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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

CAST IN A NEW LIGHT Outdated home in Rome redesigned as a modern classic

MAXIMAL IMPACT Colours, cats and keepsakes run riot in a London town house

A FORMULA-FREE FUNCTIONALIST

Maison Nisot, a Brussels house designed by Louis Herman de Koninck, bears more than a passing resemblance to much of the interwar Modern architecture influenced by Le Corbusier. Yet its largely unsung architect eschewed tired tropes and – being less a theoretician, more a sophisticated builder – was forever inventing clever solutions on the fly. Now, as Bertrand Raison reports, its 1934 interior has been brilliantly revamped. Photography: Nicolas Schimp

Opposite: the architecture features a fair few elements of the International style, including balustrades and glazed corners. This page: in the dining room, Verner Panton's 'Fun' shell chandelier of 1964 hangs above a solid rosewood table and a suspended bench (designed by Labscape) that doubles as a radiator cover. The suspended shelving unit, in its almost invisible lightness, serves as a subtle partition with the dynamic black-and-white kitchen

Opposite, clockwise from top left: in the music room, a brass wall lamp, 1969, by Jules Wabbes (*WoI* April 2021) hangs over an onyx-topped cabinet designed by Labscape to support a high-precision hi-fi system and contain vinyl records; a sliding door, composed of diverse glass panels in a De Stijl-style arrangement, leads to the entrance hall; in the living room, a 'Yin Yang' coffee table (1969), designed by Willy Rizzo, revolves and supports a hammered-brass bowl by Robert Essen (1978). This page: to the left of the fireplace, a bar is concealed by a curved walnut door. The vases on the windowsill above the benches and ottomans, upholstered in a Zoffany fabric, are by Gunnar Nyland. Like all the objects, they're from the Jimmy and John Beyens Collection

A SERIES OF major figures made their mark on Belgian architecture between the two world wars. Recently, their contribution has been reassessed. These are mostly Modernists, who, in the wake of Art Nouveau and Art Deco, demanded a more functional approach to construction and greater rigour in the use of new materials such as concrete. Certainly, they deserve our attention. But, famous in their lifetimes, they have since been rather forgotten.

That is a pity, especially when we consider the personality of Louis Herman de Koninck and the unusual nature of his houses, including Maison Nisot (1934). Born in Brussels in 1896, De Koninck was drawn to architecture at a young age and studied under Victor Horta, one of the founders of Art Nouveau. The young graduate made the most of the situation in Belgium which, at the end of World War I, involved sinking energy and resources into reconstruction. The nation found itself at a crossroads of architectural influences. Inspiration from the Netherlands' De Stijl movement intersected with that of the Bauhaus of Weimar, not neglecting the impact Frank Lloyd Wright was making across the Atlantic and the later effect of Le Corbusier. It was in this vibrant melting pot that the young De Koninck converted to functionalism, but in his own individual way.

Maison Nisot, set amid greenery in the southern outskirts of Brussels, is notable in his body of work. After a flight of stairs that removes us from the roadside, the house gradually reveals itself. At first glance, the design seems to fall squarely under the style known as International: a flat roof, Cubist shapes, wide doors and glazing to the exterior and, especially, the presence of corner windows, a trademark of the times. Yet the overall effect, and we can always rely on De Koninck for this, has nothing formulaic about it. Every detail of the construction matters; and spotting these touches is a joy.

It all begins at the left-hand end of the façade, with the porch topped by a cantilevered slab that juts out. One of this architect's calling cards is precisely this favouring of asymmetry over uniformity in proportions, which lends itself to a progressive reveal of the panoramic view. As soon as he or she crosses the threshold, the visitor has a delightful decision to make – going straight upstairs or remaining on the ground floor. Choose the latter and you can then see the sliding door that separates this modest lobby from the living room and discover that it is constructed like a stained-glass window with tiles both front and back. It allows variation in the play of light and blurs the vision of what lies beyond this fragile, luminous screen.

The translucent curtain shields a living room that, thanks to the house's commanding position over the road below, enjoys a dual aspect. On one side are windows that open generously on to the garden; facing them are counterparts framed by the vegetation that you can see in the distance. This through-space – reserved for music and floored entirely in teak parquet – affords access to a bar area next to the fireplace and then to a second, more secluded, seating area lined in walnut and devoted to reading and television.

Opposite, left: in the upstairs bathroom, which is located on the street side, Labscape's ingenious swivelling mirror faces Pierre Forssell's candlesticks for Skultuna (1970). Right: the design challenge here was to 'bookmatch' the marble from Kreglinger, a firm in the Ardennes, such that all the stripes lined up. This page: on a walnut bookcase in the office are vases by Wilhelm Kåge and a Stig Lindberg bowl. The open doorway leads to a guest bedroom

From here, a partition wall guards the privacy of the kitchen and the dining room into which it extends. This, too, is next to the garden and offers the same constant toing and froing between outside and inside that is the guiding principle of this villa: that it is integrated into its natural surroundings.

This basic spatial arrangement has been scrupulously respected by Labscape, the architectural practice co-founded by Tecla Tangorra and Robert Ivanov, which carried out the renovation. The pair have not only improved the infrastructure, which no longer complied with present-day standards, they have also brought their own passion and talent to bear on the interior. Their contribution combines craftsmanship with industrial products, an alliance that would have been embraced by De Koninck himself.

Each room has its own atmosphere: black-streaked Amazonia marble for the walls in the kitchen and dining room; a bench covered with an arabesque fabric floating above the parquet in the television area; a custom-made modular suede sofa in the large music room. All the details, from light switches to latches specially created to provide a good grip, are finished in matt bronze. The thermostat has been cast in the same material. The frames are white on the inside (to make them stand out less) and grey on the outside (to emphasise the geometric contrasts of the white façade).

This devotion to consistency extends to the floor occupied by the bedrooms, which are clearly distinguished from one another in both materials and colours. Each bathroom reflects a desire for harmony. The one adjoining the master bedroom is lined entirely with Bisazza mosaic tiles in gold leaf. Like an echo, the toilet at the foot of the stairs is given a similar treatment, enveloped from floor to ceiling in a floral design.

The work on Maison Nisot communicates a feeling of freedom when it could have been restrictive or, in effect, a passive duplication of what came before. The interior celebrates both the intricacy of the handmade and the use of mass-produced items, the latter being one of De Koninck's trademarks.

The fact that he was no theoretician perhaps explains the neglect of his work in certain quarters. Rather, he was a man of practical experience. He is one of the few architects active in Brussels to live in a house of his own design, and it was one he would continue to transform throughout his life. The lack of intellectual underpinning perhaps explains his strong approval of production methods being rationalised. By 1930 he had already created the 'Cubex' modular cabinet system, a feature of Belgian kitchens until the 1960s.

This meticulous builder will be remembered for his lack of interest in modules and formulas. For him, a house should not be organised around a central point, a principle that can clearly be seen in Maison Nisot. Different perspectives and spaces should be allowed to gradually unfold. The recent rebirth of this interwar curiosity ought to bring back an important representative of Belgian Modernism into the public eye ■

Labscape. Ring 00 32 2 482 00 40, or visit labscape.org

Opposite, left: the dressing room features full-height cupboards that house LED lights installed between two blades of bronze-patinated brass. A leather-and-nickel-plated-steel stool by Jørgen Gammelgaard (1970) sits beneath a ceiling lined with fabric from Phillip Jeffries. Right: a hand-hammered Moroccan brass basin takes centre stage in the main en suite bathroom, which is covered in mosaic glass tiles from Bisazza. This page: an Eileen Gray 'E1027' table sits in the walnut-lined golden bedroom