

## Chapter 25

# An 'architecture of bureaucracy'

## Technocratic planning of government architecture in Belgium in the 1930s

*Jens van de Maele*

### Introduction

In 1936, the Belgian government charged the modernist architect Victor Bourgeois with the design of a new administrative building in the centre of Brussels. The building had to accommodate some departments of the so-called *Compte-Chèques Postaux* (CCP), the rapidly expanding national giro cheque administration. In the years following its establishment in 1913, the CCP had become a key player in the Belgian financial system by providing its customers with a free bank account and swift remittances. During the 1920s the CCP was seen as one of the best performing – or, to use a buzzword of the epoch, one of the most 'efficient' – enterprises of its kind. The internal functioning of the Dutch giro cheque administration, for instance, was modelled after its Belgian counterpart for some years.<sup>1</sup> Later on, the CCP actively promoted the self-image of a perfectly organised corporation at the sixth conference (Warsaw, 1936) of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences, a non-profit organisation that was devoted to the worldwide dissemination of knowledge on administrative management.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the quick growth of the Belgian CCP came at a cost. Already by the late 1920s, the headquarters of the corporation – which were located in a Beaux-Arts office building constructed between 1897 and 1905, close to the nation's Parliament – had become overcrowded, leaving its employees in unpleasant working conditions (Figure 25.1).<sup>3</sup> Hence, the decision to construct a large annex at the opposite side of the existing main office was essential for safeguarding the reputation of the CCP as a 'model' administration.

Jens van de Maele



**Figure 25.1**  
Clerks in the old CCP  
office building (c.1936).  
Archives of the Flemish  
Parliament, Brussels

Victor Bourgeois (1897–1962) was one of Belgium’s most eminent modernist architects.<sup>4</sup> In the early 1920s he had designed a couple of state-sponsored social housing projects, including the *Cité Moderne* garden suburb in Brussels, which was quickly taken up by foreign architectural periodicals such as *Bauwelt* and *Das Werk*. From the mid-1920s onwards, Bourgeois had been one of the driving forces behind the Brussels-based *La Cambre* school, which offered an architectural education based on the premises of the international avant-garde. Bourgeois also took a central role within the *Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne* (CIAM), by co-presiding the first congress in La Sarraz and by organising CIAM III in Brussels (1930).<sup>5</sup> Yet, the CCP project was Bourgeois’s first large-scale government commission. By choosing Bourgeois for this economically crucial project, the Belgian government endorsed the ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ planning methods of the Modern Movement.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the internationally renowned socialist theoretician Henri de Man (1885–1953), who served as Public Works Minister (1935–1936) and Finance Minister (1936–1938), provided the decisive backing for the modernist cause. Being a strong proponent of a state-led economy, De Man highly valued technocratic knowledge. In his view, apolitical experts had the task of conducting studies on societal problems, and it was up to politicians to faithfully implement their conclusions.<sup>7</sup> Such a political constellation had always been favoured by prominent modernists like Le Corbusier, who had stated (in a 1933 letter to Siegfried Giedion) that the technical aspect of an architect’s job could be equated with the task of ‘preparing a plan’ – while it was up to those who held political power to enable the ‘execution of the plan’.<sup>8</sup> And indeed, as architectural historian Iwan Strauven has shown, Bourgeois – who had little experience with the construction of offices or semi-industrial premises – quickly started planning his task by compiling information on giro

cheque administrations in different countries. In March 1936, for example, he wrote a letter to the aforementioned Siegfried Giedion, asking if he could send him information on any recent modernisations of the Swiss postal order system. 'I am studying the issue of giro cheque administration buildings, and I intend to visit all interesting realisations in this domain', Bourgeois announced to his Swiss CIAM colleague.<sup>9</sup>

However, it would turn out that modernists like Bourgeois were not the only ones who claimed to possess knowledge on 'rational' planning methods. From an early stage, the CCP construction project caught the special attention of Louis Camu (1905–1976), a high-ranked civil servant who had been appointed by the Belgian government as 'Royal Commissioner for Administrative Reform' in 1936 – just some months after Bourgeois had been asked to design the CCP building.<sup>10</sup> Like Henri de Man, Camu believed that technocratic expertise had to inform all political and administrative decisions. Up until the outbreak of the Second World War, he would analyse every aspect of the Belgian public service, including the administrations of ministries and state-owned corporations such as the CCP. Camu alleged in numerous official reports that the state administrations could be made more powerful and cost-efficient by implementing 'modern' principles of administrative management, which all revolved strongly around the notion of planning. In the wake of the heralds of Scientific Management (such as the American Frederick Winslow Taylor and his French counterpart Henri Fayol), Camu considered it essential that administrations improved the quality of their output, and got more work done – in a shorter time, with fewer employees. Although his task was, at first, largely consultative, he rose to being one of the most influential actors in Belgian politics by the end of the decade. From 1938 onwards Camu became responsible for the implementation of his reform proposals in the public administrations. This way, his power virtually surpassed that of a minister. Nevertheless, he always kept up the image of a politically neutral 'technocrat', merely concerned with strengthening the power and 'efficiency' of the democratic state.<sup>11</sup> As will become clear, it was almost inevitable that Camu's mission would come to clash with the planning task of Bourgeois and the CCP administration.

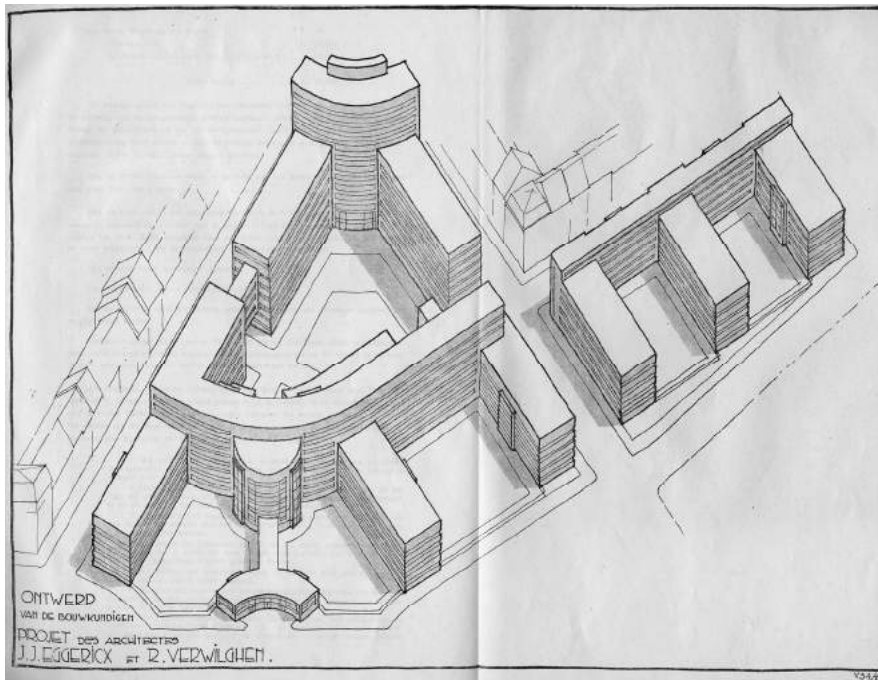
### Conceiving an efficient government administration

One of the key elements in Camu's programme of administrative reform was the assertion that new office buildings had to be constructed for most of the state-led administrations. The Royal Commissioner considered the existing ministerial offices – which were often located in residential buildings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – maladjusted to modern administrative work.<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of 1937 he requested Jean-Jules Eggericx and Raphaël Verwilghen, two modernist architects (and, as teachers at the La Cambre school, colleagues of Bourgeois), to draw up a plan for a representative, ultramodern office complex, which had to accommodate a large number of ministerial administrations. This so-called *cité administrative* had to provide about 60,000 square metres of office space, on an easily accessible location near the Parliament – and thus, coincidentally, near the existing CCP headquarters. Yet, Camu did not merely want to

Jens van de Maele

move administrations from old buildings to a new one. In a special report (1937) on the construction policies of the Belgian state, Camu explained that the removal had to go hand-in-hand with a thorough reorganisation of the departments, aimed at adopting 'rational working methods'.<sup>13</sup> This meant: raising the standards for recruitment and advancement, simplifying the organisation charts, rethinking unproductive routines, making more use of modern office equipment, and improving the workflows. In the same vein, Eggericx and Verwilghen believed that their *cité administrative* had to enable a rigorous work ethic, since the complex was to become 'as efficient as a factory' (Figure 25.2).<sup>14</sup>

Much in the same way as the British architect Leslie Martin conceived a (never-built) governmental office complex for London's Whitehall district during the 1960s,<sup>15</sup> Camu and his team of architects approached the task of designing the (equally never-built) *cité administrative* with an academic state of mind. Like Martin's 1965 report on Whitehall, Camu's second report on the government buildings – which dated from 1940 – resembled a 'scientific research paper', which meticulously attempted to determine the objective needs of the ministerial administrations (Figure 25.3).<sup>16</sup> Camu's report contained detailed studies on topics such as office depths and surfaces, climatisation systems, furniture, and (day)lighting. These studies led to one major conclusion: the majority of the civil servants had to be grouped together in generic 'open offices', ranging in capacity from four to sixteen employees. The internal layout was to be based on a *plan libre*, allowing the placement of flexible, glazed partition walls. Modifying these partitions, which would make the office complex future proof, could theoretically absorb any change in the administrative structure. In this way, Camu sought to override

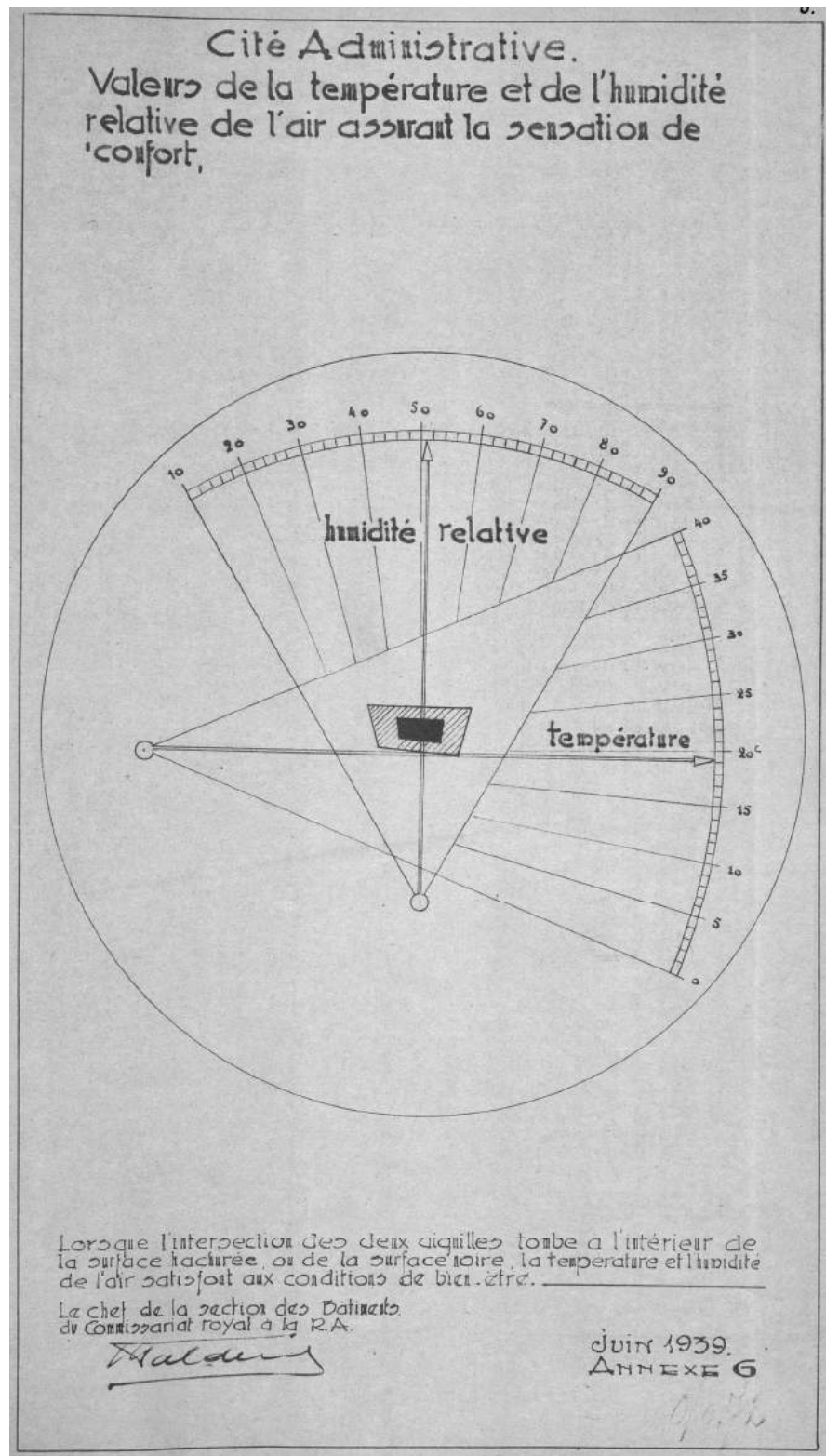


**Figure 25.2**  
Sketch for a *cité administrative* in Brussels (J.-J. Eggericx and R. Verwilghen, 1937) from the 1937 Camu report



**Figure 25.3**  
Diagram from the 1940 Camu report, showing the 'ideal' temperature and humidity levels in an office. University Archives, Leuven

Downloaded by [The University of British Columbia Library] at 09:55 01 October 2016



**Jens van de Maele**

the 'subjective' demands of the civil servants themselves, who generally favoured private office spaces. Administrative experts almost unanimously condemned such private offices, since they were considered obstacles for an efficient workflow and supervision. This stance was probably best summarised by William Henry Leffingwell, one of the American pioneers of modern office management, who already stated in 1925: 'Granting privacy to individuals who do not need it is not only a wasteful practice in office arrangement, but actually lowers the general effectiveness of such individuals.'<sup>17</sup>

Although the Belgian Royal Commissioner eagerly followed the recommendations of his advisory architects Eggericx and Verwilghen, he also took a somewhat sceptical attitude towards architects as a professional group. In his 1937 report, he listed some recent examples of 'faulty' office architecture. In a brand new administrative building of the Ministry of Education, for instance, no 'open offices' had been foreseen, while an internal renovation of the Ministry of Justice headquarters had resulted in the installation of partition walls with opaque (instead of transparent) windows.<sup>18</sup> For these *faux pas*, Camu shifted the responsibility on to the office managers of the ministries involved, who had seemingly given the wrong instructions to their architects. Yet, his criticisms also implied that most architects were incapable of designing 'modern' and 'rational' offices as long as they did not cooperate with administrative experts like him. For Camu, designing buildings was to become, above all, a matter of teamwork – and this was a position most members of the architectural avant-garde would gladly have agreed with. Yet, in Camu's view, the role of the architect was not *superior* to those of other experts. The input of 'administrative scientists' was equally essential, since both types of expertise complemented each other. Again, W.H. Leffingwell had expressed a similar view in his 1925 manual on office management:

Mistakes in the actual design of a building . . . are almost always entirely avoidable by the owner, if he will but devote a sufficient amount of thought to the problem and insist that his requirements shall be met in the designing of the building . . . It has long been evident that many architects either cannot or will not design a factory building that is efficient, and modern factory buildings are now constructed by architects and engineers working in conjunction . . . In like manner, it is now being gradually recognized that the proper construction of an office building also requires technical knowledge of office procedure and office needs, and architects are either bringing in technical office experts to cooperate with them, or having them thrust upon them by wise executives . . .<sup>19</sup>

In late 1930s Belgium, Camu did not want to rely on contingencies such as the 'wisdom' of executives or the personal initiative of private architects. Instead, he sought to establish a permanent body within the Public Works Department, which would have the sole responsibility for the construction, renovation, and acquisition of all governmental office buildings. This proposed body had to employ a number of specialised architects, as well as 'an expert on administrative organisation, who would be bestowed with authority by the Prime Minister'. Interestingly, this authoritative figure was to

impose his managerial views on both the ministerial departments *and* the architects. Lastly, the aesthetic component of future architectural projects would have to be taken under scrutiny by the 'artistic counsellor' of the Public Works Department (who was, at that time, no one less than Henry van de Velde).<sup>20</sup> Within this framework, private architects could still be given specific commissions – but it is clear that the authorship would have to be shared by several contributors. Some ten years before the American architectural critic Henry-Russell Hitchcock made his famous defence for an 'architecture of bureaucracy', Camu thus propagated the establishment of a 'bureaucratic' model for designing buildings, which did not favour any architect's personal expression, but rather the collaborative effort of different experts. While Hitchcock would (no doubt rightfully) claim in his 1947 essay that the Public Works Ministries in most countries were too 'feebly organised' to produce an 'architecture of bureaucracy' (unlike large private corporations, such as Albert Kahn's firm), Camu's pleas for a governmental architecture agency could be seen as an early attempt to overcome this 'feebleness'.<sup>21</sup>

### Louis Camu and the CCP project

In December 1937, the CCP administration appointed a contractor for the construction of the annex building designed by Bourgeois. Yet, in February 1938, when the preparation of the building site was already far advanced, Public Works Minister Joseph Merlot urged to halt the construction process immediately. Merlot – whom Camu had probably alarmed – feared that the new CCP building would compromise the planned construction of the *cit  administrative*, which was to be located in the same area.<sup>22</sup> As Desir  Bouchery, the Minister of Communications (and responsible for the CCP), was strongly opposed to this sudden intervention,<sup>23</sup> Camu organised a meeting with all parties involved in order to reconcile their differences. At this meeting Camu insisted that all CCP services would have to be located in a single 'ultra-modern building', instead of two separate ones. Furthermore, he requested that Bourgeois would cooperate with the architects Eggericx and Verwilghen, to make sure that the new CCP complex would harmonise well with the future *cit  administrative*.<sup>24</sup> Although his power was – at that time – theoretically limited, Camu was able to exert a large degree of (informal) influence, and he managed to impose his proposals on the CCP administration. Already one month later, in March 1938, Bourgeois – who had been assisted by Eggericx and Verwilghen – presented a new master plan for a single CCP headquarters building, which was thereupon approved by Camu, Merlot, and Bouchery.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the fruitful outcome of this meeting, it seems that Camu had developed a certain distrust towards Bourgeois. In July 1938, the Royal Commissioner proposed – in a letter to the Ministry of Communications – that the architect be removed from the job, in favour of Eggericx and Verwilghen.<sup>26</sup> This proposal could, of course, be regarded as a strategy to benefit Camu's own *prot g s*, but it seems that Camu was also genuinely concerned that Bourgeois and the CCP administration were unable to design a sufficiently 'rational' office building. In the end, Camu agreed that Bourgeois would stay on the job, although it was decided that all construction drawings

Jens van de Maele

had to be reviewed by a specific committee prior to their execution. This committee – which was to be monitored closely by a delegate of Camu – had to make sure that the ‘principles for the internal organisation and the functionality of the workspaces’ would be identical to those applied in the future *cit  administrative*.<sup>27</sup> As such, Camu found himself again in pole position to influence the CCP project. Over the course of the following months, the committee – which, apart from Camu’s assistant Marcel Malderez, also included Bourgeois, Eggericx, Verwilghen, and Henry van de Velde – assembled regularly, discussing themes such as the type of stone used for the faade cladding, the position of the building, and the location of stairs, elevators, and toilets.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, substantial aspects of Bourgeois’s original plans were turned into a kind of flexible matrix, which could be modified at the discretion of the committee’s members. In this new constellation, Bourgeois *de facto* became one of the ‘counselling architects’ (*architectes-conseils*) of the CCP project, next to Eggericx and Verwilghen.<sup>29</sup> The architectural ‘team’ – so cherished by administrative experts like Leffingwell and Camu – had become tangible.

Yet, even after the establishment of the aforementioned committee, Camu remained displeased by the fact that the CCP did not draw up any detailed plans on the internal circulation of goods and employees – which made it impossible to adequately judge if the workflows in the future building would be up to the standards of modern administrative science. In June 1939, the Royal Commissioner wrote rather vindictively – and not without pretension – in an official report:

The methods used to elaborate the building’s plan, its technical infrastructure and cost estimation are deplorable. The foundations have been realised, but at the same time no plans have been made regarding the interior, lighting, power supply, transportation, workflows, and furniture. There is no general plan concerning the internal disposition and the organisation of the services that should be provided in the building.<sup>30</sup>

These imputations were countered by Hendrik Marcq, the new Public Works Minister, who stressed that the CCP building would be built according to the principle of the *plan lib r *: a generic floor plan, which – according to Marcq – neutralised the need for detailed preparatory studies on the internal dispositions.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, Camu, who was a strong propagator of the *plan lib r * in the context of his *cit  administrative* project, now saw the arguments for this concept turn against him. The Royal Commissioner had always considered the open floor plan as an indispensable means for managerial flexibility, allowing easy and ‘rational’ rearrangements in office space. Marcq, however, pushed this notion to the extreme. As most parts of the CCP building were basically an assembly of stacked, empty floors, why would it not be possible to start building *before* determining the particulars of the internal arrangement? Here it becomes clear that the concepts of ‘flexibility’ and ‘rationality’ could be construed very differently among administrators. Notwithstanding Camu’s recurrent criticisms, the CCP administration pursued the construction of the new headquarters building in 1939, and by the end of 1940 it had completed the basic structure. Because of the Second World War, further

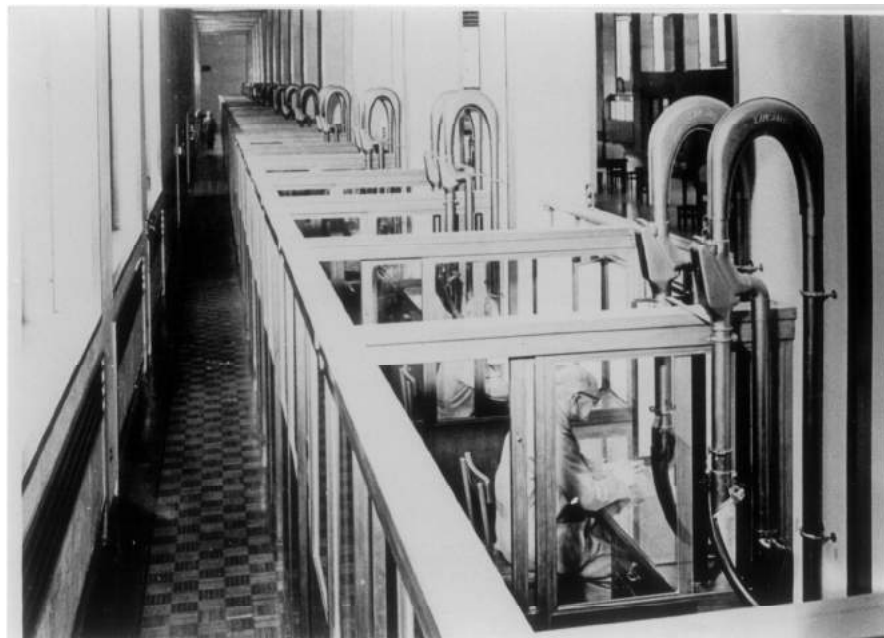


construction works could only be undertaken after 1945 – without any further interference of Camu, who had left the civil service during the war. The building was finally inaugurated in 1949, and would effectively serve as the CCP headquarters until the mid-1990s (Figure 25.4).<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 25.4**  
The building upon completion (c.1950), as shown in *La technique des travaux* (May/June 1950)



**Figure 25.5**  
The rear side of the counters in the new CCP building, equipped with pneumatic dispatch (c.1950–1960). Archives of the Flemish Parliament, Brussels



## Conclusion

In 1950, the French architecture magazine *La technique des travaux* described the new CCP building in great detail. The editor concluded that the edifice met all architectural and functional standards with great effectiveness, as it was provided with a centrally located 'internal tower', which grouped together most of the building's technical equipment – including goods lifts, a paternoster lift, and a pneumatic dispatch, which assured the connection between the public counters and the processing departments (Figure 25.5).<sup>33</sup> These were all techniques that had been propagated throughout the interwar era by the International Institute of Administrative Sciences, which was actively supported by Louis Camu. Yet, it is unclear to what extent the Royal Commissioner's interferences in the design process of the CCP building have effectively contributed to the exemplary final result. His often biting and impatient interferences, which were indeed aimed at the creation of an 'architecture of bureaucracy' for governmental bureaucracies, do reveal clearly that the aura of the architect as a general expert had become undermined in 1930s Belgium. While so-called 'rational' planning methods and principles of Scientific Management were advocated by many 'administrative scientists', architects, and politicians alike, the notions of these concepts could encompass – together with points of view held in common – crucial aspects revealing individual interpretations.

As Mauro F. Guillén has shown in his historical study on the relationships between modernist architecture and the ideology of Scientific Management during the first half of the twentieth century, modernists believed in 'a vertically stratified organisation of work and decision-making based on the principle of specialisation'.<sup>34</sup> Yet, architects were not the only ones who aspired to take the lead in this nexus of specialisations. The challenges created by a highly technological and administratively complex architectural programme clearly required a multidisciplinary approach, but it was still undecided how authority had to be shared among the different experts. Postulating the need for 'rational' planning methods did not necessarily lead to a consensus – let alone to smooth professional or personal relations between the experts involved. Architecture remained the work of man, after all.

## Notes

- 1 Cita Hartvelt, *Moderne zakelijkheid: Efficiency in wonen en werken in Nederland, 1918–1940* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), pp. 99–117. All translations by the author throughout.
- 2 'L'organisation du travail à l'Office Belge des Chèques et Virements Postaux', in *Compte rendu du VI-ème Congrès International des Sciences Administratives* (Warsaw: International Institute of Administrative Sciences, 1936), pp. 513–528.
- 3 Brussels, National Archives of Belgium (NAB), Records of the Office National pour l'achèvement de la Jonction Nord-Midi, Box 37, Inv. no. 20/34: Report by Castiau for the Minister of Communications (18 September 1929); NAB, Records of the Commissariat Royal à la Réforme Administrative (CRRA), Inv. no. 25: Report by Houtman (15 July 1939).
- 4 For a concise overview on Bourgeois' life and work, see Iwan Strauven, *Les frères Bourgeois: Architecture et plastique pure* (Brussels: Archives d'Architecture Moderne, 2005).
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 28–33.
- 6 On the notion of modernist architects and urban planners as technocratic, 'objective' and 'scientific' experts, see Mauro F. Guillén, *The Taylorized Beauty of the Mechanical: Scientific Management and the Rise of Modernist Architecture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

## Technocratic planning of government architecture in Belgium

- 7 Hendrik de Man, 'De uitvoering van het Plan van de Arbeid', in *Hendrik de Man: Persoon en ideeën (IV: Planisme)*, ed. by Piet Frantzen (Antwerp and Amsterdam: Standaard Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1975), pp. 98–99.
- 8 Cited by Jacques Aron, *La Cambre et l'architecture: Un regard sur le Bauhaus belge* (Brussels: Mardaga, 1982), p. 75.
- 9 Cited by Iwan Strauven, 'Victor Bourgeois (1897–1962): Radicaliteit en pragmatisme, moderniteit en traditie (part 2)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Ghent University, 2015), p. 211.
- 10 On Camu, see Bénédicte Rochet, 'L'impact de la seconde guerre mondiale sur les pratiques administratives', *Pyramides*, 10 (2005), 167–188.
- 11 See, for instance, Louis Camu, 'La Belgique de demain: La réforme administrative, un des grands problèmes du moment', *Revue Internationale des Sciences Administratives*, 11 (1938), 5–30.
- 12 Louis Camu, *Rapport sur les bâtiments des administrations centrales de l'État* (Brussels: n. pub., 1937).
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 14 Brussels, Archives d'Architecture Moderne (AAM), Records of Jean-Jules Eggericx, Inv. no. 296: *Rapport concernant la construction eventuelle d'immeubles de bureaux pour les administrations de l'État* (internal report by Eggericx and Verwilghen, April 1937).
- 15 Adam Sharr and Stephen Thornton, *Demolishing Whitehall: Leslie Martin, Harold Wilson and the Architecture of White Heat* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).
- 16 AAM, Eggericx Records, Inv. no. 296: *Mémoire sur les bâtiments administratifs* (unpublished official report by Camu and Malderez, January 1940); Sharr and Thornton, *Demolishing Whitehall*, p. 63.
- 17 William Henry Leffingwell, *Office Management: Principles and Practice* (Chicago, New York, and London: A.W. Show, 1925), p. 293.
- 18 Camu, *Rapport sur les bâtiments*, p. 18.
- 19 Leffingwell, *Office Management*, pp. 281–282.
- 20 Camu, *Rapport sur les bâtiments*, pp. 22–23 and 45–49.
- 21 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, 'The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius', *Architectural Review*, 101 (1947), 3–6.
- 22 NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Letter by Merlot to Bouchery (9 February 1938).
- 23 NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Letter by Bouchery to Janson (9 February 1938).
- 24 NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Meeting minutes (17 February 1938).
- 25 NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Meeting minutes (5 March 1938), and report by Camu (23 May 1939).
- 26 NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Letter by Camu to Rigaux (25 July 1938).
- 27 NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Letter by Camu to Rigaux (28 July 1938), and memorandum by Camu (28 July 1938).
- 28 See for instance NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Letters by Camu to Marcq (29 July 1938; 26 September 1938), letter by Marcq to Camu (5 August 1938), meeting minutes (11 October 1938), and letter by Camu to Meunier (22 October 1938).
- 29 NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Letter by Bourgeois to Malderez (27 March 1939), and letter by the CCP administration to Malderez (28 March 1939).
- 30 Louis Camu, *Commissariat Royal à la Réforme Administrative: Rapport annuel, 1er juin 1938 – 1er juin 1939* (n.p.: n. pub., 1939), p. 26. Camu made similar remarks in letters to the Minister of Public Works: NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Letters by Camu to Marcq (23 February 1939 and 7 April 1939).
- 31 NAB, CRRA Records, Inv. no. 25: Letter by Marcq to Camu (12 April 1939).
- 32 For an architectural analysis of the finished building, see Iwan Strauven, 'The National Giro Bank Building of Victor Bourgeois' (unpublished paper, 2003), <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/lu-322638> (accessed 24 March 2015).
- 33 L. Novgorodsky, 'Le nouvel immeuble des Chèques Postaux à Bruxelles', *La technique des travaux*, 26 (1950), 130–146.
- 34 Guillén, *The Taylorized Beauty of the Mechanical*, p. 19.