colonial private home in Cit*é* *Salongo* and remains of relief sculptures at N'Sele

that was going to take over Zaïre. As built constructions engulf the individual, so too did the military regime assert power over Zaïrian bodies. While the promise of natural cultural unity was constantly made through art, song, dance and pronouncements, the reality was that of a tightly policed situation that controlled through threat of violence.

As pockets of Kinshasa were sectioned off for the elite and ambitions were made evident through soaring icons, urban space was divided so that a politics of "strategic divisiveness" would help consolidate authority (White, 2008: 7). Further, by combining afro-kitsch embellishments with sheer modern slabs and "big man" tropes of chieftainship, *authenticité* aesthetics reflected its "blend of ambiguous, fluctuating and often derivative legitimating formulas or doctrines" (Callaghy, 1984: 6). At the same time, the overall impact of state-sponsored constructions was not without an optimism that expressly appealed to postcolonial Africanity.

While much of Mobutu's power stemmed from Euro-American buffering built on the wreckage of colonial intervention, his rule was supported from within. The dictator was able to stay in power long after the period of *authenticité* through the efforts of countless Zaïrian collaborators (White, 2008: 67; Wrong, 2000: 11). Congolese complicity in the regime might be partially understood through the overwhelming seductions of the outsized sites described in this chapter. These were never purely crass displays of wealth. Both architecture and artworks (whether successful or not) set out to link

themselves to a vivid idea of an African utopia.

More complex than the enticing two-dimensional postcard image of *authenticité* distributed by the regime in its various media platforms, the sites described here, for all their dishevelment, still inspire longing. In local discussions around Congolese built culture, nostalgia for the Mobutu era is as common as that for the colonial one.[98] As discussed in the previous chapter, imperial relics serve as depositories of the memory of a time of order and stability, most especially to those who never experienced it. Colonial remains are amongst the city's foundational blocks and cannot be easily dislodged, giving rise to daily renegotiations around them. The issue at stake with these is the structures' particularized in-built nostalgia for the metropole, a fiction of regulated rule which has long since evaporated. By comparison, the innate nostalgia of the sites of *authenticité* is for an idea of Africa.

With checks and security still firmly in place around Mobutu-era sites, these locations are allowed a certain aura of mystique. Access through institutionalized controls sees certain areas out of bounds, others only visible from certain angles and even others accessible only after much waiting. Accordingly, the experience of distinctive forms — a jagged silhouette sticking out above rooftops, the fragment of a tell-tale mosaic through the trees, the deep shadow of a monumental mass — are beguilingly fragmented. The viewer's nostalgic urge forms its own picture of the whole. Once inside one of these buildings, the sense is that these spaces continue to look to a different time zone. Their object dramas, set up against the city as backdrop, speak to potential African futures (based on reconstructions of the past, both traditional and colonial) in a way that imperial modernist relics never can. While Mobutu-era pieces are too cynical to make a believable case for a romantic pre-colonial heritage, their sizes and bulk — which, for all their vulnerability, are still able to pose a magnificent threat — describe possible versions of the Congo. They allow for new fictions and mythologies to emerge. Despite their inconsistencies and outright lies, the giant objects of Kinshasa's *authenticité* left memorable impressions on the city psyche.

98. See de Boeck and Plissart (2004: 94–95) and Malaquais (2012a: 13). A recent article in the Guardian has the byline, "On the streets of the DRC's capital, people are losing patience with both President Kabila and the opposition, as poverty and corruption spark nostalgia for the authoritarian Mobutu era" (Burke, 2016).

Although fundamentally depleting and irrevocably corrupt in colossal proportions, Mobutu's reign did not leave the Congo's capital in ruins. At the same time as electricity is metered out in unreliable bursts, tremendous tarred roads continue to serve the city. The compartmentalized monoliths of Mobutu's key sites still float, even as they lose air through the punctures of history. While the ideology of *authenticité* did not outlive Mobutu, its physical constructions did, along with certain strands of rich mythologies and searing optimism. The systems around them continue according to their own rhythms. As "documents of their time," the unfulfilled promises of sites like *l'Échangeur*, the *Stade du 20 Mai* and Mont Ngaliema, as well as the *Tour RTNC* and *Tour Gécomines* not only reflect "the unfinished project of decolonization" but also how the moment of initial independence allowed for the possibility of multiple modernisms (Enwezor, 2001: 15). In their state of material disrepair, they still reach past the present to spectacular, disembodied futures.

Conclusion: Representing the Congo



Figure 6.1: Installation of *European Ghosts* (2016), Mu.ZEE, Ostend with vitrines by Serrurier-Bovy from *Palais des Colonies* (1897)

Representing the Congo

It is the goal of this work to [write] … not on the invention of tradition, but on the tradition of invention. (Strother, 1998: xvi)

We are all culturally contaminated by each other. There is no longer a fully autonomous echt-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots). (Appiah, 1992: 155)

… we are in a world being made and unmade, more or less all the time. (Said, 1993: 15)

Tracking backwards from a concrete block piercing the 21st century Kinshasa skyline, out of a swarmed enclosure comes a taut serpentine line, trying to articulate its place in Belgium's newly industrialized epoch. A snail-shaped townhouse grips a king's *fin de siècle* ambitions as it tells of a tantalizing natural bounty. Fast forward a couple of decades and swirling form tightens into a cool, white grip brandishing mysterious sculptures as something ripped from dark ritual. The statues themselves remain silent, relying on inner energies to ride out the smooth walls, whose birthing process they bore witness to. As the century draws on, iron frameworks from Belgium give rise to the searing peaks and ruptures of Congolese modernism. In Gombe, a mountainous hunk of concrete opens up for a glimpse of the delicate proportions of a seashell, dazzling before the degraded office quarters are viewed. As lines are copied, shapes and materials translated and traded, so are their feints. Moving sideways, skirting across Kinshasa to Brussels and back again, from shattering wide angles to unsettling close-ups, different Congos emerge.

The "bits and pieces … in a variety of media" of modernist form that bounce off and reproduce each other, alternatively made for and inspired by the Congo, defy a narrative of linear progression (Hofmeyr, 2004: 21). In the multiplicity of modernisms that reverberate around the massive tract of contemporary culture that constitutes representing the Congo, recognizable stylistic features make their particular claims on it, according to their different producers' understanding of modernist progress and newness. Those ornamental forms deemed too cumbersome, that fall away as the 20th century

develops, have as much to tell about the story of Congolese modernism (or *Congo Style*), as those that have mobility.

Art Nouveau totalities were so persuasive that they blinded those within their total artworks, including its practitioners, to their own in-built Eurocentrism. As a result, their mode of practice could be used as an effective frame for the wild Congolese subject of Belgium's imagining. With an overall view of all the styles visited in this study, Art Nouveau in Belgium is the most hallucinogenic, leaving a searing image of itself before taking fragmented flight into cleaner forms. It is all the more insidious for its aesthetic ability to overlay its colonial allegiances.[1] Outside of isolated (and isolating) exhibitions, those built constructions discussed that are located in the Congo are more tangible and exposed. The histories of their forms remain visible. The fact that the *Hotels ABC* are neither ruins nor heritage sites speaks volumes. With living structures evading the romanticism of the transcendental, the overt language of Mobutu's postcolonial remains overwhelms bodies, en masse. At the same time, both *authenticité* structures and colonial remains rely on a politics of oppression and repression.

As one of the most obdurate of all of Art Nouveau's enduring progeny, the white cube may trace part of its innate primitivism back to its late 19th century point of origin. While the white cube refuses to recognize its own dominating tendencies, settler architecture sent to the colony has no such illusions. Employed as a means of rule, modernist form entrenches itself as European, only to be absorbed by a new African regime, determined to the right to describe itself. Across this selection of environments, the complete entanglement of ideas of Africa and Europe is evident. According to the formal terms of each exhibition, object and building (all wholes, with insides and outsides), there is no fixed continental identity. Moreover, moving from Art Nouveau's hazy Oriental obsessions to Mobutu's direct government alliances with Global South powerhouses, underlines how, even in the most nationalistic rhetoric, political geography involves far more than the broader locus of imperial power and its former colony.

Located in Brussels and Kinshasa at opposing ends of the 20th century, the sites discussed underscore

1. One only has to look at the number of researchers who, in seeking to critique the cultural objects of Belgian colonialism, talk about figurative sculptures in ivory by the likes of Wolfers and not Art Nouveau architecture.



Figure 6.2: Contemporary image of the remains of CCCI trains at the former station in Mbanza Ngungu

regimes of mythically systematic violence. With both the Belgium colonial regime and Mobutu's dictatorship reviled by history, examining their aesthetic legacies can often lead to moralizing. The underlying horror of King Leopold II's Congo, on the surface, seems to be in contradiction to avant-garde goals of wanting to better society. Accordingly, and because of its influence on 20th century design, it is important to try and work out how material form, in itself, was complicit. Focusing on the personal politics of the designers themselves is similar to relishing the perceived evil embodied in the person of King Leopold II. The greater task at hand has been to attempt to tear the design situations of this thesis from the hold in which art history has bound them. A close reading of representing the Congo can expose the foundational lie of the Eurocentric story of modernism that placed a set group of forms and materials as culturally specific.

From total artworks refusing to recognize the corruption of colonialism to the Gesamtkunstwerk of Mobutu's *authenticité*, bodies are missing. De-peopled colonial imagery and anonymous African artworks have been made to work hard to populate a study that covers periods of time in which masses of unidentified bodies went missing. Because of this, it is important to address the disembodied sense of time attempted in all of the exhibitions and interiors under discussion. Concurrently, the bodies of Leopold II and Mobutu are dislocated and absent, the former never setting foot in the colony and the latter dissolving into ever-expanding personifications of his power.

The histories covered here suggest that dwelling on the extreme wrong-doing of specific leaders draws attention away from the systems in place that supported them. This study has attempted to highlight hierarchies within the influential aesthetics these regimes set loose. This is abundantly clear in the case of Mobutu, who has become one of the defining caricatures of an African kleptocrat for the Euro-American press. Focusing on the semi-public, fantastical environments of the dictator's early years rather than, for example, the more obvious targets of his private palaces provides a glimpse into a modernism that is routinely denied to Congolese by Euro-American discourse. Whether successful or not, Mobutu-era experiments in shattering the European frame present rich points of departure. While not denying the extreme violence of both regimes, unpicking the logics of their object-environments makes it abundantly clear that Mobutu-era objects were never a direct copy of the colonial. Both regimes gave rise to often outlandish sites of seduction which attempt to control the viewer. Even as they revel in their own artificialities, they overwhelm onlookers.

From Art Nouveau's artificial harmonies to the disjuncture of Zaïrian giganticisms, uncertainties and instability are never completely hidden. When elements of these environments are re-used and curated into new aesthetics, reverberations of their political moments come with them. In each designed situation addressed, the extent to which ideology was in-built, applied or crept in over time has been assessed according to the particularities of its form-making. Because these fabrications were intended as provocative fascinations, with complex meanings packed into their surfaces and teeming interiors, their politics can never be read as simplistic.

The extraordinary productions of the giant regimes bookending this thesis employed different modernist constructions to describe that Congo which they tried to claim. Across the links and mutual influences of these eras, the salient connection is the modernist myth of traditional African sculpture.[2] Prior to taking their place in various art institutions (and whether or not those particular objects in today's museums are the things those institutions would like them to be), they embodied another way of describing the Congo. Before the modernist frame existed, various aspects of material culture

2. The tug of war between Belgium and Zaïre over the right to own the representative power of these objects serves to emphasize the sculptures' efficacy (exposing the alleged neutrality of the white cube in the process).

were employed as part of daily life, with their own complicated languages, borrowings from other peoples, essentialist tendencies and duplicities; according to their respective contexts.[3] Because of the continually renewed creativity of these objects, they are seen here, according to Zoe Strother's (1998: xiv) definition, as "inventive tradition" rather than the flattened symbols of culture that are used in the "invented tradition" of nation-building.

Employing these objects as critical artworks allows them to be a means to pick away at the modernist framework around them. The only way to release them would require intensive investment into the historic social life of each piece. One of the aims of this thesis has been to propose a theoretical foundation from which such studies could begin.

Postmodernism after Authenticity

Modernism is not the only system this doctoral project has set out to de-provincialize. Attempting to derail its linear, hierarchical logics necessitates that various of its mythically sealed categories be broken open, certain tools and strategies laid bare and others made available for alternative approaches. In order to describe more than Euro-America, its words have to be put to new uses. The most crucial word-tools to end with are the mutable and interlocking phenomena of authenticity and postcoloniality, in themselves impossible to disentangle from the fiction-mongering of identity, ethnicity and nationalism.

The issue of authenticity, as described via the essentialism of nostalgia, has manifested in different material formations across the scope of the Congo imaginariums dealt with in these pages. Art Nouveau, through all its artificialities, sought the authentic in exotic and rustic pasts, paving the way for modernist painters to chase presumed primitivity into African sculptures, in order to corner it in the white cube. Once in this time capsule, Congolese objects had ample time to challenge the foundational premise of the authenticity relied on to assess contemporary art. The exhibits are undoubtedly authentically African according to their provenance, but at the point of having to incarnate what they are purported to be (the authentic traditional they represent), they are duplicitous. With their purity of

3. By all evidence of their remaining representatives and offspring, one of the salient attributes often includes a subversive sense of humour.

intention in question, far-from-primitive objects threaten the white cube around them, challenging its self-aggrandizing assumptions of sophistication.

It is at this point of crisis, with Euro-American modernism besieged by numerous insurgencies,[4] that Zaïre demands the return of its objects. In the moment of making a nationalist fetish of tradition, the very concept of authenticity is objectified into the political doctrine of *authenticité*. In its language of colossal cover-up and empty overlays, *authenticité* becomes separated from the authenticity of collective experience that can speak on behalf of the average Zaïrian. Self-identification demanded a commitment to more unauthorized generalizations than *authenticité* was able to actualize.

As the postcolonial moment in Zaïre coincides with the postmodern one in Euro-American design (taking different forms according to the commissioning brief and designer whimsy), the inequalities of Congolese daily realities give rise to urgencies that overtake intellectual aesthetic battles. As a result, the autonomous postcolonial moment in the Congo and the postmodern moment in international design are too self-involved to take real measure of each other, their revolutions against what had gone before too consuming to step outside of, for any lengthy period. Aside from superficial reference — sharing pop cartoons of culture, without their accompanying modes of consumption — they are not able to make useful alliances for longevity. Mobutu welcomes Ali to make a jungle of Kinshasa. At the same time as Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans are coolly rendered monumental (as are reproduced images of Ali), Liyolo sets up monuments to extravagant kitsch, without a hint of irony.[5] With irony mostly left to the comfortable burlesques of Chéri Samba et al, no determined effort is rallied to break down the existing structural status quo.

The "posts" of the respective stylistic moments (whether employing the theoretical or literal use of the words "postmodern" and "postcolonial") serve to bolster the symbolic power of their suffixes.[6] The

4. Different sections of the modernist movement were called to a reckoning in various ways. As a reaction to high abstraction, Pop Art emerged in the mid to late 1950s in Britain and America, seeing a return to image through harnessing and distilling elements from popular culture. The classic example of the failure of International Style architecture in the USA was the destruction of Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe social housing complex (1954), whose demolition took place in the public eye from 1972–1976.

5. Warhol, in turns, annexes the hip part of Jean Michel Basquiat's painterly "Africanisms," while tacitly ignoring their harsh critique of the primitivist urge. Warhol also made portraits of Ali in his Athletes series (1978).

6. We may, thus, recognize Kwame Appiah's "space-clearing gestures" whereby the "post" in both terms refers to producers



Figure 6.3: Contemporary street scene in Gombe and *Monument Place des Artists* at Rond point Victoire by Alfred Liyolo

"modern" in "postmodern" was the meat of its substance. In the immediate postcolonial moment, the urgent requirements of a decolonized design were left to a dislocated *authenticité*, whose reactionary cultural essentialisms were ill equipped for the intense pressures that ensued.

Living with Postcolonial Remains

In following the theme of ornamentation and artificiality through the various contexts of this thesis, it emerges that the modernist motto of form-follows-function equates to form-follows-power. With modern design employed by ruling regimes and fashionable elites, it sheds ornamentation for more streamlined references to progress. Design shifts into more minimalist lines to achieve greater effectivity, leading to the powerful illusion of neutrality that bolsters the master narrative of the white cube. In Kinshasa, the block formations of colonial enterprise and *authenticité*'s monumental concrete monoliths usurp space from their surrounds, dominating skylines from their inception.

With current conditions in mind, the artificiality of the particular modernist discourse of colonial and postcolonial remains are sooner exposed by Kinshasa's unrelenting conditions than they are in protected, fleeting Art Nouveau enclaves. As fabricated traditions are merged with representations

clearing a space in which to distinguish themselves (1992: 342–356).



Figure 6.4: Contemporary images of *Musée Horta* and *Musée Fin de Siècle* in Brussels

of nature, the giant Congo of so many imaginations forms its own, illusionary ecosystem, whereby symbols of progress and Africanity grow over those of the African colony-as-progress. Within these enclaves, separated out from day-to-day space, it is those sites on which urban and natural forces visibly encroach (that is, buildings in Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu) that are the most independent as things in and of themselves. Revivified culture, whether it be buildings made into museums or objects in exhibitions, remain trapped in artificial Congos, subjected to battling the whims of the master narratives that bear them.

This study has attempted to test the agentic qualities in inanimate built environments, alongside the potential force of powerless things. Particular design situations have been unpacked with the aim of trying to delineate where the power to describe the Congo lies. Whether it is in its producers or the material power of the objects and environments themselves, detailing the interactivities and connectivities of these spaces, as well as their blockages and stagnant areas, has allowed for a rich lexicon of imagery and symbols to rise to the fore. Because of this, the initial premise of modernist discourse being rigid and unforgiving is seen to be partly opened up, in its designed form. That is to say, where overriding narratives in Euro- or Afro-centric languages are not always useful, the sites of

its built productions can be highly generative. When not utilized as spaces onto which fantasies of the Congo are to be projected, they can be nodes which embody important information concerning the nature of fabrication through form. Crucially, they allow for reflection concerning the extent to which the need to construct an Other is made visible.

Art Nouveau's strange beauty was based on othering exotic entities that fell outside of late 19th century European urbanity, from Flemish peasants and African peoples to raw nature. The modern art gallery, particularly in its 20th century mode, by its own definition objectifies all of its exhibits, implying that anything not in a frame or vitrine (literally and figuratively) cannot be classified as fine art.[7] In declaring itself autonomous, Mobutu-era productions attempted to separate themselves from Europe (and any other power that was a threat). As they succeeded in alienating the core mass of Kinshasa through dominating forms (that told of real life totalitarian rule), so too, do all the enclaves revisited here expose the class structure of their societies, according to who they were built for and who could not enter. The detail and texture that goes into constructing these alterities and divisions reveals a vibrant attachment to the myths of their own making. Sophisticated efforts to construct fantasy Congos around an other reveal a dedicated fascination with their own creation. Accordingly, the primary aim of this study has been to map the forms, arrangements and materials that this pattern of exclusion and othering takes, when dealing with the Congo.

From working through sites and contexts, from Brussels to Kinshasa, certain basic modes of approach can be drawn out. Primarily, the forms and patterns that certain ideologies take on can be recognized according to the role they have come to embody within the localized networks of their existence (at both practical and conceptual levels). This helps to avoid ethnocentric approaches that search for signs of Europe, Africa or for any indigenous purity, in complex conglomerations of form and meaning. In trying to understand how particular circumstances and trajectories lead to fabricated solutions that weather in different ways, the whole object and its history need to be taken into account. Or as much of this sensorial and archival information as possible. This approach allows for meaning to be temporal and particular, as well as for the researcher to be open to situations changing. Ultimately, in attempting

7. A central question of contemporary art practice has been to open up and question the initial assumption of modernist art and its display systems.

to expose underlying prejudices and primitivism in constructed environments, some self-awareness of the researcher's own complicities and allegiances needs to be taken into account and, preferably, made known to the reader.

No built form is ever frozen in the moment of its making, but is constantly being remade in conjunction with its surrounds. In looking at the complex sites of this study, each with its own intrinsic sense of embodiment, they have, to a certain extent, been treated as if they were alive. Across all examples, the source of these objects' fascination has been a lively involvement with both their viewers and subject matter. The push-pull appeal of these fabulist, sometimes grotesquely compelling spaces, whether swooping towers, curling ornament or spotlit galleries, is that they are entertainingly sensuous and thrillingly escapist. For the moment that they are able to take hold of the viewer's mind (which is very often dated to that of their making) as well as bodily responses, the promise of their various utopian stories, fleetingly, holds true. Within this, the excluded other that is constructed — be it primitive man, colonial subject or enemy of the nation — is the basis on which the logic of the fantasy relies. No matter what we now know about the violent truth of the contexts of these imaginariums, their eloquence in claiming space in special and powerful ways allows for some understanding and empathy for those who have been seduced by them. Their function as a rhetorical device helps to bring some closure to a deeply troubled terrain.



Figure 6.5: Street scene in Limete

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Figure 2.6: *Civilisation et Barbarie* by Philippe Wolfers (1897)
Photographer unknown (retrieved from: https://www.kunstforumwien.at/en/exhibition/kunstforum/117/the-kiss-of-the-sphinx-symbolism-in-belgium)

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Source: Photographer unknown (https://za.pinterest.com/pin/380343131006504077/)

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Source: Photographer unknown, Reprinted from Innendekoration. Revue Mensuelle Illustree pour la decoration interieure moderne, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 45 & p. 63

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Source: Photographer unknown (retrieved from: https://za.pinterest.com/skiangel65/henry-van-de-velde/)

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Source: ©Bastin & Evrard/SOFAM (used with permission)

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Source: Photographer: Alexandre, *Archives d'Architecture Moderne*, Brussels (used with permission)

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Source: Photographer unknown, reprinted from: Wynants, M. (1997) *Van Hertogen en Kongolezen. Tervuren en de Koloniale Tentoonstelling 1897*, Brussels: Koninklik Museum Voor Midden-Afrika Tervuren, p. 123 & p. 140

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Source: Photographer: Alexandre, © Collection RMCA Tervuren (used with permission)

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Source: Photographer: Alexandre, © Collection RMCA Tervuren (used with permission)

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Source: Reprinted from: Wynants, M. (1997) *Van Hertogen en Kongolezen. Tervuren en de Koloniale Tentoonstelling 1897*, Brussels: Koninklik Museum Voor Midden-Afrika Tervuren, p. 111

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Source: Horta Museum Archives and Library (permission to use)

Figure 2.22: Preparatory sketch for *Salle d'Ethnographie* by Paul Hankar
Source: Reprinted from: Loyer, F. (1991) Dix ans d'art nouveau: Paul Hankar, architecte, Brussels: Archives d'architecture moderne a Bruxelles, p. 391

Figure 3.1: Installation image *African Negro Art* (1935), Museum of Modern Art, New York
Source: ©SCALA (permission to use)

Figure 3.2: Contemporary image Folkwang Museum (built in 1902)
Source: Photographer: Ruth Sacks

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Source: Photographer unknown (retrieved from: http://www.fotomarburg.de/besobilder/view)

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Source: ©SCALA (permission to use)

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Source: Photographer: Walker Evans, reprinted in: Sweeney, J. (ed.) (1935). African Negro Art (Vol. 1), Chicago: Museum of Modern Art, p. 482

Figure 3.8: Installation images of the Surrealists' Counter-Colonial Exhibition, Paris (1931)
Source: Photographer unknown, Reprinted in: Morton, P. (2000) *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition*, Paris & Massachusetts: MIT Press. pp. 104-5

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Source: Photographer unknown (retrieved from: https://www.studyblue.com/notes/note/n/surrealism-128c/deck/11424391)

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Source: Photographer unknown (retrieved from: https://wolfsonianfiulibrary.wordpress.com/2010/06/17/art-nouveau-architecture-on-review-anew/); Photographer unknown (Retrieved from: http://kosubaawate.blogspot.co.za/2011/02/leopoldville-1956-tourist-circuit-ii.html)

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Source: Photographer unknown, © Collection RMCA Tervuren (used with permission)

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Source: Photographer unknown, Printed in: *Zaïre: l'Hebdomadaire de l'Afrique Centrale*, (1972) '*Un anée pas comme les autres*', 10 January, p. 8.

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