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The Twentieth-Century Ministerial Office Building as a Laboratory of Government

Within the historiographical field of "political architecture", ministerial office buildings have always been a somewhat marginal subject, undeservedly deemed of secondary importance in relation to more "representative" types of political buildings. Dwelling on the insights of the nineteenth-century essayist Bagehot and the office historians Duffy and Gardey, my contribution postulates that from the early twentieth century onward, ministerial office architecture has become an essential functional component of any political configuration, as well as a phenomenon defined by a complex interrelationship between physical realities and managerial norms. Even though various historiographical contributions from the last two decades have successfully scrutinised the reciprocal conceptual relations between politics and architecture in relation to ministerial offices, the huge influence of internationally circulating managerial norms such as Taylorism has strangely remained under the radar. Using the example of Belgium during the interwar period, I seek to demonstrate how such norms were strongly mobilised when new ministerial office buildings were planned, and how their propagators even considered "modern" and "efficient" office architecture to be an agent of broad social reform. With this case study, I would like to call attention to the need for a transnational comparative perspective covering the intermingled domains of politics, architecture, and management.

1. Introduction[1]

In 2017, an unlikely book hit the non-fiction charts: *The House of Government. A Saga of the Russian Revolution* by the American-Russian Berkeley professor of history Yuri Slezkine.[2] Meanwhile translated into six languages, Slezkine's highly acclaimed and incredibly circumstantial 1100-page tome contains numerous story lines, including a sparkling interpretation of Soviet communism

1 The author expresses his gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their comments as well as to Johan Lagae, Marnix Beyen, and Rika Devos for their feedback during the research phase.

2 Yuri Slezkine, The House of Government. A Saga of the Russian Revolution, Princeton/ Oxford 2017.

as a "millenarian cult". The key narrative, however, deals with the planning, construction, and usage of the governmental edifice after which the book is named. A large and luxurious apartment complex built around 1930 near the Kremlin, the "House of Government" offered accommodation and leisure opportunities (movie theatre, tennis court, restaurant, et cetera) for hundreds of *nomenklatura* members and their families. In the best tradition of Karl Schlögel, Slezkine's work thus calls attention to the formal and informal "topographies of power" in the Soviet capital.[3] Our understanding of the everyday exertion of political power – and this is true for any country or capital – can indeed benefit tremendously if we are given an insight in the *loci* where government officials live and work. These physical spaces, which can be defined from the macro to the micro level (that is from the urban quarter to the individual room), are effectively one of the factors that shape the field of politics – and vice versa. By focussing on the living spaces of politicians and top-ranking civil servants, Slezkine has been able to explore numerous intimate life stories, many of which ended dramatically in Stalin's Great Purge. Undoubtedly, these often emotionally charged personal narratives have contributed to the appeal of *The House of Government* among a non-academic readership. There is no reason to assume, however, that an inquiry into the work spaces of government officials (as opposed to living spaces) would be any less elucidating for those sharing an interest in the history of politics, architecture, or urbanity – not to mention those favouring a hybrid approach combining thematic and methodological elements from all these fields.

Office buildings for the state's executive power accommodate ministers, cabinet members, civil servants, and lower-ranking clerks, and can be considered a subtype of "political architecture". In the last two decades, historical research on this subtype has gone through a slow but marked development. Within the broader field of political history, government office buildings have always been a rather subordinate theme. In this respect, the international historiography appears to have been marked by what can be called the "Bagehotian dichotomy". In his classic essay *The English Constitution* (1867), the Victorian journalist Walter Bagehot evoked a physical and symbolical cleavage between two components of British government: the ostentatiously "representative" elements or "dignified parts" (such as the monarchy and the aristocratic House of Lords) and the more profane "efficient parts" (such as the ministerial cabinets and the civil service). Crucially, Bagehot considered both components as complementary and, from a functional point of view, as equally important: neither could do without the other, and together, they made sure that

3 Karl Schlögel, Terror und Traum. Moskau 1937, München 2008.

the British governmental framework (or "machine", as he called it) operated smoothly and legitimately.[4] Yet, many contributions to the history of political architecture have tended to focus solely on buildings that are associated with the "dignified" realm of government, and which thus have a clear-cut symbolical, representative, and/or ceremonial function. This approach has resulted in a predilection for (1) grandiose capital planning projects (for example Albert Speer's plans for Berlin, the construction of Brasília in the 1950s and 1960s), and (2) building typologies that are considered constitutive for (sub)national spheres of social coherence (for example presidential palaces, parliamentary assemblies). Despite the seemingly extensive ambitions often encapsulated within their titles, these studies essentially ignore government offices or mention the "efficient parts" solely as a peripheral phenomenon, subordinate (rather than complementary) to the "dignified" types of political architecture.[5]

From a methodological point of view, the added merit of investigating architecture linked to the "efficient realm" – *in casu* government office buildings – has been highlighted in a short 2004 article by the British architect and publicist Francis Duffy, who has long affirmed himself a propagator of interdisciplinary architectural history research. Some decades after writing his pioneering 1980 essay on *Office Buildings and Organisational Change*, which is still unrivalled as a general introduction to the global history of office architecture, Duffy argued that "the government's programme and its stock of office space are inextricably woven together; [change] one and the other must follow".[6] When taken literally, Duffy's maxim might come across as an example of tautological determinism. When interpreted metaphorically, however, it can serve as a valuable conceptual tool: by evoking the image of a mirror, Duffy reminds us that the field of architecture can reflect (or reveal) something about the

4 Walter Bagehot, The English Constitution, London 1867.

5 Some examples: Charles T. Goodsell, The Social Meaning of Civic Space. Studying Political Authority through Architecture, Lawrence 1988; Ingeborg Flagge/Wolfgang Jean Stock (eds.), Architektur und Demokratie. Bauen für die Politik von der amerikanischen Revolution bis zur Gegenwart, Stuttgart 1992; Lawrence J. Vale, Architecture, Power, and National Identity, London 1992; Kim Dovey, Framing Places. Mediating Power in Built Form, London/New York 2001; Wolfgang Sonne, Representing the State. Capital City Planning in the Early Twentieth Century, München 2003; Hans Vorländer (ed.), Zur Ästhetik der Demokratie. Formen der politischen Selbstdarstellung, Stuttgart 2003; Michael Minkenberg (ed.), Power and Architecture. The Construction of Capitals and the Politics of Space, New York/Oxford 2014.

6 Francis Duffy, Postscript, in: Tim Allen et al., Working without Walls. An Insight into the Transforming Government Workplace, London 2004, p. 78-79, quote p. 78. See also Francis Duffy, Office Buildings and Organisational Change, in: Anthony D. King (ed.), Buildings and Society. Essays on the Social Development of the Built Environment, London 1980, p. 254-280.

field of politics, and vice versa. In my opinion, this latter addition – the notion of a reciprocal relation – is essential for understanding government office buildings: neither politics nor architecture, Duffy signals, are autonomous realms. In a 2008 publication on the history of the former *Reichsluftfahrtministerium* building (a massive Berlin office complex from the mid-1930s which has successively accommodated ministerial administrations of the Nazi regime, the German Democratic Republic, and the present-day Federal Republic), the editors Dörte Hansen and Maika Jachmann have explicitly made mention of a mirror effect: "*Das Detlev-Rohwedder-Haus* [the present-day name of the complex] *... spiegelt die Brüche der jüngeren deutschen Geschichte wider wie kaum ein anderes Gebäude*".[7] In Hansen's and Jachmann's interpretation, however, the reciprocal factor is not thematised. A similar approach has marked the work of the architectural historian Janet Wright, whose (otherwise perfectly commendable) 1997 study on the history of Canadian government architecture described state-built edifices as "the by-products of the changing politics, priorities, and policies of the government".[8] As I have suggested above, one should be attentive to the fact that ministerial office buildings can also influence or shape the field of government, rather than being mere "by-products" or "mirrors" of politics.

An example of such influencing or shaping can be found in a recent book by the British historian Clare Copley on the post-1989 reuse and reappropriation of various state-built edifices of the Nazi era. Copley remarked that during the 1930s, the *Reichsluftfahrtministerium* building was the locus of several crucial discussions and decisions concerning the practical organisation of the Holocaust.[9] Even though there is evidently a factor of contingency involved here (those decisions could have been made in other meeting rooms, in other buildings), one is nevertheless left to wonder if there is really no link whatsoever between (1) the bureaucratic rationality of the *Reichsluftfahrtministerium*'s architecture, which was defined by a staggering number of two thousand office rooms and an interior disposition that adhered to the latest Taylorism-inspired standards of managerial efficiency[10], and (2) the bureaucratic rationality that guided the planning of the genocide of the European Jews. Once again, this hy-

7 Dörte Jansen/Maika Jachmann (eds.), Das Detlev-Rohwedder-Haus. Spiegel der deutschen Geschichte, Berlin 2015, p. 3. Another text describing this building as a mirror of history is Manfred Görtemaker, Orte der Demokratie. Ein historisch-politischer Wegweiser durch Berlin, Berlin 2005, p. 221. On these references, see also Clare Copley, Nazi Buildings, Cold War Traces and Governmentality in Post-Unification Berlin, London/New York 2020, p. 2 and p. 46.

8 Janet Wright, Crown Assets. The Architecture of the Department of Public Works, 1867-1967, Toronto 1997, p. 3.

9 Copley, p. 41-43.

pothesis does not imply a naïve and simplistic belief in architectural determinism (which is the idea that human actors cannot escape the "agency" of the architecture they occupy). Instead, it seeks to question, problematise, and historicise reciprocal relationships between a government and a government building. Undoubtedly, Hitler's war efforts could never have reached such heights without an enormous and efficient office complex such as the *Reichsluftfahrtministerium*, where an equally immense "bureaucratic army" meticulously planned invasions and devastations from behind typewriters, telephones, telegraph machines, filing cabinets, and calculating devices. In this sense, the French office expert Maurice Ponthière was nothing less than prophetic when he noted in his 1935 office planning handbook *Le bureau moteur* that "*même cette activité rapide, violente, brutale entre toutes, la guerre, est maintenant conduite par le bureau*".[11]

2. Conceptual and Historiographical Approaches

Conceptualising government office architecture and politics as "mirrors" of one another, requires analysing both fields in unison. Furthermore, in order to avoid an overtly narrow focus on classic questions concerning architectural representation, which are strongly linked to the style and iconography of façades, both the exterior and the interior of buildings should be scrutinised.[12] These approaches are in line with the notion of the modern office as "*un complexe technico-organisationnel*". Proposed by the French historian Delphine

[10] On the building's internal efficiency, see: Jansen/Jachmann, p. 20; Hans Wilderotter, Politische Architektur in Berlin. Funktion, Repräsentation und Geschichte, in: idem (ed.), Das Haus am Werderschen Markt. Von der Reichsbank zum Auswärtigen Amt, Berlin 2000, p. 9-54; Hans Wilderotter, Alltag der Macht. Berlin Wilhelmstrasse, Berlin 1998, p. 78-80.

[11] Maurice Ponthière, Le bureau moteur. Fonction et organisation des bureaux, Paris 1935, p. 13.

[12] Many studies dealing with the history of ministerial office buildings focus heavily on these aesthetic elements. Examples include Lois Craig et al., Federal Presence. Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Building, Cambridge/London 1978; Sally Kress Tompkins, A Quest for Grandeur. Charles Moore and the Federal Triangle, Washington 1993; Nico Randeraad, In Search of a National Building Style. Administrative Architecture in the Netherlands in the Second Half of the 19th Century, in: Yearbook of European Administrative History, 1994, p. 243-260; Michael H. Port, Imperial London. Civil Government Building in London, 1850-1915, New Haven/London 1995; Miles Glendinning et al., The Architecture of Scottish Government. From Kingship to Parliamentary Democracy, Dundee 2004; Marieke Kuipers, Ministeries. Categoriaal onderzoek wederopbouw 1940-1965, Zeist 2006; Andreas Nachama/Peter Steinbach (eds.), Die Wilhelmstraße. Regierungsviertel im Wandel, Berlin 2007; Christian Hottin (ed.), Lieux de pouvoirs. Architectures administratives de la France contemporaine, 1945-2013, in: In situ. Revue des patrimoines 17:1, 2018 (theme issue).

Gardey, this notion requires an analytical distinction between two interdependent components: the tangible components or "hardware" (buildings and equipment) on the one hand, and the intangible elements or "software" (managerial norms and routines) on the other.[13] In the introduction to their recently published edited volume on office interiors, the Swiss historians Gianenrico Bernasconi and Stefan Nellen have called new attention to Gardey's thesis, by emphasising the complexity of the modern office: "*Seine Gestaltung vollzieht sich durch das Zusammenwirken verschiedener Faktoren wie der architektonischen Hülle, der Inneneinrichtung, der Anordnung von Maschinen ..., des Mobiliars und der Abstimmung atmosphärischer Eigenschaften ... .*" In addition, a crucial role was played by "*das organisatorische Denken, das Scientific Management und die Rationalisierungsbestrebungen, die seit Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts eine neue Art des Raums entwerfen*".[14] The complex, multi-layered space resulting from these innovations can quite simply be characterised as "*ein Laboratorium der Moderne*", as Gardey herself suggested in the same volume.[15]

Despite the appearance of a number of excellent studies in the last two decades which have managed to capture and problematise some of the complexity inherent in government office architecture, the role of such architecture as a "laboratory of modernity", co-defined by managerial norms of office work and spatiality, remains under-researched. So far, an important question has thus stayed under the radar: how did one of the most important ideologies of the twentieth century, Taylorism, influence the routines and spaces of government office workers in various countries – and so, ultimately, of government itself?[16] While the appeal of Frederick Winslow Taylor's 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management* upon prominent modernist architects of the interwar period, such as Le Corbusier, has been fairly well documented[17], the impact of this ideology in governmental circles – and, more specifically, its impact on the work and workspaces of civil servants – has been much less systematically analysed. Here, it is worthwhile to use a paraphrase of Gardey: for many countries, it is

13 Delphine Gardey, Écrire, calculer, classer. Comment une révolution de papier a transformé les sociétés contemporaines (1800-1940), Paris 2008, p. 164-165 and p. 253.

14 Gianenrico Bernasconi/Stefan Nellen, Einleitung, in: idem (eds.), Das Büro. Zur Rationalisierung des Interieurs, 1880-1960, Bielefeld 2019, p. 9-26, here p. 10.

15 Delphine Gardey, 'Espèces d'espaces', Raumarten. Soziale, technische und politische Aspekte, in: Bernasconi/Nellen, p. 277-286, here p. 285.

16 On the impact of Taylorism, see for instance: Dirk van Laak, Technokratie im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts. Eine einflussreiche 'Hintergrundideologie', in: Lutz Raphael (ed.), Theorien und Experimente der Moderne. Europas Gesellschaften im 20. Jahrhundert, Vienna 2012, p. 101-128, here p. 113-114.

17 A classic text on this topic: Mary McLeod, 'Architecture or Revolution'. Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change, in: Art Journal 43:2, 1983, p. 132-147.

still unclear if (and how) government office buildings have functioned – or were supposed to function – as laboratories of government. Before offering a concise synthesis of my own research on the Belgian case, I will discuss some remarkable findings from five recent historiographical contributions which did manage to raise a corner of the veil.

Clare Copley's aforementioned case study on the former *Reichsluftfahrtministerium* building analysed the "dialectic of exclusion and inclusion" in relation to the post-1989 usage of this Berlin office complex, which nowadays houses the Federal Finance Ministry.[18] Concerning the building's everyday functioning in accommodating government staff, Copley noted that the authorities of the *Berliner Republik* have emphasised conceptual discontinuities with the previous, non-democratic users in Nazi Germany and the GDR. As such, the post-1989 authorities have sought to soften the building's "overwhelmingly inaccessible appearance" vis-à-vis "ordinary citizens"[19], which is often associated with the totalitarian spirit of the Nazi regime. Yet, notwithstanding the present-day discursive emphasis on democracy and openness, inaccessibility remains the norm in many crucial respects. Copley for instance argued that despite the regular organisation of events aimed at welcoming the public to the complex, such as "open door days", the actual loci of power remain a black box from the citizens' point of view: "... [When] approaching the finance minister's guarded office door, ... visitors must put all camera equipment away and are discouraged from lingering by the building staff [;] [once] at the door itself, the exclusionary message conveyed by the rope across the doorway, indicating that visitors should not try to cross the threshold and actually enter the room, is underlined by the presence of security guards".[20] Through this account, it becomes manifest that elements of the building's original architectural disposition ("hardware") and managerial routines ("software") are subject to an inertia that is not challenged by present-day power holders – despite rhetorical claims to the contrary. Or, to paraphrase Francis Duffy's maxim: the *Reichsluftfahrtministerium* building has not "changed" as much as one could expect, since today's leaders essentially underscore certain aspects of secretiveness and exclusion which had also guided the building's conception in the mid-1930s. Copley has rightly argued that these aspects were not even unique to the Nazi regime, as they can be traced back to earlier models such as nineteenth-century town halls, including those in liberal democracies. Without doubt, these are relevant insights for the analysis of ministerial office complexes in other geographical and temporal contexts.

18 Copley,p. 24-25, p. 69-77.
19 Ibidem, p. 73.
20 Ibidem, p. 69-77, here p. 77.

Another recent publication on the German case has dealt with two modernist administrative complexes constructed by the West German state in the early 1950s, the *Bundeskriminalamt* in Wiesbaden and the *Bundesrechnungshof* in Frankfurt am Main.[21] By closely investigating political-administrative and architectural developments together, historian Dorothea Steffen has been able to detect a paradoxical discrepancy: while the designers of these complexes had conceived sober, businesslike façades and volumes which articulated a clear caesura from the pompous classicism that had marked various official buildings from the Nazi period, the *tabula rasa* symbolism behind this modernism did not necessarily match the self-understanding of the organisations the buildings were to accommodate. After all, many of the civil servants working in these new complexes saw themselves as defenders of supposedly "neutral" and "apolitical" administrative traditions – and as such they saw no need to embody any kind of discontinuity in relation to the Nazi era in their everyday activities. Here, the normative moral connotations embodied by the architecture were tacitly "resisted" by the office workers. This conceptual mismatch between architecture and its occupants is intriguing indeed, even though unfortunately, Steffen's study is barely concerned with the interiors and operational functioning of the new complexes.

Written by the historian Christian Welzbacher, a third study on Germany worth mentioning deals with a number of office complexes conceived during the Weimar period.[22] Even though the author's primary interest lay with urban planning and iconography and hence with the exterior of buildings, some of Welzbacher's conceptual insights seem well-suited for studying government office buildings in general. One of these insights is the notion of "*Repräsentation als versinnbildlichte Zweckrationalität*", which became influential in Germany shortly after the First World War. In this context, the façades of some new office complexes were designed to show the operational efficiency of the bureaucracies they accommodated. Like the architects of the post-war complexes discussed by Steffen, various leading figures of the Weimar Republic sought to represent the new, democratic German state as a "rational" and modern actor.[23] As in the aforementioned titles, the link with Scientific Management's ethos of efficiency is not explicitly thematised by Welzbacher, even though its presence looms large throughout his investigation.

[21] Dorothea Steffen, Tradierte Institutionen, moderne Gebäude. Verwaltung und Verwaltungsbauten der Bundesrepublik in den frühen 1950er Jahren, Bielefeld 2019.

[22] Christian Welzbacher, Die Staatsarchitektur der Weimarer Republik, Berlin 2006. See also Christian Welzbacher, Monumente der Macht. Eine politische Architekturgeschichte Deutschlands 1920–1960, Berlin 2016.

[23] Welzbacher, Die Staatsarchitektur, p. 12.

Finally, two inquiries on the United Kingdom and Sweden offer additional leads for further research. Its interdisciplinary scope reflected in the authorial team, a 2013 study by the architect Adam Sharr and the political historian Stephen Thornton focused on an elaborate – but unrealised – architectural scheme from mid-1960s Britain.[24] Backed by Prime Minister Harold Wilson, the radically modernist architect Leslie Martin proposed to replace much of the existing office buildings in London's ministerial Whitehall quarter by a "ziggurat-section megastructure" where most of the ministerial departments could be concentrated. Sharr and Thornton have presented their narrative as a kind of counterfactual history: by reconstructing the genesis of a project that almost became reality, they rightfully emphasised the importance of "paper architecture" as an object of historical analysis. Martin's remarkable office proposal was characterised by the scientistic ambition to create an architecture devoid of subjective values and aesthetical contingencies. In line with the high-modernist social views of Wilson, who manifested himself as a herald of technological progress, this attempt at a technocratically informed rationalisation of the civil service and its architecture resulted in "a 'total plan' where the most efficient space-use, building mass, building population, office depth and daylighting were quantified and calculated".[25] Hence, Martin's ideas were obviously tributary to early twentieth-century notions of Scientific Management, even though Sharr and Thornton, too, have refrained from exploring this historical link.

Having many similarities with the rationale behind Martin's and Wilson's Whitehall project, the 1960s reforms of the Swedish national board for the construction of government architecture formed the topic of the 2017 doctoral dissertation by the architect Erik Sigge.[26] Sigge's study correlated broad developments in Swedish politics and public administration – such as the emergence of economic concepts and budgetary techniques that would later, from the 1980s onwards, become associated with the neoliberal-oriented New Public Management – to the development of novel ideas on government architecture. Like the Whitehall plan, projects such as the massive *Garnisonen* ministerial office complex in Stockholm, which was built around 1970, were the result of a desire to "objectify" the design process and its outcomes. With the ultimate aim of saving public funds, the architects behind the complex rejected "any preconceived

24 Adam Sharr/Stephen Thornton, Demolishing Whitehall. Leslie Martin, Harold Wilson and the Architecture of White Heat, Farnham/Burlington 2013.

25 Ibidem, p. 63.

26 Erik Sigge, Architecture's Red Tape. Government Building Construction in Sweden, 1963-1973, Doctoral dissertation, Stockholm 2017.

preferences of form, material, scale, or style".[27] Additionally, like Leslie Martin, they emphasised the need for an open-ended and future-proof design that could be updated according to changing functional and organisational needs. While Sigge did not discuss these parallels with the 1960s Whitehall project himself, his narrative clearly shows the potential merit of a transnational comparative perspective. Once again, moreover, his study left questions unanswered about the long-term impact of early-twentieth-century visions on managerial efficiency. In the following paragraph, I will outline my own approach concerning the relationship between such managerial visions and ministerial office architecture, taking Belgium as a case study. My temporal focus will be on the interwar period, when this relationship first rose to prominence.

3. A Moralist Attempt at Reforming the Executive Power, Architecture, and Society. A Case Study on Belgium in the Interwar Period[28]

In his book on the Moscow "House of Government", Yuri Slezkine aptly notes that "[the] modern state, more or less by definition, does too much or not enough; its many services are both intrusions and entitlements".[29] Over the course of the last century, governmental bureaucracies of the Western world have indeed been the object of a vast qualitative and quantitative expansion driven by the creation of welfare systems. In Belgium, as in many countries, an acceleration of this expansion took place right after the First World War. Faced with massive infrastructural damage and urgent popular demands for social justice, war-torn Belgium did not enter the interwar period without undergoing marked political and socio-economic transformations. As such, the nineteenth-century bourgeois democracy was expanded through the introduction of universal suffrage (albeit for women not until 1948), while the first steps were taken towards the introduction of a social security framework. The two major imperatives of the immediate post-1918 years – material reconstruction and the establishment of a more just society – resulted in bureaucratic growth. As new governmental agencies were created and the tasks of existing ministries became more comprehensive, the number of civil servants rose significantly. This dynamic soon generated new problems: on the one hand, the go-

[27] Ibidem, p. 18.

[28] This paragraph is based on my doctoral dissertation: Jens van de Maele, Architectures of Bureaucracy. An Architectural and Political History of Ministerial Offices in Belgium, 1915-1940, Doctoral dissertation, Ghent/Antwerp 2019. See also Jens van de Maele, 'Gläserne Zwischenwände für effektive Kontrollen'. Das belgische Regierungsbüro in der Zwischenkriegszeit, in: Bernasconi/Nellen, p. 89-108.

[29] Slezkine, S. 17.

vernment was faced with a rise of public expenditures and budgetary deficits that were difficult to keep in check; on the other hand, it became obvious that the growing civil service lacked procedures for evaluating its own operational quality and cost-efficiency. Both issues literally became visible in the increased scattering of ministerial administrations over various old buildings and former bourgeois townhouses throughout Brussels, which were haphazardly bought or rented to keep up with the pace of administrative expansion. This geographical scattering ran counter to the need for swift communications between ministerial services. Moreover, the dispersion and functional inadequacy of numerous buildings, many of which were never designed for an administrative purpose in the first place, went hand in hand with high rents and maintenance costs, and sometimes with suboptimal working conditions for civil servants and low-ranking clerks.

In the aftermath of the Great War, most Belgian cabinet members still considered the managerial notion of "efficiency" as something of an alien concept. Sure enough, it did exert a platonic attraction: in mid-1918, for example, the government sent a committee of enquiry to the United States to investigate the potential of Taylorism as a means for reconstructing the national economy and enhancing its competitiveness. Not getting published until 1920, which in itself was a rather obvious indicator of administrative inefficiency, the committee's bulky concluding report remained a dead letter, however. Somewhat more thoroughgoing were the actions of the 1920-1923 Minister of Defence Albert Devèze, who affirmed himself as a devotee of the French mining engineer Henri Fayol. In his own country, Fayol had caused something of a furore with his 1916 book *Administration industrielle et générale*, which has been described by historian Marjorie Beale as "a Gallic alternative" to Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*.[30] With his "general" managerial theory, Fayol sought to formulate guidelines that could be easily applied by both blue-collar labourers and office workers.[31] Even though largely commensurable with Taylorism, "Fayolism" did place more emphasis on the idea that anyone in a leading position ("*chef*") should make himself visible to his subordinates to the largest possible extent. An embodiment of both impeccable moral standards and a perfect, internalised work ethic, *chefs* were supposed to set the "right example" to their lower-ranking personnel, who were believed to need continuous external stimuli in order to perform adequately. This managerial directive for generating a "conduct of conduct" can be linked to Foucault's principle of govern-

[30] Marjorie A. Beale, The Modernist Enterprise. French Elites and the Threat of Modernity, 1900-1940, Stanford 1999, p. 97.

[31] Henri Fayol, Administration industrielle et générale. Prévoyance, organisation, commandement, coordination, contrôle, Paris 1916.

mentality. In her previously mentioned book on state buildings in the *Berliner Republik*, Copley has summarised this principle, tracing it back to the nineteenth-century "development of spaces such as the park or the public square that functioned both as 'omniopticon', where being 'seen' would enhance awareness of one's comportment, and as spaces of emulation, where one could observe and seek to mirror the manner, dress and behaviour of one's 'better'".[32] Crucially, the innovativeness of Taylorism and Fayolism did not stem from the transposition of directives for the "conduct of conduct" from the urban space to the workspace, but rather in the codification of such directives into synthetic doctrines, and in their association with "scientific" methods aimed at an "objective" quantification of efficiency.

In the context of Fayol's emphasis on seeing and being seen, a new significance was given to the architectural notion of the so-called "open plan" workspace, defined by large rooms having as little internal walls or partitions as possible. Already favoured by Taylorists to facilitate basic surveillance and speed up the transmission of objects from one worker to another, the open plan office paired well with Fayolism as being a means for generating mutual observation between chefs and their subordinates. In Belgium, Devèze promoted these new managerial principles by distributing a brochure among the employees of his department which summarised Fayol's theory. Even though there was no budgetary space for the construction of buildings where the concept of the open office could be brought into practice, Devèze's brochure did promote the clustering of his ministerial employees in as little individual buildings and rooms as possible: "*... [Il faut] que les agents d'un même bureau soient, si possible, groupés dans un même local*".[33] In 1922, Fayol himself wrote that he saluted the Belgian reformist initiative with "*une joyeuse émotion*", while he portrayed Devèze as *"[un] instaurateur d'une politique administrative dont nos amis belges apprécient déjà les heureux effets*".[34] However, Fayol's praise was more of a statement than an accurate depiction of reality. In France, Fayolism had become adopted by various commercial enterprises – but to the great indignation of Fayol himself, the French government had not followed suit. Likewise, during the 1920s, the Belgian civil service as a whole was not subjected to either managerial or architectural reforms. As such, Devèze's actions remained an isolated event, and most of the problems that first rose to prominence in the

32 Copley, p. 26.

33 Anonymous, Une doctrine administrative. Adaptation, à l'usage du personnel du Ministère de la Défense Nationale, du livre de M. Fayol, 'Administration industrielle et générale', Brussels 1921, p. 61.

34 Henri Fayol, Préface, in : Albert Schatz, L'entreprise gouvernementale et son administration, Paris 1922, p. 5-23, here p. 5.

immediate post-war years were largely left unremedied – including the dispersion of ministries among many edifices, the high operational costs of both the civil service and its buildings, and the absence of procedures for improving administrative performance.

Eventually, it took until the mid-1930s before a comprehensive civil reform plan was placed on the political agenda. Instigated by Prime Minister Paul van Zeeland (1935-1937), this plan was part of a global strategy for countering the causes and effects of the lingering economic crisis. An admirer of Roosevelt's New Deal, Van Zeeland sought to break the deadlock of political impotence vis-à-vis the crisis by pleading for a degree of technocratic rule and long-term socio-economic planning. After a beneficial devaluation of the national currency in 1935, the Prime Minister turned his efforts to the governmental bureaucracy, considering its inefficiency and expensiveness a hindrance to vigorous political action. In the second half of 1936, he asked the King to appoint a "Royal Commissioner for Administrative Reform", who was to be charged with investigating and improving the civil service's global functioning. The task was given to the political scientist Louis Camu, who remained in office until May 1940, thereby outlasting Van Zeeland's cabinet as well as five other cabinets over a period of less than three years. In a time plagued by exceptional political instability, Camu thus managed to occupy a uniquely permanent position as an independent expert within the political-administrative system, filling up a strategic functional void between the political field and the civil service. Equally unique was the Royal Commissioner's large personal interest in architecture, particularly the modernist variant. For Camu, the question of administrative efficiency could not be merely phrased in managerial terms: the "material" aspects – that is the office buildings and spaces – were to become an object of reform as well. As such, both elements from Gardey's methodological framework on office history – the "hardware" of buildings and equipment and the "software" of managerial processes and rules – were conceptualised by Camu as necessary conditions for one another: without new buildings, the introduction of new managerial rules was doomed to remain fruitless, and vice versa.

The Royal Commissioner expressed his vision in a series of official reports, of which the first (1937) focused on the civil service's procedures concerning recruitment, appointment, and promotion. Fully compatible with the theories of Fayol, whom Camu explicitly praised on various occasions, the report on *Le statut des agents de l'État* pleaded for the creation of a homogeneous legal statute for all government employees with the aim of eradicating most manifestations of nepotism, wastefulness, incompetence, and ministerial particularism.[35]

[35] Louis Camu, Le statut des agents de l'État, Brussels 1937.

Becoming officially sanctioned through a Royal Decree in October 1937, Camu's statute was supposed to contribute to nothing less than a moral revival – not just within political and administrative circles, but also within society as a whole. After all, in Camu's eyes, the Belgian citizen rightfully did not place much trust in his government, on account of it being insufficiently competent and performant. Appointing "efficient", highly qualified and preferably highly educated leading civil servants of unimpeachable integrity – the typical *chefs* occurring in Fayol's writings – was thus supposed to generate a virtuous circle. Ideally, the improved performance levels resulting from this professionalisation would lead to a better respected and more authoritative government. In a second, complementary report, which was also published in 1937, Camu offered a *status quaestionis* of the main problems with the ministerial office buildings, thereby invoking additional Fayolist sensitivities: many lower-ranking civil servants (such as clerks or typists) worked without being permanently visually surveilled by their *chefs*, the workflows were continuously interrupted by a profusion of individual office rooms and archaic errand services, the public could not find its way in the maze of addresses and labyrinthine buildings, and the most elementary sanitary regulations regarding light, air and cleanliness were often neglected.[36] The diagnosis was immediately followed by the cure: all ministerial administrations were to be concentrated in a minimal number of large buildings, where the latest managerial notions on efficient office work could be turned into reality.

Concretely, the proposed solution lay in the construction of a large medium-rise modernist complex providing about 70.000 m² of usable space, to be located near the Parliament. For this purpose, entire neighbourhoods, such as the bourgeois *quartier Notre-Dame-aux-Neiges* and the working-class *quartier des Bas-Fonds*, were earmarked for destruction. This strategy was in line with the "heavy renovation" approach that characterised many of the twentieth-century urban planning projects in the Belgian capital, which ultimately gave rise to the notion of *bruxellisation* as shorthand for an indiscriminate attitude towards the capital's architectural patrimony and social fabric.[37] The practical conception of the complex was placed in the hands of the modernist architectural duo Jean-Jules Eggericx and Raphaël Verwilghen, two *protégés* of Henry van de Velde who had already proven their capability in handling governmental representation through their design for the acclaimed Belgian pavilion

36 Louis Camu, Rapport sur les bâtiments des administrations centrales de l'État, Brussels 1937.

37 Chloé Deligne, Discours politique et urbanisme. Réflexion à partir du cas de la Jonction Nord-Midi, Bruxelles 1900-1960, in: Revue belge de géographie 122:1, 1998, p. 29-54, here p. 33.

at the 1937 Paris World's Fair. For the ministerial project in Brussels, they opted for an equivalent of the "*Repräsentation als versinnblildlichte Zweckrationalität*"[38] that had characterised some of the German governmental office designs conceived during the Weimar Republic. Emboldened by Camu's managerial objectives, the architects signalled that the projected complex had to be "as efficient as a factory": an obvious reference to the Fayolist tenet that industrial work and administrative work had to adhere to similar managerial principles. As such, the building's modular steel or concrete framed structure would allow for the flexible creation of spacious open plan offices, thus facilitating mutual surveillance and swift workflows. To determine the optimum distances between desks, Eggericx and Verwilghen made ample use of the recently published architectural handbook *Bauentwurfslehre* (1936) by the German architect Ernst Neufert, who had defined countless "good practices" for enhancing the cost-efficiency of any conceivable building type. Stark, unornamented façades were intended to represent this ethos of efficiency externally, even though Camu's design team signalled that the building's volumetry and dimensions were also supposed to generate a new sense of monumentality, akin to the grandeur instilled in Hans Poelzig's design for the I.G. Farben headquarters complex in Frankfurt. Successfully incarnating the various contradictory architectural tendencies of its time, Poelzig's *I.G.-Farben-Haus* (built 1928-1931) had blended functionalist elements with classical composition principles and noble construction materials.

For Eggericx and Verwilghen, who did not only seek to bestow the government with a renewed sense of authority, but who also sought to forge an "urban continuity" with a select number of older ministerial complexes that were deemed of monumental value, such as the late eighteenth-century neoclassicist ensemble of townhouses along the *rue de la Loi*, the majestic headquarters of the powerful and prestigious German chemical conglomerate indeed served as a highly inspirational example. Hence, not only the managerial principles of Fayolism and Taylorism, originally conceived for the commercial world, acted as a model, but also the administrative buildings designed for this world. In this context, it can hardly be called a coincidence that the *I.G.-Farben-Haus* had greatly influenced the design of the Berlin *Reichsluftfahrtministerium* building as well.[39]

38 Welzbacher, Die Staatsarchitektur.

39 On the influence of the I.G.-Farben-Haus on the Reichsluftfahrtministerium, see: Matthew Philpotts, Cultural-Political Palimpsests. The Reich Aviation Ministry and the Multiple Temporalities of Dictatorship, in: New German Critique 39:3, 2012, p. 207-230, here p. 216.

Image 1: View of the former *I.G.-Farben-Haus,* 2009.

Camu's 1937 report followed the proposals of his architectural team in their entirety, while the Royal Commissioner added an original component himself: in his view, the Belgian citizens had to be included in the Fayolist scheme of mutual surveillance as well. To this aim, he proposed to accommodate the most important public services in a central counter hall, from where visitors could observe a large open office room: "*Il est inutile de donner l'impression que le travail administratif doit être tenue caché [:] [la] tenue des bureaux s'améliorera et la confiance du public sera augmentée*".[40] In this idealist scheme, architecture and spatial arrangements functioned as agents for creating trust in the executive power. Just like high-ranking civil servants were to observe lower-ranking employees and vice versa, the public had to be able to see the civil service at work and witness its zeal and excellence. Remarkably, Camu linked this idea to the work of Montesquieu, whose *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) had contained a plea for "*la vertu*", a public virtue fostering trust, love, and respect one's country and its institutions. The visual and indeed omnioptical confrontation of the citizens with their government employees within a modernist office complex was thus intended to contribute to the creation of a Montesquieuan *vertu* – and this in a country that, according to Camu, had since the end of the war been characterised by a continuous "*crise des valeurs morales qui ... ronge fortement l'armature sociale*".[41] Yet, like in the case of the former *Reichsluftfahrtministerium* building discussed by Copley, it is clear that the mutual surveillance between the public and the government officials would only have functioned within the framework of a dialectic of exclusion and inclusion. After all, the transparency towards the public was to be facilitated solely in a carefully delineated part of the future complex, the counter hall, while the other parts would remain black boxes from the citizens' point of view.

[40] Camu, Rapport sur les bâtiments, p. 31.
[41] Camu, Le statut des agents, p. 7.

In January 1940, the Royal Commissioner released a second and last report on the planned ministerial office complex.[42] Having been written with the aim of securing government funds for the construction of his reform plans, his 1937 report had mainly offered a narrative about the necessity of modern offices. The 1940 report, in contrast, focused predominantly on technical and even scientific aspects of architecture. This time, definitive architectural and managerial choices were made with the highest possible degree of accuracy – and as such, the report defined norms such as the preferred temperature and humidity levels, the best natural lighting conditions, the sizes of the desks and drawers, and the number of employees per open office. The result was an illustration of the tendency – present in both managerial and modernist architectural circles – to objectify and standardise all aspects of administrative work. Against the actual situation, characterised by numerous small, scattered, and maladjusted office buildings, Camu thus placed an antithetical future, which was at once ordered, unified, and quantified. Crucially, Camu's quantifications were not only inspired by an urge for efficiency in terms of space-time management, but also served to create a sense of fairness: within the projected office complex, all ministerial administrations (and, consequently, all categories of employees) were to be treated as much as possible in equal terms. With their value-free aura, numbers were to structure life in the ministerial administrations to the utmost extent. Here, Camu manifested himself as a typical technocrat thinker, harbouring, to use a definition by historian Dirk van Laak, "*Misstrauen ... gegen alles, was nicht gemessen werden kann, was scheinbar irrational und vieldeutig ist*".[43] However, the Royal Commissioner's emphasis on the necessity of a public virtue indicates once again how deeply the science of management was steeped in moral – and thus inherently subjective – premises.

Ultimately, Camu's architectural-managerial scheme remained without results: the Royal Commissariat was disbanded in May 1940, before a single stone of the planned ministerial complex was put in place. Officially shelved in the aftermath of the war, the idea of centralising the majority of ministries in a single complex was nevertheless picked up again by the mid-1950s, but this time without any involvement of Camu (who had meanwhile transformed himself into a successful banking director) or his erstwhile design team. Conceived from scratch by a new group of architects, the post-war ministerial complex, which got effectively built between the late 1950s and the early 1980s in the Bas-Fonds quarter, was completely detached from the notion of civil service reform. Even though the Belgian ministerial administrations had further expan-

[42] Mémoire sur les bâtiments administratifs, January 1940, in: CIVA Brussels, Fonds J.-J. Eggericx 296.

[43] Van Laak, p. 116.

ded after 1945, resulting in renewed concerns about operational inefficiency and high costs, no attempts were made during the post-war decades to implement a civil service reform. Likewise, the moral imperative dominating Camu's discourse of the late 1930s, which implied the usage of managerial reforms and architectural reforms as means for establishing a relationship of trust between the governed and those who govern, was entirely absent in the post-war plans.

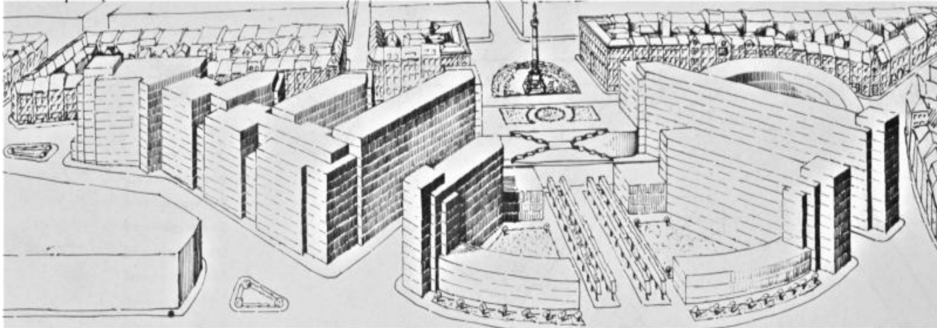

Image 2: Perspective drawing of the planned ministerial office complex in Brussels, 1940.

4. Conclusion

In relation to the historiographical tendencies discussed in the first part of this article, the relevance of my short exploration of the Belgian case during the interwar period is twofold. On the one hand, my narrative traces the tight linkages between government, government architecture, and managerial thought. It is precisely through the interplay of those three components that architecture could become normatively conceptualised as a "laboratory" altering the government's functioning. Being an unelected, technocratically inspired reformer of the civil service and its office buildings, Royal Commissioner Camu staged himself as an aspiring reformer of society at large. He shared the latter ambition with social engineers like Taylor and Fayol, who had equally dreamt of a society permeated with their managerial ideals. For Taylor, the principles of Scientific Management were indeed "applicable to all kinds of human activities, from our simplest individual acts to the work of our great corporations" – and "the sooner they come [into general use ... throughout the civilised world], the better for all the people".[44] While Camu's attempt at "changing the buildings" in order to "change government" would never bear fruit, the story of the

[44] Frederick Winslow Taylor, The Principles of Scientific Management, New York/London, p. 7 and p. 29.

project can effectively be presented as a kind of counterfactual narrative, just like Sharr and Thornton have done in their case study on 1960s Britain. When judged by the amount of plan-making that had gone into Camu's new ministerial complex, the project had few competitors in interwar Belgium. Without the rupture caused by the war, the complex as it had been envisioned by the Royal Commissioner might have become a reality – even though there is little doubt that the architecture and its proposed Fayolist or omnioptical managerial regime would have sparked acts of resistance from its occupants, possibly resulting in a situation analogous to the 1950s West German case described by Dorothea Steffen.

On the other hand, my narrative illustrates the added value of a comparative perspective, both in terms of describing historical events with an eye on transnational phenomena and exchanges, and using analytical and interpretative tools originally conceived for separate national contexts. Of course, as inhabitants of a small country often dubbed a crossroads of Germanic and Romance cultures, Belgian intellectuals of the interwar period were perhaps more profoundly influenced by foreign developments than those in most other countries, making a comparative perspective a logical choice for a historian of Belgium. Yet, while Camu and his architects sought to blend aspects of French managerial theory and German architecture into one synthesis, their work was not merely derivative. The Royal Commissioner's plea for architectural transparency as a means for generating a Montesquieuan political ethos was wholly original – and even though Camu's conceptual association between a democratic political praxis and architectural transparency was anteceded by Hannes Meyer's famous competition submission for the League of Nations Headquarters (1927), it did precede Hans Schwippert's symbolically laden transparent design of the plenary hall for the West German *Bundeshaus* (Bonn, 1948).[45] Another original element can be found in the striking parallels between Camu's project and the 1960s plan described by Sharr and Thornton: like the British Prime Minister Wilson and architect Martin, Camu entertained a desire to "transcend party politics" through technocratic recipes, whose contents "simultaneously [challenged] and [reinforced] a hierarchical social order at the scales of building, city and nation".[46] In 1930s Belgium as well as in 1960s Britain, leading actors in the political-administrative system effectively attempted to modernise society as a whole, and they sought to initiate this movement by actively promoting scientific values and methods in the sphere of the gov-

[45] On the notion of transparency in relation to both buildings, see for instance: Deborah Ascher Barnstone, The Transparent State. Architecture and Politics in Postwar Germany, London/New York 2005, p. 6-8, p. 50, p. 108-131, p. 214 and p. 228.

[46] Sharr/Thornton, p. 3 and p. 7.

ernment’s own functioning. As such, it is beyond question that a transnational comparative perspective can also be enriching for researchers dealing with “large” countries, allowing them to recalibrate the supposed innovativeness of certain historical phenomena.

Images

Image 1: 2009 view of the former *I.G.-Farben-Haus* (since 2001 used by the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität). Photo by Eva Kröcher (GNU Free Documentation License/Creative Commons).
Image 2: Perspective drawing of the planned ministerial office complex in Brussels, 1940 (detail). Mémoire sur les bâtiments administratifs, January 1940, in: CIVA Brussels, Fonds J.-J. Eggericx 296.