GÉRALD LEDENT

THE STANDARDIZATION OF HOUSING

FROM HEROISM TO FLAT PRAGMATISM

Throughout history, cultural realities have transformed ideological stances according to local contingencies. Modernist thinking did not escape this rule. The permanence of socio-cultural codes embedded in local traditional housing types has made the Modernists' much promoted *tabula rasa*, illusory. In fact, modernist projects emerged in culturally charged contexts which gave them particular distinctions. Therefore, seemingly similar housing typologies were neither experienced nor even executed in the same way whether they were developed in Berlin, Paris, London or Brussels.

In Belgium, and especially in Brussels, modernist housing was perceived through the lens of a previous benchmark: the individual row house, to which it stands in total contradiction both in terms of material culture and sociological foundation.

This standard house took its archetypical form at the end of the 19th century.[1] Coming from a long aesthetic and technical evolution, the typical row house welcomed the lifestyle of the growing bourgeoisie of the time.

In most Belgian urban agglomerations, this archetype became the constitutive element of the large masterplans[2] that organized the expansion of cities. The row houses were the products of private and resolutely individual real estate developments.

The Belgian row house that Victor Horta himself qualifies as a 'typical average nice house of the times'[3] can be described through a few precise characteristics. First, it is defined by an organic relationship with the surrounding urban fabric. The individual row house is aligned and inserted in an existing closed urban block which clearly defines the front and the rear parts of the house. Second, the row house presents an individual character, sheltering a family and its domestic help. Third, these homes are limited in height, rarely exceeding four floors. Above this height, sensorial relations to the street are no longer possible.[4] Finally, all these houses follow a repetitive plan, articulating two types of rooms – the main and the secondary ones – without a predefined function.

A total of 291.000 such buildings were erected between 1800 and 1914 in the Brussels' region alone.[5] The marks of this unprecedented expansion remain profoundly visible in the residential fabric of Belgian cities. Today more than a third of the dwellings in Brussels are row houses.[6] Additionally, this type of housing accounts for half of the residential surfaces of the large urban agglomerations.[7]

This typology experienced little evolution prior to the First World War. During the *Art Nouveau* period these traditional houses retained much of their characteristics, but their plans drastically changed as the circulation system took a radical turn. If the first social housing projects challenged the sacrosanct street alignment with new urban morphologies (garden cities and semi open blocks), they were marginal and the figure of the individual row house remained preponderant in Belgium until the Second World War. In contrast to the majority of other European cities[8], almost no intermediate examples have been developed between this type of houses and the modernist apartment blocks erected after the Second World War. These modernist buildings radically opposed all the four characteristics of the traditional row house typology.

Besides positioning itself in total contradiction to the traditional domestic types, Belgian Modernism has further developed through two successive waves, producing very contrasting results. These two waves distinguished themselves from one another through their ideological approach as well as

1 Gérald Ledent, *Genèse de la maison bruxelloise*. In: Anania p. & Declève B. (eds.) *Montréal et Bruxelles en projet[s]. Les enjeux de la densification urbaine*. Louvain-la-Neuve: PUL (2017).

2 B. Zitouni, *Agglomérer. Une anatomie de l'extension bruxelloise*, (1828-1915), VUB-Press (2017).

3 L. Devos, *Analyse d'une maison mitoyenne bruxelloise de 1914*, Bruxelles, Institut Supérieur d'Architecture Saint-Luc (1997).

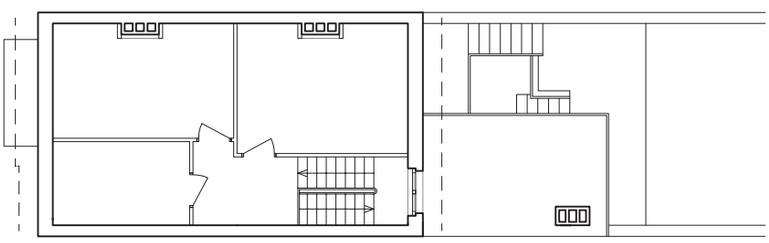
4 'At three or four stories, (…), you can see details in the street (…). From three stories you can yell out, and catch the attention of someone below. Above four stories these connections break down.' See: Alexander C., Ishikawa, S. & Silverstein M., *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction*, Oxford University Press (1977), p.118.

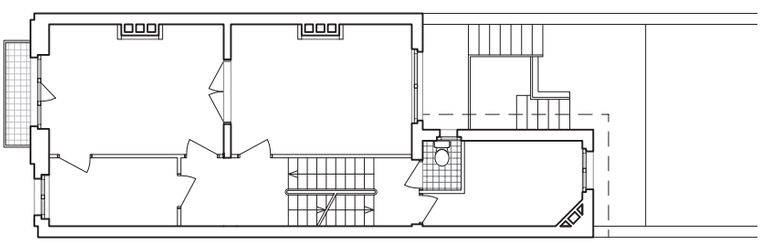
5 These buildings are essentially single-family houses. See: Loeckx J. & Van Ransbeeck, S., *Typologie van de Brusselse woonhuizen*, A. Monteyne (1981).

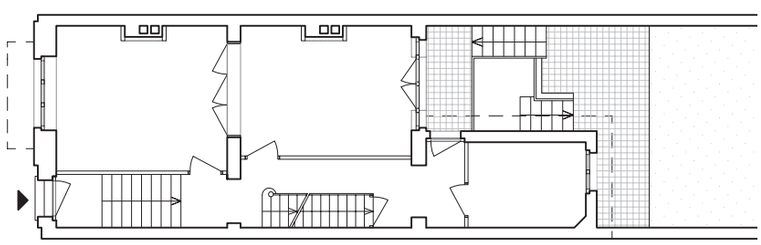
6 On a total stock of 546 118 housing units in Brussels, 195 831 find place in a typical raw house out of which 140.000 date from before 1918. See: Ledent G., *Potentiels Relationnels. L'aptitude des dispositifs physiques de l'habitat à soutenir la sociabilité. Bruxelles, le cas des immeubles élevés et isolés de logement*. UCL Louvain (2014), p.96.

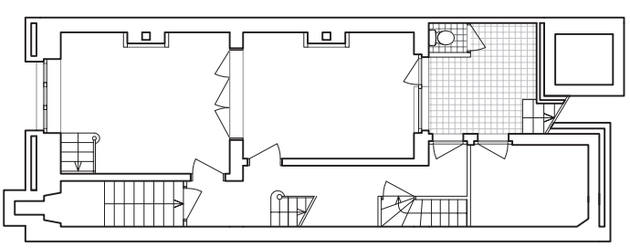
7 Ibid.

8 As it is the case for Haussmannian Buildings in Paris, the *Siedlungen* in Germany or the collective housings of the Amsterdam school.









their impact on the built environment. The first wave could be qualified as heroic and dissident. Before the Second World War, a few pioneers inspired by the CIAM's ideas attempted to impose their architectural and urban vision. Their achievements were mainly theoretical and resulted in a very limited amount of constructions. The second wave which emerged after the Second World War, was pragmatic and seemingly forgot the precepts of the founding fathers of Modernism. Only the forms and modes of production established by the first wave were kept. The effervescence of post-war reconstruction resulted in the second wave of modernism having a much greater impact on the appearance of our territories, creating new forms of both infrastructure and housing.

HEROISM

Before the Second World War, Modernism was mainly introduced under the influence of Belgian members of the CIAM; Victor Bourgeois, Huib Hoste, Louis-Herman De Coninck, Renaat Braem and Raphael Verwilghen.[9] The group of architects called *l'Équerre*[10], took over the Belgian office of the CIAM from 1935 on, and began to spread the ideas of modern architecture and town planning through their eponymous magazine. For the Dutch-speaking world, the magazine *Opbouwen*, founded by Huib Hoste did a similar job. The third CIAM, organized in 1930 in Brussels, constituted a high point for the Belgian scene of modern architecture.

The CIAM meeting proposed to adapt architecture to societal changes. In this respect, the declaration of the first congress of La Sarraz (Switzerland) is unequivocal since it affirmed the need for a new architecture, one that would satisfy the 'present-day material, sentimental and spiritual, intellectual demands'[11]. If this first meeting established a posture, anchoring the congress in Modernism and determined its objectives, the following conferences addressed specific topics. The CIAM's debates were focusing on two major topics: urbanism and housing. The four first congresses perfectly summarized the concerns of modernist architects regarding housing. The second CIAM meeting in Frankfurt, '*Die Wöhnung für das Existenz minimum*'[12], was devoted to rational construction and the functional conception of housing. The third CIAM, organized in Brussels, was primarily about the construction of groups of dwellings and the opportunity to build both vertically and horizontally.[13] The concerns of the fourth CIAM, summarized by the words *'*Can our cities survive?*'*[14] and *'*The charter of Athens'[15], were mainly related to urbanism. Le Corbusier's text, mainly addresses the need to redefine the city and to reorganize its functions by dividing them into four categories: housing, leisure, work and transportation. Among these functions, the dwelling was the 'initial cell'[16] and formed the central piece of urban planning.

In line with the precepts established by the CIAM, visionary projects were proposed in Belgium, such as the linear city between Antwerp and Liège by Renaat Braem (1934)[17], the competition for the left bank in Antwerp by Le Corbusier(1933), the clustering of the city administration along the *grand boulevards* of Brussels by Stanislas Jasinski (1930)[18] or even the '*Nouveau Bruxelles*' that Victor Bourgeois proposed at the third CIAM in Brussels. None of these projects were ever carried out.[19]

As far as housing is concerned, Victor Bourgeois' proposal for Brussels[20] is exemplary. He imagined the capital city to be a territorial phenomenon going beyond its usual limits and spreading along the canal – between its economic lungs

9 E. Rey, *International Congress for Modern Architecture. CIAM: Dokumente 1928-1939*, Birkhauser (1979).

10 Sébastien Charlier, *L'équerre: réédition intégrale – the complete edition*, Édititons Fourre-Tout (2012).

11 See: CIAM 1928. La Sarraz declaration, in Le Corbusier, *La Charte d'Athènes*, Paris, Points (1942), pp. 119-123.

12 F. A. M. Hochbauamt, *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*, Englert & Schlosser (1930).

13 M. Ragon, *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme moderne*, Seuil (1991), p.141.

14 J.L. Sert, *Can our cities survive?: An ABC of urban problems, their analysis, their solutions*, Harvard University Press (1942).

15 Le Corbusier, *La Charte d'Athènes*, Paris, Points (1942), pp. 119-123.

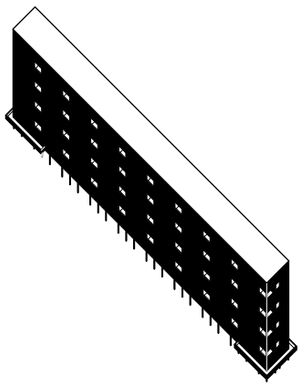
16 Ibid, p. 110.

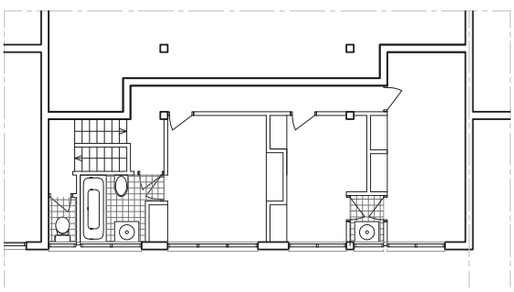
17 Francis Strauven & Renaat Braem, *Renaat Braem: les aventures dialectiques d'un moderniste flamand*, Archives d'architecture moderne (1985).

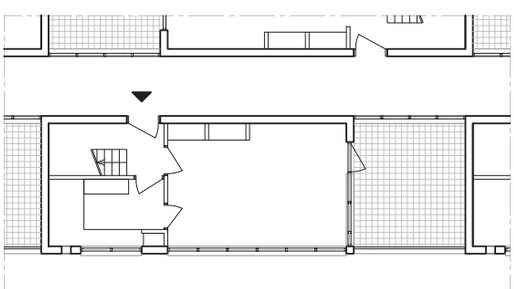
18 J. Vandenbreeden, *Art Déco et Modernisme en Belgique*, Tielt, Racine (1996), p. 207.

19 Geert Beekaert & Francis Strauven, *La construction en Belgique. 1945-1970*, Anvers, Confédération nationale de la Construction (1971).

20 This project was fully developed in the magazine *L'Émulation*. See: Victor Bourgeois, *L'Urbanisation du Grand-Bruxelles*, L'Émulation (1932) 52, pp. 167-183, and Victor Bourgeois, *Habitations Minima*. L'Émulation (1931), pp. 391-414.







situated to the North and the South. Similarly to other modernist architects of the time[21], Bourgeois proposed a new city formed of four residential zones, resolutely turning its back on the old city. This new city was organized around a large cross featuring leisure activities and community facilities. Housing was organized in long slab buildings, ten-story high, free-standing in green spaces in the immediate vicinity of services such as kindergartens, playgrounds, parking lots, etc.

The apartment blocks proposed by Victor Bourgeois were inspired by the ideas of Ginzburg and Le Corbusier.[22] Each building consisted of a simple *domino* structure offering a wide range of possible spatial arrangements.[23] The ground floor and first floor were intended for commercial use. Above, the dwellings were organized into duplexes accessible every other floor by an interior street. Wide terraces were connected to the living spaces and directly lit the interior circulation. All modern comforts were foreseen: 'rational kitchen equipments'[24], bathroom, but also a supply line that included both conveyor belts and goods lifts. Finally, gardens, sports facilities, and sun decks were planned on the roofs.

The dwellings proposed by Bourgeois were the opposite of the traditional Brussels' housing type, described earlier. First of all, they dismissed the principle of a closed urban block with a designated front and a back for each unit. On the contrary, the project proposed isolated buildings surrounded by greenery. In these buildings, collective living replaced the individual character of the traditional houses. The modernist architects became the main proponents of this new housing form, claiming that it 'civilizes men because it enables courteous neighborly interactions and mutual help between co-owners and co-renters'[25]. Secondly, the relatively high skyline proposed by Bourgeois contrasted with the low-rise character of traditional Belgian cities. These new heights created a difficult debates, as witnessed by the numerous critiques that flourished both in popular and specialized press.[26] Finally and perhaps even more significantly, Bourgeois' buildings provided a functional definition of domestic space. Each room's dimensions and location was defined according to its function in respect of the spatial standards given by ergonomic studies. Housing spaces were thus calibrated with great capacity for invention, in order to provide the minimum space necessary for all imaginable domestic functions at that time.

PRAGMATISM

Born between the First and Second World Wars modernism was late in impacting the Belgian built environment; it was only after the Second World War that conditions for its appearance were propitious. In fact, in the early post-war period, the three pillars of Modernism came together. First of all, a strong and centralized welfare state appeared. It controlled a national territory which had been 'scientifically' explored during the war in order to take advantage of its natural, economic and social resources. New industrial managerial techniques soon followed and became the main tools of Modernism. In a post-war era these new techniques, particularly those involving civil engineering, were heavily influenced by military engineering.[27] The modernist rhetoric born before the war was resuscitated, but mainly as a pretext. The heroic thought of the early Modernists drifted away from its ideals to focus on the rationalist logics only. As Bruno Vayssière emphasizes, the housing problem was to become 'the object of work of civil servants and industrialists'[28]. In these conditions,

21 See: Le Corbusier, Ville Contemporaine pour 3 millions d'habitants, (1922), or; Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Hochhausstadt* (1925).

22 Even if the blocks of flats of Victor Bourgeois are way thinner (9 m) than *the Unité* of Le Corbusier (24 m).

23 'Faisons des bâtiments neutres, non plus limités par l'étroitesse de leur façade individuelle, mais libérés et enrichis mutuellement par la longue file de toutes leurs façades et accueillants par définition, à des aménagements successifs.' Victor Bourgeois, *Habitations Minima*. L'Émulation (1931), p. 396.

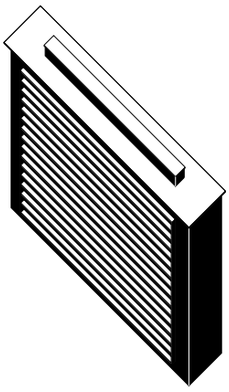
24 Here, Bourgeois refers to the cubex kitchen that De Koninck presented at the *Journées de l'Habitation Minimum* in 1930.

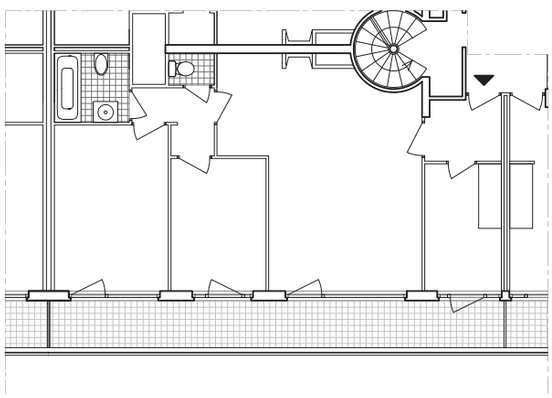
25 S. Jasinski, *propos des immeubles à logement collectif*, in *La Maison* (1957).

26 P. Van Dijk, *Immeubles à appartements de l'entre-deux-guerres*, Bruxelles, Ministère de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. (2007), p. 30, see also R. Marique, *Buildings où tours à taudis*, in *La Maison*, n°7 (1947), pp. 172-197.

27 B. Vayssière, *Reconstruction, Déconstruction – Le Hard French ou L'Architecture Française Des Trente Glorieuses*, Paris, Picard (1988).

28 Ibid.





the 'inhabitable was replaced by the constructible'[29]. In Belgium, as in numerous European countries, the post-war state apparatus used modernization rhetoric to launch a technocratic reconstruction of the country, on the level of infrastructure as much as of housing. On the one hand, new infrastructures (roads, freeways, rings, etc.) were built, mainly supporting automobile traffic and accompanying the rebuilding of urban areas (*plan Tekhné*[30], *plan Manhattan*[31]). Large parts of cities were then sacrificed on the altar of modernity. The Universal Exhibition of 1958 illustrates the ambitions of the Belgian state in terms of reconstruction and its full commitment to the modernistic approach. On the other hand, the post-war period was marked by a housing deficit, estimated to about 300,000 units. The two laws De Taye (1948) and Brunfaut (1949), attempted to provide a concrete response to this issue. The aim of the first was to encourage the construction and acquisition of modest homes by private individuals. The second, pushed by the socialist architect Fernand Brunfaut, planned to rather support public housing activities. This meant developing public housing through the financing of public space and infrastructure. It was planned that the state would finance the totality of the road works connected with public housing. In 1953, again on the initiative of Minister Alfred De Taye, a law was passed in order to fight against unhealthy living conditions. Communes were reimbursed 80% of the cost of slum clearance. This decision brought about massive cleanup – and destruction – operations of popular neighborhoods.[32]

From 1956 on, state intervention was limited to complexes comprised of a minimum of 25 dwellings.[33] This rule brought about the construction of large apartment buildings in the form of modern slabs (or modern towers). Whatever the initiatives, public or private, housing in Belgium was seen in a radically new way.[34] In the large Belgian cities, a new infrastructural network was implemented. It seemed completely natural that apartment blocks should be grafted on this new network, thus turning their back on traditional urban fabrics.

Different from the heroic period, this housing had to be built rapidly and in great numbers. Where invention had been valued during the previous period, the production in this new era was rather organized in series and based on norms stated more or less explicitly for both the public and private sectors.[35] These norms confirmed the notion of a 'household'[36] and of the nuclear family as the basis for housing production. In spite of all this, some minimal plans were established by the National Society of Housing and Lodging. A part of the public sector's production remained inventive in the implantation of buildings as much as in the organization of housing. Descendents of the modern avant-garde, some housing operations of the early post-war period followed the precepts of the Athens Charter to the letter. This was the case in Laeken's *Cité Modèle*, in *Ieder Zijn Huis* in Evere, but also in Kiel and Droixhe.

Pragmatic modernism is best illustrated in the private developments of apartment buildings of the post-war period. From the 1960s on, a series of private developers (Etrimo, Amelinckx, Broens, etc.) produced housing of exceptional homogeneity. These developers worked on a large scale. They began by buying vast pieces of land, either from individual property owners, old industrial sites or agricultural land. In the absence of legislation concerning building heights or density, the developers set the tone by negotiating directly with the local authorities, thus playing an important role in the rebuilding

29 Paul Chemetov in Dufaux F. & Fourcaut A. (ed.), *Le monde des grands ensembles. France, Allemagne, Pologne, Russie, République tchèque, Bulgarie, Algérie, Corée du Sud, Iran, Italie, Afrique du Sud,* Cachan, Éditions Créaphis (2004), p. 10.

30 De Saulnier, *Bruxelles à l'heure de la renovation*, in *Habiter* (1963), pp. 2-34.

31 A. Martens & M. Vandenaande, *Quartier Nord. Le relogement des expulses*, Bruxelles, EPO (1994).

32 This law is probably at the origine of the Tekhné plan for the center of Brussels commissioned by the city administration in 1955 and presented in 1962. See: De Saulnier, *Bruxelles à l'heure de la renovation*, in Habiter (1963), pp. 2-34.

33 R. Schoonbrodt, *Sociologie de l'habitat social*, Editions des Archives d'Architecture Moderne (1979), p.37. See also: F. Noël, *Les politiques d'habitat*, Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles (2009).

34 A. Brauman, p. Culot, J-P. Hoa, C. Mierop, H. Paindaveine & A. Van Loo, *L'immeuble et la parcelle. Les immeubles à appartements comme éléments constitutifs du tissu urbain. Le cas de Bruxelles. 1870-1980*, Bruxelles, Editions des Archives d'Architecture Moderne (1982), p. 2.

35 Jean Delhaye, *L'appartement d'aujourd'hui*, Desoer (1946), M. Mombach, *Plans minima. Première série. 1948-1949*, Bruxelles, Société Nationale des habitations et logement à bon marché (1948).

36 Ibid.

of certain neighborhoods, but also in the development of the Belgian suburbs, particularly in Brussels.

Originally these apartment buildings were mainly found on the outskirts of city centers but today cities have grown around them. The surrounding greenery and the reasonable driving distance from the city center were the main selling points. For technical and economic reasons these apartment blocks were generally limited to twelve floors above an underground garage. In the beginning, some common services such as laundries on the roof, a community room and a caretaker's dwelling were assigned to each of the circulation cores. The housing slabs often had a North-South orientation, with balconies along their two main facades. The flats, often mono-oriented, were organized in a particularly repetitive manner. As an example, Etrimo's apartments offered identical plans, duplicated four times around a vertical nucleus limited to a strict minimum. This arrangement were repeated two to four times according to the possibilities of the plot. In terms of proportion, these buildings are quite far from those of the pioneers of the Modern movement. The buildings are thicker in order to increase profit, and the care given to composition and materiality is compromised. Within the flat itself every space is measured and dimensioned in a normative way. Moreover, new spatial distinctions appear clearly, such as the separation between day and night spaces or between parents' and children's bedrooms.[37]

In general, the buildings produced by the private sector were much more timid in terms of typological innovation than in the public sector. The private developers focused on pragmatic modernism and their products were devoid of the ambitions of the modern movement ideology. The heroic model of the first wave was completely abandoned and housing simply became a serially produced goods. Nevertheless, beyond the revival of modernism, the typical floor plans established by private developers were the products of market studies and aimed at conforming in the best way possible to the demand of the real estate market in Belgium.[38] Thus they were able to aptly interpret the concerns that Belgians had regarding housing from the 1950s until the 1970s.

CRITIQUE

Modernism proposed a rupture with the codes of the past and the coming of a new society. Concerning housing, this proposal rejected the historical traditions and the constitution of domestic types coming from a long sedimentation of uses, aesthetic codes, and techniques that reflected local cultural conventions. In Belgium, modernist ideas about housing, as developed by the CIAM, were radical since they opposed traditional housing structures on every point.

The first modernist wave – heroic – was founded on innovation and produced dwellings whose disposition was entirely functional. The architects' ambitions were explicit; it was about transforming ways of living. The models imagined by the first wave, were essentially rhetorical.

The second wave – pragmatic – was confronted with the necessity of building a great number of housing units and let the innovations of first modernists be replaced by systematization and codification of housing. Ambitions then had nothing left of the revolutionary, but the opposite; space was simply used to settle the welfare state that the war had left behind. Heroic models were set aside, replaced products generated according to norms.

37 The emergence of a clear split between living rooms and sleeping rooms only appears in the 20th century. See C. Moley, *L'immeuble en formation: genèse de l'habitat collectif et avatars intermédiaires*, Mardaga, (1991). See also: C. Moley, *La genèse du jour/nuit. Scission de l'espace du logement en deux parties*. In: M. Eleb-Vidal, (ed.) *La maison. Espaces et intimités*. Paris: École d'Architecture Paris-Villemin (1986).

38 According to the interview of Pol Mertens, former partner of Jean-Florian Colin at Etrimo.

This shift within the modernist model seemed to be unanimously accepted among the population and the politicians, as a result of the strong desires for progress and change just after the war. But, from the end of the 1960s, social crises and energy consumption caused discord around the modernist housing production. Initially representative of a new age of progress, this housing type was then criticized from different points of view. This first criticism concerned the poor quality of the construction and the subsequently high consumption of energy. Secondly, the free space surrounding the buildings was called into question due to its inability to be part of a city. Finally, the social movement of the 1960s showed to what extent functionalism and the following normalization of housing as a market product, blocked its possible evolution. The modernist models and the products made in series that succeeded them were often unable to accommodate the evolution of cultural conventions within the society and the uses they brought about. Yet, over the last few years, repetitive economic crises have led people to reconsider the stigmatization from which modernist housing blocks built in the 1970s, have suffered. Today they receive a more objective attention concerning their potentials: robust construction, vast, open spaces at their feet, effective and minimal circulation spaces, shared facilities, well-lit spaces, wide open views, visual landmarks in relatively low-rise Belgian cities, etc. All of these elements are positive points that allow the rehabilitation of these buildings. This objective re-reading of the qualities of modernist architecture provides a fundamental measure of the possibility of renovation.