

Horta Houses (Belgium)

No 1005

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The major town houses of the architect Victor Horta
<i>Location</i>	Region of Bruxelles-Capitale
<i>State Party</i>	Belgium
<i>Date</i>	23 July 1999

Justification by State Party

The four major town houses of the architect Victor Horta (1861–1947) – Hôtel Tassel, Hôtel Solvay, Hôtel van Eetvelde, and Maison & Atelier Horta, located in Brussels – testify the different facets of the exceptional creativity of this Belgian architect in the decade leading up to the 20th century. Horta is considered one of the decisive initiators of *Art Nouveau*, and thus also one of the most remarkable pioneers of modern architecture. The stylistic revolution represented by the works of Horta is characterized, for example, by the introduction of a free and open plan, the diffusion and transformation of light through the entire construction, and the creation of a decoration that brilliantly joins the energy of curved lines with the structure of the building.

The four town houses by Victor Horta represent masterpieces of human creative genius, as they form an essential link from the classical tradition to the Modern Movement in the history of architecture, as conceived by one of the pioneers of *Art Nouveau*. Horta revolutionized the architectural concepts of his time by introducing the idea of an open plan and creating a real dialogue of materials and their uses according to their intrinsic nature within a new way of conceiving decoration.

Criterion i

The Horta buildings represent an outstanding example of a type of architectural construction. They revive the 19th century tradition of bourgeois residential buildings, combining residential and representational functions, which require a subtle organization of spaces and differentiated circulation. In each case, Horta's genius created a coherent unity of architecture and decoration, reflecting the personality of the owner.

Criterion iv

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

The *Hôtel Tassel* can be considered the founding work of *Art Nouveau*. Commissioned by Professor Emile Tassel in 1893, it was the first work in which Victor Horta was able to realize his original conception of architecture, with all the characteristic features that he developed in his other town houses. The house was finished in 1894, but Horta continued designing the furniture for some years, as well as making some minor changes requested by the client. When completed, the Hôtel Tassel raised mixed reactions, but it was soon considered a key building in the development of modern architecture. After World War II the house was split up into small flats so that little of the decoration remained visible. In 1976 the architect Jean Delhaye bought the house, restored the street facade and the main doors, and adapted the building to function as prestige offices.

Commissioned by Armand Solvay, the *Hôtel Solvay* was built from 1895 to 1898, with furniture completed in 1903. The construction of stables was designed by the architects C Bosmans and H Vandeveld, beginning in 1899, though Horta may have been consulted for the design. The Solvay family kept the house until 1957, when M and Mme Wittamer-De Camps bought it, thus avoiding its demolition. The building became the seat of their fashion house, bringing some changes. The southern light-well, of which the glass had been broken in 1942, was closed by atelier floors. At the ground level two large display windows were opened. After transferring the fashion activity elsewhere in 1980, the owners started the restoration of the building, including the restitution of the glass roofs of the main staircase (1980–82), cooling of the interior decoration, and restoring the façades (1988–89).

Commissioned by M and Mme Van Eetvelde in 1895, the construction of the *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* started in 1897; the west wing was completed in 1900, and the east wing in 1901. In 1920, after the death of Mme Van Eetvelde, the property was divided in two parts. The original building and the east wing (4 avenue Palmerston) were sold to the Pouppez de Kettenis family, who lived there for some 30 years. In 1950, it was bought by the current owner, the *Fédération de l'Industrie du Gaz* (FIGAZ), who used the main floor for representation. A garage was added to the east wing, and in 1966 offices were added to the light-well. In 1988, FIGAZ started a restoration, conducted by a former student of Horta, the architect Jean Delhaye, and the architect Barbara Van der Wee. The west wing was connected with the corner building in 1920, resulting in some unfortunate changes. When the Nicolaidis-Hoffman family acquired the building in 1926, they wanted to demolish it, but were fortunately not given the permit. Finally the building was bought by Jean Delhaye as his personal residence.

The *Maison & Atelier Horta* responded to the professional and family needs of the architect, and were built in 1898–1901 on two lots in a fashionable district of the town. Soon after completion, Horta made some modifications, expanding the house into the garden in 1906. After his divorce, he leased the buildings for a while, but then continued living there, making changes in the interior; a terrace and a winter garden were added, and the atelier was enlarged. In 1911 the street front was modified when Horta introduced a garage. In 1919 the buildings were sold to Major Henri Pinte and in

1926 the two parts of the building were separated. In 1961 the Commune of Saint-Gilles acquired the residential part for a museum of Horta's work. The building was restored in 1967 by Jean Delhaye, to accommodate its use as a museum, and further works were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s. A new restoration was initiated in 1989.

Description

The four town houses by Victor Horta are: Hôtel Tassel, 6 rue P-A Janson; Hôtel Solvay, 224 avenue Louise; Hôtel van Eetvelde, 2-4 avenue Palmerston; and Maison & Atelier Horta, 23-25 rue Américaine, in the centre of Brussels.

- Hôtel Tassel

This town house is built on a lot 7.79m wide and 39m deep. The client, Professor Emile Tassel, desired a house that he could use as a bachelor, living with his grandmother, loving to receive friends, and conducting scientific work. The street façade, built in stone, is remarkably integrated into its context. Above the entrance there is a two-storey bow-window in an innovative steel structure, a demonstration of Horta's skill at joining traditional forms with new technical and artistic concepts. On the street side the building has the entrance floor, a mezzanine, first and second floors, and an attic. These levels are skilfully shifted towards the garden side by way of a central staircase. Underneath there is a basement. The plan is symmetrical in relation to the central axis, starting from the entrance, passing via the main staircase through the living room, and ending in the large bow-window of the dining hall towards the garden. The main staircase reaches the office at the first-floor level, and there are two secondary staircases serving the rest of the building. Horta differentiated the light for the different parts of the interior, as reflected even in the elevations. The centre of the house is illuminated in an ingenious manner through a lantern of the winter garden and glass windows over the main staircase. Bedrooms occupy the upper floors. One can detect various types of influences in this building, including Japanese in the octagonal hall, Egyptian in the entrance and the interior, medieval in the composition of bow-windows, and classical in the perfect symmetry of the composition. The plasticity and sensitive undulation of surfaces, however, came from him alone.

- Hôtel Solvay

The best preserved of all Horta's town houses, the Hôtel Solvay still maintains its interior intact, including original art objects and the utilities in functional order. The front elevation is in stone while the garden side is built in brick. The building has a basement, the main floor, a floor for the parents, one for the children, and one for the staff. Built on a wider lot than the Hôtel Tassel, the upper floors have three rooms on the street side and the lateral rooms have bow-windows. The main floor has a salon occupying the entire width of the lot, with a balcony in the centre section, thus articulating the space and the front elevation; the dining hall faces the garden. Interior furnishings are beautifully designed in delicate, darkish, undulating timber and metal structures. Windows and partitions have richly coloured stained glass, floors have decorative patterns, and walls have painted decorations in soft colours, reflecting the forms of the furniture and fittings. The entrance passage, placed in the left section of the front, leads from

the street directly to the garden. Halfway through, the passage opens into a *hall d'honneur*, leading to the main staircase and having access to the services on both sides.

- Hôtel van Eetvelde

Commissioned by Edmond van Eetvelde, diplomat and Secretary General of Congo, the building was to provide a home for the family and a prestigious setting for the reception of international guests. The ensemble consists of the main building (1895–1897) and the east wing (1900–1901) in 4 avenue Palmerston, and the west wing (1889–1900) in 2 avenue Palmerston, joining with a rented house further west. The main building has a rectangular plan, while the west wing with the rented house form a triangular extension around the street corner. The central part of the main building is dedicated to a complex system of communication, including the main stairs leading from the entrance hall to the first floor; behind this there is a staircase for the family and one for service. The main floor has a large living room on the street side and a dining hall at the back; there is access to a salon and billiard room in the east wing and to an office in the west wing. The interiors are designed in the same luxurious pattern as the other houses. The street elevation of No 4, painted and decorated in shades of salmon pink, develops over four storeys in alternating rhythms. The dominating materials are glass and metal. In No 2 the elevation is built in stone, and introduces finely decorated curved window elements.

- Maison & Atelier Horta

Modest in size, the Maison & Atelier Horta are nevertheless a real showpiece of the creative capacity of Victor Horta, a laboratory where he experimented on the combination of materials and spaces with the most up-to-date technology. The site is 12.5m wide: the residential part in 25 rue Américaine is 6.7m wide while the atelier in 23 rue Américaine, on the right, is 5.8m wide. The ensemble has three floors and a mansard roof. The facade is built in stone and has delicately designed metal railings. The most spectacular element in the building is represented by the vast glass ceiling over the main staircase.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Each of the four properties is listed by Royal Decree: Hôtel Tassel, 1976; Hôtel Solvay, 1977; Hôtel van Eetvelde, 1971 and 1976; Maison & Atelier Horta, 1963. The garden and stable block of the Hôtel Solvay are listed by a Decree of the *Gouvernement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale* of 22 April 1999. The listing of the Hôtel Solvay includes the built-in furniture and fittings but not the loose furniture and works of art, which are original and exceptionally complete.

Since 1989, the responsibility for the conservation of historic buildings in Brussels has been with the *Ministère de la Région Bruxelles-Capitale*. In 1993 management and control of conservation was made the subject of an *ordonnance régionale* under which all work to a listed building has to be approved by a government order. In the case of the four houses such work is controlled by the architects of the *Service des Monuments et des Sites*, who

submit the proposal to the judgement of the *Commission Royale des Monuments et des Sites*.

The four houses proposed for inscription are all in historic quarters with considerable numbers of listed buildings and "protected zones." Buffer zones have been defined for each of the four houses. These need to be expanded, in the case of the Hôtel Tassel and the Maison & Atelier Horta, to include both sides of the streets they incorporate. There are also protection zones adjoining the buffer zones which further extend protection and, in the case of the Hôtel van Eetvelde, a listed site (*site classé*) consisting of a sequence of squares and avenues within which the house stands.

Management

The Hôtels Tassel, Solvay, and van Eetvelde are in private ownership but are readily accessible to the public. The management of these properties is in the hands of the owners, with regular monitoring by the *Service des Monuments et des Sites* of the region. There are no official management plans and work which does not qualify for subsidy is the responsibility of the owner, who often has recourse to benefactors.

The Hôtel Tassel, which is let as offices, can be visited occasionally as part of a city tour. The number of visitors per year does not exceed 100 at present. The Hôtel Solvay is preserved by its owners as a private museum, complete with a loyal staff and well trained guides. It can be visited on request; groups of a maximum of 20 are permitted. The number of visitors per year is estimated at 1000, excluding the crowds on Heritage Days (*Journées du patrimoine*) when the building is open to everyone and 5000 may come over two days. The Hôtel van Eetvelde (4 avenue Palmerston) is the head office of FIGAS (*Fédération de l'Industrie du Gaz*) and can be visited in groups of twenty on the two Heritage Day afternoons, when the number of visitors reaches 1500. It can also be visited on request by scholars and as part of city tours. The part of the Hôtel van Eetvelde at 2 avenue Palmerston is let to an embassy and is not accessible to visitors. The Maison & Atelier Horta are owned by the Commune de Saint-Gilles, constituting the Musée Horta, which is administered by the ASBL Musée Horta. The purpose of the museum is to preserve the buildings and to make Horta's work known. Because of its important archives and library specializing in Horta and *Art Nouveau*, it has become a research and documentation centre in these subjects. The number of visitors per year has reached 50,000 and the ever-growing demand is posing a serious threat to floor and wall coverings. The long-term plan is to extend the museum in a new building on the opposite side of the street, housing a tea room, temporary exhibitions, and the library. This would relieve pressure on the museum itself.

There are plans to restore the buildings to their original state, or to their state during a period deemed to be the most representative, as is the case with both the Hôtel van Eetvelde and the Maison & Atelier Horta. In the case of the Hôtel Solvay this plan has been realized, but in the other cases it remains incomplete. In the case of the Hôtel Tassel, the built-in furniture and the light fittings, which were substituted for the lost Horta designs, should be replaced with genuine Horta designs. Restoration work, like conservation work, is the responsibility of the owners, but is carried out under the control of the *Service des Monuments et des Sites*. Both the conservation and the

restoration work to the four houses have benefited from substantial state subsidies. The Commune de Saint-Gilles also provides an annual subsidy to cover the running costs of the Musée Horta.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

- Hôtel Tassel

The house was split up into small flats after World War II so that Horta's wonderful plan ceased to be "legible" and little of the decoration remained visible. In 1976 the architect Jean Delhayé bought the house, faithfully restoring the street facade and the main doors but also adapting the building to function as prestige offices, which involved raising the roof over the rear part to create a large office lit by dormer windows. On the upper floors Horta's lost built-in furniture and light fittings were replaced by Delhayé's own designs, but the painted decoration on the main staircase wall and the stained-glass windows of the smoking room were brilliantly recreated from original drawings and photographs. At the top of the staircase Delhayé was able to re-use the stained-glass panels that had been dismantled and stored when the building was divided into flats. The restoration was carried out between 1980 and 1985.

- Hôtel Solvay

This is Horta's most ambitious and spectacular work surviving from the *Art Nouveau* period, and the only one of his buildings to have been preserved virtually intact with the heating and ventilating installation, the lighting system, the sanitary installation, and the kitchen still in operation, and the complete interior decoration, fittings, and furniture all in place. The building's remarkable state of preservation is due, first, to Horta's brilliant design and, secondly, to a regime of regular maintenance and repair. It is true that the building suffered some changes when the new owners blocked the southern light-well in order to insert additional workshops for their fashion house, and cut two large shop windows in the front facade. However, since 1988, under the direction of the architect Jos Vandembreden, these changes have been undone and the damage repaired; the restoration work is of the highest order and includes the restitution of the original polychromy of the front facade based on meticulous research to establish the original colours and on the use of the original painting and varnishing techniques.

- Hôtel van Eetvelde

This building also had its light-well blocked above the glass dome to provide extra office space when the *Fédération de l'Industrie du Gaz*, (FIGAZ) bought 4 avenue Palmerston and made it their headquarters. The light-well structure was dismantled and stored, so that when FIGAZ were later persuaded to restore the building, they were able to remove the offending office floors and reinstate the light-well structure. Restoration, begun in 1988 with Jean Delhayé and Barbara Van der Wee as architects, has included the light-well, the facade, the front garden, the drawing room, and the drawing room extension. It will continue with the glass dome over the staircase and winter garden and with the restoration of the

roof. It is to be hoped that the owners can be persuaded in the long term to acquire 2 avenue Palmerston, so that the later addition by Horta of the large and imposing office with its connecting ante-chamber, which was cut off when the property was divided after Madame van Eetvelde's death, will once again become an integral part of the central staircase and winter garden.

- **Maison & Atelier Horta**

In 1961 Jean Delhay persuaded the local authority, the Commune de Saint-Gilles, to buy the house with a view to converting it into a museum. In 1967 he carried out a restoration, but also made a number of changes to enable the building to function as a museum, including a flat in the basement, a lift, and terraces on the garden side; the rear elevation was faced with "Eternit" panels. The museum, at first confined to the house, opened in 1969 but was able to expand when in 1973 the commune bought the atelier. Barbara Van der Wee, in charge of restoration since 1991, has carried out a full survey of the buildings and garden, determining the chronology of the construction and so identifying a period (1908–11) when the two buildings were at their best (before the unfortunate insertion of the garage). A major item of the current restoration has been the removal of the window and door which replaced the garage door on the street facade of the atelier and the reinstatement of the original window. Because the house and atelier are a museum, it has been necessary to provide the services usual in a public building. This work is being done with the utmost care and respect for the historic fabric of the building.

Authenticity

Despite the changes to the Hôtel Tassel, the authenticity of design, materials, and workmanship remains high, while the authenticity of the setting is unimpaired. The function has changed as it has in every case, either from house to office (Hôtels Tassel and van Eetvelde) or from house to museum (Hôtel Solvay and Maison & Atelier Horta). At the Hôtel Solvay the authenticity in design, materials, and workmanship is exceptionally high. It is only the authenticity of the setting that is in any doubt, inevitably because of the change in the avenue Louise from an elegant residential boulevard to an urban motorway, and because of the consequent pressure from developers to build large office blocks. The authenticity remains high also at the Hôtel van Eetvelde and the Maison & Atelier Horta. The authenticity of the setting of the Hôtel van Eetvelde remains exceptionally high as a result of the better protection afforded to its surroundings.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the four town houses of Victor Horta in Brussels in January 2000.

Qualities

The four town houses of Victor Horta in Brussels proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List are all outstanding examples of *Art Nouveau*, achieving an overwhelming sense of unity through total design, from the merest door knob or bell-push to the complete furnishings and furniture in every room. Besides the familiar

decoration, *Art Nouveau* in architecture, of which Horta was the originator and leading exponent, foreshadows the Modern Movement with its revolutionary planning (the free and open plan and the introduction of light into the building with the central part given over to the staircase and winter garden top-lit by a glass roof), the clear expression of the plan on the facade, the development of a skeletal design language making consistent use of the new materials, steel and glass, and the introduction of advanced technical services.

Comparative analysis

Art Nouveau in architecture, a brilliant but short-lived manifestation, is so far scarcely represented on the World Heritage List. If one includes its equivalents in other countries - Arts and Crafts, Secession, Jugendstil, Stile Liberty, Modernisme - there are only two inscriptions, both in Barcelona: Lluís Domènech's Palau de la Música Catalana and Hospital de Sant Pau, and Antoni Gaudí's Parque Güell and Casa Milà. Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland, C F A Voysey in England, Berlage in the Netherlands, Guimard in France, Wagner, Hoffman, and Olbrich in Austria, D'Aronco and Sommaruga in Italy, and Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright in the United States, to name but the most famous, are not yet represented. Putting together a number of buildings by one architect seems an acceptable procedure (there is a good precedent with Andrea Palladio in the inscription of the City of Vicenza and the Palladian Villas of the Veneto), provided that there is consistency and logic in the selection and provided the buildings represent "outstanding universal value."

Art Nouveau has been the subject of an International Joint Study organized by UNESCO. In the report of its final plenary meeting, held in Turin (Italy) in October 1994, the international expert group included the buildings of Horta in Brussels in a short list of nine that it commended as being worthy of consideration for inclusion on the World Heritage List.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

It is recommended that:

- the buffer zones for the Hôtel Tassel and the Maison & Atelier Horta be enlarged as indicated and for the reasons given in the evaluation reports;
- the State Party be asked what measures it proposes to take to prevent the removal of loose furniture and works of art (*patrimoine mobilier*), since these are not protected under the current listing regulations;
- the State Party be asked to suggest ways in which the important long-term measure of covering the underpass in the avenue Louise opposite the Hôtel Solvay to protect the facade from excessive pollution might be undertaken;
- management plans be provided for each of the four properties.

Brief description

The four major town houses, Hôtel Tassel, Hôtel Solvay, Hôtel van Eetvelde, and Maison & Atelier Horta, located in Brussels and designed by the architect Victor Horta, one of

the initiators of *Art Nouveau*, are some of the most remarkable pioneering works of architecture at the end of the 19th century. The stylistic revolution represented by these works is characterized by the open plan, the diffusion of light, and the brilliant joining of the curved lines of decoration with the structure of the building.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, and iv*:

Criterion i The Town Houses of Victor Horta in Brussels are works of human creative genius, representing the highest expression of the influential *Art Nouveau* style in art and architecture.

Criterion ii The appearance of *Art Nouveau* in the closing years of the 19th century marked a decisive stage in the evolution of architecture, making possible subsequent developments, and the Town Houses of Victor Horta in Brussels bear exceptional witness to its radical new approach.

Criterion iv The Town Houses of Victor Horta are outstanding examples of *Art Nouveau* architecture brilliantly illustrating the transition from the 19th to the 20th century in art, thought, and society.

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