

*Strand 2. Art Nouveau and Politics in the Dawn of Globalisation*

**Style Congo in the Congo: Tracing Art Nouveau in Mbanza-Ngungu**

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Abstract

This paper addresses Belgian Art Nouveau's links to colonialism by looking at the movement's industrial offshoots in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Hotel Alimentation du Bas-Congo (1904-8) and its adjoining prefabricated colonial village in Mbanza-Ngungu will be the primary focus. Manufactured with prefabricated iron in Belgium, the Hotel ABC structures present a pared down version of the influential Belgian movement. Tracing Art Nouveau from its high point of organic total artworks in Brussels to factory-made versions in the colony serves to expand the implications of its colonial legacy. When viewed within the lush conditions of the Congo, the Hotel ABC structures' distinctive metal frameworks expose the inflexibilities of Art Nouveau in its conception of the natural world.

**Keywords:** Belgian Art Nouveau, postcolonial history, colonial architecture, prefabricated iron, Congo

## **The Congo in Brussels, the Capital of Art Nouveau**

This paper addresses Belgian Art Nouveau's links to colonialism by looking at the movement's industrial offshoots in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Hotel Alimentation du Bas-Congo (1904-8) and its adjoining prefabricated colonial village in Mbanza-Ngungu will be the primary focus. Manufactured with prefabricated iron in Belgium, the Hotel ABC structures present a pared down version of the influential Belgian movement. Tracing Art Nouveau from its high point of organic total artworks in Brussels to factory-made versions in the colony serves to expand the implications of its colonial legacy. When viewed within the lush conditions of the Congo, the Hotel ABC structures' distinctive metal frameworks expose the inflexibilities of Art Nouveau in its conception of the natural world. In *fin de siècle* Brussels, iconic examples of Art Nouveau set up an image of the Congo as an abundant source of raw nature.

The strong connection of Belgian Art Nouveau to the colonial endeavor of Belgium's King Leopold II has never been a secret. The king's African colony, the Congo Free State (CFS), existed from 1885 to 1908, which coincided with the height of Art Nouveau in Belgium. The movement that coalesced around well-known practitioners such as Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde took place from approx. 1890 to 1905. As a result of coinciding timelines, this fundamental root of European Art Nouveau became entangled with King Leopold II's colonial enterprise in Africa. The city of Brussels was enriched with various new architectural features with money generated by the CFS, including certain Art Nouveau exhibitions and buildings. As well as being patronized by businessmen who had active interests in the colony (such as Ernest Solvay), the colonial administration commissioned key Art Nouveau total artworks.

Horta designed the iconic Hôtel Van Eetvelde (1995) for Edmond Van Eetvelde, the Chief Administrator of the CFS. The interior design of the building in which a part of the business of the Congo took place included subtle allusions to the fauna and flora of the Congo. The most prominent commission led to one of the many names ascribed to the movement as "Style Congo" (Bruneel-Hye de Crom and Luwel, 1967: 60). This was the *Congo Pavilion [Palais des Colonies]* held at Tervuren, just outside of Brussels on the occasion of the 1897 Brussels World's Fair. Major Art Nouveau designers such as Henry Van de Velde, Paul Hankar and Gustave Serrurier-

Bovy participated in designing halls in which the various attributes of the colony were displayed for the Belgian public. Congolese culture, raw materials as well as import and export products were laid out within immersive and seductive Art Nouveau environments (See Fig 1). The inauguration of Art Nouveau to a wider audience, outside of avant-garde circles in which it was incubated, was indelibly tied to King Leopold II's Congo.

It is now established fact that the years of Leopold II's reign in the Congo saw its population drastically depleted, with some estimates seeing half of its people wiped out.<sup>1</sup> Reports of extreme human rights abuses by the CFS administration, particularly in the case of rubber extraction, began to circulate internationally from 1890. With agitation from movements like the British-led Congo Reform Association, which pursued a public campaign against King Leopold II for his avariciousness in the Congo, the Belgium government was eventually pressurized into taking control of the colony in 1908.

There is a growing scholarship around the implications of the complicity of the influential Belgian Art Nouveau movement in what has become known internationally as one of the most notorious colonial regimes in Africa. Deborah Silverman has been at the forefront of locating connections between Victor Horta and Henry Van de Velde to colonial activity in the Congo. In the series of articles, "Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism," she describes Belgian Art Nouveau as a style of domination, directly influenced by images emerging from the colony.<sup>2</sup> These include the influences of Congolese nature, the colonial whiplash used exert harsh punishment on Congolese subjects and (in van de Velde's work) the body art of Congolese subjects. This work has serious implications for the legacy of Art Nouveau in Brussels (popularly

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: International Relations of Identity*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Silverman: "Art Nouveau Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism Part I", *West 86th*, 18, 2011, pp. 2–45; Deborah Silverman: "Art Nouveau Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism Part II", *West 86th*, 19, 2012, pp. 175–195; Deborah Silverman: "Art Nouveau Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism Part III", *West 86th*, 20, 2013, pp. 3–61

dubbed the capital of Art Nouveau) and the museum of Tervuren, inaugurated by the 1897 Congo Pavilion.

This paper moves away from focusing on *fin de siècle* Belgium to look at the offshoots of Art Nouveau that were erected in the Congo in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The primary concern is what further layers can be added to our understanding of Art Nouveau's relationship to colonialism through looking at the industrial versions that were sent to the Congo. Contrary to the work of outspoken Art Nouveau architects like Horta and Van de Velde, very little information concerning the origins of this architecture exist. My analysis therefore rests on my current day experience of the structures. I believe this approach has much to tell concerning the legacy of these buildings: as representations of both the colonial industrialization processes that birthed them and the logical denouement of the aesthetic ideology espoused in the movement that preceded it.

### **Iron Hotels and a Prepackaged Village**

The Hotels Alimentation du Bas-Congo (ABC) were erected in Mbanza Ngungu (known as Thysville during the colonial period) between 1904 and 1908 and Kinshasa (Leopoldville) in 1911. Their purpose was to accommodate colonial travellers frequenting the first railway, the Matadi-Leopoldville line. Their iron frameworks were manufactured in Hoboken by the Antwerp factory Grandes Chaudronneries de l'Escaut.<sup>3</sup> While the Hotels ABC in both Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu can be regarded as continuations of Art Nouveau because of their iron exoskeletons, I will focus on the latter. Unlike its sister structure, the Mbanza-Ngungu hotel also came with prefabricated housing for European workers. This presents a continuation of the rural version of Belgian Art Nouveau, transposed into Africa.

The *Hotel ABC* and its adjacent village formed the foundational buildings of the colonial station of Thysville. Named after Colonel Albert Thys, director of the Matadi-Leopoldville line construction, Thysville began as a station for European railway workers. This occupied land previously known as Nsonga Ngungu, meaning "the market place." Occupation of the fertile area

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<sup>3</sup> Robert, "De la villegaiture ...", 148.

for the purposes of building the station necessitated the removal of the two villages of Ntolungudi and Noki.<sup>4</sup> The site was highly favourable, located halfway between Leopoldville and Matadi and renowned for its temperate climate.

Manufactured with the tropical environment in mind, the hotel was designed with an iron exoskeleton of balconies and stairwells (See: Fig 2). The structural metalwork, embellished with decorative details, was intended to serve as a buffer zone between the hotel's interior and what for its makers would have been the unknown outside. In an early example of colonial tropical architecture, the shaded area of balconies protect the inner chambers from what was, to Europeans, untenable heat and an unfamiliar landscape. Further, curlicued edges ushered in a whiff of ornamental fancy into factory aesthetics, providing a touch of bourgeois décor to the colonial experience. As a colonial structure designed for the housing of Europeans exclusively, this interactive skin further performed a more public display of colonial social relations.

For the hotel guest looking out, the ornate iron edging of the structure framed the surrounds appear manageable, even picturesque. In the midst of what would have been perceived as raw nature, metal frameworks shielded its incumbents. The gaze from the balconies could look down on the outside from the metal terraces, at leisure. At the same time, various business meetings and colonial interactions were played out in public. The continual presence of Congolese hotel staff having to go about their various tasks on or via the external balconies and stairwells would make the servitude of this particular branch of the local workforce deliberately visible. What was high tech architecture at the time reminded those on the outside who was in charge. While colonial control was in no way monolithic and the exposed balconies would also have exposed

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<sup>4</sup> Yves Robert, "De la villegature a Thysville au tourisme patrimonial a Mbanza-Ngungu. Des heritages culturels cosmopolites comme levier de developpement urbain", *Enjeux patrimoniaux en contexte postcolonial: Patrimoine et development en Republique democratique du Congo*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2017, pp. 139-163: 146.

the foibles and weaknesses of the colonists, the terms set up by iron architecture were hugely unequal.

Archival images of the Hotel ABC reveal it to be the tallest structure in the fledgling settlement, surrounded by smaller workers cottages (See Fig 3). Different models of variously-proportioned cottages were repeated to form a cluster of structures connected to the railroad and station. With a prominent component of prefabricated metal parts, the housing came in a few basic models, repeated across the village. More iron is incorporated in the central, grander buildings, flaunting decorative sheets of metalwork and more elaborate staircases (See Fig 4). Around these are clusters of smaller, simpler bungalows. The early township is aesthetically connected through corrugated iron roofs, topped with the metallic flourishes of weather vanes. Whereas similar bungalows were used across the colony at this time, the Mbanza Ngungu village stands out as having a sophisticated design: not only is the visible metalwork more refined than in the average colonial home, but the cluster of housing were conceived as a whole.

The idea of unified architectural organism can be seen as a continuation of Art Nouveau's legacy, particularly its rural branch. Belgian country homes like van de Velde's Villa Bloemenwerf (1895) and Serrurier-Bovy's l'Aube (1903) were designed to respond to their environment. Their underlying purpose was to encourage a way of life closer to an imagined peasant past, living in communion with nature in buildings that set up harmonious relations with their environment. The mass-produced version sent to the colony are suggestive of a different kind of sanctuary. Within a hot and humid environment, the purpose of the architecture was to shield its foreign inhabitants from nature rather than taking refuge in it. Unlike Art Nouveau worker housing schemes in Belgium, which incorporated regional features (especially Flemish vernacular), the Thysville experiment ignored existing Congolese architectural aesthetics, which were attune to the specificities of environmental conditions and made with local natural materials.

The arrival of the pre-packaged village did not only signal the displacement and wreckage of the existing Congolese communities in the area (as was the case for all colonial settlement).<sup>5</sup> They also served to emphasize a preconceived idea of social and class structure. Some of the inflexibilities of a colonial system formed in Europe are demonstrated in the village of housing for European workers established in Mbanza Ngungu. Grander homes were reserved for railway company managers. Smaller, one-roomed cottages provided for the single colonial worker. Openly displaying the social structure of the tiny group of European workers, the village also clearly demarcates the racial segregation of the colonial city to come. Accommodation for Congolese workers (when it came to be provided after 1908) took on a more makeshift form, with various formations of wood, brick and straw huts predominating.

Produced by a factory whose product range extended to yachts and steamers, the iron-based buildings presented a sophisticated means of taking the colonial mission further afield. Not only did they represent highly desirable, specialized items in the roughshod frontier environment of the colony, but also tools with which land could be claimed more effectively. Moreover, when the most advanced use of iron of that time was paraded in the colony for the exclusive use of the minority colonial community, luxury overpowered local dwellings. The hotels were not only instruments of lopsided socio-political-cultural relations but made them plainly visible.

Manufactured in Belgium, shipped to the colony and then transported by rail, the Hotel ABC settlement was both the product and agent of the transportation system that enabled colonial industrialization entrench itself. The Matadi-Leopoldville line to which the settlement was attached had particular connotations for the implications of prefabricated iron during the early colonial period.

### **What the Railway Brought:**

In the Congo, as in Belgium, railroad iron incorporated into architecture was a symbol of industrialization. Art Nouveau in Belgium, the most rapidly industrialized nation in continental

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Belgian State Decree of 1885, almost all Congolese land was appropriated to be used or sold by the colonial administration or given as concessions to commercial companies.

Europe, was defined by innovative displays of ironwork (combined with walls of glass echoing train stations) that linked luxury homes and shopping malls to an image of teleological progress. The important shift that takes place with such associations in the colony is that iron's promise of industry was a vital component of colonial occupation and extraction.

The Hotel ABC and adjacent buildings were visibly connected to the railway line which delivered them, via their exposed ironwork. As much as forming the core of early settlement, the buildings formed a central axis point for imperial traffic. Essentially serving as giant embellishments to the Matadi-Leopoldville line, the Hotel ABC structures were linked to this ultimate symbol of Belgium's export-oriented colonial economy. This saw the CFS only installing infrastructure that would enable the removal of Congolese raw materials (for example, ivory, wood and rubber). While the Congolese people were forced to serve as the workforce, no services, such as hospitals, were installed for them and a monetary system was not introduced until after 1908.

The Matadi-Leopoldville line was built between 1890 to 1898, with great difficulty. It formed a critical part of colonial commerce, as the Congo River was unnavigable between the Leopoldville trading post and the colonial coastal port at Boma because of cataracts. Construction work on the line from Matadi to Stanley Pool, like the portage system that preceded it, came at great cost to those Congolese forced into manual labor. According to missionaries in the region, local legend had it that each tie along the railway represented a Congolese life and each telegraph post a European one.<sup>6</sup> While the actual death toll is difficult to ascertain, official reports from 1890 to 1898 were that 1,800 black workers and 132 white officers had perished. In a broader context, the railway signaled disruption and destabilization of power for the existing peoples of the area.

The Bas-Congo was renowned for its vegetal opulence and the Thysville settlement became an important hub for colonial agricultural programmes. Dubbed Leopoldville's "vegetable garden," existing Congolese practices of working the land were thrown into chaos by colonial approaches

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<sup>6</sup> Sigbert Axelson, *Culture Confrontation in the Lower Congo: From the Old Congo Kingdom to the Congo Independent State, with Special Reference to the Swedish Missionaries*, Falkoping, Gummessons, 1970, p. 204.

to agriculture and overburdened the capacity of the land.<sup>7</sup> Colonial agricultural drives systematically devastated pre-existing farming, distribution and trade systems. As a nodal point for industrialization, Mbanza Ngungu's early iron structures represented not only privileged enclosure and mass dispossession, but also the start of rural underdevelopment. With the status of Congo being the second most industrialized colony in Sub-Saharan Africa also came an agricultural population that was amongst the poorest on the continent.

The railway accelerated the systematic the breaking down of local socio-economic infrastructure and the denaturing of the landscape. The factory iron that made up the *Hotel ABC*'s exoskeleton and the framework of a village was the material of rapidly accelerating irrevocable change in the space it sliced through. The trajectory of Art Nouveau ironwork moves from exuberant experimental forms celebrating new technology in Brussels to the colony, where it comes to be associated with deeply troubled histories.

### **Compacting the Total Artwork**

Ownership of a colony inspired new spurts of invention and industry, including Belgian Art Nouveau. In key total artworks in Brussels, avant-garde innovation was linked to the new colony through the avant-garde movement. The organic aesthetics of the *Congo Pavilion* and *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* set up a vision of the distant Congo colony as a bountiful natural resource. Inventive use of iron aping the form of natural growth displayed the possibilities of new technological developments. Sinuous networks of ornamentation-as-structure celebrated the new Belgian era and with it, the presence of a colony. Within these environments, the particular elastic qualities of newly introduced Congolese woods allowed for further experimentation that defined the Belgian movement. Congolese ivory was also commonly used in chryselephantine sculptures and household objects. As a flood of raw materials were removed from the Congo to for the profit of the metropole, they also enhanced and enabled Art Nouveau innovation. The effects of total

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<sup>7</sup> Louis Baeck, *Une société rurale en transition: Étude socio-économique de la région de Thysville, en Zaïre No. 2* (February), Brussels, Éditions Universitaires, 1952, 139.

space were achieved through exposed metal infrastructure, twisted into the restless lines of natural forces, in harmony with the features of each interior. They thus paved the way for the development of its pared down factory offshoots.

For the purposes of the colonial settlement, sweeping whiplash lines are compacted into more repetitive, geometric forms. Rather than creating the impression of natural growth, the hotel building has a more, streamlined machine aesthetic. It is closer in appearance to more symmetrical work by later generations of Belgian designers (as seen in the work of an architect like Benjamin De Lestre). As factory products, the pre-packaged constructions sent to the colony present ambitious examples of the flood of cheaply manufactured merchandise influenced by more specialized Art Nouveau environments that flooded Euro-American markets in the early 1900s.

The Hotel ABC and its accompanying buildings do not represent the kind of total artwork seen in fin de siècle Brussels. However, they speak to a different kind of totality because of being assembled from a prefabricated kit. Whereas in the total artworks of Art Nouveau each detail is a microcosm, the structure of the prefabricated buildings is the repetition of a cast configuration. Easily assembled metal skeletons were the foundations of the building itself, designed to expand into preplanned structures. Inventive use of iron demonstrated in high Belgian Art Nouveau had developed into the practical accessories of colonization.

Whereas Art Nouveau in the service of the colonial administration in the metropole conjured up an appealing idea of the colony to the Belgian public, its industrial offshoots did more utilitarian work in claiming space with a particular spatial design and aesthetic. If an underlying ideology of colonial conquest was ostensibly obscured by the exuberant displays of the *Congo Pavilion* and *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*, the same cannot be said for the iron-laced structures of Thysville. In the actual space of the colony, the function of imported architecture was plainly exposed. At the same time as machine aesthetics irrevocably set down the foundations for how the colonial city was to operate, it also exposed itself to natural forces that it not entirely understand. In the Congo, the manner in which prefabricated iron architecture has weathered over the years reveal some of the arrogance and folly of importing architectural solutions.

## **Entanglement**

Art Nouveau in the metropole created a fantasy of symbolically fusing nature with industry and colony with innovation. When Congolese cultures were represented, they were blended into this artificial nature. In the early colonial outpost, metal frameworks formed both a barrier and a domesticating frame against surrounding vegetation. As sinuous lines fell away, imported metal frameworks were engulfed in abundant tropical conditions from the moment they entered the colony.

In Mbanza-Ngungu today, the former Hotel ABC serves as the local courthouse and is an active hub of all kinds of activity, both formal and informal. In need of constant upkeep, its decorative iron visibly squares off against encroaching plant life and rust. The view from its balconies is of abandoned train carriages in what is now a defunct section of the railway. The remains of the original Matadi-Leopoldville trains are rusted husks overtaken by creeping vegetation. The nearby workers cottages, now occupied by Congolese railway staff, are in poor condition, with many of the structures visibly deteriorating. Its occupants complain of damp, untenable conditions. Neither a heritage site nor a ruin, the former colonial village is a place of reordering and practical compromise. In Mbanza Ngungu, former colonial apparatus has been absorbed into the greater, slow-growing circuitries of its surrounds, constantly renegotiating early promises of modernization, initially intended for a colonial elite.

Over the years, nature has intervened to contradict the original claims that portable prefabricated iron made as a rational design solution to the occupation of tropical climes. Pounding temperatures, wet air and tropical storms have left visible traces on metal. Surfaces are alive with sedimentations of moss, insects, plants and oxidation, which layers of paint fail to completely hold at bay. While the hotel maintains its distinctive silhouette, the walls of all the older building are bent and broken in parts. Natural forces have affected the buildings so thoroughly that they have exposed the more permeable nature of iron. No longer inflexible, it starts to resemble something organic that decomposes.

Where Art Nouveau organics attempted to simulate natural growth—and, when exhibiting the Congo, make patriarchal claims on what was natural to the Congo—they made assumptions concerning what nature was. In the total artwork, nature was something that could be controlled and bent to obey the greater aesthetic task. The natural environment and its growth patterns that van de Velde, Horta et al attempted to represent were something separate from daily life: a nature lost to urbanization. As a result, the Art Nouveau aesthetic of natural rhythms and flows was ultimately artificial. Harmonious environments were inflexible and could not adapt to changing conditions and needs. This is emphasized in its industrial offshoots whose inflexible designs gave little thought to its greater environment. The prefabricated Thysville village was intended to function as an organism, with a ready-made, structured living arrangement in place. From the point of their entry into the Congo, natural forces have enacted control over prefabricated colonial designs. With a sense of irony, nature has bestowed the organic qualities onto these buildings that their makers never could.

In a reversal of Art Nouveau logic, where an image of the Congo was clasped in the grip of artificial organic forms, the former prefabricated settlement is now enveloped in living, writhing nature where growing plants are bound up with colonial debris. The entanglement reclaims its traumatic colonial foundations and affects how its history is materially represented.

## **Curriculum Vitae**

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Dr Ruth SACKS is a South African writer and visual artist who lives in Johannesburg. She holds a PhD, entitled “Congo Style: From Belgian Art Nouveau to Zaire’s l’Authenticite,” from the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (Johannesburg, 2017). Recent conference papers include the 17th ACASA Triennial (Accra, 2017), College Art Association (Washington DC, 2016), Mediation passee, presente et future (Kinshasa, 2016) and Biblioteque Kandinsky Summer University (Paris, 2014). Her most recent article will be in the forthcoming edition of the Architectural Theory Review (No.22). She lectures in Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg).