

Design Design .ENB

ELGIQUE/INBELGIUM/INBELGIË 1945-2000





**A book written by Lise Coirier
in collaboration with Denis Laurent**

- Discovering a creative Belgium through design and its recent history after the 2nd World War until 2000.
- More than 300 historical documents from private and public archives, collections... and discussions with experimented designers who are the alive memory of this period.

**192 pages | 24 x 26 cm | hardcover | 39,95 €
320 illustrations in full color and black and white**

I-The New Belgium. From reconstruction to the Golden Sixties: 1945-1963

«In 1945 the eyes of all the Belgians looking out from the grave were turned towards the glorious promises of a halcyon future. The most urgent objective was to restore the bankrupt economy, and therefore to produce and sell...» Jacques Richez, *Textes et Prétextes*, 1980



1. From modern effort to social housing

In Belgium the post-war years were marked by a gradual recovery of the economy. Here as in other countries the reconstruction process was supported by American funds and benefited from technological progress and industrial streamlining spurred by the global conflict. Faced with the urgent need to refocus activities, armament companies (such as the Herstal-based *Fabrique nationale*) were the first to develop new products: as early as 1947 FN started to market some outstandingly designed dairy products. In the furniture sector the Belgian output was chiefly the product of architects and interior decoration designers. And soon enough the Scandinavian trends – which were already discernible in the 1930s – blended with the US and later Italy's influences. Industrial design was in its infancy at the time but architects such as Henry van de Velde, Gaston Eysselinck, Antoine Pompe and Louis Herman De Koninck were joining the “modern effort”. The latter's standardized *Cubex* kitchens (1930) for example, were mass produced to equip the brand new apartment buildings. International exhibitions such as the one organised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, created a considerable stir among both designers and the general public through monthly magazines such as *La Maison* and *Bouwen en Wonen*. Belgium was only starting to follow the movement rather tentatively as it embraced a fascinating destiny featuring socially-oriented, standardized furniture as well as more experimental attempts. During the fifties modern furniture took a new turn characterized by international style and everyday streamlining adapted to working-class housing.

The new spirit of Belgian interior designers

As of 1945 the Ministry of Reconstruction entrusted several interior decoration designers with the task of finding some rational housing solutions. Decorator Éric Lemesre's duty was to create not some “charming and stylish family houses... but modular and standardized furniture that could be mass-produced thanks to modern mechanical means”. He studied models of kitchens, bedrooms and living rooms that

could be integrated in the types of houses planned by the *Chantiers nationaux* (national building sites). For example, he designed « mobile furniture made up of combinable elements stacked on a detachable base ».

Other furniture and interior decoration designers, such as Marcel-Louis Bagniet, Willy Van Der Meeren, René Baucher, Sylvie Féron, Raymond Van Loo and Aimée Huysmans, brought colours to the burgeoning socially-oriented furniture. Their projects showed concern for streamlining production, which can be seen for example in the type of material used (tubular steel, plywood), and sensitivity for human factors, while the modernistic features reflected the ethical and aesthetics Scandinavian influence, particularly with the designs of Alvar Aalto and Kaare Klint, noticed during the 1951 Milan *Triennial*. Functionalism was enhanced as it complied with psychological factors, a renewed appreciation for nature and historical shapes. For example, the leather and mahogany chair (1950) by Marcel-Louis Bagniet, based on a variation of an older Klint model, is a reinterpretation of the 19th century camping chair.

Bagniet was the proponent of geometrical art in Belgium with the *7Arts* periodical (1922-28), the French-speaking equivalent of *Het Overzicht*. At first the design of his furniture reflected the techniques and devices of his abstract paintings, but later this was superseded by rounder shapes in the 1930s. In his gallery (*L'Intérieur moderne*, established boulevard de Waterloo and later rue Jourdan in Brussels) the versatile designer displayed a large selection of handicrafts as well as industrial and traditional furniture. As of 1945 and like De Koninck, he tended to streamline living conditions in his projects for the bachelor's pad, the modern lounge or living room, the standardized kitchen... This was part of an emergency social rationale (that will eventually lead him to meet designer Yuri Soloviev in Moscow in 1964) as well as a comfort and well-being approach.

The Baucher-Féron pair also hosted a gallery, located on Avenue Louise in Brussels. With their movable arrays they took part in the *Salon de l'Enfance et de la Famille* (Children and Family Fair) at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels, and the Milan Triennial of 1954 and 1957. Through the *Form* cooperative they also exhibited their work in Oslo (1951), Vienna (1953) and New York (1954), and at the 1958 Universal Exhibition in Brussels (Hall #7).

Another active Brussels-based pair in this area is the one formed by Raymond Van Loo and his wife Aimée Huysmans. After a one-year training period in Bagniet's gallery they started working together with an idealism that was typical of the post-war era., creating pieces “to provide furniture for ordinary people” and taking part in exhibitions such as “Schoner wonen” in the Antwerp Festival Hall in 1949, and “Logis 50” at Porte de Namur in Brussels. They also developed many model housing facilities for the *Chantiers nationaux* in Deurne in 1948, the *Goede Woningen* in 1952 and Kiel in 1953. Their contribution to modern furniture is reflected in plain yet welcoming chairs with a reclining back, or canvas seats with taut straps... In 1951 the French periodical *Meubles et Décors* reproduced their modern furniture alongside the designs of Bagniet. That same year at the 9th Milan Triennial, they designed the interior arrangement of the *Maison expérimentale QT8 Sanciro* (test house) built by Belgian architect Paul Amaury Michel.

Through his interior designer activities, architect Stanislas Jasinski also stood out as an avant-garde personality. At the same time he became the exclusive distributor in Belgium for furniture made by British designers such as Robin Day. As an ardent supporter of British design he took part in major London-based exhibitions including « Britain Can Make It » (1946) and « Festival of Britain » (1951), which marked the transition from post-war austerity to a more cheerful, pleasant design.

The Belgian capital city also hosted representations from international firms such as Arteluce and Arredoluce, who developed some innovative mobile lamps, or Imexcotra, which sells Scandinavian design at a very reasonable price (this production will be largely circulated in Belgium). At the same time Joseph Klibanski founded the modern furniture department at the *Innovation* department store in 1948, located rue Neuve in Brussels. Josine des Cressonnières, future administrator of the Design Centre, started her career at *Innovation* in 1953, eventually organising the fashion designer trade as she became an advisor for furniture, furniture textiles and all home equipment. As new shapes were emerging, the *Torck* baby carriage was all the rage with young mothers, while Delvaux's *Airess* line of luggage was being sold in department stores. All this augured a better future as demographics and leisure occupations were on the rise.

À Temps modernes, meubles modernes (With modern times come modern shapes)

1950 marked the birth of an association called *Formes nouvelles*, created by Éric Lemesre, Willy Van Der Meeren, Axel Lemesre and Marcel-Louis Bagniet, in cooperation with the *Centre des Métiers d'Art* in Brabant and its chairman Paul Mariamé. Its mission was to consider social housing from an architecture and interior decoration angle. The association was an active participant in the « Logis 50 » exhibition held under tent at Porte de Namur. The stage was designed by Éric Lemesre around the message « Don't give in to the temptations of fantasy: demand true beauty! Your interior will befit you and life will appear all the more beautiful! » and aimed to raise both the public's and the industry's awareness on what was tasteful and distasteful. As Bagniet indicated in his introduction: "The idea is to show the public quality objects made by Belgian artists, artisans and industrialists that can be sold at reasonable prices." These concepts pertaining to a modern identity expressed a paternalistic behaviour typical of that time, relying on formal judgement criteria and in which the union between designers and manufacturers hinted at the beginnings of a certain idea of industrial beauty. Van Vanhaegenborgh was showcasing Van Loo furniture, the *Innovation* department store was displaying plywood furniture and Bagniet was disclosing his designs. From 1953 *Formes nouvelles* became a cooperative and opened a gallery called *Form*, located avenue de la Toison d'Or in Brussels. The gallery served to permanently enhance the prestige of handicrafts and industrial objects for many designers.

In 1955, art critic and chairman of *Formes nouvelles* Léon Louis Sosset issued the manifesto paper *À Temps modernes, meubles modernes*. He was supported by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Middle Classes with a view to promoting tasteful contemporary furniture manufactured in Belgium. That same year the « Jeune décoration » contest was being held in Brussels; it was set up by *Formes nouvelles* and the *Innovation* department store to raise the public's awareness to the market's new designs, and witnessed the emerging talents of Raymond Van Loo and Willy Van Der Meeren. As of the early 1950s the positive response to *Formes nouvelles* (which ran until 1961) contributed to implement secretariats throughout Belgian provinces aimed

at promoting art-related trades and industries through the joint publication of a newsletter.

The vogue for model apartments

The impulse for social furniture reached a peak during the « Het nieuwe wonen » exhibition, coordinated by *Formes nouvelles*. The event took place in June 1953 in the Kiel housing complex in the greater Antwerp. Thirteen model apartments were entirely designed by architects Renaat Braem, V. Maeremans and A. Maes, and fitted out by several decorators of the time. Before that the Ministry of Reconstruction had initiated other exhibitions for model housing, such as the architectural complex of Deurne in 1948 and *Goede Woningen* in 1952.

One of the first model apartments was designed by Raymond Van Loo and Aimée Huysmans for the *Chantiers nationaux* in Deurne. Other interior decoration designers and architects adopted the same approach, including Éric Lemesre, Emiel Veranneman on behalf of Van den Berghe-Pauvers and Willy Van Der Meeren, who worked closely together with the Vilvorde-based company Tubax. As was typical of the time Van Der Meeren's innovative furniture featured a leg assembly made up of criss-crossed steel pipes sustaining formica-covered plywood surfaces. The unaffectedly displayed light and rational structure was shown with a combination of free shapes and bright colours.

A similar experience was launched in Brussels in 1954 as seven model apartments were arranged by architect Charles Van Nueten in a complex located in the popular Marolles neighbourhood. The experience was to be repeated in Liège in 1958 in a social apartment building located on the heights of Droixhe. As the stage for social furniture was being set, *Form* was taking part in the *Salon des Arts ménagers* (an exhibition of domestic arts) in Paris in 1953, before occupying a larger area the following year in the « Foyer d'aujourd'hui » at the *Salon de l'Enfance et de la Famille* in the Brussels-based Museum of Fine Arts.

2. The emergence of industrial design

Moving away from the functionalism rationale and the fearful dreariness of residential complexes, Belgium took a new turn in 1954, a key year for the birth of industrial design in Europe: as the Ulm-based *Hochschule für Gestaltung* was educating its first students, Milan's Triennial largely welcomed this discipline, while the Milan-based department store *La Rinascente* created the prestigious Compasso d'Oro prize. Interiors were becoming more welcoming and the shrewd use of materials was a core concern. Many Belgian players on the furniture scene, such as Jules Wabbes or De Coene, favoured wood and its various forms, both rational and useful: glued-laminated timber, blockboard, plywood... Wabbes' Universal Furniture and the De Coene-Knoll gave Belgium a new image, while national products started to be exported.



Jules Wabbes and *Mobilier universel*

Jules Wabbes began designing furniture in 1950. At first he produced some short and rather luxurious series in which rigorous shapes were enhanced by a keen sense of performance and attention to detail. In his wood slat furniture he introduced a subtle visual pattern by alternating end grain wood and glued wooden slats. Among the 1951 models is the distinctive *Gérard Philippe* table, jointly designed with Philippe Neerman, which is supported by an original ‘gun barrel steel’ leg assembly. In 1957 Wabbes set up his own publishing house for office furniture, *Mobilier universel*, which also distributes American and Italian furniture (Dunbar and Velca) through the showroom located boulevard du Régent in Brussels. That same year he was brought to fame at the 11th Triennial in Milan with a collection of desks, tables, bookcases, free-standing furniture and luminaires; he was rewarded with a silver medal for his work.

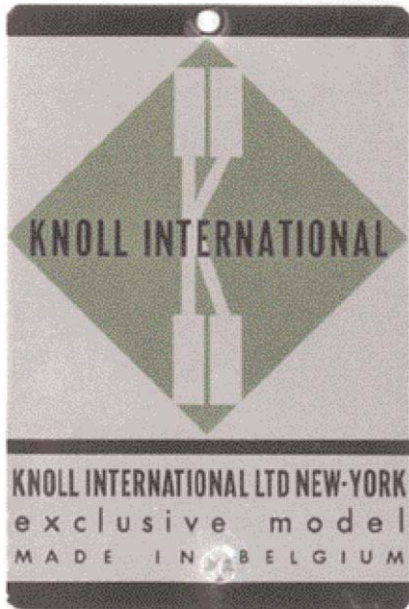
Wabbes’ architecture and industrial design group, which also employed designer Louise Carrey and architects André Jacquain and Victor Mulpas, had a number of orders to fulfil: the interior decoration of Sabena’s *DC7CS* and *Convair 440s* as early as 1954, arranging several private homes (Declercq, Olivier Strebelle, Lombard, Urvater...) as well as the Foncolin administrative building. Together, Wabbes and Jacquain also designed the window displays of the Belgian section at the 1958 New York World Trade Fair. With his juxtaposable school furniture (eventually turned out to be too expensive to manufacture) displayed in the Belgian section called « At home as at School » Wabbes was awarded the gold medal at the 12th Milan Triennial in 1960.

The Kortrijkse Kunstwerkstede De Coene

The story of the De Coene buildings dates back to the late 19th century. At the Paris International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in 1925 and the 1935 Universal Exhibition in Brussels, Jozef De Coene, a disciple of Henry van de Velde, won several first prizes. Between the two World Wars he had already imported the formulas for triplex and prefabricated houses that would eventually become his claim to fame. As the Germans had sequestered his business, it had to wait until the early 1950s to resume.

Philippe Neerman joined the firm in September 1954. At the beginning he was tasked with submitting specifications to architects but very soon he was also asked to design “imitation” Swedish furniture on behalf of Imexcotra, the importer of Scandinavian furniture which De Coene bought out in the mid 1950s. At the same period and on behalf of the Courtrai-based firm Neerman decorated the interior of the De Bijenkorf

department store in Rotterdam, built by Marcel Breuer. Until the late 1970s De Coene continued designing furniture and handling prefabricated construction simultaneously, even affording himself the luxury of offering self-assembly design in the 1960s through the Decoplan collection.



The Knoll experience

As of 1954 De Coene was granted license to manufacture Knoll furniture, the embodiment of international style the American way. The Belgian company also managed production of the famous steel mesh *Diamond* chair designed by sculptor Harry Bertoia in 1950-52. The shell of Eero Saarinen's *Womb* chair was also mass produced by De Coene, who adjusted the chair's manufacturing process by replacing the polyester (reinforced with glass fibre) with multiplex. The firm took advantage of the fame brought by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Florence Knoll designs to develop its own collections of office furniture, sold under the name Cotribel. Architect Constantin Brodzki was called in to coordinate the interior decoration of the Knoll showroom located rue Royale in Brussels. The new exhibition space was hosted by Jan Saverys and Régine Chemay from the very beginning, before shutting its doors in the 1980s.

Industrial design kicks off in Belgium

In 1954, Brodzki organised the first industrial design exhibition in Belgium at the International Fair in Liège. The display arrangement was made by Corneille Hannoset, with the help of artists Enrico Castellani and Serge Vandercam. That same year he created the *Maison modèle* (The Model House) at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels, as part of the *Journées de l'Enfance et de la Famille*. Industrial design became a call for society's progress. At last, Belgium was emerging from moroseness to enter a period of rapid growth in terms of teaching, ideas and production.

3. Concepts and the teaching of industrial design

During the 1950s social furniture gradually left the foreground to make way for other positions. Set up in 1926, the *Institut supérieur des arts décoratifs* of La Cambre in Brussels has from the very beginning always nursed the ambition to combine art and industry in the spirit of the Bauhaus (its first director, Henry van de Velde, had founded the Weimar *École des arts décoratifs* at the turn of the century that Walter Gropius would rename 'Bauhaus' in 1919). La Cambre was Belgium's first national higher education school to have an industrial design course in 1954, following an initiative by Robert L. Delevoy who had been teaching there since 1946. The influence of the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* in Ulm (1953-68) probably had much to do with that development. Tomás Maldonado, a spokesman for the *Hochschule*, visited Belgium on a regular basis. The HfG approached teaching from a rationalist angle that sharply contrasted with the artistic ideals of Bauhaus. Reflecting the desire to support design on objective grounds the curriculum expanded to include subject matters such as ergonomics, economics, sociology, information theory and the psychology of perception. The emphasis was placed on the method rather than intuition. As for La Cambre, it kept its experimental, forward-looking and multidisciplinary features while at the same time opening up to a more rational approach towards mass-produced products. After Léon Stynen, Delevoy took the head of the school in 1965 and initiated the project for an Industrial Design Higher Education School. The very ambitious curriculum was equivalent to a three-year post-graduate degree. However, it never actually materialized in that form but it strongly influenced the other Belgian schools, particularly the Flemish ones.

Returning to the roots of industrial design

Compared to other European countries and the United States, Belgium had a gap to bridge in terms of teaching and developing industrial products that integrated both design and technology. Communicating with the world was not as easy then as it is today, and it eventually took prominent people such as Robert L. Delevoy, Constantin Brodzki, André De Poerck, Jacques Dervichian, Josine des Cressonnières, Pierre Génicot, Lucien Kroll, Philippe Neerman and Pol Provost (to name a few) to open up Belgium to a local and international dialogue as early as the mid-1950s. Designers and companies that had partaken of the social furniture experience were adopting new materials and industrial manufacturing processes. The interior designer trade tended to be replaced by those of industrial designer and interior decoration designer, while Belgian industries were thriving: FN, Tubax, Belform, Éts. Verhaegen, Van den Berghe-Pauvers...

Like many other professionals who attended the congress meetings of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) as of the late 1950s, architect J. Iwens (with De Poerck as his associate) summed up the rationalist thinking: "Industrial design is a field requiring that the functional, technical, commercial and aesthetic aspects of any object to be mass produced, be pulled together as early as the design stage of that object.... For several years now many countries have agreed that industrial design is one of the best ways to bolster sales; in that respect Belgium is somewhat lagging behind."

The exhibitions in Gent: From social furniture to mass-produced items

As a contemporary of *Formes nouvelles*, *Het Gentse Meubel* first appeared in 1951 as a cooperative with the support of Adelbert Van de Walle, the curator of Gent's *Museum voor Sierkunst en industriële Vormgeving*. Upon his initiative three editions of the *Nationaal Salon voor het Modern Sociaal Meubel* followed one another from 1955 to 1957, with the event being promoted through radio and a selection board. At the first of these exhibitions furniture designer Pieter De Bruyne came into the limelight. He got in touch with Gio Ponti, with whom he sought (according to Belgian manufacturer Frans Defour) "both a safeguard against decadence and a opening to limitless opportunities." The furniture designing contest launched by *Galleries* and *Grand Bazar* in Brussels, Liège and Antwerp attracted more than two hundred projects. Prize-winning designers rarely emerge from obscurity, with the exception of Jos De Mey and Pieter De Bruyne, and the latter was making repeated contacts with foreign countries through Italian companies Arflex et Arteluce as well as through *Domus* and *Daily Mirror* contests... During the second *Nationaal Salon*, followed by the « Modern sociaal meubel in België » exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Gent, Alfred Hendrickx distinctively stood out with his designs for the Malines-based company Belform. His elegant production was related to the Italian furniture of the time, which featured sculptural and organic chairs designed by Gio Ponti, Ico Parisi and Franco Albini on behalf of Cassina. In 1956 Pieter De Bruyne won first prize at the *Esposizione permanente mobili de Cantù* in Italy, while Emiel Veranneman was working with US manufacturer Herman Miller on a chair made of leather and *wenge*. At the same time Jos De Mey was designing for Van den Berghe-Pauvers (with a somewhat restrained pattern), he was also designing more expressive *sapelli* furniture for Luxus. Labelled « Het goed wonen, in deze tijd », this Courtrai-based manufacturer focused on luxury furniture Made in Belgium.

Industrial Design institutes and the *Signe d'Or*

First in Liège then in Brussels, the *Form* cooperative gave rise in 1956 to two independently established industrial design institutes. Liège was opposed to Brussels and to its new impetus represented by the *Signe d'Or* (the Golden Sign) that rewarded the best industrial design creations.

The Brussels-based institute was established by Pol Provost, then chairman of both the *Fédération des Industries de Belgique* and De Coene. With the help of public support he set up his quarters on rue d'Arlon. Josine des Cressonnières relinquished her position at the *Innovation* department store to become the General Secretary of the organisation. After initiating the *Signe d'Or Benelux* in 1956 in a private capacity (through her *Association pour la Promotion de la Qualité de la Création industrielle*), she launched her first selection of products in 1957, on display at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*, then at the Expo 58. However, the Institute's activities tended to become gradually staid under the stewardship of Hubert Dessy.

The early days of teaching industrial design

«The future of teaching industrial design relies on the awareness that an educational model focused on the product must make way for system-oriented teaching»
«L'enseignement de l'industrial design», *Infordesign*, n° 28, July 1969

Following the La Cambre experience, the teaching of industrial design in Belgium was introduced at the Institut Saint-Luc in Liège (1964), spurred by Georges Guében, the *Nationaal Hoger Instituut voor Bouwkunst en Stedenbouw* in Antwerp (1967), J.J. Stiefenhofer, and the *Stedelijk Hoger Instituut voor Visuele Communicatie en Vormgeving* in Genk (1969), under the leadership of Piet Stockmans. La Cambre followed an original path, as Delevoy strived to train designers who were also “discoverers of the possible.” Architect André De Poerck (founder of the *Union des Industrial Designers*, UID) initiated the industrial design department. Constantin Brodzki followed after him during two years before leaving to teach at the Mons Polytechnical School, where designer-engineers are trained in the spirit of the Milan Polytechnical School. He eventually came back to La Cambre in the early 1980s and became the first tenured industrial design professor in Belgium, as was Philippe Neerman in Antwerp. In the meantime, a number of studio masters were following one another in Brussels: Robert L. Delevoy, Christine Baeyens and Jean-Paul Emonds-Alt. Later on, and up to this very day, Andy Jacobs was at the head of the department. And the *Atelier de Mobilier et Agencement* was placed under the stewardship of Christophe Gevers as of 1959. In the area of furniture designing and interior architecture many Belgian schools and art schools still invest in the contemporary, including Brussels, Mons, as well as Tournai and Malines.

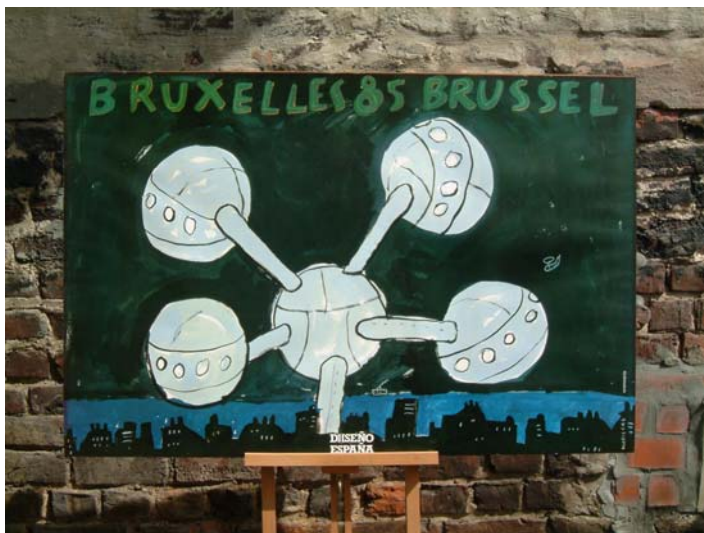


A Brussels-Liège bridge?

As specialty education for industrial design was being implemented, initiatives continued to thrive in Brussels and Liège, reflecting the prevailing enthusiasm for this subject matter. Inspired by American furniture designed by Knoll and Herman Miller, Lucien Kroll and Charles Vandenhove launched their VK line as early as 1955. They took advantage of the Form cooperative as well as a mission to arrange the Belgian pavilion during the 11th Triennial in Milan in 1957 to circulate their designs alongside those of Jules Wabbes.

In 1956, both architects had already handled the stage design of the industrial design department at the International Fair in Liège, two years after Brodzki, Hannoset and Castellani's exhibition. Henry van de Velde featured prominently as chairman of the Liège-based *Institut d'Esthétique industrielle*. According to Kroll, « the social and rational approach adopted for this exhibition is redolent of De Stijl and the major forms of mass production that fulfill the social programme. The “industrial” show, as van de Velde suggested, was staged using sweeping photographic panoramas, furniture, objects, architectural and graphical supports. Window displays showcased glass, ceramics, medical and electronic equipment as well as the FN's electrical milking machine...” In the wake of the Liège event the Design group started to form around Jean-Paul Emonds-Alt (sculptor and designer), Lucien Kroll (architect and designer), Émile Souply (goldsmith and jewellery designer), Luc Van Malderen (graphic designer) and Antoine de Vinck (ceramist). Due to some relationship difficulties the group didn't last long, despite its multidisciplinary quality.

So in 1957 Belgium had definitely entered the age of industrial design with the first edition of the *Signe d'Or*, the *Nationale Meubelwedstrijd* at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Gent, and the design contest initiated by the Fabrimétal federation in companies — an event that put young designer Jean Keup into the limelight.



4. Expo 58 brought Belgium onto the international scene

The first post-war Universal Exhibition took place in Brussels in 1958. With “Science and Progress at the Service of Mankind” as the event's topic, it embodied more than any other event the technocratic faith that was typical of that period of continuous

growth. The Exhibition was a genuine watershed in the recognition of design in both Belgium and throughout the world, and welcomed no less than 30 million visitors. The five pointed star designed by Lucien De Roeck came to symbolise the event which also launched the “atom” style. Jacques Richez designed the poster as well as the official booklet around the theme “A more human world”. Josine des Cressonnières presented her first selection of *Signes d’Or*, which she later took to New York, Stockholm, Paris and Lyon.

De Coene’s *grands chantiers*

Expo 58 was a fantastic driving force for the growth of De Coene, in charge of building the twenty-eight pavilions with frames made of glued-laminated timber. For Belgium, wood became a material just as innovative and modern as concrete or aluminium. The Belgian Wood Industry pavilion was a spectacular piece of technical achievement, with its semi-spherical dome culminating at 25 meters above ground. The Courtrai-based company temporarily hired between two and three thousand unemployed people in order to fulfil such colossal orders, as it recovered its former glory of the days when the company had arranged the *Résidence Palace* in Brussels. De Coene’s chairman Pol Provost renamed the pavilion ‘De Coene Wood Industry’. In 1958 the company had several subsidiaries, including a slicing plant in Heinsch, an exotic wood mill in Gent, a chipwood plant in Wilrijk, and BSM in Comines (France). In the years following Expo 58 a number of major developments were led by Arthur Deleu and Philippe Neerman through the Contractjobs subsidiary, including the Royal Insitute of Artistic Heritage, the Royal Library of Belgium, the head office of *Banque Bruxelles Lambert*, King Baudouin’s train for Congo... Thanks to triplex, which had contributed to the company’s success since the period between the two World Wars, De Coene continued expanding by selling prefabricated houses in Belgium and elsewhere. André De Poerck, who developed the Belgian pavilion at the 10th Triennial in Milan in 1954 and was awarded a prize of honour for a laminated wood beam, was one of the main players in this adventure.

The form-freeing “atom” style

As the set was being staged for social furniture in the Applied Arte department, Expo 58 established a trend that eventually became known as the “atom” style, a vocabulary made of round, entertaining and colourful shapes suggesting progress through references to atomic and space technologies: the commissioning of the first nuclear industrial power plant at Calder Hall in 1956 and the launch of the *Sputnik* satellite by the Soviets the following year made a strong impression on the imagination of the western people. Through Paul De Groote, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Brussels’ Free University and Euratom Commissioner, André Jacqmain, both Victor Mulpas and Jules Wabbes were commissioned to develop the International Science Centre. Wabbes, together with Jacqmain, also designed a spectacular fountain made of coloured crystal blocks manufactured by the Val-Saint-Lambert crystal glassworks. In the Grand Entrance Hall of the Belgian pavilion, Wabbes displayed his work alongside other designers, including Emiel Veranneman, who dedicated a table to him the following year.

The main manufacturers of the time, such as Fabrique nationale, Val-Saint-Lambert, Belform, Delvaux, Tubax, Van den Berghe-Pauvers and Wiskemann, were represented

in the Belgian pavilion. Baucher-Féron, Bagniet and Van Loo-Huysmans showed furnished studio apartments akin to model apartments, and Herman Lampaert displayed his textile designs for Belgium's cotton-making plants. Other highlights included Jasinski designing the *Atomium*'s restaurant, Royal Boch manufacturing the *Atomium* and *Miami* serviceware, Delvaux launching its classic *Brillant* handbag, and Torck selling its *Expo 58* umbrella-chair, a registered design patterned with the colours of the Belgian flag.



Belgium, land of welcome and grounds for creativity

The arrival of the Golden Sixties proved crucial for Belgium, as the country was increasingly opening up to international markets and welcoming a number of foreign investors. French designers were working with Belgian companies, such as Roger Tallon who designed a machine tool called *Gallic 16* for *La Mondiale*. In 1961 the American firm Tupperware established its European design and production plant in Alost, with Belgian Bob Daenen heading the Product Design department; he kept this position until the 1990s, developing a large number of outstanding models.

The 1960s also initiated discussions around home economics, as women's liberation prompted the rapid development of household appliances. The fully automated kitchen fantasy, of which a scathing picture was painted by French film director Jacques Tati, became a dominant fixture in that "push-button" age. American-made 'merchandesign' swept through Europe, as packaging and presentation became just as important as functionality. "Beautiful shapes" started to appear, which proved bolder and more innovative than during the fifties: "Fulfil your dream according to your budget!" Household appliances made by Acec (*Ateliers de Constructions électriques de Charleroi*), Nova and Kalorik (who all won a prize at the 1958 *Signe d'Or*) were among the most outstanding innovations. In the late 1960s, Nova, whose integrated design office developed a whole line of metal and plastic appliances with very bright colours, also appealed to the *Cie de l'Esthétique industrielle* (CEI), the Paris-based subsidiary of Raymond Loewy International. The sixties also witnessed the development of leisure activities and travels, and Gevaert's automatic cameras were all the rage.

The emergence of 'self-assembled' creativity

In 1958 the second edition of *Signe d'Or* – in its Benelux version – devoted one of its prizes to a table designed by Claude Blondel and Raymond Van Loo with a collapsible leg assembly made of flat aluminium sections and boasting a customized table top. In Flanders, the Museum of Decorative Arts organised the third *Nationaal Salon voor industriële Vormgeving* in Gent in 1959, and later the “Woon fijn” exhibition. That same year, family business Van den Berghe-Pauvers was awarded the *Signe d'Or* for a chair designed by Rik Gerard. In 1963, Walter Busschop launched Bulo in Mechelen, a company specialised in designing, manufacturing and selling office furniture.

Anticipating the breakthrough of self-assembled design, Philippe Neerman conceived the Decoplan collection for De Coene. These trailblazing pieces of furniture were designed as build-it-yourself modules: a single key was needed to assemble and disassemble them. The bed frames, chairs and sofas were made of solid wood and were used to reinforce the contours of the streamlined furniture. The line's advertising and packaging aspects were carefully thought out by a team that included Corneille Hannoset. The *Design Centre* awarded a *Signe d'Or* to Decoplan in 1963 and the 12th Milan Triennial gave it first prize for the concept. During an exhibition organised by the Stuttgart Design Centre, the collection was photographed, featuring Gent-born mime artist Hoste. Unfortunately, the collection entered the market too soon and suffered from poor distribution, failing to succeed as it deserved to.

II- The Design Centre in Brussels

Two decades across the reality of progress and industrial myth: 1964-1986

«We are living amid mediocrity. The meaning of the *Signe d'Or* is to highlight and reward products that serve as statements against mediocrity. And also, the *Signe d'Or* is to the Belgian industry what the rosette is on a lapel: a small, yet significantly prestigious detail, both in Belgium and abroad.»

J. des Cressonnières, in: *Infordesign*, n°24, 9/1968.



1- The Design Centre opens its doors in Brussels

The Belgian-Luxemburg DC was inaugurated in the Ravenstein galleries in Brussels on February 19, 1964; the event was attended by His Royal Highness Prince Albert as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Managing Director Josine des Cressonnières was the organiser of this activity hub located near the central railway station and Sabena's air terminal, at the heart of the city's business and tourist centre and a stone's throw from the Federation of Belgian Industries (FIB) and the Belgian Office of Foreign Trade (OBCE). When it was established in February 1962 the association's focus was to "set up a permanent exhibition centre devoid of any gainful motives, aimed at promoting the prestige of the Belgian industry in compliance with the criteria of industrial design, at initiating a centre of interest and a documentation centre for foreign buyers and the Belgian public, as well as an information centre which, by its standing, shall contribute to educate the public and make it more knowledgeable..." At the time other DCS already existed in London, Essen, Amsterdam, Helsinki, Stockholm, Stuttgart and Tokyo. One of the objectives of the Belgian-Luxembourg DC was to further build relations with foreign initiatives through a network of multiple exchanges.



Josine des Cressonnières, the soul and spirit of the site

Described as a very attractive, charismatic woman and very intuitive in the programme aimed at promoting design, J. des Cressonnières (1926-1985) personified thirty years of fostering both design and industrial design in Belgium. She was widowed at the very early age of 25 as she lost her husband in the summer of 1952 during his appointment as General Director of *Intertropicale Comfina* in Leopoldville in Congo. After the birth of her daughter Géraldine, she started her career at the *Innovation* department store on rue Neuve as a fashion designer and buyer in the home furnishings department between 1953 and 1956. She subsequently created the *Signe d'Or Benelux* in a private capacity, awarding the prize every two years, with the support of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Thanks to the support of both Pol Provost and André De Poerck, J. des Cressonnières became the head of the DC, and incorporated the *Signe d'Or* into her programme. The programme became a triennial event as of 1968 until 1983. At the time it was seen as being on a par with the highest international awards, such as the British Design Award or the Italian *Compasso d'Oro*. Regardless of the prize the DC rapidly became the perfect tool for looking after the interests of designers and companies in Belgium.

Establishing the DC was allegedly inspired by the London-based DC, headed by Sir Paul Reilly since its inception in 1956. In his piece entitled “*The Expanding role of DCs*” (ICSID, 1975) Reilly emphasized the kind of progress industrial design should accomplish, moving from the object to the study of society and serve as a “showcase” and “social laboratory”. He advised J. des Cressonnières (as did Tomas Maldonado and André Ricard during ICSID meetings) to surround herself with a group of designers likely to represent the younger generation of Belgian industrial design. Incidentally, Philippe Neerman, who was very involved in setting up this DC since he first starting working for De Coene (Neerman was chairman Pol Provost’s *éminence grise*), claims to be behind the very concept of the **Brussels School**. As he indicated himself in the mid 1950s several fellow designers were won over to the goal of having a Brussels-based DC. Some of these fellow designers included André De Poerck, Lucien Kroll, Corneille Hannoset, Constantin Brodzki, Pierre Génicot, Jacques Richez, Michel Olyff, Charles Dethier, Willy Van der Meeren, Jules Wabbes, Jos De Mey, ...



Selections and quality labels

For its exhibitions the DC establishes a criteria template to select the objects; this list is recurrently inscribed on the *Signe d'Or* awards and mentioned in all calls for selection: “Functional value of object or object well adapted to its use, aesthetic value, technical quality, sound choice of materials used, perfection of execution, inventiveness, price consistent with

above-mentioned qualities and human unity / value of the solution.” Producers showcase their mass-produced items currently for sale on the market, the manufacturer is invited to come and comment on it and if the object is not movable, the jury goes to it. Three categories of products are taken into account: consumer durable goods, equipment and investment goods, packaging and some small-scale, traditional productions that allow for mass-production methods. Index cards including the title name, the name of the manufacturer and designer, along with a short description and a picture of the product, its price and strong points allow visitors (the general public and potential buyers) to better understand the designs presented by the DC as part of its ongoing and temporary exhibitions.

The Ravenstein Gallery, an adjustable platform

The inauguration as well as the team in charge of designing and developing the DC were presented in the offprint called *Le DC*, issued by the monthly *Industrie* (FIB, January 1965): Constantin Brodzki, Architect, Pierre Génicot, Designer, Michel Olyff, Graphic Designer, W. Bresseleers, Consultant and André De Poerck, Coordinator. The Ravenstein Gallery construction site was mostly the result of J. des Cressonnières’ determination, further serving as the ‘interface’ between Belgium’s business world and political realm. Initially, the project was not workable nor could a figure be put on it, but it still came to be thanks to a combination of talents. Constantin Brodzki coordinated the architectural programme and allied himself with the skills of the likes of Pierre Génicot for all the objects, Philippe Neerman for the engineering and design as well the final development stage (together with the De Coene art studios) and of Michel Olyff for all graphical and signalling aspects. The originality of DC’s architecture was that it toyed around with what Brodzki called “space modulation”. He remembers that “all efforts had to follow the same ambitious path: everything had to be mobile. Even the lighting, with its spotlights and ceiling-mounted luminaires with fluorescent lamps had to be able to move under a suspended ceiling. As the Ravenstein Gallery’s hall is on a very steep slope, we had agreed to bring the ground to a horizontal level by installing three large bench terraces as well as a suspended ceiling capable of creating a volume consistent with human aspects and with the light partitions that outlined the exhibition” (for a total surface of 580 m²). To alternate between stage designs and walking from space to space, Génicot designed some mobile furniture with tables made of two-dimensional *wenge* and curve wood with a simple Plexiglas top that could serve as a window. “The stairs were also mobile, as the handrail could be taken apart on each set and replaced with a staircase”, recalls C. Brodzki. This avant-garde interior design in an area that was meant to become a movie theatre undoubtedly contributed to the success of the DC.



2- The international aura of Belgian design

With the Design Centre, the Belgian economy got a new lease of life

Since its beginnings in the Ravenstein Gallery until 1974 the DC welcomed more than 90,000 visitors every year. The extraneously decorated Belgian interior that somewhat lacked novelty was gradually modified. The time was also that of new neighbourhoods and new cities such as Louvain-La-Neuve in 1971, with its prefabricated turnkey tenements. The stereotypes and functionalism of housing were starting to develop as the city was spreading to the suburbs and overtaking the countryside. In the late 1960s the Belgian highways became the vastest and most dense network in Europe, and is the only one in the world to be entirely lit at night, thanks to luminaires designed by the Schröder group. The city and road networks became consumer objects as landscapes were being modified by automobiles and concrete was taking over public places (parking lots, tunnels, etc.). Television sets were making their way into every household, broadcasting shows in Technicolor. It was only when the first oil crisis appeared that the Belgian people started to change their consumer patterns. Too much waste and too little respect for the environment!

It was also during those years that the “ready-to-discard” culture imported from the USA challenged the long-lasting artisan tradition as well as that of interior decoration designers Belgium was familiar with. Innovative materials at the time, including nylon, plastic, polyester and triplex offered some exciting prospects for designers and industrialists alike, as they saw an opportunity to manufacture larger production runs, meet market requirements and standardize furniture, objects as well as accessories. In 1965, Europlastica, the international plastics fair held in Gent, selected a number of Belgian products, together with the Belgian Committee of Plastics Processing Industries and the DC, which organised three consecutive exhibitions on this topic: *Emballages emballants* in 1969, with a selection of plastic packaging for processed food from 28 Belgian companies (Bifi, Artois,...), *En plastique véritable* in 1970, with a special issue published by *Belgian Plastics*, followed by *Mobiliers sans frontière* two years later which focused on Meurop. The fad for synthetic materials made from petroleum involved all products as consumers began to know how to tell the difference between Bakelite, Perspex, Luran, imitation leather, vinyl and Tupperware.



The Meurop adventure and the peak of the ‘All-Plastic’ trend

As Meurop quit the metal sector and reconverted to invest in plastics in the mid-1960s, the idea was to produce modern, tasteful furniture at popular prices. Under the leadership of Frans Pottier, Meurop built relations with designers in five countries, including the very trendy British designer Robert Heritage. Emond-Alt remembers Pottier’s ambition to “introduce

contemporary, unpretentious and low-budget plastic furniture. This very functional furniture line was very successful in Flanders and Brussels, especially with students and younger households, while Wallonia was a little more reluctant to it. Pottier took me on his boat all the way to Paris, travelling through Le Havre. It was an unbelievable journey. He took care of everything: selecting the designers he paid on the basis of royalties only (every product carried the initial letter of the designer's name, just like at Thonet), the production of plastic by injection as well as the management of an entire chain of 42 stores located in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg." Meurop furniture was not of very high quality but at the time the manufacturer offered a very extensive range of items. The energy and plastics crisis caused the company to go bankrupt, which was strangely connected to the tragic fate of the Pottier family.

Concurrently, Maurice Le Clercq designed the *Kew-Lox* model that pre-empted Meurop's screwless and glueless *Elvire* furniture (designed by E.-Alt), made of tubes and polyester foam. The Namur-based company continued to produce furniture with fixed and sliding panels made of Unalit and decorating it with ornamental adhesives under the same name. During this '*All-Plastic Utopia*' stage (to paraphrase the title of Plasticarium's exhibition which took place at the Architectural Foundation in Brussels in 1994) a number of Belgian designers emerged: E.-Alt designed the *Spa Reine* PVC bottle (which won the Packaging Oscar in 1970), reaching a daily production of nearly 120,000 bottles; Jean Keup (Opdermillen) launched his *Grigniotières*® (1972) and plastic calendars (1971), evocative of Enzo Mari's calendars for the Italian firm Danese; on behalf of Tupperware Europe (located in Alost) Bob Daenen designed some educational games called *Build-O-Fun* (at the same time as Lego in Denmark) as well as his *Multiservers*, *Slimservers*, his *Amphibio* collection (1970-73/74) and *Florette* vases; Charles Dethier had his self-assembled *L'Ove Lamps* I and II (which won the *Signe d'Or* in 1968) released by the Ameropean Corporation. At the same time as the DC, *Interieur 70* and *72* showed the many facets of plastic productions for housing and leisure purposes. In a press report by Guy Rouckaerts on behalf of *Infodesign*, Verner Panton spoke about his views on plastic-minded design: "In my work, the most important thing for me is the harmony of the environment, which is infinitely more significant than a simple chair or any other product. Space, colours, pieces of furniture, textiles, the lighting, everything must be designed according to the whole." A number of companies shared that total self-identity, such as V-Form with its *Mobil* divider-cupboards, or A. & L. Verhaegen, manufacturers of the Epeda mattress, the Lattoflex bed system and the Beaufort seats. In other terms, homes devoted a lot of space to storage systems, human engineering and well-being.

Belgium, the crossroads of Europe

This is evocative of a board game invented by baroness Michel Fallon in 1970, but it also reflects the country's advantaged position as a choice location with the presence of the European Community, established in Brussels since the late 1950s. Charles Dethier chaired the Union of Industrial Designers (UID) after A. De Poerck and in 1969, he became one of the founding members of BEDA (*Board of European Design Associations*). As Jean Keup (Opdermillen) put it: "Belgian companies still had some decision-making authority from the late 1950s until the early 1970s and hadn't been transferred elsewhere as is the case today. Hiring a designer was considered chic, and the idea was to package the product and then design the wrapping. But as the first oil crisis struck, companies started to shed some of their freelance designers or in some cases, gradually integrated them into a Design Team." For example, the Philips production plant has been established in Louvain since 1948, with local premises in Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, Luxembourg and Leopoldville. A number of designers, including Emond-Alt, had designed lighting units for *Philips Éclairage Belgique*. And at the

end of his career at De Coene, Neerman designed the Philips chair for the company's head office located in Eindhoven.

In addition to Knoll, who was already well established in Belgium thanks to De Coene (Courtrai) and its showrooms in Brussels and Amsterdam, other companies were expressing an interest in the Benelux, with the DC acting as the mediator. For example, Christophe Gevers (who created and designed a number of restaurants and bars in Brussels, including the *Taverne des Beaux-Arts*, the *Marie-Joseph* restaurant, the *Vieux-Saint-Martin*, the very first *Quick* fast-food restaurants on Stéphanie Square in Brussels, then in Paris, Bordeaux and Milan) was approached by Asko Finland to develop a set of office furniture pieces called *Asko 300*. "The rational beauty of these furniture items, combined with high-quality production and finishing, was designed with the greatest detail in mind", according to Asko's information leaflet. "This modular equipment... makes it easy to assemble, while the various elements are interchangeable... it can be adjusted to any furnishing problem in any executive office." Asko set up its showroom on rue de la Chapelle in Brussels where it also sold objects and accessories made in Scandinavia. Arteluce, also established in Brussels, continued working with Pieter De Bruyne, who had already designed a luminaire with Perspex volumes for the Italian lighting company in 1957. *Bataille & ibens* were released by Spectrum (NL) and André Verroken by N-Line International. Using ceramics, Pieter Stockmans worked with Mosa in Maastricht (The Netherlands) to design a serveware range of items: *Sonja* (1967), followed by other models such as *Norma* (1982). Textile was also strongly developing, through the Courtrai-based company BIC Carpets, which started the wave of pure wool carpets with *Bic Succes*, *Super Bic Succes* and *Super frisé*, winning the *Signe d'Or* of 1971. Natural materials re-emerged, toning with the pop art trends of contemporary furniture. Even the wallpapers designed by Evolution Folio in Brussels prompted users to create customized mural paintings. They are reminiscent of Vasarely's Op Art, whose foundation was designed by Emiel Veranneman; a few years earlier Veranneman took part in the Belgian pavilion at the Universal Exhibition in Osaka, Japan, alongside Wabbes and Gevers.

3- At the turning point of post-industrial Belgium

The Design Centre: A ten-year review (1964-1974)

As the DC celebrated its 10th anniversary, it issued an offprint with the *A+* periodical. The introduction was written by André De Poerck, current president of UID, recalling that in 1959 in Stockholm, at ICSID's Congress, "leaving all 'fashion styles' and 'industrial beauty' to formalism, the designer delegates of 19 countries decided to use the word DESIGN as the most fitting symbol of their activities." In Belgium in the early 1970s, design was exclusively in the hands of three institutions: the Professional Union of Industrial Designers in Belgium (UID), whose purpose is to organise the design trade; the Belgian Institute for the Development of Industrial Design (IBD), a public utility institute that carries out dogmatic and theoretical research; and the Design Centre asbl (DC), a not-for-profit organisation that promotes industrial design in the Belgian industry and among the general public. It receives annual subsidies from the OBCE that cover 50% of its expenditures, the remainder being supplied by the Centre's own income. In her paper *Dix ans du DC*, Josine des Cressonnières focused on the extended scope of industrial design, which encompasses not only "the analysis of the product, but also the analysis of product systems, services as well as the company's

overall policy, even including environmental issues...” In 1974 the DC awarded a *Signe d'Or* to engineering design products or advanced and highly specialized products. Also, budding inter-disciplinarity was noted between several areas of activity: graphic design, industrial design, engineering design, interior design, fashion design, ... The 10-year evaluation of an intense programme was largely positive, as the public flocked in while the media echoed anything that was novel. But is the DC still consistent with globalizing market realities? Is a structure at national or Belux level still relevant? Such basic questions were put forward during a round table that brought together industrialists, schools, designers, distributors, consumers, the public sector, the press and DC officials. In the report written by journalist Guy Rouckaerts for *A+*, a number of events were highlighted by attendants as being extremely innovative: *Que font les designers belges* was a largely successful event with designers themselves; *Jeux, jouets* emphasized some excellent toy and game prototypes, to be followed by other exhibitions devoted to design for younger people. For the purposes of product demonstration, *Le métro de Bruxelles* displayed both the end result as well as all production stages, including the manufacturing process through a number of scale models made by Philippe Neerman. With *Le consommateur choisit* (consumers are choosers), design's mechanisms were rendered intelligible. And lastly, *L'Eclairage* made it possible to distinguish between better products on a market overwhelmed by tackiness. Exhibitions from abroad offered a better way to compare Belgian products with those from outside the country: since 1965 they have hosted Holland, Japan, the London and Vienna DC's, the three Scandinavian countries, the USSR and after 1974, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, the United States, Greece and Spain.

The subsequent objective was therefore to further the development of the Brussels-based DC so that it could address the issue, and to steer it as much as possible towards consumers and the industry to raise their awareness as they tackle the changes of a society that was going global. “We need to shed its perceived role as a *display window for products*”, said professor Stiefenhofer, the Director of IBD. *DC's are turning into meeting places for open discussions...* *As such, we would like to express the wish that DC's will develop less against an industrial background and increasingly more often against an overall cultural background*, added Guy Rouckaerts.



Belgian design and its image

Mobilier belge contemporain was exhibited at the DC in 1967, then on an exchange basis with the London-based DC in 1969. At other times it was shown alongside sector-based exhibitions made possible with the sponsorship of federations such as Féchimie, Febeltex, Fébelbois... With the support of the OBCE, DC reviewed *300 produits à l'image de la Belgique B>70* and focused on the novelties that shaped Belgium's image in foreign fairs. Human engineering, or the art of adapting tools, machines and workplaces to human beings, was one of the concerns of the time, going hand in hand with the development of teaching industrial design. *Que font les étudiants en Industrial Design?* (What do students study in industrial design?) was one of the questions asked by the DC in 1969. Concurrently, companies and the distribution sector were expanding through Inno-BM, Casa as well as other store chains such as Resocub, Santens, ... Plastics and all-synthetic materials made it possible to achieve much larger production runs than in the past at more reasonable prices (*Objets bien dessinés à moins de 500F*, DC, 1968), benefiting manufacturers in many business sectors: furniture, luminaires, kitchen and bathroom accessories, textiles, automobiles, etc. The 'home' was relinquishing its social undertones – despite one last surge with Alfred Hendrickx's exhibition for Belform (DC, 1969) – to become a space that was both entertaining and functional. With the new shopping attitude the consumer society was in full swing in the early 1970s. *Le home au chantier* and *Le home, la femme et l'homme* (DC, 1970) both focused on the dichotomy between a rational pattern and the utopian views of the time. Houses were being conceived with prefabricated materials in mind, people were drinking out of plastic bottles... yet a number of issues were being raised by the DC as early as 1971: *Le consommateur choisit, Pour une nouvelle culture urbaine, La presse du design, ...* With the oil crisis more natural materials were being considered (*Touchons du Bois, Le mobilier de jardin*) and new courses of thought furthered the debate: *Le trafic dans les villes historiques, Design d'aéroport, Magie du son* and *Home en kit*, which was addressed in the early '80s in the *Kit & Design* exhibition.

With the more rapid developments of industrial design, designers like Pieter De Bruyne started seeking a more experimental type of furniture. The DC organised three exhibitions together with the *Institut économique et social des Classes moyennes* around the topic *Design et métiers d'art*. Along the lines of the non-conventional Global Tools school and the *Banal Design* concepts developed in the late '70s by Alessandro Mendini with the Alchimia group, De Bruyne launched into designing unique pieces and positioned himself toward contemporary design. His 1975 *Chantilly* chest of drawers or his double throne are not that remote from the symbolic *Casablanca* sideboard designed by Ettore Sottsass, which signalled Memphis studio's arrival on the scene in the early '80s. De Bruyne had a critical eye for industrialised furniture and the fact that it became commonplace among the general public. In his own way he rejected formalism and design's subservience to the industry. His eccentric suggestion was to mass produce from the craft industry, while at the same time remaining aware of the object's historical meaning and its development in a household setting. In addition, De Bruyne's stance made it possible to shift from the concept of materialising the product to a metaphysical and society-based debate.

ICSID's Interdesigns in Belgium: 1975-1985

Alongside the Brussels-based DC, ICSID served as a platform to think about and exchange ideas among some thirty countries, including Belgium. ICSID's first Interdesign focused on the issue of urban communications (*Urban traffic on a human scale*) and was organised at the

Collège de l'Europe in Bruges in 1975. The fifteen hectic days of Congress ended with a report written by journalists Guy Rouckaerts and Géraldine des Cressonnières, the daughter of Josine. In 1981 Géraldine was the first to chair the new ICSID-UNESCO committee, leading to the second ICSID Interdesign event in October 1985 held in Louvain-La-Neuve around the topic *Medical equipment for developing countries*. Twenty-five countries took part, and workshops were interdisciplinary. J. des Cressonnières entrusted her daughter Géraldine with the task of coordinating the Congress, but died after a long illness the day before the Congress opened.

As a reminder, ICSID is an international design network that started up in June 1957 at the instigation of 7 countries, including Belgium, France, Great Britain, Italy and the United States. Maldonado's definition of industrial design (which still holds true today) dates back to a seminar that was held in Bruges in March 1964: "*Industrial design is a creative activity whose aim is to determine the formal qualities of objects produced by industry... Industrial design extends to embrace all the aspects of human environment which are conditioned by industrial production.*" To avoid any confusion with products, an international association was also set up for graphic designers in 1963: ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations), in which Belgian designers Jacques Richez and Guy Schockaert were very actively involved.



The *Biennale Interieur* in Courtrai

The choice of the year was probably not altogether an accident, given the events that shook Europe in May as well as the *Summer of Love* that was organised in the wake of the *Biennale Interieur*, which opened its doors amid the turmoil of the current events in October 1968 in the Exhibitions Halls of Courtrai (renamed Kortrijk Xpo).

The *Fondation Interieur* was established in 1967 at the behest of Jan-Pieter Ballegeer and Fred Sandra, the architect of Courtrai's Exhibition Halls, with the task of "promoting creativity in the field of contemporary housing." For the *Biennale's* first edition nearly a dozen Belgian manufacturers keen to support the spread of the avant-garde shapes of contemporary furniture, attended the event together with a few Dutch and French firms. Some of the participating companies included BIC Carpets, Van den Berghe-Pauvers, Barco and its range of television sets, Niko with the Inter70 switches, Defour, Beaufort & Vform, The Belgian Linen Association, Beka, Simmons mattresses, Mewaf, Amphora ceramics as well as Finippon's designer objects, Novalux with some Rudi Verhelst furniture, Top-Mouton furniture, Durllet, and Aurora. In the catalogue of the first Biennial, the title of Geert Bekaert's foreword was "*L'homme 'designed'*", speaking of "interior design that involves responsibilities, directly expressing viability, shapes and human character. The crisis

contemporary interiors are currently undergoing is akin to the personality crisis. Are men and women in 1968... capable of structuring their own lives in a creative manner?" As of 1970 the Biennial launched its own *Bourse aux idées* (idea market), which since 1972 has become a contest for young professionals, *Design for Europe*. Prominent people such as Gio Ponti (I) and Verner Panton (D) were involved in the first editions of *Interieur*, providing the event with unparalleled international aura. There were some 53,000 visitors in 1968 and more than twice as many until the year 2000. The exhibition floor surface was increased threefold, with a little extra in the form of artistic direction coordinated by Moniek E. Bucquoye from 1988 to 1994, followed by Marc Dubois and Max Borka. As of 1976 Boudewijn Delaere was responsible for the fair's graphical identity. International juries saw some designers of great renown, including Eero Aarnio (FIN), Ron Arad (GB), Gae Aulenti (I), Ricardo Bofill (E), Andrea Branzi (I), Anna Castelli-Ferrieri (I), Robin Day (GB), Javier Mariscal (E), Ingo Maurer (D), Jasper Morrison (GB), Jean Nouvel (F), Pierre Paulin (F), Andrée Putman (F), Peter Raacke (D), Borek Sipek (NL), Ettore Sottsass (I) and Hannes Wettstein (CH).

4. The 1980s: New creative avenues

The Design Centre defends issues that are abreast of the times, raising the interest of design circles through the Union of Designers in Belgium (UDB) and the "*Monde du design*" exhibition organised in 1980 as part of Europalia Belgium. The event welcomed more than 15,000 visitors, with an offering of some sixty creations by design teams and designers around a number of themes: the street, public transportation, sports, factories, the house, hospitals, graphical design, etc. The multidisciplinary quality stemming from the presentation opened new prospects; from there on good taste was to be a thing of the past! The early 1980s were characterised by the advent of the computer age, which followed on from the space age of the previous decades. Architects once again became interested in design through international companies such as Alessi, Tecno, Herman Miller, Bulo... And in Belgium, some quotable names include Claire Bataille and Paul ibens, Christian Kieckens and Jo Crépain.

Another *Design Centre* exhibition was held in 1981. Entitled "Design and Export", "bringing together forty-seven companies, research and design departments, the creations of which contribute to Belgium's expansion abroad thanks to their industrial design qualities." Two prizes were awarded by the Minister of Foreign Trade and by the *Société nationale d'investissement*. The first prize went to BIC Carpets for its collection of wall-to-wall, pure wool Woolmark carpets, and the second one was given to ABAY for its silo used to store sugar in bulk. Other companies passed with honours: FN for its plasticizer designed in 1978 by Patvoort and Emonds-Alt and its Browning collection of golf clubs designed by Philippe Jeghers, and Tupperware Belgium for its *Multiserver* of which nearly 2.3 million units were produced. The selection also included Claire Bataille and Paul ibens with their construction kit system 78+ which won them a *Signe d'Or*. In the leisure area Cross was awarded a label for its Lazer motorcycle helmets, as was Donnay for its collection of *Pro* tennis rackets, Superia with its range of *Éminence* and *Turbo* bicycles, and Etap Yachting with the *Etap 20* sailboat. In the interior furniture and textiles department, the Étés. Verhaegen were shortlisted for their Lattoflex programme (designed by Christophe Gevers and Janine Kleykens). Durllet was

also included in this category with its *Barbados* leather chairs, Mercator and its line of *Delta* office furniture designed by Philippe Olbrechts ... As for engineering design, it developed as one of Belgium's brainchilds, thanks to FN and Prodata, whose *C70* cash register designed by Paul Verhaert included the register itself as well as the business micro-computer, all in one.



New expanding sectors: Mobility and lighting

In the field of mobility two companies shared the market. After designing the BOVA bus together with the Technische Hogeschool in Eindhoven, IDEA (Axel Enthoven) continued expanding in the public transportation sector by setting up EADC (Enthoven Associates Design Consultants): streetcars designed together with Alstom and Bombardier, trains for BN... IDPO Neerman, on the other hand, had been positioned as a research and design department since 1970. Its range of activities involves transportation systems, architecture and urban planning, product design and creating workstations as well as control stations. His clients include *Électricité de France* and the *Société des Autoroutes Paris-Rhin-Rhône*. After designing the Brussels metro network (1967-1973) together with the STIB and *Brugeoise & Nivelles*, Philippe Neerman continued the public transportation adventure by designing subways in Lyon and Marseille, streetcars in Nantes and Grenoble... As J. des Cressonnières said in *Design et export*, “exporting know-how, in the field of design for example, is one possible road to Belgium’s future expansion abroad. As with all highly industrialised countries Belgium must export grey matter, more so than simply matter...” That vision was rewarded ten years later when IDPO Neerman received the IF Award for his light urban transportation model called *Citadis*: it was developed with GEC Alstom as early as 1985 and is still studied and incorporated in the social fabric of some European cities, including Porto, Dublin, Montpellier and Orléans.

The early 1980 was further characterised by the establishment and expansion of lighting design in Belgium, thanks to companies such as Kreon, Modular, Light, Jori and Belgo Chrom. In 1981, the Design Centre devoted an exhibition to Christophe Gevers’ luminaires on behalf of Light. A pioneer in this area, Jean Keup designed the *Lightscreen*. He was awarded the Design Centre label and more significantly, the first prize in 1980 at the *Interieur* fair, equipping the lobby with three thousand light rods. This architectural luminaire also graced the Belgian embassy in New Delhi: with light rods of varying length that can be placed anywhere and changed instantaneously, the system is based on the observation that “lighting has developed poorly... Everything has always been designed to catch light; today, we exploit the level of light... In

my opinion we are lagging behind people's true need: human contact", according to Jean Keup. With this new product and others after that, lighting design became one of the best outlets for Belgian industrial designers.

Revitalising the textile industry and textile designs

The *Plan pour le Textile et la Confection* had a major effect on safeguarding this imperilled industry and on the designers that revolved around it. The plan, supported by the *Institut du Textile et de la Confection de Belgique* (ITCB) between 1980 and 1985 made it possible to stabilise jobs, production and consumption in Belgium in the linen, cotton and wool sectors while at the same time developing the chemical fibre market. It also contributed to boost exports as well as the job market for fashion designers and textile designers, as creativity was seen as a source of added value in the areas of fashion and design. Alongside the ITCB and the *Fédération de l'Habillement, de la Maille et du Textile* (Febeltex), a number of private initiatives enhanced Belgium's international aura: the annual Decosit Fair (Textirama), with the "D87" design contest in 1987, the *Année du Commerce extérieur* and the 'Made in Belgium' Fair, the "Mode, c'est belge" operation and lastly, the Textivision association, which seeks to pass future trends onto designers and producers. Many designers, especially in Flanders, made good use of the plan and established ties with industrialists.

The trade, promotion and museums

The designer trade has to deal with poor promotional efforts of its activities and with the fact that the industrial economy is turning into a service-oriented society. Despite the inexorable decline of the Design Centre after the final *Signe d'Or* in 1983, a few new initiatives emerged. The Union of Designers in Belgium *Belgique* published the first issue of *Guide de l'UDB* (1981) under the chairmanship of Charles Dethier. A key element was included in that document, namely a *Professional Code of Conduct* that is still used today as an ethical basis for the qualities required in order to operate in the design sector. In Flanders, graphical designer Paul Ibou launched *Vorm in Vlaanderen* in 1981, an information periodical devoted to graphical arts, visual communication, design and culture, in which he presented the first edition of the annual *Linea* fair, a blend of design, art-oriented occupation and plastic arts. As far as promotional efforts are concerned, the Designer's Week-End started organising (in Brussels in 1983) a yearly round of importer showrooms of major design names at international level (Tradix, J. Van Craen, Tecno...).

Moving away from the beaten track, the Museum of Modern Art organised a retrospective exhibit called "Design en Belgique 1940-1984". The purpose was to seize the opportunity to open a section devoted to the history of design in the 20th century. A number of areas were highlighted: architecture and furniture, ceramics and glass, textiles and wallpaper, technical products, means of transportation, sports and leisure as well as graphic arts. This was also a way of celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Brussels-based Design Centre, which helped select the pieces to be displayed. Unfortunately, after Josine des Cressonnières passed away in 1985, the permanent collection project came to

an end, and on the 1st of July 1986 the Design Centre shut down for good, a rather unfortunate turn in the history of design in Belgium.

III - Belgium in search of identity(ies)

The composite profile of Belgian design: 1986-2000

“The country has the diluteness, complexity, indifference and inconsistency of a metropolitan environment, yet lacks its energy and sense of daring... There is no immediate enthusiasm for novelty. The natural principle of slow growth is still well established. Often, the success of any Belgian product will come from the roundabout foreign route.”
Geert Beekaert, « La métropole à l’envers », *Design Made in Belgium 1900-1994*, Interieur, 1994



From crafts to industrial design, VIZO takes on the promotional relay

Following the shut-down of the Design Centre, designers and companies experienced a total lack of any promotional relay. The *Union Professionnelle des Designers de Belgique* was also suffering from federalisation, and refocused its activities more towards safeguarding the designer trade in the broader sense (products, graphical arts, interior architecture). It also issued a few publications, including a key one that is a select inventory of designs for public spaces (*Choisir son mobilier urbain*, choosing your street furniture), in cooperation with the Walloon Ministry of Equipmen and Public Transportation.

We will, however, have to wait until the early 1990s to witness the birth in Flanders (spurred by the Ministry of Economy) of the *Vlaams Instituut voor het zelfstandig Ondernemen* (VIZO) and its Vormgeving department (art and design trades). Its story goes hand in hand with Belgium’s federalisation process and the later split of the province of Brabant into Walloon and Flemish parts. The Flemish community took over all craft and art-related trades as part of the economic and trade activities (following the dissolution of the Social and Economic Institute for Middle Classes), while the French-speaking community was virtually unrepresented in this sector, as it took over the production of art, crafts and design as part its cultural agenda.

As the focus was on applied contemporary arts (*kreatieve ambachten*), we had to wait another ten years before industrial design once again became an item of

promotion in Flanders. VIZO took care of this from 1997 onwards, and one year later its 2nd Triennial at the *Museum voor Sierkunst en industriële Vormgeving* in Gent was devoted to industrial design; this was followed by the opening of its gallery at the corner of rue de la Chancellerie in Brussels, which hosts six exhibitions per year. The French-speaking front is a barren land, and only a few schools such as ENSAV La Cambre and the Institut Saint-Luc in Liège, joined by a couple of private initiatives (Designers Week-End, Fonds Design and Entreprise de la Fondation Roi Baudouin, the Théorèmes gallery in Brussels...), strive to relay creativity. In addition, many young designers were seen scattering off to live in France, Canada, the United States and other countries. At the same time industrial designers tended to widen the scope of their activities and engage in graphical activity (overall corporate identity, packaging, signs, etc.). Belgium was gradually becoming a land of intellect and design accessible to France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Great Britain as well as some countries in other continents. A vacuum was left on the Belgian market as production and the decision-making centre of many companies permanently moved to new locations. As a result, designers were forced to approach new clients abroad to ensure their skills would be better recognized.



The Henry van de Velde award, a benchmark in Flanders

Initiated in 1994 by the VIZO and its director Johan Valcke, the Henry van de Velde awards offer recognition to designers and companies in Flanders, providing them with a sort of international reputation. The awards are granted on an annual basis: the ‘Career’ award is given to a designer who has worked with a high level of excellence for a minimum of thirty years; the ‘Young Talent’ award honours a designer in the product or graphical communication field who has been active for at least five years; the ‘Corporate’ award (since 1995) assesses employment and the consistent integration of design as an element of added value; the ‘Best Product’ is selected among the works of designers supported by the VIZO; and lastly, the ‘Public’ award is subject to a ballot open to visitors during the exhibition of nominated products. Such awards continue to serve as benchmarks, and perhaps some day might become available to the rest of the country and even go international, following the example of trophies such as the IF Award (Hanover), the Red Dot Award (Essen) or the Compasso d’Oro (Milan).

History of Henry van de Velde awards - 1993-2000

Career

- 1994 : Emiel Veranneman (furniture)
- 1995 : Michel Martens (stained-glass windows)
- 1996 : Armand Blondeel (stained-glass windows)
- 1997 : Rob Buytaert (graphical design)
- 1998 : Pieter Stockmans (ceramics)
- 1999 : Philippe Neerman (industrial and environmental design)
- 2000 : Fernand Baudin (typography and graphical design)

Young Talent

- 1994 : David Huycke (gold-making and jewellery)
- 1995 : Weyers & Borms (lighting design)
- 1996 : Katrien Rondelez (textile)
- 1997 : Nedda El-Asmar (gold-making and industrial design)
- 1998 : Hilde De Decker (jewellery)
- 1999 : Tine Vindevogel (jewellery)
- 2000 : Michaël Samyn (Internet design)

Best Product

- 1994 : André Verroken (furniture)
- 1995 : Tjok Dessauvage (ceramics)
- 1996 : Maarten Van Severen (furniture – *Chaise longue*)
- 1997 : Francine Van der Biest (textile – *Tapis n° 11*)
- 1998 : Jan-Willem van Zijst (glassware – *Sand 2/25* bowl)
- 1999 : Sylvie Vandenhoecke (gold-making – vase)
- 2000 : Martine Gyselbrecht (textile – *Passé-Présent-Futur* samples)

Corporate (since 1995)

- 1995 : Samsonite (luggage)
- 1996 : Kreon (lighting design)
- 1997 : Bulo (office furniture)
- 1998 : Spijker (furniture)
- 1999 : Obumex (furniture and kitchens)
- 2000 : Casimir (general designs and furniture)

Public Award

- 1994 : David Huycke (gold-making)
- 1995 : Fabiaan Van Severen (furniture – *Pallisade* folding screen)
- 1996 : Herman Wittocx (furniture – *Pirnitz* cupboard)
- 1997 : Ola-Dele Kuku (furniture – *Extract* cupboard)
- 1998 : Idir Mecibah (furniture – *Fer 37 I* table)
- 1999 : Wim Segers (furniture – *Natal* chair)
- 2000 : Martine Gyselbrecht (textile – *Passé-Présent-Futur* samples)



New research thrusts

Outside the institutional framework, which prompts designers to develop greater individualism, some became more assertive in the late 1980s as they wavered between the production of *unica* and the industry. Architects and interior architects were storming back into the design field. With an acute sense of space and man's place with regard to objects, Maarten Van Severen is probably the person who breathed new life into Belgian creativity. Having received the van de Velde award for his *Chaise longue* (deck chair) made of polyester, fibre glass and aluminium his furniture was rapidly produced by internationally renowned brand names such as Vitra, Edra, Kartell, etc., although some of his designs continued to be manufactured in Belgium by Top Mouton. Designed as micro-architecture, each piece – chair, table, or bookcase – gets straight to the point. As a result, its usefulness becomes obvious: to sit down, to lie down, and to take possession of space. The quest for perfection, for beauty and integrated technology initially stems from the workshop rationale, as with Xavier Lust who designed the taut and arched line of the *Banc* (bench), produced by MDF Italia as of 2000. *Le banc* serves as a counterpoint to other musings on design, along the lines of the *maestri italiani*. Pol Quadens based his approach on a vocabulary of streamlined shapes, eventually resulting in the carbon-made *CO6* chair in 1996, said to be the lightest in the world (980 grams), and reminiscent of the *Superleggera* (1957) designed by Gio Ponti for Cassina, or the *LightLight* designed by Alberto Meda for Alias thirty years later. While following a streamlining trend another Belgian designer, Casimir, chose the crude and solid aspect of materials, and interior architect and designer Danny Venlet created furniture with pure and organic lines in the fashion of Marc Newson, with whom he worked in Australia.

On a more high-tech note, following the development of technologies in the field of computers, home automation and composite materials, Belgium boasts a number of very creative design offices such as In Spirit, Naos Design and Verhaert. Other agencies and companies, including Barco, Global Design, Maximal Productvision and Clemtone, give a biomorphic touch to electronic and multimedia products, household appliances as well as recreational, fashion and travel accessories, while working for CE+Technics, Nicetis, Samsonite, Tupperware Europe... The term used was “bio-design”, applied to production run objects whose anthropomorphic or zoomorphic features (in a bid to humanise technology) are made easier through the use of new design software

programmes as well as plastic and composite materials. The style was also applied to the area of environmental design, opening the debate on mobility, security and signalling inside cities and in the outskirts. A number of design offices were further involved in the field of public transportation with a human face: Enthoven Associates Design Consultants (EADC) with its De Lijn streetcars in Belgium, and IDPO Neerman with the aforementioned *Citadis* models. We should also mention designers specialising in automobile designing, such as Charles van den Bosch who created the *Vertigo* for Étienne Gillet, Dirk Van Braeckel working on behalf of Audi-VW, Skoda and Bentley, Steve Cryns who's behind the Lotus *Elise* design, and Luc Donderwolcke who has worked with Lamborghini, among others.

Lighting design is an area highly prized by designers and companies, including Delta Light, Kreon, Light, Lumière et Objet (Henriette Michaux), Schröder, Modular, Moonlight (Pierre Lallemand), Dark and Waco, as it allows more technology, more emotions and colours into the products designed for indoor, professional and urban spaces. Grand-Hornu Images, a not-for-profit organisation, devoted its first major exhibition to lighting design: "Lumière – Matière" was a comparison between the luminaires of Pierre Lallemand and the furniture of Claude Renard, who is better known in the comic strip world and for stage design. As the Museum of Contemporary Arts (MAC's) took residence on the former coalmine site of Grand-Hornu, the association gradually refocused its activities on design, a wise choice given its adequacy with the industrial beauty of the location. This was also a way of raising the awareness of a cross-border Walloon public – usually rather traditional in their exhibition choices – as well as introducing them to contemporary themes, and eventually to individualities one regularly comes across in contemporary design.

Another driving force of Belgian creativity is to be found in the area of outdoor furniture (through companies such as Extremis and Tribù) and kitchens, thanks to Bruno Meeus, Philippe Allaey and Obumex, who called on some talented architects including Claire Bataille, Paul ibens, Vincent Van Duysen or the British-born John Pawson. Furniture manufacturers such as Durler were trying to find new innovative paths with the *Howto sit* by Lowie Vermeersch or the designs of Frank De Clercq, Frans Van Praet and Axel Enthoven. Office furniture, on the other hand, was mainly developing in Flanders with Bulo: the firm's *Cartes blanches* helped materialise many cooperative efforts with architects, designers and fashion designers, including Bataille & ibens, Dirk Bikkembergs, Anne Demeulemeester, Jean Nouvel, bOb Van Reeth, Maarten Van Severen..., as their many awards provided access to the international design scene. Companies specialising in technical and interior textiles also asked designers to develop their samples, including the likes of Martine Gyselbrecht, Ann-Marie Jonckheere, Marie Mees, Claudine Piaget, Katrien Rondelez, Francine Van der Biest and Marc Vanhoe.

In the area of tableware, table accessories and *art de la table*, Val-Saint-Lambert launched new crystal designs, with Frenchman Martin Szekeley and Czech-born Borek Sípek, exhibited in Grand-Hornu Images. Siegfried De Buck and Nedda El-Asmar developed silver and silver plated cutlery, tea sets and coffee sets for brands such as Wiskemann and Puiforcat (of the Hermès group). L'Anverre, in addition to its hand-crafted glass pieces, was manufactured by

Kreon and Zanotta (Italy). As for ceramics – while Royal Boch was waiting for more halcyon days – activities were relocated in Flanders, with Pieter Stockmans and Jos Devriendt to name only two.

Furthermore, deliberations on industrial machinery continued as the Théorèmes gallery and Martine Boucher's not-for-profit organisation D-Sign based in Brussels, launched a contest in 1992 called "Éco-Design", which became "Éco-Design Europe" two years later because of its success with young designers. Environmental issues were the focus of attention. But the debate was nothing new as it had been initiated in the 1970s with the oil crises, challenging society on the future of the environment. Apart from a return to natural materials, designers and companies were thinking in terms of recycling, saving energy and sustainable development, projecting themselves into the future and taking into account both end-users as well as the resources needed to better handle the product's life cycle.

Belgian designers' know-how is popular abroad

Events of the scope of Universal Exhibitions are conducive to the expression of Belgian creativity. Case in point: the Jean Keup research and design office created the pavilion as well as the *Avenue de l'Europe* in Sevilla in 1992, together with four other architects. His contribution was to develop a huge structure made of wire tightened with technical textiles. Thanks to twelve columns (including one for the Belgian Pavilion) the air was cooled by spraying water, thereby lowering the ambient temperature by approximately seven degrees. Other designers brought their contribution to the Belgian Pavilion, including Frans Van Praet with his *Sevilla* stool manufactured at Val-Saint-Lambert.

Another initiative, the European Design Prizes, was initiated in 1985 under the instigation of the Danish Design Council, encompassing Belgium as a partner with the IBD. In 1988, the event was organised in Brussels and six years later the *Fondation Interieur* was awarded the European Design Prize, which was tantamount to acknowledging the country's creative power. The Design for Europe prize was one of the highlights of the Biennial, further enhancing its international impact. Closer to the teaching of design, the *École supérieure des Arts visuels de La Cambre* was rewarded in 1989 as part of the Alcatel contest and was dubbed the best design school in Europe, thereby showing the outstanding level of education maintained in Belgium. The school's international renown was further ensured by design schools located in Antwerp, Genk, Liège and more recently Courtrai. The "Productontwikkeling" department, as industrial design is called in Flanders, needed to adjust to new technologies, particularly 3D computer-generated images. Furthermore, the purpose of interior architecture departments increasingly involves designing urban spaces and joining what is known as environmental design: such is the case for La Cambre and the CAD in Brussels, the Katholieke Hogeschool in Mechelen as well as the Saint-Luc institutes in both Brussels and Tournai...

« Branding Belgium », or the paradox of an identity

At the furniture fairs of Milan and Cologne, the Belgians (often relayed by Flanders) have a prominent place. In 2000, Max Borka, in charge of artistic

direction at the biennial *Interieur* show in Courtrai, organised a few memorable events. The *Interieur Design Academy* (I/De/A) was officially launched around the topic of mobility and nomadism at the dawn of the third millennium, a highly trendy topic since the mid-1990s that continues to be developed in the fields of plastics arts and design. Another exhibition held at *Interieur*, “Branding Belgium”, was first presented to the Cologne and Milan fairs in 1999 as part of « F3 – Forms From Flanders » (a Jan Boelen project for the defunct *Centrum voor integrale Produktontwikkeling*, or CEPRO). With “Belgitudes”, one last look was cast on the identity of designers such as Maarten Van Severen, Fabiaan Van Severen and Dirk Wynants. Another section of *Interieur 2000*, probably one of the most original, revolved around “Hot Houses” and was coordinated by Belgian designer Casimir, who drew upon the concept of the *Casa calda*, a well-known work by Andrea Branzi. As such, *Interieur* remains a must-see that in the course of its thirty-two years of existence lost nothing of its forward-looking qualities on housing and contemporary ways of living.

In Brussels and throughout Wallonia a number of exhibitions were devoted to mobility. “Dynamic City” took place the same year as I/De/A at the Brussels-based *Fondation pour l’Architecture*, preceded four years earlier by “Les véhicules de demain” at Grand-Hornu Images, designed together with the *Institut supérieur de Design* in Valenciennes which was founded by Belgian Philippe Delvigne, a former La Cambre student.

This ongoing dialogue between economics and culture has become an obvious fixture, as the Belgium of today is quite different from what it once was. Although design still remains at the crossroads of Europe it has become international, extending beyond borders. The culture of products has driven society to evolve towards concepts of services where the material is often confused with the ethereal. As in art, there is a degree of subjectivity, of Belgian surrealism and of “fashions and trends”. Actually, we can see that the market is becoming increasingly global and intangible. Right now, we would be hard pressed to predict whether a chair or a table will be successful when the world is suffering from an overproduction of consumer goods and finds it difficult to absorb them. As a result, designers return to a more experimental approach, to prototypes, without necessarily linking this with industrial prospects. Furthermore, because of ever-increasing constraints, creativity networks compel designers to adjust to the parameters of production and distribution, to manage their strategy and to avoid designing in a haphazard manner. While Belgium is sometimes reduced to the identity of its regions and communities, the country still offers many options for openings and contacts with foreign countries. Lise Coirier, original texts/English translation – extracts from “*Design en Belgique/in Belgium/in België*”, Racine, Brussels, 2004.

This book is sponsored by IBM

> *Here is a word from IBM Belgium executive manager*

The post-war era marked an important turning point for design in Belgium, as we will see or have the pleasure of rediscovering in the following pages.

This was also the time when large international companies felt the need to make their internal and external audiences aware of their concern for quality in business and products.

IBM did not escape from the trend. The attention of Thomas J. Watson Jr, president of IBM, was drawn to the care that one of his Italian competitors of the day devoted to the design of his products. He realised that the role a large company takes on must also manifest itself visually. He went on to launch a massive image programme with the firm's own house style - and he surrounded himself with the great names of the age such as the architect and industrial designer Eliot Noyes and the graphic designer Paul Rand. Their goal was not to pin down a single rigid image with the risk of rapid obsolescence, but to appeal to different collaborations throughout the world. And the mission of these creative artists? To point up whatever was best in modern design and translate it into the dedication to excellence and progress pursued by IBM.

In the mid-50s under the banner of Paul Rand, the first chapter in the transformation of IBM left its mark on every graphical manifestation of the company – its logo, its internal and external communication vehicles. Then there came furniture and buildings: Eero Saarinen, Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, Charles Eames and others were progressively to endow IBM with new traits that went hand in hand with its expansion.

Europe did not escape from the movement. Over many years the famous Swiss graphical designer Josef Müller Brockman gave the continent's communications teams the benefit of his advice and ensured that IBM was surrounded by the best local talents.

Design is not a fashion, rather a fashion of developing and evolving things. This position has been undeniable over the course of the years. Later on, the pavilion for the itinerant technology exhibition that IBM organised in Europe in the latter half of the '80s was entrusted to the talents of the architect Lorenzo Piano, who conceived the Beaubourg complex in Paris. The PC saw the light of day in 1982 and before the end of the decade had evolved into portable models whose look was designed by Richard Sapper.

To be sure, caring about style is not an end in itself. No matter what the age or corner of the world, no matter what culture, sector or scale you are working in, the search for shapes that are as aesthetic as they are functional transforms the pursuit of excellence, a lucid and laid-back attitude, into a state of mind open to innovation and creativity.

Bart Van Den Meersche
Country General Manager
IBM Belgium - Luxembourg