Abstract This article focuses on seven
exhibitions presented in Brussels between
1971 and 2013, all dealing with the issue
of Belgian architectural identity. Indeed,
Belgium is a territory where tensions and
cultural negotiations are structural because
of its multiple regions and the co-existence
of different communities. As a discipline
embedded in this specific geography of
conflicts, architecture seems particularly
interesting as an area to look at in order
to analyse how cross-cultural exchange
can occur. The article aims to evaluate the
transcultural resolution of this persistent
curatorial question of Belgian architectural
identity over time, by considering the con-
nections between curatorial discourses over
time and their intertextuality.

Résumé La Belgique est un pays où les
tensions et les négociations culturelles sont
structurelles en raison de la coexistence de
plusieurs régions et communautés. Ancrées
dans ce territoire conflictuel, les exposi-
tions d'architecture peuvent être révéla-
trices des tractations interculturelles qui
s'y jouent. Cet article se concentre sur sept
expositions présentées à Bruxelles entre
1971 et 2013 qui posent toutes la question
de l'identité architecturale belge. Il vise en à
évaluer la résolution transculturelle en exa-
minant la filiation des discours curatoriaux
et leur intertextualité.

Lyna Bourouiba, Anne-Laure Iger

Debating the Identity of Belgian Architecture through Exhibitions: The Storytelling of an Intercultural Diachronic Contact Zone

Identity and Curatorial Belgian Conditions
Since the late 1960s, the architecture field has benefited from an extended range of mediations, densifying voices, theoretical issues, and discourses on practices. The exhibition, in its intermedial plurality, is part of the expanded mode of existence of architecture (Herbin, 2015). It contributes to the intermediality of the discipline, while using intermediality to show, experiment with, and get to know architecture. At a moment when architectural modernism was in crisis,

Fig. 1 Flemish students strike in Leuven, a wall newspaper gives the latest news: "Overheveling naar wallonie" ("Transfer to Wallonia"), 1968. © Netherlands National Archives, photograph by Ron Kroon, Anefo.

this pluralization has generated disciplinary reconfigurations by freeing architectural practice from modernist hegemony. By exploring new forms inspired by history and places, critical postures have increased in number.

This renewed enthusiasm was concomitant with political events troubling Europe at the end of the 1960s. In Belgium, these were times of deep political and administrative reconfiguration. In 1968, the division of the Catholic University of Leuven crystallized the territorial and linguistic concordance debate. Flemish nationalists demanded the departure of French-speakers from the university and renamed it the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven). Following these violent demonstrations, fixed linguistic borders were extended between Flemish and French-speaking regions as communities **(Fig. 1)**. Twenty-one years later, in 1989, Belgium passed a new state reform creating the Brussels-Capital Region, dissociating the land from Flanders and giving it greater autonomy. Besides territorial division, these two crises, like many Belgian state reforms, engendered a multiplication of levels of power: communal, provincial, communitarian, regional, federal, and European. These complexities affected the political and administrative governance of the country. They have also aroused intense cultural and identarian debates, embodied in language. More than territorial limits or common history, cultural identity was formulated—even claimed—through language.

Belgium is a territory where tensions and cultural negotiations are structural. This situation is a source of relations of domination related to the distribution of power and funds. So far as (architectural) culture is concerned, the attribution of subsidies is based on the different communities (Flemish, German, and French-speaking). This arrangement does not grant equal funding, which then results in a three-tiered system (De Caigny and Vandermarliere, 2016). Bearing in mind such concerns and their potential transcultural resolutions, Belgian architecture—as a discipline embedded in this specific geography of conflicts—seems particularly interesting as an area to look at in order to analyse how cross-cultural exchange occurs. Assuming that cultural identity as a way of belonging, to either the country or community, is embodied in architectural concerns, the question arises of whether Belgian architectural identity is situated between common and specific cultural dimensions. Perceivable in a number of forms of practice, this debate finds a mediation echo. Since the 1990s, the *Jaarboek* of the Flemish Architecture Institute and the *Inventaires* published by the Wallonia Brussels Federation have listed recent projects built across the country, and essays such as Geert Bekaert's *Contemporary Architecture in Belgium* have sought to theorize forms of practice about this cultural issue. As early as the late 1960s, curatorial practices were embracing the problem of how to frame in an exhibition Belgian architectural identity and displaying panels showing its diversity. These rare initiatives differed from the curatorial habits of the moment, commonly dedicated to modernist reviews and monographs. Thus, in 1969, the exhibition *Antoine Pompe et l'Effort moderne en Belgique 1890–1940* by Maurice Culot and François Terlinden marked an initial turning point. The show was a provocative reaction to the functionalist tendency in Belgium which, according to the curators, moved away from its historical origin and became increasingly associated with the rapid urban transformation and destruction in Brussels due to property speculation, better known as *bruxellisation*. If modern architecture was being shown, the purpose was above all to explore

Belgian specificities and crafts. From then on, numerous Brussels exhibitions aimed to depict Belgian architectural practices on a territorial scale.

This article focuses on seven exhibitions presented in Brussels between 1971 and 2013. They all dealt with the issue of Belgian architectural identity, not in a way that claimed architecture as belonging to this or that community but rather in order to promote, analyse, and create architecture. We approach them through the lens of what literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt called a *contact zone* (Pratt, 2008). A *contact zone* denotes spaces where cultural encounters and clashes take place, where power relations are negotiated and where transculturation rather than assimilation may occur. As a capital situated at the intersection of territories and communities, Brussels is a place of convergence and stimulation of debates. Despite its institutional complexities, this multilayered capital embodies the potential to overcome these struggles in Belgian identity (Corijn *et al.*, 2009; Doucet, 2015). We argue that architecture exhibitions, in addition to displaying architecture, enable establishing privileged situations for debate and production of knowledge. As such, they form time-spaces where architectural discourse is being shaped, debated, transformed, and disseminated. In the case of Brussels, this process takes place in a complex intercultural sphere of intercommunities. Furthermore, collectively, the seven exhibitions form what we have decided to call a *diachronic contact zone*. Indeed, we do not only propose to consider the concept of the *contact zone* as a tool for analysing debates and collective production in the space and time of the exhibition. We also suggest viewing it as a means to investigate exhibitions in a *thick present* (Haraway, 2020), where architectural knowledge occurs through a series of intellectual positions that respond to one another.[1] So

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then, our ambition is not to compare but accurately describe these exhibitions (Macé, 2016: 201). By considering them more as ethical and political statements, they shape architectural discourse. Indeed, together they face a common curatorial question and favour collective postures, proposing a national unity affirmation, or, alternatively, regional and communitarian specificities. While the debate on the possibility of a Belgian architectural identity persists over time, (re-)emerging in numerous Brussels exhibitions, its vivacity appears in catalogues and booklets. The curatorial repositioning depends more on discursive quotations than on material ones. Catalogues and booklets are then privileged mediums for studying these interwoven discourses, replacing the intermedial spectrum with an intertextual one. These sources, in the context of this article and our theses, were cross-referenced in interviews we conducted with some of the curators who worked on these seven exhibitions: Jean-Didier Bergilez, Vincent Brunetta, Diane Hennebert, Pablo Lhoas, Francis Strauven, and Iwan Strauven. Thus archives and oral history constitute the corpus we assembled to explore to what extent these exhibitions attempt the exercise of a cross-cultural resolution.

### *Assemble*: Describing Belgian Architecture as a "Difficult Whole"

In 1971, Geert Bekaert, accompanied by Francis Strauven, presented an exhibition at the Royal Library Albert 1, commissioned by the National Confederation of Construction. Critically portraying a diversity of practices within Belgium, *La Construction en Belgique 1945–1970/Bouwen in België 1945–1970* aimed to faithfully represent an ongoing architecture, regardless of any stylistic dogma.

Like Maurice Culot and François Terlinden in 1969, Geert Bekaert and Francis Strauven aimed to offer a dissident and original curation. Their common intent was to bring about a rupture in the prevailing view of architecture. It was also a reaction to Renaat Braem's notorious 1968 pamphlet *Het lelijkste land ter wereld* ("The Ugliest Country in the World") (Braem, 1968). As

Geert Bekaert wrote in the introduction to the catalogue: "The aim here is not to show beautiful things, but to try to bring to light a history, that is to say correlations and a meaning" (Bekaert and Strauven, 1971: 15). Their approach was to move away from stylistic scopes—i.e. from the Modern movement—towards a broader question: how to define architectural practice in Belgium?

To conduct this retrospective of Belgian architecture, Geert Bekaert and Francis Strauven decided to inventory the whole architectural production from 1945 to 1970: new constructions as vernacular sceneries. With the help of the photographer Karl Vermeir, Francis Strauven crossed the entire Belgian territory, visiting each project shortlisted for the exhibition **(Fig. 2)**. Geert Bekaert, meanwhile, wrote a substantial introduction for the catalogue identifying new patterns, justifying the projects they exhibited and presenting a critical and historical overview of Belgian post-war architecture. This text was submitted to several Belgian architects, such as Pierre Puttemans, Renaat Braem, Albert Bontridder, K.N. Elno, and Paul Felix, with the intention of entering into a discussion on its theoretical content and scope. Unfortunately, the feedback was not as abundant and sharp as Geert Bekaert had expected. Pierre Puttemans and Renaat Braem were the only ones who shared their comments, which then appeared throughout Geert Bekaert's text, nuancing or in dialogue with it **(Fig. 3)**. Although hardly fertile, this attempt at a debate outlined a first definition of what a Belgian architectural identity might be and the potential to define it through a curatorial *contact zone*. Furthermore, the exhibition travelled across Belgium, expanding its impact.

Thirty years later, in 2000, Brussels was named the European Capital of Culture, under the title *Brussels 2000*. Many events were organized in the city and, as Isabelle Doucet highlighted, this was "a spur for the architectural community" (Doucet, 2015: 13). Among various events, the exhibition *Supernova Jonge Belgische Architectuur/Jeune Architecture belge* offered a national insight into architectural practice led by architects who graduated between 1984 and 1994

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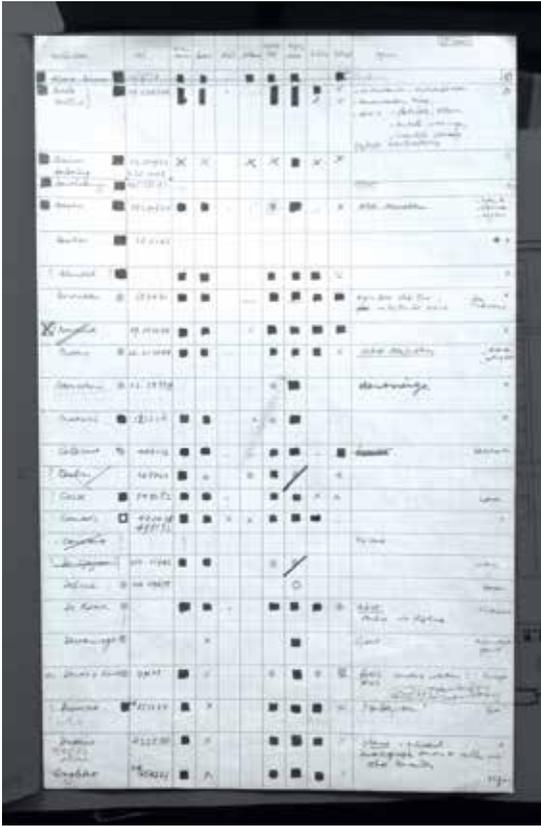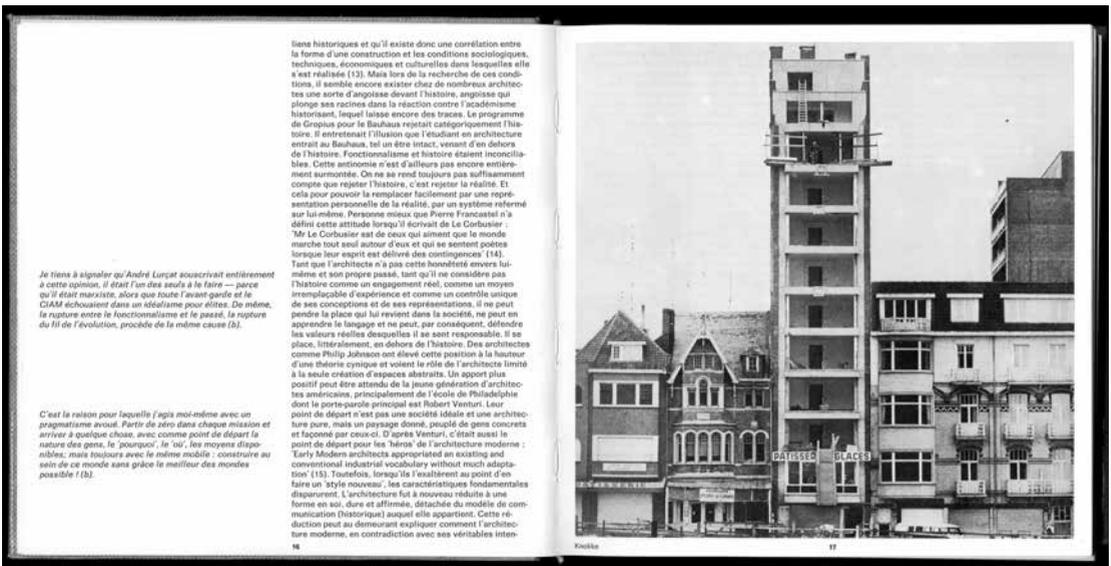
Fig. 2
Handwritten list of the architects selected for the exhibition *La Construction en Belgique 1945–1970*, 1971. © Francis Strauven's personal archives.

Fig. 3
Geert Bekaert's introduction with comments by Renaat Braem and photograph by Filip Tas. © *La Construction en Belgique 1945–1970,* 1971, pp. 16–17.

Fig. 4
Poster of the exhibition *Supernova* listing the names of the exhibited architecture offices, 2000. © Vincent Brunetta's personal archives.

Fig. 5
Cover of the booklet of the Jan de Vylder architecten *NICHE* exhibition, 2009. © BOZAR.

Fig. 6
Photograph of Iwan Strauven, curator, presenting *XX Models* in Shenzhen, as part of "Belgian Spirit", to Didier Reynders, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Her Majesty Mathilde Queen of the Belgians, 2012. © Iwan Strauven's personal archives.

(Fig. 4). This curatorial focus was a clear reaction to Francis Strauven's 1996 exhibition *L'Éloge de la Simplicité/De Rijkdom van de Eenvoud*, presented at the Fondation pour l'Architecture and dedicated to the Flemish tendency to pursue a certain sobriety and authenticity. *Supernova* aimed to challenge this "one-sided view of architecture" (Brunetta *et al.*, 2000: 11). While this exhibition questioned a previous, Flemish-centred curatorial proposal, it was hardly a territorial rebalancing. On the contrary, the approach sought to display young architecture from the whole of Belgium, in the firm belief that the practices that produced it invariably remained too far removed from the mediatic tumult. To do so, the exhibition offered an overview of the young generation's concerns through an "unorthodox" scenography. Models, drawings, and photographs were displayed fluidly to let visitors link projects and practices on their own. For the curatorial team,[2] the point was not to name a Belgian way of practising architecture but rather embrace a "difficult whole" (Venturi, 1966)—not to specify a definitive Belgian architecture but at best identify common patterns. After *Brussels 2000*, several initiatives continued to document the works of young practitioners, such as the book series A16[3] and the architecture programming of the Brussels Centre for Fine Arts (BOZAR).

Indeed, in partnership with *A+ magazine*, BOZAR organized the exhibition series *Niche* from 2008 to 2012 (Fig. 5). For four years, young architects from all parts of the country were invited by the curators, Iwan Strauven and Marie-Cécile Guyaux, to present their work via a small monographic exhibition and a conference.[4] With a model

on display on each occasion, these shows aimed—as *Supernova* did—"to offer young talent a stage" (Guyaux and Strauven, 2012: 11). However, the *Niche* selection was no longer dedicated to a precise generation but to "the firms' early [projects] and [to] large-scale undertakings" (Guyaux and Strauven, 2012: 17). The whole sought to create a balance between Flemish and French-speaking offices, reclaiming bicommunitarianism.

At the end of the 20 *Niche* events, a retrospective entitled *XX Models* was realized in 2012 to serve as an event to close the series. Rather than simply revealing some criteria of so-called "Belgian architecture", the exhibition attempted to offer "a snapshot of the scope and richness of young Belgian architecture" (Guyaux and Strauven, 2012: 11). This panorama, originally shown in Brussels, also benefited from an international reception by travelling to Shenzhen and Marseille (Fig. 6). More than 40 years after *La Construction en Belgique 1945–1970*, Geert Bekaert was invited to write a text in the catalogue. His contribution offered both a retrospective review of and new insights into the question that he himself was the first to address, and which continues to be a subject of debate. With a precise examination of the doctrinal bastions and statements that determined Belgium's contemporary architectural path, Geert Bekaert updated his own curatorial proposition from the 1970s. He concluded his text by aligning the ambitions of *La Construction en Belgique 1945–1970* and *XX Models*: "The application of the inspired approach of the new class to a broad survey of the current situation in architecture is not inconceivable, as attempted by *Bouwen in Belgïe* in the past. It could be a great show" (Bekaert, 2012: 23).

By linking the two exhibitions' perspectives, Geert Bekaert demonstrated the persistence of a theoretical debate in the curatorial practice, and the possibility for a *diachronic contact zone*. The three exhibitions explored in the first part of this article all mapped a commitment to the question of Belgian architectural identity. Their curators, who were from different parts of the country, all emphasized unity, and an ambition to elaborate the "difficult whole". Quoting from

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2   Vincent Brunetta, Filiep Decorte, Nel Janssens, Olivier Masson, Kathleen Mertens, and Jan Verheyden were the curators.

3   The A16 editions were led at the beginning by Vincent Brunetta and Véronique Patteeuw, then Jean-Didier Bergilez joined them, followed by Marie-Cécile Guyaux, when Vincent Brunetta left. Firstly, six editions were published from 2003 to 2006, in collaboration with the VAi. Five were issued from 2006 to 2011, with the CIVA. All books were labelled "young architectures".

4   The *Niche* programme followed on from the *35m·* exhibitions held at the VAi in Antwerp (2005–08), promoting young architecture in Flanders.

one another, improving upon one another, they collectively aimed to create a transcultural framework, including Flemish as well as French-speaking practices. They bypassed antagonisms by praising the vivacity of renewed and young architectures, irrespective of any stylistic obedience.

Specify: Relating Regional Architectural Singularities across Belgium

Already mentioned as a trigger for *Supernova*, *L'Éloge de la Simplicité* was presented in 1996 at the Fondation pour l'Architecture, a French-speaking autonomous structure. The Fondation pour l'Architecture was created in 1986 to provide a stage for the collections of the Archives d'Architecture Moderne, assembled from 1969 by Culot and his numerous partners. Initially funded only through the sponsorship of Philippe Rotthier, the Fondation quickly started to receive funds from private investors within the Belgian French-speaking community. Because of its funding and actors, it is commonly identified as the first place dedicated to French-speaking architectural culture in Brussels. Following an invitation from its director, Diane Hennebert, Francis Strauven was commissioned to stress the new Flemish architecture paradigm. According to the curator, and to numerous commentators on the state of architecture since the late 1980s, practice in Flanders faced a turning point. After years of postmodernism and historical eclecticism, a new generation was on the rise. Reflecting this renewal, the exhibition gathered actors known to be involved in the Flemish scene. Indeed, the scenography was designed by Marie-José Van Hee, the booklet concept by Christian Kieckens, and the curating, as with most of the texts, by Francis Strauven (Figs. 7–8). The event's critical reception was as complex as its production: the French-speaking institutional anchoring, associated with Flemish actors and funds, engendered intense debates. Indeed, exhibiting Belgian architectural identity in Brussels by limiting it to practices carried out by Flemish people, as if circumscribing it to stylistic criteria, was perceived as partial, even illusory by the public. It appears that the aim was no longer

an attempt to capture a "difficult whole" but identify Flemish specificities. While the latter had the potential to be productive for theoretically understanding the ongoing development of Belgian architecture, they were perceived at that particular time as identity claims. *L'Éloge de la Simplicité* was a controversial exhibition which generated fierce debates and anchored rivalries between communities. Above all, however, it raised the question of the concordance between aesthetics and territory, and of its legitimacy. Does exhibiting Belgian architectural identity mean formulating stylistic criteria and determining regional or community affiliation?

In 2005, the first edition of the exhibition *(Re)nouveaux plaisirs d'architecture* was presented at La Cambre architecture school in collaboration with CIVA[5] and curated by Pablo Lhoas and Jean-Didier Bergilez. By partnering with CIVA, La Cambre played the role of a cultural institution and occupied a previously non-existent place in the media landscape. The exhibition followed the publication of *Qui a peur de l'architecture?* (Genard and Lhoas, 2004), a book project led by Jean-Louis Genard with the participation of Pablo Lhoas and Jean-Didier Bergilez. The book was famous for its plea for more egalitarian conditions of access to public commissions. As Francophone architecture was receiving little or no media attention at the time, the exhibition's purpose was perceived to be unusual. Although its curators stated that the ambition was not to define a Francophone architectural identity per se, they nevertheless affirmed the necessity to render the regional production more visible to the public. By pursuing this aim, they chose to be exhaustive, or at least to show a wide range of practices, in contrast to the exhibition *L'Éloge de la*

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5   Founded in 2000, the Centre International pour la Ville, l'Architecture et le paysage (CIVA) gathered six associations dedicated to urban and architectural issues and was supported by the Wallonia Brussels Federation. In 2016, following its liquidation, the Brussels-Capital Region took over the structure and turned it into the CIVA Foundation. The institution will move in the next couple of years to KANAL Centre Pompidou.
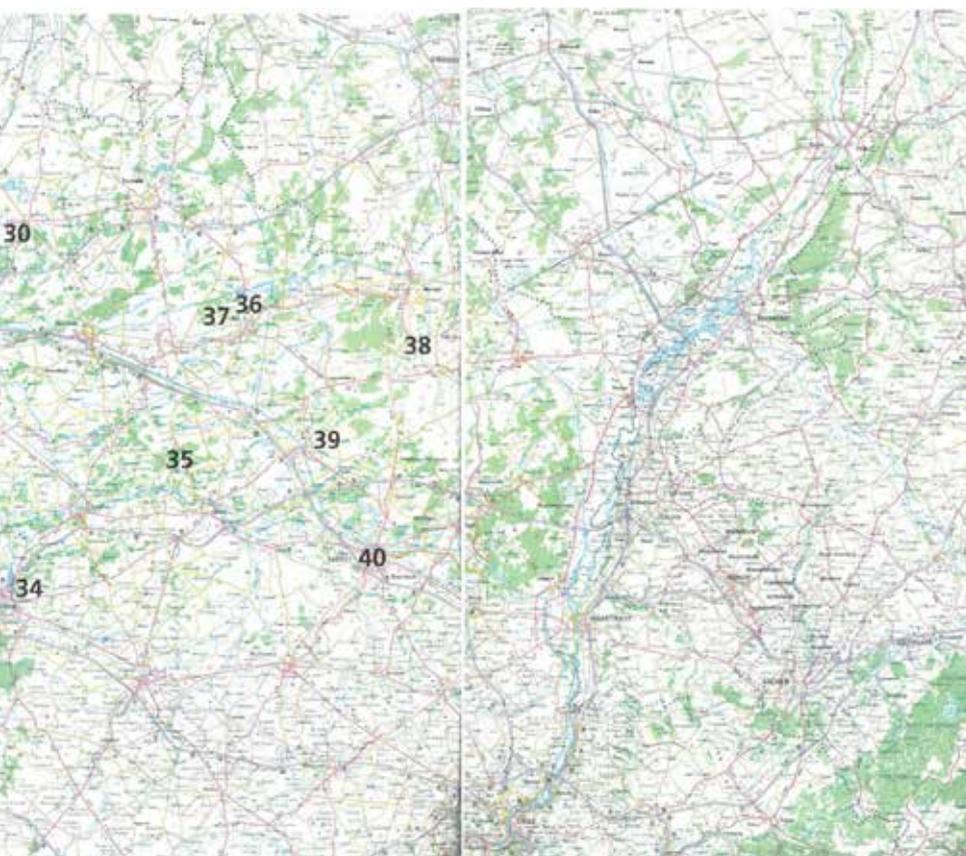
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Fig. 7
Photograph of the exhibition
L'Éloge de la Simplicité, 1996.
© Francis Strauven's personal
archives, photograph by
Francis Strauven.
Fig. 8
Map of the exhibited projects
illustrating the partial vision of
the Belgian territory, from the
booklet of the exhibition *L'Éloge
de la Simplicité*, 1996.

Simplicité, which brought together a selection of Flemish buildings under a shared aesthetic banner. This intention also raised the question of how to select the architecture offices to reflect this desired diversity. A jury with a multidisciplinary, French and Flemish-speaking membership was established, without any obligation of institutional representation. Of the 80 proposals received, 12 offices were selected **(Fig. 9)**. Their curatorial stance thus contributed to the construction of a specific understanding of Belgian architectural culture by choosing not to consider it on a national scale. But its process also proposed transcultural conditions for defining what Francophone architecture could be. Finally, in *(Re)nouveaux plaisirs d'architecture*, as in *Supernova* and *XX Models*, the focus was on young practices, judged "innovative, creative, experimental" (Bergilez *et al.*, 2005: 4). The exhibition thus emphasized their promotion and encouraged their access to commissions.

Two years later, in 2007, the second edition was presented at La Cambre, still in partnership with CIVA and supported by the same curators. The ambition remained one of exhibiting young, plural, French-speaking practices selected by a bilingual and multidisciplinary jury. The thematic curatorial approach made this edition specific. The architectural projects were no longer selected in order to offer a panorama of regional production but for their capacity to circumvent or negotiate with the rules that constrain architectural practice.

Six years later, the third edition of *(Re)nouveaux plaisirs d'architecture* was presented under the name *Dithyrambes* (Bergilez *et al.*, 2013). The exhibition was again held at La Cambre, which in 2010 became the ULB Faculty of Architecture La Cambre Horta, and again in collaboration with CIVA and directed by the same team **(Fig. 10)**. Meanwhile, however, the French-speaking government had set up the Cellule Architecture: a structure that guaranteed the architectural quality of public buildings and stimulated and financed cultural projects. Thanks to this communitarian support, the exhibition travelled abroad and was presented in São Paulo and Bordeaux.

Therefore, in contrast to the first two editions, Francophone architectural production started to be part of not only the national but also the international media scene. Furthermore, the offices were no longer selected by a mixed, bilingual, and multidisciplinary jury but by the curators themselves. *Dithyrambes* thus testified to a certain curatorial autonomy. By shifting from offering a comprehensive overview to a more critical selection, the curatorial team constructed, through mediation, a specific but subjective, young French-speaking architectural identity.

We can therefore state that intercultural negotiations regarding the Belgian territory in the four exhibitions described in this section didn't appear in the curatorial discourse and only became visible when we looked at the framework of their production and institutional backing. Indeed, in *L'Éloge de la Simplicité*, the host institution was subsidized by the French Community of Belgium, whereas curating, funding, and projects were subsidized by Flanders. For *(Re)nouveaux plaisirs d'architecture* exhibitions, the institution, funding, and projects fell under the French Community of Belgium, and the jury was mixed. Considering simultaneously places and teams' affiliations highlights the power struggles prevailing in these curating arrangements. Subsequently, certain primacies appeared: the choice of projects on display depended above all on the community of the funding source.

A Transcultural Resolution?
These exhibitions thus form a *diachronic contact zone* appearing in the ambition and even the enthusiasm of the curators to mention the projects, architects, and theoretical spectrums of those who explored the topic of a Belgian architecture and discussed positions on architectural identity before them. To investigate those curatorial situations, we asked how the question of identity was posed in terms of cultural unicity or specificity in an intercultural process. We analysed the corpus through two temporal scales. On the one hand, we considered exhibitions one by one, by focusing on their discourses and their cultural background, i.e.
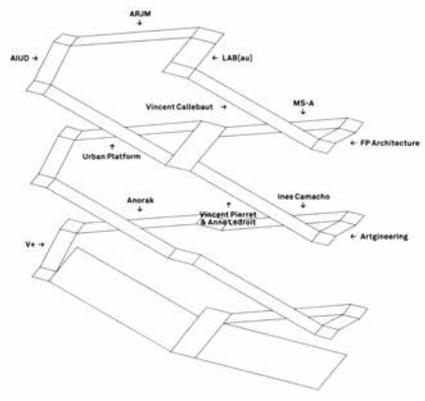
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Fig. 9
Axonometry of La Cambre
museum. Source: Bergilez,
J.-D. *et al.*, 2005 : 3.
Fig. 10
Last adjustments in the La
Cambre museum for the
exhibition *(Re)nouveaux
plaisirs d'architecture:
Dithyrambes*, © Photo: Faculté
d'architecture La Cambre
Horta, ULB, 2013.

the communitarian or regional belongings of funding, institution, and curatorial teams. On the other hand, within a longer time frame, we investigated the architectural identity debate through a chain of exhibitions, bouncing from one to another. Considering these exhibitions diachronically allows us to identify the persistence of a common curatorial question continually reinvented. In this sense, exhibitions can be seen as a set of intellectual postures redebated over time. Thus, it becomes clear that all these curatorial practices appear not only as collective scopes but as a common ground for the discipline. Indeed, since 2015, the magazine *A+ Architecture in Belgium* has contributed to the pursuit of this *diachronic contact zone,* through the exhibition series entitled *Across*. The series addresses borders but always seeks to transcend them, both through intercultural production alliances (mixed funding, French- and Flemish-speaking host institutions, trans- and international juries) and through curatorial discourses. Building on the exhibitions reviewed in this article, *Across* makes youth the primary condition for selection, and does not establish cultural primacy. Its objective is to create the conditions for intercultural representation and negotiation.

Finally, the possibility of a transcultural resolution within the exhibition as *contact zone*, or at least of a process of transculturation, remains difficult to identify at the scale of an exhibition. As few traces persist from an isolated show, studying how ideas are transformed in this space-time seems complex. But the diachronic scale and the intertextual study allow for observing phenomena of displacement and complexification within the architectural discipline. Still from a diachronic perspective, curatorial configurations and conditions appear to be embedded in a field of complex intercultural interlacing. In a unitary approach to architectural identity, because funding is bicommunitarian, intercultural exchanges are simplified and transculturality can occur in both discourse and the means of production. In a fragmented approach, discourse is not the result of a transcultural process because the funding imposes a demand on making internal practices visible. Thus, funding seems to be the main obstacle to intercultural dialogue. Symptomatic of Belgian institutional complexities, these situations testify to alliances and conflicts that shaped unequal transcultural resolutions, despite efforts to create favourable conditions. To go further, we may wonder: to what extent did communitarian affiliations determine Belgian curatorial practices and limit the local architectural debate?

Acknowledgements

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