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'As Efficient as a Factory': Architectural and Managerial Discourses on Government Office Buildings in Belgium, 1919–39

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the impact of managerial ideologies on projects for new governmental office buildings in Belgium in the 1920s and 1930s. Following the pre-war publication of F. W. Taylor's 'scientific management' theories, the scientisation of office activities was propagated by efficiency experts throughout the western world. In Belgium, as in France, the work of the mining engineer Henri Fayol was particularly influential. According to Fayol, private and public bureaucracies had to follow identical managerial principles, notably that all employees were to observe one another as much as possible. These ideas of visibility overlapped with the emphasis on transparency and open planning coming from quite a different quarter, namely Le Corbusier, Hannes Meyer and other modernist architects in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet how Fayol's ideal was to be realised without compromising the traditional need for privacy for high-ranking office workers remained unresolved. The article explores the ideas of two crucial expert groups — architects and managerial experts — over these issues as they developed in Belgium in the inter-war years. In the 1920s, the mining engineer Max-Léo Gérard called for ministerial buildings that facilitated 'collaborative work' and the information scientist Paul Otlet advocated an ideal type of government offices based on an architectural diagram that facilitated mutual observation. In the 1930s, the architect Stanislas Jasinski proposed remodelling the centre of Brussels as a series of office blocks, in a design copied from Le Corbusier's cruciform skyscrapers in the Plan Voisin. Such ideas received official endorsement with the Royal Commissariat for Administrative Reform under Louis Camu, which proposed to strengthen the societal role of governmental bureaucracy by rehousing the civil service in an enormous office complex close to the parliament. Contrasting with the idealism of these unrealised plans was one of the few government projects actually built, the Ministry of Science and Arts headquarters designed in 1929 by the in-house architect Georges Hano.

In 1929, the high-ranking Belgian civil servant Albert Henry published a series of satirical short stories that caricatured daily life in government administration.[1] A Ministry of Agriculture employee for almost thirty years, Henry had an intimate knowledge of a

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phenomenon that was described by Michel Foucault as the 'administrative grotesque'. This 'grotesque', Foucault signalled in one of his 1975 lectures for the Collège de France, has been an 'essential feature' of big western bureaucracies, and is manifest in the unavoidable (even though not exclusive) existence of 'the mediocre, useless, imbecilic, superficial, ridiculous […] functionary'.[2] In Henry's short story *L'envol de l'aigle* (*The Flight of the Eagle*), these qualities are personified in a character with the preposterous name of Napoléon Gagateux. Despite his utter lack of talent and capabilities, Gagateux climbs the administrative ladder and ultimately manages to secure a leading position at the (fictitious) Ministry of Intelligence. Taking a personal interest in scientific management, he becomes determined to improve the ideas of Frederick Winslow Taylor *et al*. This leads him to conceive a new 'scientific' theory of efficiency based on the notion that all ministerial employees should halt their activities 'every 17 minutes, 11 seconds, and 4/10s of a second' in order to avoid becoming too absorbed by their tasks. Complemented by the installation of automated alarm clocks (dubbed 'intelligence inciters') in all offices, this theoretical innovation quickly achieves renown beyond ministerial walls. An academic delegation from 'Pigs University, Chicago' even crosses the Atlantic to observe at first hand Belgium's innovative contribution to the transnational efficiency debate. Back home, the Chicago professors eagerly spread the word about the 'marvellous intelligence system of [the] glorious Mr. Kakatew [*sic*]'.[3]

Henry's short story is a brilliant parody of the scientisation of the office, a phenomenon that became established in the western world following the publication of Taylor's *Shop Management* (1903) and *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). Taylorism had sought to apply 'scientific' methods such as measuring, quantifying and generalising to the sphere of industrial labour. In this way, 'efficiency' was to be achieved by minimising the time spent on a given task. The protagonist from *L'envol de l'aigle* used the same strategy to achieve the opposite result: Gagateux in effect increased the time allotted to administrative duties. Though fiction, Henry's story signals that inter-war governmental bureaucracies were not impervious to the ethos of scientific management, the most ardent supporters of which were to be found among industrialists and business professionals, but also among modernist architects. Prominent figures of the international avant-garde, such as Le Corbusier and Hannes Meyer, embraced aspects of scientific management to give their designs a sense of scientific objectivity and neutrality. At the same time, Henry's story indicates that efficiency ideologies such as Taylorism, despite their aura of objectivity, were far from uncontested. Like any intellectual trend, scientific management was subject to mediating forces, and the need for mediation was probably nowhere felt as strongly as in the civil service — the long-standing traditions and tight hierarchies of which functioned as a buffer against managerial innovations.[4]

This article retraces the development of the efficiency debate in inter-war Belgian ministerial administrations by focusing on the discourses concerning their own workplaces. How and where were the ministries to be accommodated in order to enhance efficiency and back up dynamics in governance? The article explores the discourses produced by two crucial groups: architects and managerial specialists. The main argument is that architectural reforms were regularly seen as an essential precondition for administrative reforms: improvements in the sphere of management were believed

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Fig. 1. *Belgian government offices occupied by German military staff, photograph of* c. *1914–17 (Archives of the City of Brussels, Keym photo collection)*

to require a new office architecture. This architecture was to adhere to the basic tenets of the modernist movement, featuring a rationalised design process, an open plan and industrial construction techniques. Ultimately, improving management via an improved architecture was believed to result in an improved government bureaucracy, and thus in improved governance. In this context, reform-minded members from two epistemic communities — architecture and management — were linked through what the historian Dirk van Laak termed the 'technocratic background ideology'.[5] Rarely made explicit by its followers, this highly influential ideology sought to detach the sphere of government as much as possible from supposedly irrational and unquantifiable variables (including, at times, democratic interference by the public), in favour of policies and governance methods based on 'objective' expert knowledge.

In this article, the modern office is conceived as a 'technical-organisational complex'. Developed by the historian Delphine Gardey, this approach sees the office as a space determined by both managerial and architectural normative ideas.[6] Gardey's interpretation requires that we pay special attention to the interior dimension of architecture, as interiors were a principal domain where management professionals experimented most prolifically with the scientisation of administrative work. It is in this domain, moreover, that the notion of visual surveillance — a crucial component of inter-war managerial ideologies — proved to be highly operative. Gardey's approach is also congruent with the conceptual frameworks of the architect Francis Duffy, the managerial expert Christopher Baldry and the architectural historians Donald

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Albrecht and Chrysanthe Broikos, all of whom advocate a more synthetic view of office buildings, spaces and technologies on the one hand, and the organisation of office work on the other.[7]

THE PROBLEMATISATION OF GOVERNMENTAL EFFICIENCY AFTER 1918

Following the introduction of general male suffrage in 1918, right after the end of the first world war, the Belgian government developed its very first social welfare initiatives. This expansion of the state resulted in innovations such as the indexation of wages and the structural subvention of private health insurance organisations. In politically conservative milieus, this combined rise of governmental interventionism and expenditure — as well as its logical corollary, taxation — was regarded with severe scepticism. One of the most ardent critics was the mining engineer Max-Léo Gérard (1879–1955). Belonging to the right-wing section of the Liberal party, Gérard had spent his early career in finance, and had been appointed as the personal secretary of King Albert in 1919. In him, two crucial personality traits came together. On the one hand, Gérard's political affiliation was indicative of what the historian Ginette Kurgan-van Hentenryk calls a 'nostalgia for the bourgeois democracy of the nineteenth century', when political affairs had been the domain of an exclusive elite elected through a system of census suffrage.[8] On the other hand, his educational background resulted in a strong predilection for engineering beyond the narrow domain of technicalities. In a country that owed its international standing and (unequally distributed) wealth to coal-driven industrialisation, mining engineers saw themselves in a self-evident way as expert organisers, who were able to manage resources — both natural and human — with the aim of creating profit.

Having furthered efficiency in the banking sector, Gérard turned his attention to the sphere of government. In 1922, he published an article on 'the cost and performance of the civil service' in *La revue générale*, a magazine read by the Belgian intelligentsia. One of the first prominent examples of a conceptual linkage between management and architecture, Gérard's contribution condemned the rapid growth of the governmental bureaucracy since 1918, as well as the absence of medium-term planning in relation to the government's office buildings. Gérard noted that the newly recruited ministerial employees were often accommodated in numerous small eighteenth- or nineteenth-century townhouses (Fig. 1). These were not only expensive to buy, rent and maintain, but also maladjusted to the exigencies of efficient office work, since they impeded smooth communication between and within departments.[9]

Instead, Gérard proposed the construction of new edifices, 'specially designed to facilitate collaborative work' (*travail en collaboration*).[10] By emphasising the latter, he hinted at the construction of open-plan buildings, where large numbers of office workers could be grouped together, and where the flow of paperwork would not be hindered by inner walls and partitions. This was not a new concept: as Pedro Guedes noted, open-plan designs were proposed in the mid-nineteenth century for British government buildings, while large communal office rooms were also fairly common in the banking sector with which Gérard was familiar.[11] In the sphere of Belgian government, however, their application had been limited to turn-of-the-century headquarters for highly technical railway and postal administrations.[12] Moreover, influenced by the French managerial

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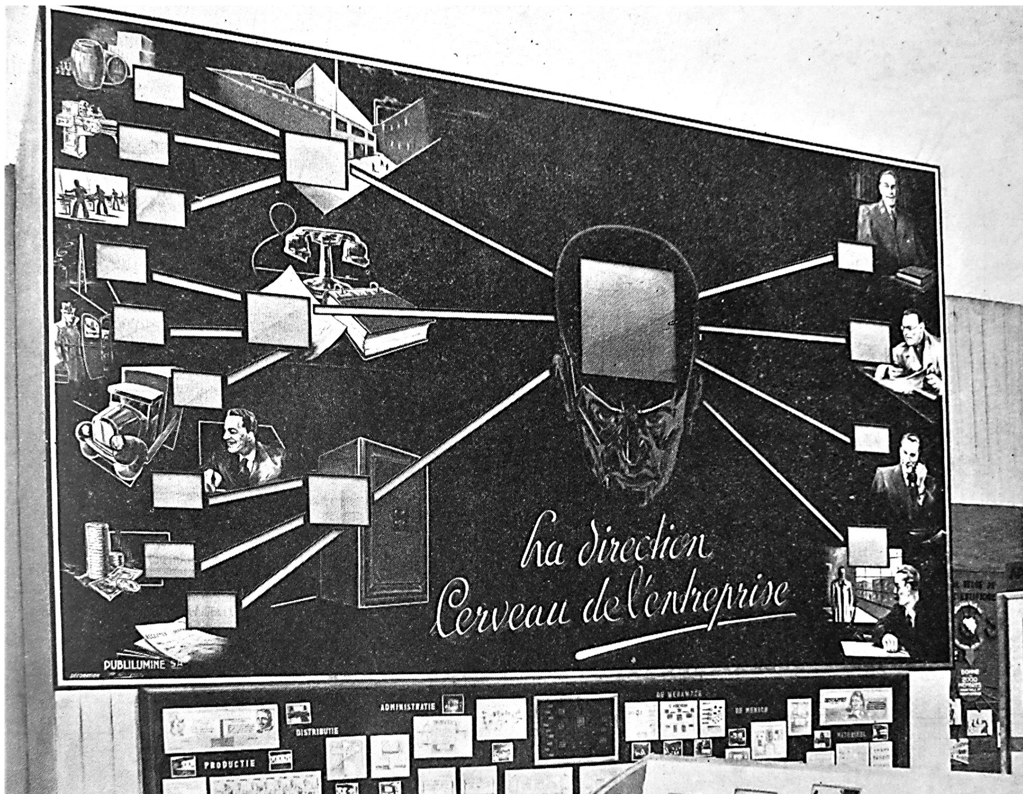

Fig. 2. *'La direction: Cerveau de l'entreprise' ['Management: The Brains of an Enterprise'], from 'Une exposition d'organisation des entreprises',* Bulletin du Comité national belge de l'organisation scientifique, *13, nos 9–10 (1939), p. 217*

specialist Henri Fayol (1841–1925), Gérard's conceptualisation of 'collaborative work' took on an entirely distinct meaning that set it apart from earlier interpretations.

A mining engineer like Gérard, Fayol published in Paris a bestselling managerial handbook, *Administration industrielle et générale* (1916), in which Taylorist principles originally conceived for the world of factory work were transposed to the sphere of office work. A novel element in Fayol's thinking was the notion that any organisation, be it governmental or commercial, is an organically developing and hierarchically stratified 'social body' (*corps social*). Diagrammatically visualising this idea through organisation charts (an innovative practice at that time), Fayol prescribed a *corps social* with a leader (*chef*) at the 'head', numerous 'organs' for the other operational functions and an intricate connectedness between all elements. In this framework, the leading managers appeared as twentieth-century equivalents of a *homo universalis*, gifted with excellent physical health, strong intelligence, broad general culture and superior moral qualities.[13] With such ideas, Fayol emphasised that modern bureaucracies, in the words of the historian Yves Cohen, 'were not only dedicated to rationalisation […] and functionalism, but also,

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in a complementary way […], to the promotion of "personality"'.[14] Being the privilege of the top- and medium-ranking *chefs*, the development of an authentic 'personality' was not prescribed for subaltern members of the administrative *corps social*. Instead, Fayol believed that low-ranking figures such as clerks and typists, positions often occupied by women, were primarily motivated by a desire for imitation: their conduct (and, consequently, their efficiency) could only reach satisfactory levels if the (male) *chefs* served as role models. In this way, Fayol's managerial ideology legitimated the subordination of certain groups of employees, reflecting socially conservative views on class and gender. A large image shown at the 1939 exhibition of the Belgian National Committee on Scientific Management (a non-governmental institution) provided a graphic representation of Fayol's ideas on the central and dominant position of the *chef* in the *corps social* (Fig. 2).

The Fayolist scheme as favoured in Gérard's 1922 article linked 'collaborative work' to two interrelated elements. On the one hand, low-ranking personnel were to be accommodated in communal spaces. On the other hand, the *chefs* were to establish a relationship of mutual visibility between themselves and their subordinates. The latter objective transcended the Taylorist principle of a direct relationship between low-ranking workers and their line manager. Whereas for Taylor a worker was expected to learn only from their immediate line manager, in Fayol's 'social body', any member of the organisation was expected to imitate the example set by any of those occupying a higher position in the hierarchy. Yet how this objective was to be translated architecturally remained undiscussed by both Fayol and Gérard, apart from the vague recommendation to construct large(r) office spaces. In 1920, a visualisation of a government office commensurate with Fayolist tenets was nevertheless published by the Belgian lawyer Paul Otlet (1868–1944) in *La Belgique et la guerre*, a lavish coffee-table book devoted to glorifying Belgium's role in the first world war.[15] Containing a section on post-war reconstruction, the book offered various guidelines for societal improvement, including Otlet's regarding the domain of public administration.

Nowadays credited as one of the founding fathers of information science, Otlet had been an active participant in pre-war international conferences (1910 and 1913) on the so-called administrative sciences. Reaching its heyday in the inter-war period, this field of knowledge analysed all aspects of administration, including both commercial and governmental. The plural term 'sciences' indicated an ambition to interweave various domains of expertise, such as scientific management, political science, economy, law, psychology and statistics.[16] At the 1910 and 1913 conferences, Otlet had described himself as an advocate of office classification systems and modern administrative equipment such as typing machines and dictaphones.[17] After the first world war, Otlet increasingly promoted himself as a transnational bridge figure between the domains of modernist architecture and administrative management. This led to his membership of the international support committee of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) and to close contacts with Le Corbusier, whom in the mid-1920s Otlet asked to design his Mundaneum, an information centre devoted to the preservation of all human knowledge.[18] In *La Belgique et la guerre*, Otlet offered one of his first remarkable syntheses of managerial and architectural expertise.[19]

Focusing on the bureaucracy of local government, Otlet provided a view of an ideal typical municipal administration building of the future (Fig. 3). Lacking realistic

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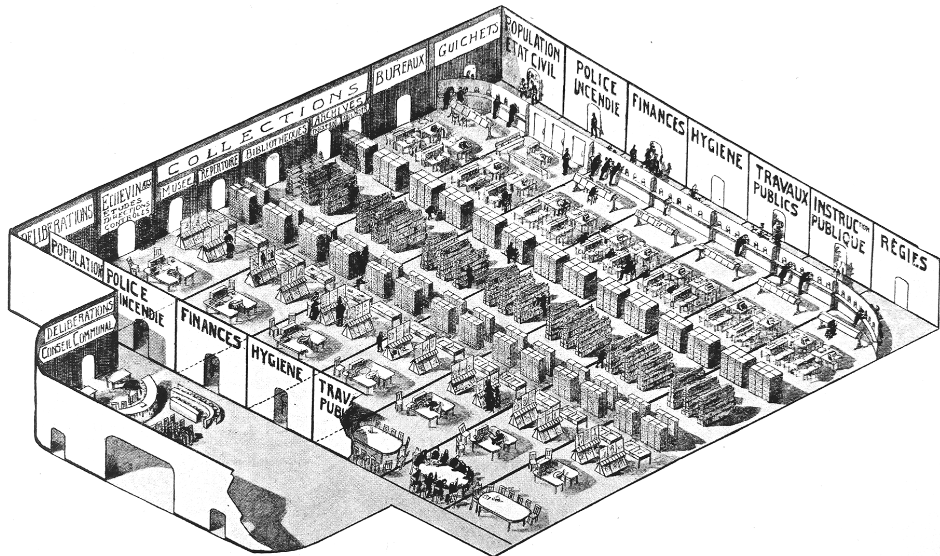

Fig. 3. *Paul Otlet, diagrammatic view of an ideal typical municipal administration building, from Georges Rency,* La Belgique et la guerre: La vie matérielle de la Belgique durant la guerre mondiale *(1920), p. 303*

details on constructional aspects, the drawing represented a diagrammatical open office. This office was spatially determined by two axes, respectively representing the municipal functions (such as the registry of births, deaths and marriages, the police department, and so on) and the constituent components of the administrative process (such as the services provided to the public via counters, the filing of documentation in archival drawers and bookshelves, and the study work undertaken by the aldermen). The flow of communication and paperwork was facilitated by the open-plan design, and so was the establishment of mutual observation between various categories of employees. Only for the municipal council meetings did Otlet project a space distinctly separate from those of the other components of the administrative process, thereby underscoring the municipal council's legislative rather than executive role in the municipal framework. By integrating a 'museum' in the open-plan office, Otlet even seemed to hint at the desirability that members of the public would penetrate into the heart of the administrative machinery — where they could, in passing, observe the aldermen's everyday activities.

A similar idea, of integrating visiting citizens into government office buildings, had been recommended almost a century earlier by the English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. In *Constitutional Code*, his 1830 study on governmental reform, Bentham emphasised the need to have ministerial functionaries directly supervised by the public, as a safeguard against corruption.[20] In a similar way, Otlet's diagram functioned as a normative metaphor for perfect governance. As such, the drawing both illustrates a belief in architectural transparency and serves as a telling example

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of the 'typically modern preoccupation for order', which according to Gardey had first been witnessed in the sphere of record-keeping around the turn of the century.[21] Otlet extended this need for 'order' to all aspects of municipal government: it was not only books and archives that needed to be systematically rationalised, categorised and fixed, but also municipal employees, as well as technical equipment and administrative procedures. In this idealist realm, the 'mediocre' and 'useless' functionary from Foucault's 'administrative grotesque' was to be rendered useful and efficient through the disciplinary power of transparency and order. Yet, by attempting to rationalise architectural space and human behaviour to the point of absurdity, Otlet's diagram shows how a quest for managerial control could easily evoke this 'grotesque'.

PRAGMATISM AND ICONOCLASM AROUND 1930

Neither Gérard's nor Otlet's theoretical contribution had any tangible impact. With regard to government office buildings, rentals and piecemeal acquisitions of townhouses remained the norm throughout the 1920s. In the face of a poorly performing economy and accompanying budgetary restraints, this was less expensive than commissioning new constructions, despite the high recurring costs and the inefficiencies caused by increasing dispersion. In this, Belgium was not unique; something similar occurred in the Netherlands, where construction policies of the inter-war period were largely limited to 'restorations, structural alterations, raised ceilings, and enlarged basements'.[22] Only at the end of the decade did the Belgian government order the construction of a new office building: a headquarters for the Ministry of Science and Arts, built in 1929–32 and designed by Georges Hano, an in-house architect of the Ministry of Public Works.[23] Located between two existing neoclassical townhouses, this eight-storey building blended with its surroundings through design elements such as bas-reliefs under the cornice, window grilles, a bluestone plinth and white natural stone for the façade. Inside, the headquarters was divided into two sections, separated from one another by an internal courtyard and linked through a corridor (Fig. 4). Each storey of the front section accommodated around nine office spaces, which could be used either as private rooms or as shared rooms for a maximum of about six civil servants. In the rear, every floor accommodated one non-compartmentalised space for larger groups of employees. Even though the archival sources are silent on this, the combination of enclosed workspaces for higher-ranking personnel and open offices for subaltern employees does create the impression of a pragmatic hybrid, which compromised between Fayolist notions of office work and traditional interpretations that favoured a high degree of privacy for leading civil servants.

In the first half of the 1930s, a much bolder statement — from an architectural as well as managerial point of view — was made by the modernist architect Stanislas ('Sta') Jasinski (1901–1978), who had studied painting at the Brussels academy and had worked for both Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde. Without governmental backing, Jasinski proposed a theoretical scheme for the improvement of the Belgian ministerial offices and, by extension, for a transformation of the capital's urban framework. His motivation seems to have been somewhat opportunistic: during economically dire times, he may have believed that government offices offered a possibility to raise his

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Fig. 4. *Ministry of Science and Arts headquarters building, designed by Georges Hano and built 1929–32, plan of typical floor (Archives of the City of Brussels)*

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profile simultaneously on both the architectural and the political scene. Promoting his idea in an article for the Flemish modernist art periodical *Opbouwen* in 1933, Jasinski began by accusing public authorities of 'negligence', claiming that the ongoing dispersal of governmental administrations in myriad locations forced citizens to 'drift from one office to the other […] full of anger when one at last arrives at the counter desk just to find out that it is closing time'.[24] The offices themselves were staffed by 'unhappy civil servants choking in damp air', who were forced to work amid 'creaking staircases', 'walls with crumbling plasterwork' and 'stacks of old documents and archives piling up on the floors and tables'. He concluded: 'To bring in a sense of order and logic in this mess [and] to restore job satisfaction […], all that needs to be done is to tear down the existing buildings and have them replaced by new, adequate ones.'[25]

One year earlier, in an article for *La revue documentaire*, a magazine dealing with innovations in the building trade, Jasinski had shown what 'adequate' offices should look like.[26] Much impressed by Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin after having visited the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau at the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs, Jasinski copied its core features in a project for the centre of Brussels (Fig. 5). Like Le Corbusier, he called for a *tabula rasa* approach to urban planning, proposing to demolish an entire neighbourhood located a stone's throw from the historic core of the city, the Grand-Place (visible top left). In its stead, Jasinski envisaged an undefined number of thirty-storey office skyscrapers, conceptually identical to the cruciform *grattes-ciel* from the Plan Voisin. Yet, while Le Corbusier had distinguished between sixty-storey skyscrapers for corporate administration and medium-rise blocks of about ten storeys for public administration, Jasinski — in keeping with the thinking of Fayol — envisaged uniform high-rise blocks that would accommodate commercial and governmental offices alike.[27] Breaking with governmental traditions in multiple ways, Jasinski's plan further implied a spatial concentration of the entire civil service in the so-called lower town, rather than in the uptown part of Brussels. The latter hosted the majority of the existing ministerial headquarters and had been a centre of political power since medieval times. Not surprisingly, Jasinski's iconoclastic and anti-historical vision was met with indifference in governmental circles. Yet as an artistic statement and specimen of radical paper architecture, his 1932 photomontage of cruciform skyscrapers later secured a firm place in the canon of Belgian architectural history.

MONUMENTALITY AND EFFICIENCY: REFORM PLANS IN 1935–39

By the mid-1930s, the Belgian economy had gone from bad to worse. In the years following the Wall Street crash of 1929, unemployment reached critical levels and wages fell significantly, while fascist-inspired organisations tried to capitalise on the impotence of the political establishment in addressing these problems. In 1935, however, a new prime minister took office, the centre-right Catholic lawyer and political scientist Paul van Zeeland, who was determined to transcend the economic and political crises. Confronted with the growing allure of fascism, Van Zeeland believed that only a 'strong state' (*État fort*) could implement much-needed reforms. As such, he sought to increase the power of the executive at the expense of parliament. Besides a currency devaluation, Van Zeeland adopted an 'administrative reform' programme aimed at the professionalisation and

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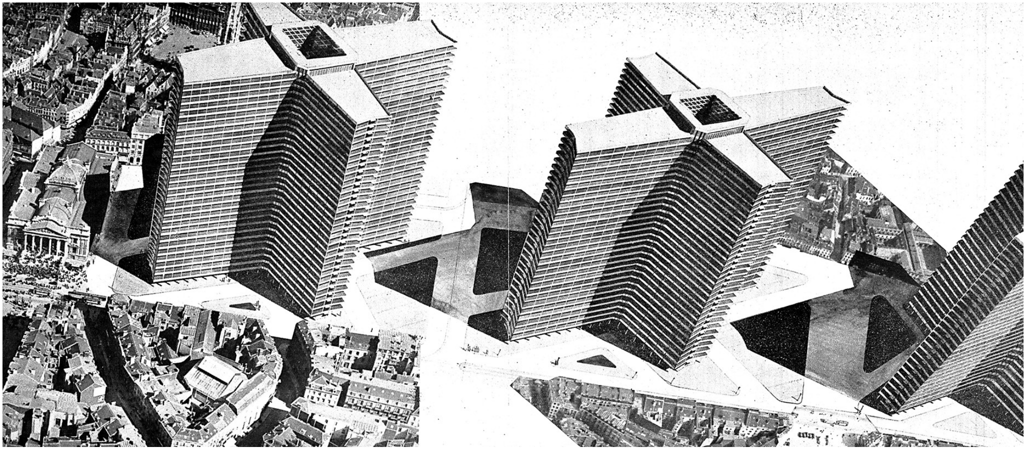

Fig. 5. *Project for the reconstruction of central Brussels with thirty-storey cruciform skyscrapers, photomontage from Sta Jasinski, 'Pourquoi et comment bâtir pour l'avenir?',* La revue documentaire*, 2, no. 2 (1932)*

'rationalisation' of the civil service. This reform sought nothing less than a managerial revolution. Without an efficient governmental administration, Van Zeeland asserted, state action could never reach the level of performance required.[28] In this, he was supported by Gérard, whom he appointed as minister of finance in his cabinet.

From 1936 until the start of the second world war (when it was abandoned), the intended revolution was entrusted to the so-called royal commissioner for administrative reform, a *sui generis* appointment given to the young Liberal political scientist Louis Camu (1905–1976). In a similar way to the Brownlow committee (1936–37) established in the United States under F. D. Roosevelt's New Deal, Belgium's royal commissioner was given the mandate of analysing the deficiencies of the civil service and coming up with solutions.[29] In contrast to this US counterpart, however, Camu also investigated the architecture of government offices, even treating the theme on a par with purely managerial issues. Believing that the in-house architects of the Department of Public Works were not up to the task of realising the desired scientisation of the government offices, he sought external architectural expertise and to this end approached Le Corbusier during a visit he was making to the Belgian capital. Decades later, in an interview in 1976, Camu recalled that he discussed civil service reform with the architect during a corridor chat at an unspecified conference, possibly the symposium on public housing organised by a Brussels-based association of lawyers (October 1937) or a meeting of the CIAM executive committee (July 1938).[30] By then, Le Corbusier could lay claim to some experience in the design of government offices: following his much-debated but fruitless participation in the 1926 architectural competition for the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva, he had designed the governmental Centrosoyuz office complex in Moscow (built 1928–36) and in 1936 had assisted a Brazilian team of architects with the concept design of the Ministry of Education and Health headquarters in Rio de Janeiro (built 1939–43). According

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to Camu, Le Corbusier reacted 'enthusiastically' to the royal commission's aims and proposed to design a thirty-storey office tower for the entirety of the civil service, to be located in the lower town near the future Brussels Central railway station. Even though no drawings appear to have been made, Camu later relayed Le Corbusier's idea to Hubert Pierlot, one of Van Zeeland's successors as prime minister (1939–40). Pierlot's candid reaction was succinct: 'Mais Camu, mais vous êtes fou!' ('Camu, you are crazy!').[31] Looking back almost four decades later, Camu likewise dismissed Le Corbusier's proposal as 'simplistic'.[32]

In the event, the royal commission appointed Jean-Jules Eggericx and Raphaël Verwilghen, two private architects who taught at the Institut Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs, the Brussels-based modernist school established in 1926 at the behest of Henri van de Velde.[33] During the 1920s and 1930s, Eggericx and Verwilghen collaborated on numerous residential buildings in Brussels and also, with Van de Velde, on the Belgian pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. In a 1937 internal exploratory report for Camu, Eggericx and Verwilghen outlined their vision. Drawing on the notion of the *Zeitgeist*, the architects claimed that every historical era had seen the production of architectural masterpieces indicative of the period's cultural values and convictions; in this regard, they believed that only a small number of government buildings in Brussels — most importantly the parliamentary complex and the ensemble of government offices in the rue de la Loi, both dating from the eighteenth century — were worth preserving. Almost all of the other 150 or so government buildings scattered throughout the capital were to be abandoned in favour of a medium-rise office complex to be built near the parliament, where the majority of civil servants would be concentrated. Clearly inspired by the widely publicised headquarters building of the German chemical conglomerate IG Farben in Frankfurt, designed by Hans Poelzig and built in 1928–30, the new modernist complex was to become representative of the current *Zeitgeist*, thereby 'establishing a continuity with the architectural ensemble created by the government over the course of the centuries' (Fig. 6).[34]

By emphasising a tight link between past and present, Eggericx and Verwilghen evoked the idea that the Belgian state derived its political legitimacy from the historical rootedness of its institutions. At the same time, they conceptualised their project within the framework of an ongoing and open-ended process of architectural construction, aimed at the creation of physical markers of national identity. This way, the architects also suggested that architectural modernism derived its artistic and social legitimacy from its rootedness in history. The latter idea corresponds to Adrian Forty's characterisation of modernism as an 'utterly "historical"' phenomenon, which 'claimed to be embodying the consciousness of the age' and was to be 'recognised [as such] in the future'.[35] Consequently, Eggericx and Verwilghen steered clear of the radical aesthetic choices found in Jasinski's and Le Corbusier's earlier plans for Brussels, even though they emphasised that the future office complex would be a manifestation of 'monumentality' and 'grandeur'.[36]

With regard to the functioning of the complex, Eggericx and Verwilghen suggested that the managerial ethos from the world of industry and commerce should also serve the world of government. They believed that 'office work must, like any other kind of work, be executed according to a preconceived plan which allows for interlinking the

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various steps of the work process'.[37] Like Fayol, they made no functional distinction between commercial and governmental worlds — even though it was clear, once again, that the governmental bureaucracy was to follow the managerial norms that had become commonplace in commercial contexts, rather than the other way round. They emphasised that government office buildings should be 'as efficient as a Factory' ('aussi efficient qu'une Usine'). By repeatedly using a capital letter throughout their report, Eggericx and Verwilghen imbued the notion of 'the Factory' with special significance. Even though they did not explicitly equate office buildings with factories, they did strongly imply this comparison, stating that 'the ministerial administrations should produce [original emphasis] and the buildings in which they are housed should be conceived to facilitate this production'.[38]

In Belgian texts on civil service reform, references to the factory as a conceptual model had been unheard of up to that point. In the transnational doctrinal framework of architectural modernism, however, they were ubiquitous. One of the best-known examples in this respect is the entry for the Geneva League of Nations headquarters competition (1926–27) by the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer (1889–1954). According to Meyer's widely published programme, various parts of the so-called Palais des Nations complex were to be equipped with a shed roof, while the building's façade cladding tiles were conceived in asbestos cement. These design elements from the world of industry were intentionally deployed to create an aura of anti-monumentality. Transparent and ordinary building materials were to represent the League of Nations as a non-elitist social institution; fully glazed walls and factory-like rooftops and construction materials were used as ideological markers of the democratic, pacifist and internationalist global politics to which the left-wing architect aspired. As Meyer stated in 1927:

> [N]o reception rooms garnished with columns for tired sovereigns, but hygienic work spaces for active representatives of the people. [N]o narrow corridors for the intrigues of diplomats, but open glazed rooms for public discussions.[39]

That factory workers had to be exposed to both intense natural lighting and close managerial supervision were basic tenets of scientific management. Meyer cleverly modified these industrial principles and transposed them to the solemn context of the League of Nations. Indeed, about a century after Bentham's *Constitutional Code* had advocated a close supervision of civil servants' activities by citizens, Meyer pleaded for a constellation of visual control to which the world's leaders and bureaucrats were to be permanently subjected. Expressing his distrust of the highbrow world of international diplomacy, Meyer did not simply deploy the factory as an architectural model — he turned its aesthetics and managerial rationality into a symbol of a new world, in which administrative secrecy, nationalist aspirations and, by extension, capitalist exploitation would no longer have a place. Paradoxically, Meyer's anti-monumental design was thus transformed again into a monument: a monument to radical democratic politics. Yet, as will become clear, an amalgamation of two different managerial rationalities — aimed at the functioning of the factory and the office respectively — into one architectural model could give rise to even more unresolved and unintended paradoxes.

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TRANSPARENCY VERSUS SECRECY

Camu's official 1937 report, *Rapport sur les bâtiments des administrations centrales de l'État*, drew on input from Eggericx and Verwilghen to explain how factory-like efficiency would be achieved in the new office complex.[40] In this context, the notion of surveillance came to play a major role, just as it had done in the writings of Fayol, whose work Camu greatly admired.[41] Camu proposed to create a single 'information service' for all ministries, preferably located on the ground floor of the office complex and connected by telephone to all departments. If questions were 'superficial', answers could be provided right away; if not, members of the public would be referred to specialised civil servants. In all circumstances, the primary contacts between citizens and administrators were to take place in counter halls:

> the public will see the civil servants through glazed partition walls. It is useless to create the impression that administrative work should be kept hidden. In the offices, the conduct [of the civil servants] will improve, while the public's confidence will rise.[42]

Rather than being a mere application of the principle of glazed open offices, these propositions served a central purpose in Camu's ethical programme. In line with Fayolist tenets, Camu believed that leading civil servants were to be universal men, capable of acting as 'pillars of the state'.[43] Through mutual visual surveillance, the lower-ranking ministerial workers were expected to mimic the impeccable behaviour of these role models. Eager to expand his reformist ambitions to society at large, Camu even sought to involve the public in his future regime of surveillance: every citizen, he believed, had the right to witness the exemplary nature of the (future) Belgian civil service. The intended outcome was public trust, leading to a virtuous circle: if citizens realised that the ministerial administrations were solely motivated by looking after the common good, governmental decisions would be accepted more easily and state power would subsequently increase. Independently of Meyer, with whose work he was probably not familiar, Camu thus sought to deploy visual transparency as a means of both generating moral revival and criticising administrative traditions.

Camu's 1937 report remained silent — perhaps intentionally so — about the nature of the office rooms for the top-ranking figures in the ministerial hierarchy, including the cabinet members and the secretaries-general. Were these individuals to be placed in glazed private offices enabling reciprocal surveillance, or rather in traditional, non-transparent rooms? No answer was given. In a similar vein, his report left other conceptual issues unresolved. In their 1937 architectural programme, Eggericx and Verwilghen had proposed to locate the counter halls in a small, low-rise, semi-detached pavilion (see Fig. 6, bottom left). Yet the surveillance scheme proposed by Camu — with members of the public controlling 'their' civil servants — necessitated a different kind of spatiality. What Eggericx and Verwilghen proposed was the type of space that Thomas A. Markus has termed the 'shallow visitor zone' (found in virtually all types of modern public buildings), where the effect is to forge distance, with the large majority of workers occupying 'a zone beyond, which, to the visitors, looks deep'.[44] For Camu, this distance was to be minimised. Even though he did not discuss the architectural consequences of his choice, it is clear that the proposed surveillance scheme could only function if counter halls were

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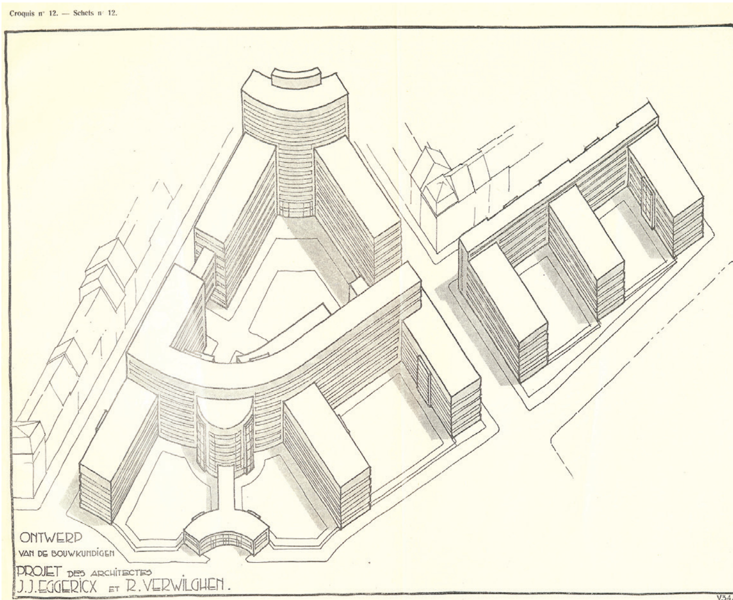

Fig. 6. *Jean-Jules Eggericx and Raphaël Verwilghen, project for a medium-rise government office complex in central Brussels, axonometric from Louis Camu,* Rapport sur les bâtiments des administrations centrales de l'État *(1937)*

fully integrated in the main building volume(s), where visitors could observe a more representative cross-section of the administrative work than in a peripheral pavilion. If realised, the result would have borne some resemblance to the theoretical proposal made around 1920 by Otlet.

Another unresolved issue in Camu's 1937 report concerned the notion of administrative secrecy. Any plea for total transparency, be it literal or conceptual, is by definition at odds with one of the chief characteristics of bureaucratic organisations: confidentiality. In his classic *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Economy and Society*) of 1919–22, Max Weber observed that 'every bureaucratic administration has an inclination to exclude the public' and that 'the bureaucracy hides its knowledge and its conduct from criticism as well as it can'.[45] This impulse towards secrecy, which is an integral part of civil service traditions throughout the world, serves a double aim: it reduces the potential for unwanted interference by the public, while also preventing personal information on citizens from being exposed to outsiders. The political scientist David Beetham has emphasised that this secrecy is not incompatible with democratic control, even though governmental administrations can never be permanently and integrally surveilled by the public: 'it is not that […] administration is subject to constant public gaze, but the knowledge that at any point it might become so, that forms part of the discipline of its accountability'.[46] As an *intimus* of the governmental administration (and as the author of a number of confidential reports), Camu must have been quite aware of the administration's inherent and, to a certain degree, indispensable tendency towards secrecy and opaqueness. Indeed, even if the public had been allowed to exert visual surveillance, many aspects of administrative secrecy would inevitably have remained intact.

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CONCLUSION

The 1936–40 architectural plans of the royal commission for administrative reform came to nothing. Even though the functional programme of the commission's government office complex was further developed in the years 1938–40, no new buildings saw the light of day before the commission's disbandment in May 1940, at the start of the second world war. The planning work undertaken by Camu and his architectural team does show, however, how architectural conceptions of new government offices were strongly tied with normative ideas on governmental functioning, and how these were heavily inspired by transnationally circulating managerial models from the worlds of industry and commerce. In this respect, the efficiency theories of Fayol, picked up by Belgian thinkers such as Otlet and Gérard, served as a crucial source of inspiration. Additionally, the ideas of internationally recognised modern architects such as Le Corbusier and Poelzig played their part.

Through an architectural language of form that was to be both modern and 'monumental', the royal commission sought to forge a historical continuity with a limited number of existing ministry buildings, thereby intensifying and dramatising through aesthetic means the societal significance of the governmental bureaucracy. Yet the commission's attempts at transposing managerial and architectural principles from the corporate to the governmental sector created a range of problems and paradoxes that were insufficiently recognised at the time. By conceptualising office buildings for the civil service as spaces determined by a commerce- or factory-like efficiency, where the 'administrative grotesque' could be eradicated for ever, the royal commission prescribed a Fayolist scheme of visual surveillance. It was not clear, however, how this principle was to be architecturally realised. Hence Camu's promotion of transparent counter halls as a means of creating public trust in government can be characterised as a somewhat populist narrative: behind the counters, large parts of the civil service's functioning would have remained opaque, figuratively and literally. At best, the suggestion can be considered symbolic: the counter halls in the planned complex were to become the theatre of a staged presentation, with a fraction of the civil service's work force taking up the role as incarnations of perfection. Ultimately, it seems that the design for a new ministry office building by the government architect Hano, completed in 1932, was the best embodiment in the inter-war period of the scientisation of the government office, for in Hano's hands traditional notions of privacy for the *chefs* were combined with novel managerial ideals on surveillance for lower-ranking clerks. Lacking the novelty found in the plans of Otlet, Jasinski and Camu, Hano's design was a pragmatic hybrid that probably best suited the conservative forces inherent in the civil service.

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BIOGRAPHY

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