

Fall 2015

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Recommended Citation

Manning, Courtney, "Victor Horta's Illusion of Space" (2015). *Student Research*. 1.
https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/art_studentresearch/1

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VICTOR HORTA'S ILLUSION OF SPACE

Courtney Manning

10/19/2015

ARTH 345A

The late 19th century was a time of improvement. With the industrial revolution had come many new technologies and now was the time to make them better. Some areas of change were large-scale iron and steel production, widespread use of machinery in manufacturing, increased use of steam power, and electrical communications. New technology in these areas includes alloys, chemicals, telegraph, telephone, and radio. These new technologies increased economic growth in a small period of time. The increase in productivity led to a larger middle class and improved living standards as well as causing migration to cities. Victor Horta was among those who shaped the new living standards through architecture. He attempted to create the illusion of more space within the cramped quarters that resulted from this large migration to cities.

With the growing voracity of industrialization and mass production, artists and architects returned to the organic styles of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.¹ Victor Horta was one such architect; his style attempted to create larger indoor spaces than were formerly prevalent. His choice materials were iron, light, and air. Horta used these elements to provide freedom to clients. This was a freedom from the stuffy, cell-like homes that were previously popular.

Victor Horta combined the styles of history with current trends such as Art Nouveau. Art Nouveau began as a reaction against the historical emphasis of mid-19th century art and was characterized by a, “whiplash linearity reminiscent of twining plant

¹ Isabel Kuhl, Kristina Lowis, Sabine Thiel-Siling, *50 Architects You should Know* (Prestel, 2009).

tendrils.”² Among the first continental examples of Art Nouveau was Horta’s Tassel House, which incorporated Neo-Gothic and Neo-Rococo elements.³ The Neo-Gothic was an attempt to revive the medieval Gothic style in decorative patterns while the Neo-Rococo emphasized grandeur and luxury. Victor Horta was able to combine these two styles with the new, creating something unique.

A particular problem that Horta needed to solve was how to create spaciousness within the tall narrow town houses of Brussels.⁴ Because they hindered the free circulation of air and light, he disliked enclosed spaces and solid doors.⁵ He used various techniques such as glass roofs and mirrors to create the illusion of large open areas. Placing mirrors directly across from each other gives the impression that there are multiple rooms adjacent to each other and adding a light between them immediately brightens the room by multitudes more than having a single mirror. The use of structural iron to get rid of walls and allow daylight to come through windows also created the impression of more space.

Victor Horta appreciated structural iron because it allowed him to get rid of the medieval style of thick walls, small rooms, and tiny windows that he felt very negatively towards. He believed that air and light should not be luxuries, and supported the, “Art a’

² "Art Nouveau," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition* (06, 2015), 1-1.

³ "Horta, Victor, Baron," *Britannica Biographies* (3, 2012), 1.

⁴ Isabel Kuhl, Kristina Lowis, Sabine Thiel-Siling, *50 Architects You should Know*

⁵ *Art Noveau 1890-1914*, ed. Paul Greenhalgh (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2000).

la Rue movement, which believed in relating art to everyday life.”⁶ People at this time were living crowded in cities with smog and filth that created all sorts of health problems. Horta’s ideals were a reaction against the current living standards. He attempted to incorporate air and light into his buildings, to free the occupants from stuffy living quarters. He wanted the building itself to be a part of the occupant’s daily life and viewed the house as a “portrait” of those who live in it.⁷ Horta also believed the house to be a full and complete work, so he connected furniture and light fixtures to the building itself. He took care of every detail in the spaces he created and often lowered his own fee for the sake of his magnificent artwork, so that the client could afford it in its whole and complete form⁸. This attitude, holding the art above the profit, was unique, as was everything Horta did.

Horta’s designs were revolutionary and “outstanding[ly] original.”⁹ Until his time, iron had been, “reserved for constructions built by engineers, such as exhibition halls, railway stations, warehouses, green-houses and the like.”¹⁰ It is strange to consider using iron rather than wood to evoke something more natural and homey in a building, but this is something that Horta did with excellent results. The strength of the iron allowed him to incorporate more windows,¹¹ as well as slender curving components

⁶ Sherban Cantacuzino, "Horta, Victor," *Grove Art Online* (.

⁷ C. Duliere, "The House as a Total Work of Art. (Cover Story)," *UNESCO Courier* 43, no. 8 (08, 1990), 22.

⁸ *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*

⁹ Duliere, *The House as a Total Work of Art. (Cover Story)*, 22

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*

where once a partition wall would have lent its support.¹² The iron follows a root motif, avoiding feet at the bases of furniture. Instead, it is, “rooted into the architecture by a continuous plinth.”¹³ All of the decoration and architecture are intertwined in this manner, “the line of the load-bearing structures is prolonged and softened by the decoration, which seems to originate from the supporting pillars and to extend to the ceilings, the walls, the floor, accentuating the continuity of the interior space.”¹⁴ This causes spaces to become more open without losing the continuity of the building’s whole.

Another problem Horta faced was how to provide the air and light that was not commonly present in the homes of the middle class. He was a socialist and the Belgian Workers’ Party was very close to his heart.¹⁵ His designs were for new money (meaning funds not inherited over a great period of time through generations, but rather freshly acquired by the family) in the middle class because they showed energy, independence, and a spirit of enterprise.¹⁶ While these qualities seem to contradict the ideas of socialism, they do manage to line up with Horta’s hopeful idealist mentality.

It was definitely not ideal that poor ventilation in buildings and the voracious popularity of smoking caused lung disease. People lacked nutrients from the sun because they didn’t go outside or let light in the buildings. It was all around an

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Duliere, *The House as a Total Work of Art. (Cover Story)*, 22

¹⁵ *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*

¹⁶ Ibid.

unhealthy situation. There were few at this time who, like Horta, recognized the importance of open spaces. One person who agreed with him and lived during the same time, though never met him, was Ellen White, who spoke on the importance of light and air saying:

When God had made our world ... he said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good. Shall we close our houses, and exclude from them the light with God has pronounced good? Many deprive themselves of light and air, because they fear their picture frames or expensive furniture will be tarnished, and their lovely carpets faded. We may arrange our houses tastefully... and have no fears of welcoming in the purifying air and glad sunshine.¹⁷

At a time when people were medicating themselves with things we now know are poison, people like Ellen White and Victor Horta (though he may not have known it) were advocates for healthier lifestyles. Though White's vision was very religious, and Horta's was aesthetic, a lower class deprived of sunshine and fresh air was not in line with either of their dreams.

In order to incorporate light and air, he designed with colors that were reinforced by artificial lamps which were attached to varied supporting structures in the form of hanging bells, flowers, or stars.¹⁸ He used tracked opalescent glass that changed color based on the source of the light, so that there was never a black hole of a window, but

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *Ellen G. White Miscellaneous Periodical Articles - Book II of III* (Lulu Press, Inc, 2013).

¹⁸ *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*

instead a different color from the sun during the day or from artificial lamps at night.¹⁹ He played with light, and used it to open up the room. Combining lamps with mirrors gave the illusion of a bigger area. He used these tactics in most of his work.

Two leading examples of Horta's architectural work are the Tassel house and Solvay house. Both of these incorporate iron and light in a manner that creates the illusion of more space. Located on avenue Louise in Brussels, these and several other works, were part of the renovations made after World War I.²⁰ Horta worked very hard on these buildings and his determination is attributed to bitterness at having been excluded from any major official commissions to rebuild.²¹

In the Solvay house, Horta placed two mirrors directly opposite each other with lamps in between. The mirrors magnified the light and the reflections made it appear as though you were looking through a window into another room. This illusion of enlargement was important because the building was quite thin and Horta had to take into account that because of this the interior of the houses were poorly lit.²² Iron tendrils made columns and railing supports near the stairway appear to be plant life, giving the warmth of life to a very cold material. The green color of the iron not only lent itself to supporting the impression of plant life, but also contrasted the warm colors that

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Horta preferred, such as rose reds, honey yellows, golden yellows, ochres and oranges.²³ In addition, Horta used green marble on the stairs,²⁴ which could suggest a forest floor.

In the Tassel house, Horta used a conservatory to bring light into the interior (fig 4).²⁵ If it was not already enough that he used the greenish tendril pattern for the ironwork, “rooting” it into the architecture²⁶, the use of conservatory windows should emphasize that Horta was reconciling industrial material with nature. It is a design that very blatantly begs the onlooker to be fooled into thinking he is in nature, or, at the very least, make the connection between the two. Conservatory windows also lessened the impression of a wall, making the room feel larger by not completely disconnecting it from the outside.

Horta completed two other houses in this area of Brussels, as well as other commissions in varied locations. Noted as a fashionable architect, businessmen began to approach Horta to bring their shops in line with current tastes.²⁷ These were located in the historic heart of the city and included the Innovation, the Grand Bazar Anspach, the Waucquez department store, and the Wolfers shops.²⁸

Unfortunately, Horta reached a turning point where his work was gaining popularity, but the more popular it grew, the less private clients (as opposed to business

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

owners) wanted his work. They were seeking something unique and novel. The more popular Horta became, particularly with department store commissions, the less unique and novel his work was, and fewer people wanted him to design their homes. The people who had essentially built his career were now ending it. However, Horta did his part in ending the relations as well, coming to believe that private housing was, “too susceptible to the vagaries of fashion” and desiring to create more monumental works.²⁹

It is unclear whether Horta considered the reconciliation of industry and nature solved. His Art Nouveau work ended around 1903³⁰ and he moved towards academism. His once revolutionary work began to adhere to the practice of the schools. He began to cover the ironwork with stone. Perhaps he was exploring this as the solution to his problem. It is also possible that he simply gave up on attempting to reconcile the two, determining instead that it was an impossible feat to combine the industrial with the natural in a way that excellently served the purposes of the modern man. Or maybe he lost his touch and no longer had the capacity to revolutionize. It is also possible that upon realizing the struggles of private housing, he shrugged, and said, “I tried,” and moved on to bigger and better things.

Horta did not think of Art Nouveau as a break from the past, but rather as a re-statement of it.³¹ It was coming back to the foundational principles of classicism and reincorporating nature into architecture. This was accomplished in a totally new way,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Cantacuzino, *Horta, Victor*

³¹ *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*

however; through iron, light, and space; elements which had not been used in medieval styles. These elements took architecture away from dark, stuffy, enclosed spaces into a world of innovation, light, and air through a richly ornamental, asymmetrical, and dreamlike style.³²

Under appreciated in his time and even beyond it, Victor Horta was the leading innovator in bringing the ideas of light and space into architecture. It had never been done in such a way before, and unfortunately, for all his hard work and genius, most of his buildings have been demolished.³³ The Solvay house is the only one that remains more or less intact, allowing us to see the subtle effects of his artificial lighting.³⁴ It seems that once his ideas were mainstream nobody was interested anymore. Horta's importance is much more than novelty. He broke ground on what people today consider standard. A room with no light or air is extremely below our expectations of any space other than a basement or cellar. We have Victor Horta to thank for his influence in opening indoor spaces to fill them with air and light.

³² *Art Nouveau*, 1-1

³³ "Victor Horta, Baron," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th Edition (06, 2015), 1.

³⁴ *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*

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