Gérald Ledent
Alessandro Porotto

BRUSSELS Housing

Atlas of Residential Building Types

BIRKHÄUSER

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City life is challenged by the Belgian dream of a free-standing house in a garden – which might just be an architect's nightmare, as pictured by Hannes Coudenys in *Ugly Belgian Houses*.

Gérald Ledent and Alessandro Porotto

Brussels Housing: A Typology

«Dans l'art de l'architecture, la maison est certainement ce qui caractérise
le mieux les mœurs, les goûts et les usages d'une population;
son ordonnance, comme ses distributions, ne se modifie qu'à la longue,
et si puissants que soient des conquérants, leur tyrannie ne va jamais
jusqu'à tenter de changer la forme des habitations du peuple conquis»

EUGÈNE EMMANUEL VIOLLET-LE-DUC [1]

Housing

This book sets out to analyse and illustrate the various housing forms that exist in Brussels. This objective is undertaken from an architectural viewpoint by examining the spatial features of housing across the various phases of the city's evolution, from its origin to its golden age at the turn of the 20th century, and on to contemporary practice. In addition to documenting the qualities of housing itself, the book investigates the mechanisms that drove housing's evolution and the ways in which housing production has shaped the city.

The variety of housing forms in Brussels is vast, as are the continuing debates and private or public initiatives that have enriched them. Interestingly, discussions about housing quality have been revived in recent decades as a means to address several challenges: the city's growing population, climate change, and social inclusion. In addition, since the 1960s, Brussels' urban housing has developed in competition with that of the city's hinterland, which extends as far as the Belgian coast. The competition between the city and its periphery is fuelled by the tenacious dream many people have of living in a villa on an isolated plot of suburban land, as illustrated by Hannes Coudenys' *Ugly Belgian Houses*[2] project. This unbridled desire for individuality poses a fierce challenge to city living, which in response needs to become more inviting. Housing has a central place in the quest to renew and enhance urban quality of life, and answers to contemporary challenges include introducing new layouts, foreseeing innovative relationships to the public realm, addressing the evolution of the household, or even developing alternative forms of land and property tenure.

If an analysis of housing spaces is central to this book, it is not without reason. Through the study of these spaces, the local lifestyles, uses, and dwelling practices are equally revealed. As David Harvey elegantly puts it, "we make the house and the house makes us".[3] By understanding the places we live in, we also come to understand ourselves. For people living in Brussels, there is an immediate interest in this knowledge. Knowing one's city better means understanding oneself better, while offering tools to help shape one's environment. For those who do not live there, this knowledge promotes a better understanding of a city and its identity, how it is inhabited, and how history is engraved on its spaces. This understanding of identity through domestic space can be compared with August Sander's work from the 1920s, *People of the 20th Century*,[4] a collective portrait of German society at that time in which attitudes and clothing indicated what kind of people were portrayed. Likewise, this book aims to give a better understanding of local habits and practices through the study of domestic spaces. In short, tell me where you live, and I will tell you who you are!

1 "In architecture, the house is certainly what best characterises the customs, tastes and habits of a population; its layout, like its distribution, is only modified in the long run, and however powerful conquerors may be, their tyranny never goes so far as to attempt to change the houses of the conquered." (author's translation) In: Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène Emmanuel. *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIème au XVIème siècle*. vol. 6. Paris, Bance et Morel, 1863. **2** Coudenys, Hannes. *Ugly Belgian Houses: Don't Try This at Home.* Ghent, Borgerhoff & Lamberigts, 2015. **3** Harvey, David. *Spaces of Hope.* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000. **4** Sander, August. *People of the 20th Century: A Cultural Work of Photographs Divided Into Seven Groups.* Munich, Schirmer/Mosel, 2013.

AZRA
EXCHANGE

Gérald Ledent

A City of Row Houses: From the Origins to 1914

From Rural to Urban Houses

In Roman times, Brussels did not yet exist; its territory consisted only of several secondary roads.[1] Three Gallo-Roman villas have been found in the area.[2] Although very little remains of these villas, we can nevertheless make certain observations: rural housing was set on ridges and slopes to avoid floods;[3] single-storey villas were organised around a large central room[4] opening onto a portico; and building materials included bricks, cob, and tiles.

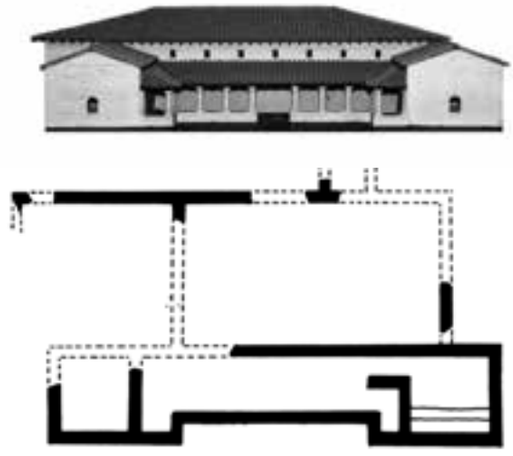
Things changed after the fall of the Roman Empire. Wooden construction re-appeared, resuming pre-Roman traditions.[5] The 19th-century architect Louis Cloquet[6] points out two other evolutions during this period: women were no longer isolated within houses, which now included large openings to the exterior.

Two forms of housing could be found in Brussels in the early Middle Ages. On the one hand, peasant houses, common across the region, displayed a single large quadrangular space organised around a central family hearth.[7] Their construction was rudimentary, with wooden and cob walls capped by large thatched-ridge roofs.

On the other hand, local lords built stone houses – *steens* in Dutch. In the absence of city walls, these costly houses were designed to protect their residents, as suggested by their stone construction, central towers, and crenelated walls.[8] Such buildings consisted of several floors erected on vaulted basements. Texts mention various *steens* in Brussels,[9] but none of these noble houses remains today; the last one was destroyed in 1910 during work on the north–south railway connection.[10]

City Housing

Brussels was officially founded around 979,[11] when its first marketplace developed along the Senne River. The real turning point for housing, however, was the construction of the earliest city walls in the 12th century.[12] The aim at the time was to fit as many residents as possible behind the walls; buildings were therefore packed tightly together. In order to be accessible, houses



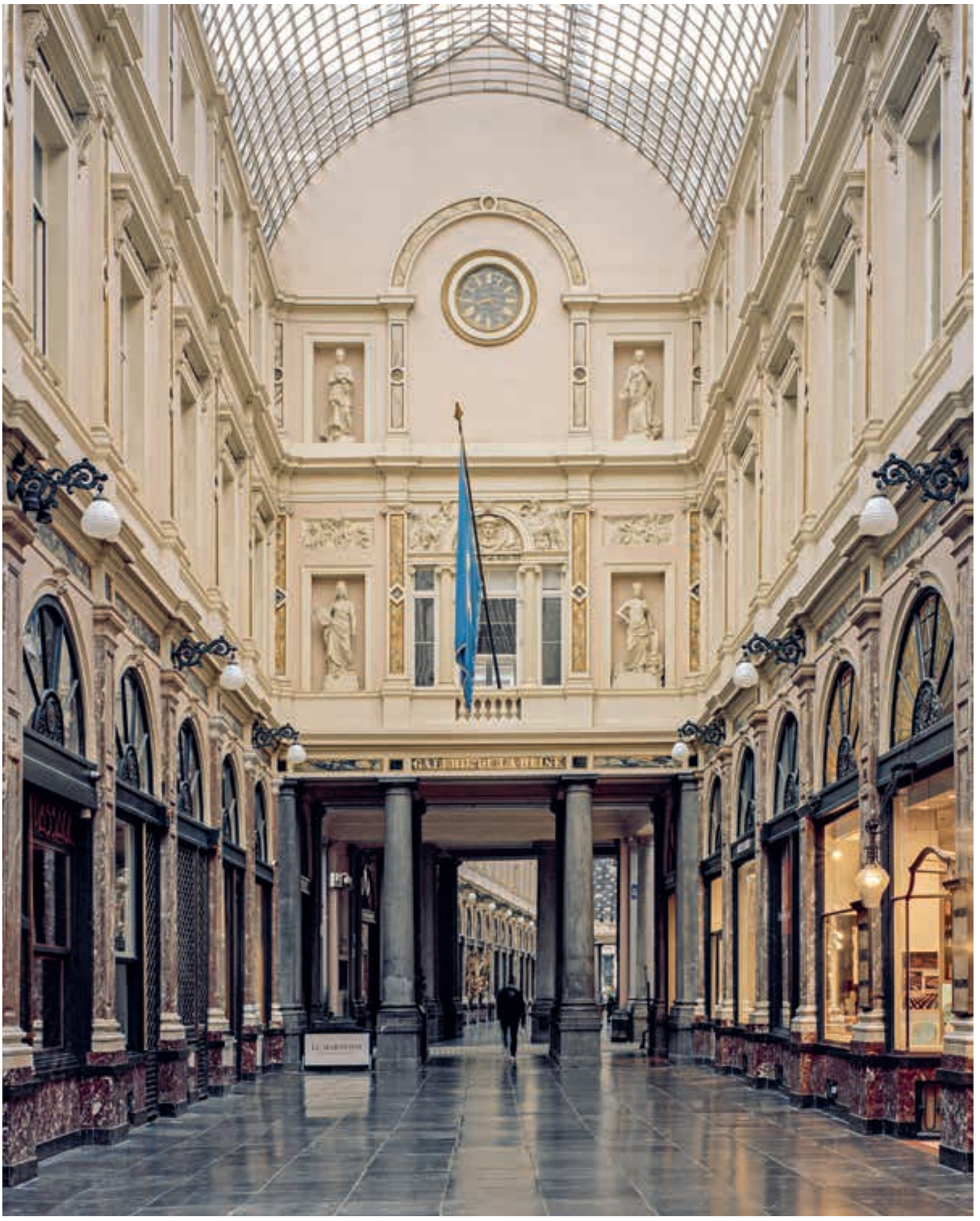
Reconstruction drawing and model of the Gallo-Roman villa in Jette, third century AD

1 Known as *diverticula*. "The 'Roman road' in Wemmel, the 'Dieweg' in Uccle, the 'Rue Haute' and the 'Chaussée de Haecht' in Brussels would be the distant evidence of this." Martiny, Victor-Gaston. *Bruxelles: architecture civile et militaire avant 1900.* Brussels, J.M. Collet, 1992, p. 12. 2 Remains of Roman villas have been found in the Brussels municipalities of Anderlecht, Laeken, and Jette. Matthys, André. "La villa gallo-romaine de Jette." *Archeologica Belgica*, vol. 2, no. 152, 1972, pp. 7–37. 3 Charruadas, Paulo. "De la campagne à la ville. Peuplement, structures foncières et croissance économique dans la région de Bruxelles avant l'an mil." *Medieval and Modern Matters*, vol. 2, 2011, pp. 1–24. 4 Cloquet, Louis. *Traité d'architecture. Eléments de l'architecture. Types d'édifices. Esthétique. Composition et pratique de l'architecture.* vol. 4, Liège, Ch. Béranger, 1900; Matthys, André. "La villa gallo-romaine de Jette." *Archeologica Belgica*, vol. 2, no. 152, 1972, pp. 7–37. 5 Following the invasions from the north, Gauls resumed their tradition of building with wood. Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène. *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle.* vol. 6, Paris, Bance, 1863, p. 214. 6 Cloquet, Louis. *Traité d'architecture. Eléments de l'architecture. Types d'édifices. Esthétique. Composition et pratique de l'architecture.* vol. 4, Liège, Ch. Béranger, 1900, p. 2. 7 van de Walle, Adelbrecht. *Het bouwbedrijf in de Lage Landen tijdens de middeleeuwen.* Antwerp, De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1959. 8 Verniers, Louis. *Un millénaire d'histoire de Bruxelles: depuis les origines jusqu'en 1830.* Brussels, de Boeck, 1965, pp. 77–78. 9 Valkenborgsteen, Ketelsteen, Meynaersteen, Machiaensteen Martiny, Victor-Gaston. *Bruxelles: architecture civile et militaire avant 1900.* Brussels, J.M. Collet, 1992, p. 14; Henne, Alexandre and Alfonse Guillaume Ghislain Wauters. *Histoire de la ville de Bruxelles*. Perichon, 1845, vol. 1. pp. 22–23; Millin, Aubin-Louis. *Antiquités nationales ou Recueil de monuments pour servir à l'histoire générale.* vol. 5, Paris, Drouhin, 1797. 10 Martiny, Victor-Gaston. *Bruxelles: architecture civile et militaire avant 1900.* Brussels, J.M. Collet, 1992, p. 14. 11 CERAA. *Morphologie urbaine à Bruxelles.* Brussels, CERAA, 1987. 12 Bonenfant, Paul. "Les premiers remparts de Bruxelles." *Annales de la Société Royale d'Archéologie de Bruxelles*, vol. XL, 1936, pp. 7–47; Deligne, Chloé. *Bruxelles et sa rivière. Genèse d'un territoire urbain (12e-18e siècle).* Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2003. *Studies in European Urban History*.

< A city of streets and dense urban fabric (Grasmarkt – rue du Marché aux Herbes)

L-shaped brick housing from the 15th century

Hôtel Clèves-Ravenstein, pp. 50–51



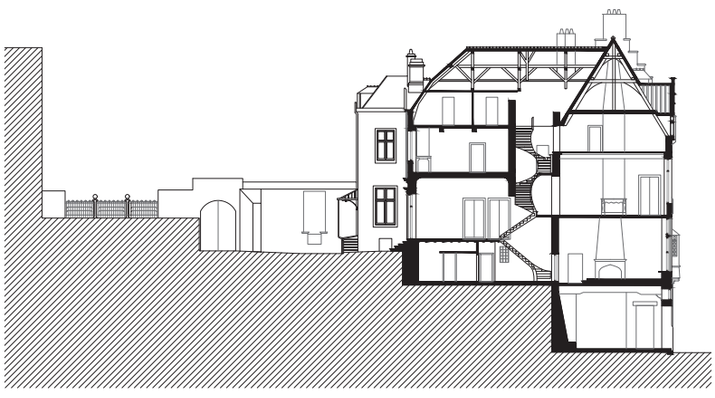
Combining housing and covered passages

Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert, pp. 64–66
Passage du Nord

1 Hôtel Clèves-Ravenstein

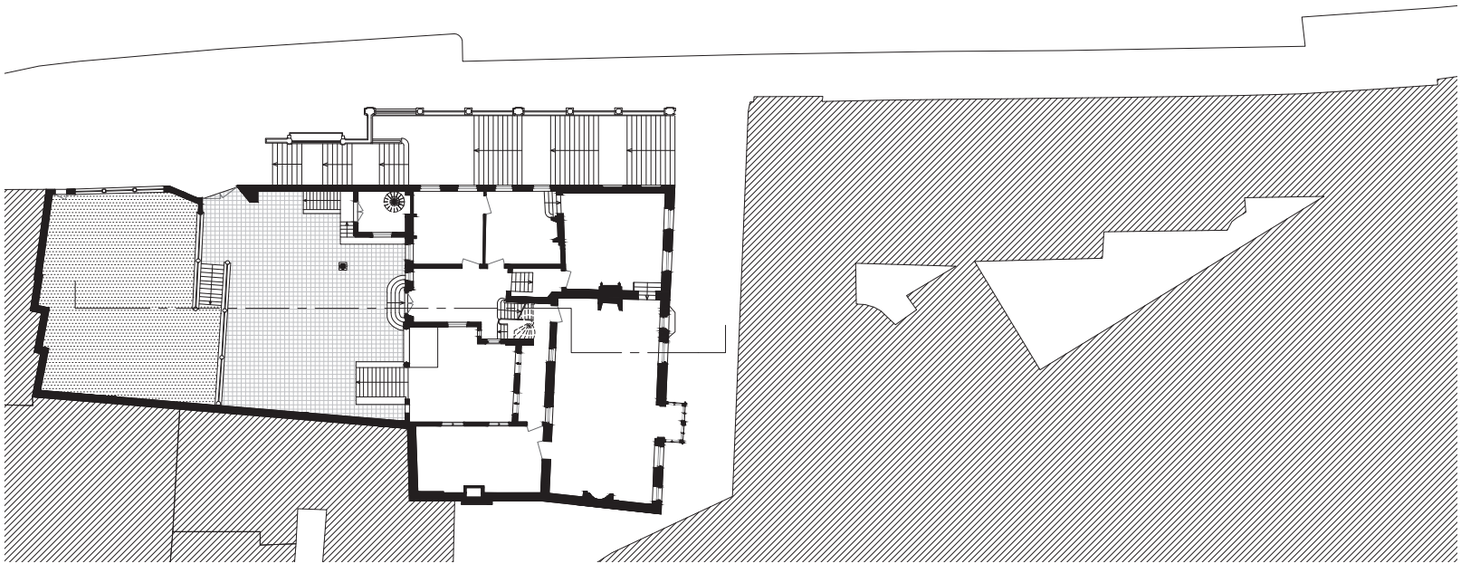
COMPLETION: Late 15th century to early 16th century
ARCHITECT: Unknown
ADDRESS: Ravensteinstraat 3 rue Ravenstein, 1000 Brussels
NUMBER OF UNITS: 1
UNIT FLOOR AREA: 1170 m² + courtyard 458 m²
HOUSING TYPE: Semi-detached house

This imposing brick building is one of the only town mansions remaining from the Burgundian period (see also pp. 30–31). It is positioned at the crossing of the very steep Rue Ravenstein and the smaller Rue des Sols that has now been cut off by Victor Horta's Centre for Fine Arts. The patrician house has four floors, complemented by two levels under an imposing wooden roof structure. It is a fine example of the L-shape typical of wealthy housing of the 15th century. This particular layout allows for greater façade development and the creation of a courtyard (a higher and a lower courtyard in this case because of the sloping ground). The staircase is positioned in the angle of the building. Therefore, all rooms are arranged in a row, as in most Renaissance buildings. The gothic façade is made of red bricks with chiselled sandstone for the building edges and to frame the windows, which are stone-mullioned. The building also features crenelated gables and two imposing, stone bay-windows on the side street.

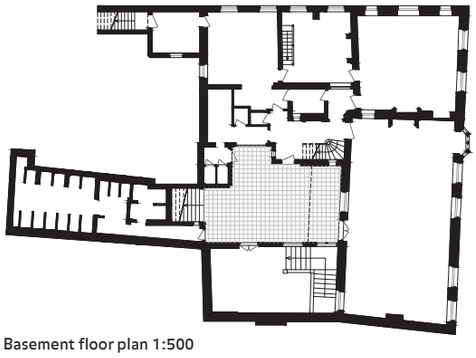


Cross section 1:500

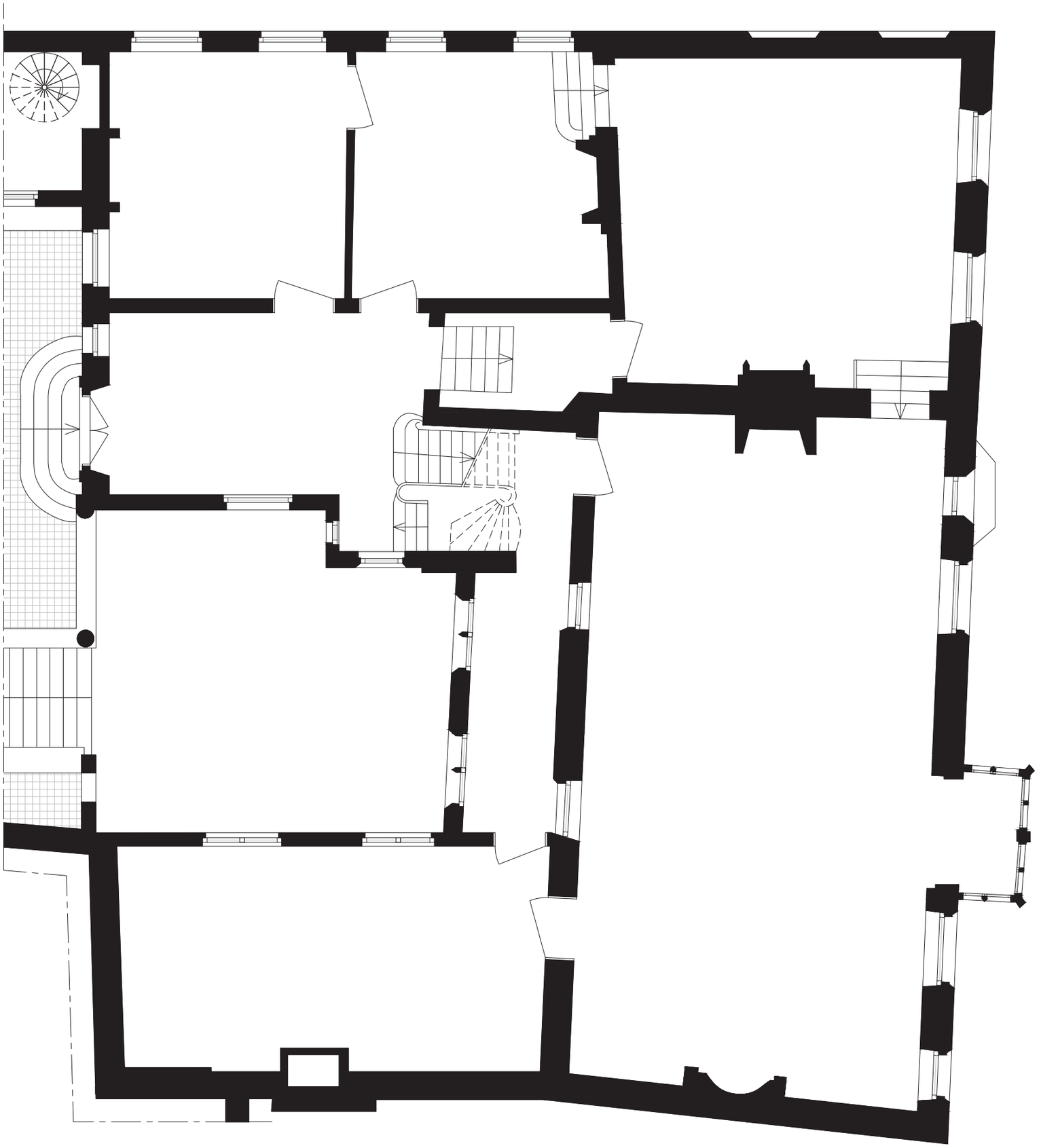
Façade 1:500



Ground floor plan 1:500



Basement floor plan 1:500



Unit plan 1:100

0 5 m

Gérald Ledent

Perpetuating or Opposing the Terraced House

The bourgeois terraced house, Brussels' dominant housing type as documented in the preceding chapter, is not the city's only residential form. However, its importance in terms of numbers as well as in the city's collective unconscious has made it a benchmark against which to compare all other housing forms in the territory, including those that existed before. Comparing other residential forms with the standard form of housing allows us to understand why and how they appeared on the Brussels territory, both before and after the golden age of the Brussels terraced house at the turn of the 20th century. Hence, this chapter aims to offer a genealogy of such residential forms, organised according to spatial and typological features rather than chronologically. While some resemble the dominant – referential – type, others diverge partially or completely from it.

Continuing the Terraced House

Two of these other forms of housing are directly related to the referential type: palaces consisting of multiple houses and houses built over a sunken garage.

Palace of Houses

The earliest forms of social housing are consistent with the dominant type, producing only minor variations on its four basic spatial features yet often complementing them and producing a collective effect that goes beyond the individual house. The Cité Fontainas, pp. 134–135, next to the Porte de Hal, reflects this desire to create a unified setting for a group of modest dwellings.[1] Similar to Partoes' classical beguinage or English crescents, the building gives the illusion of living in a palace, which corresponds to the bourgeois image of the city.

Behind the façade of a palace stand a series of 16 terraced houses (Beyaert – Trappeniers, Cité Fontainas, 1867)

Replacing Servants' Quarters in the Basement with Garages

At the end of the First World War, two changes had a direct impact on housing in Brussels. From a social point of view, home-based domestic servants were disappearing. From a technical point of view, the widespread use of the car modified people's relationship with public space as well as with individual housing, which now required garages.

These changes did not dramatically modify the standard housing type: garages replaced the servants' spaces in the sunken basement. Houses were set back from the street to allow access ramps for automobiles (Saint-Michel 97, pp. 162–163). In addition, with the disappearance of domestic servants, the kitchen migrated to an annex on the *bel étage*, where it had been in the Leopoldian Houses, p. 67, of the 19th century. These houses were built largely in the city's second belt, primarily in the east (Woluwé-St-Pierre, Woluwé-St-Lambert, Auderghem, etc.). They were built on plot widths similar to those used at the end of the 19th century and were likewise organised as closed city blocks. They reproduced the individual character, the limited height, and the repetitive layout of the referential type.

< A city of wide open green spaces (Tachtigbeukenlaan – avenue des Quatre-Vingts Hêtres)

1 Smets, Marcel. *L'avènement de la cité-jardin en Belgique, Histoire de l'habitat social en Belgique de 1830 à 1930*. Liège, Pierre Mardaga, 1977. Collection Architecture + Documents, pp. 34–35.

Palaces made of houses

Cité Fontainas, see 134–135

Individual modernist housing in the interwar period

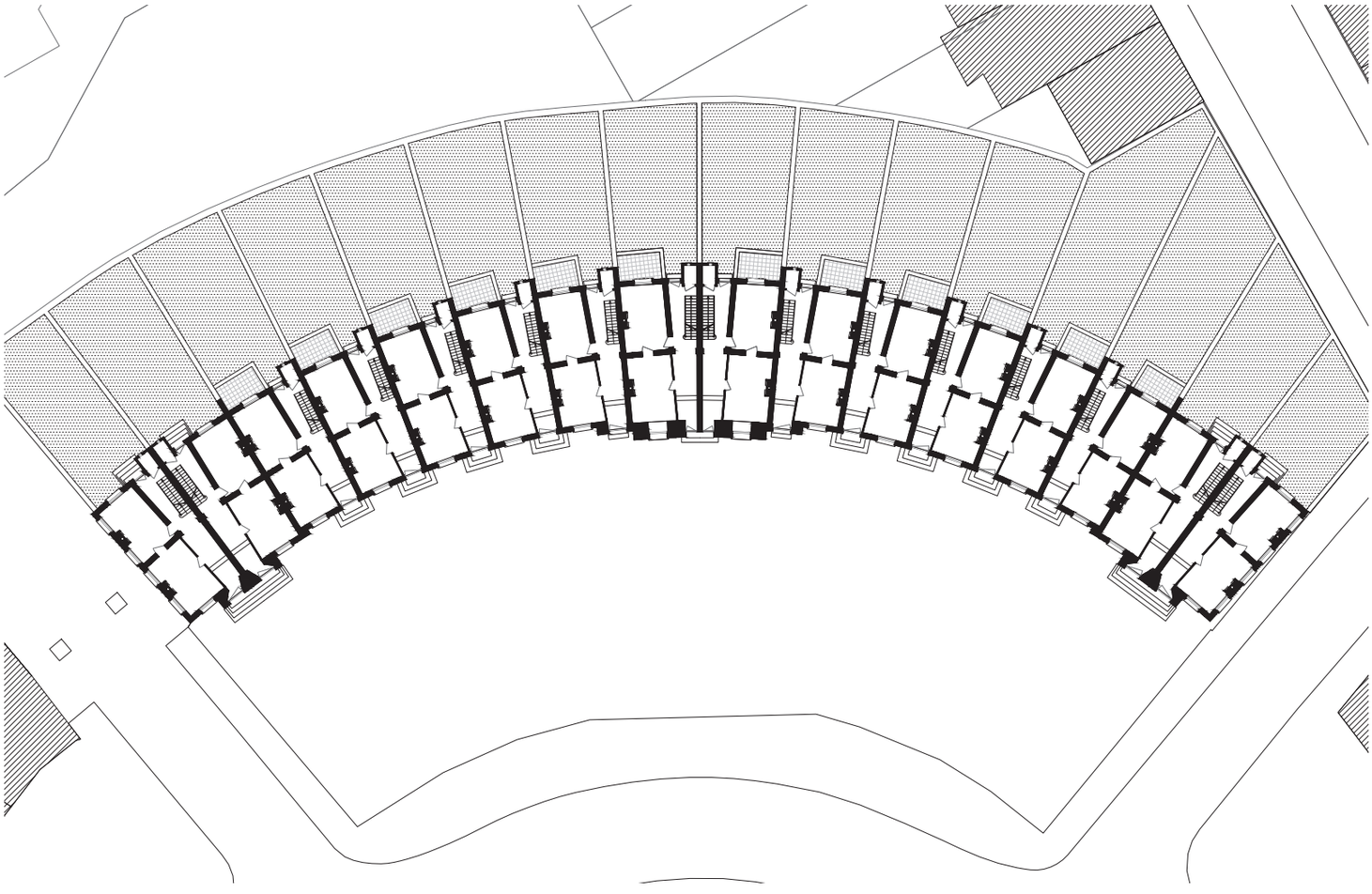
Hôtel Wolfers, pp. 176–177
Maison de Verre, pp. 192–193

25 Cité Fontainas

COMPLETION: 1867
ARCHITECT: Antoine Trappeniers, Henri Beyaert
ADDRESS: Fontainashof 1–8 cité Fontainas, 1060 Brussels
NUMBER OF UNITS: 32
UNIT FLOOR AREA: 134 m² + garden 143 m²
HOUSING TYPE: Terraced houses

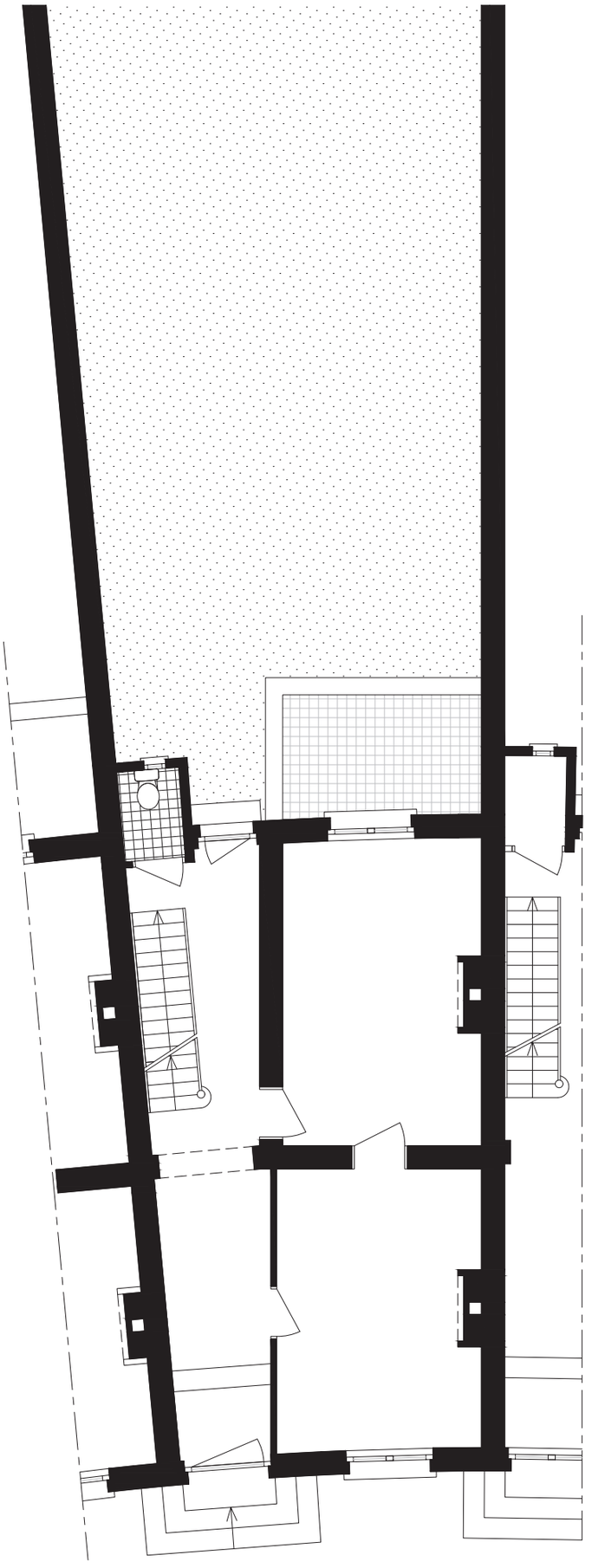
This monumental neoclassical building is located close to the Hal Gate (see also pp. 114–115). It is surrounded by gardens closed off by wrought-iron fences. The wide entrance is flanked by two imposing carved blue-limestone pedestals bearing vases. The building was inspired by the English crescents, accommodating multiple dwellings behind a monumental façade. The housing estate comprises 16 houses, originally comprising 32 dwellings. They were intended for Brussels' retired teachers. Each house is divided into two longitudinal bays, the narrower of which contains the staircase and a toilet; the wider bay has two adjoining rooms. The two-storey façade is topped by a slate roof punctuated by eight dormer windows. This façade is marked by three pavilions: one in the centre, the other two at the ends. Each pavilion features engaged columns on the first floor supporting an entablature. It is topped by a pediment surrounded by a balustrade. The central pediment shows a bas-relief representing André-Napoléon Fontainas (1807–1863), mayor of the city of Brussels, between two allegorical figures. The front façade is made of light-coloured stone, while the rear is plastered. Between the pavilions, the evenly spaced windows are interrupted every two bays by the entrance doors to the houses.

Façade 1:500



Ground floor plan 1:500

0 25 m

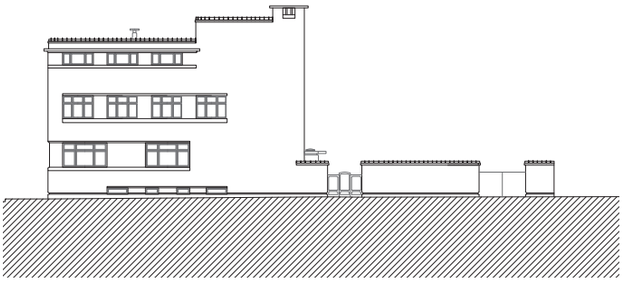


Unit plan 1:100

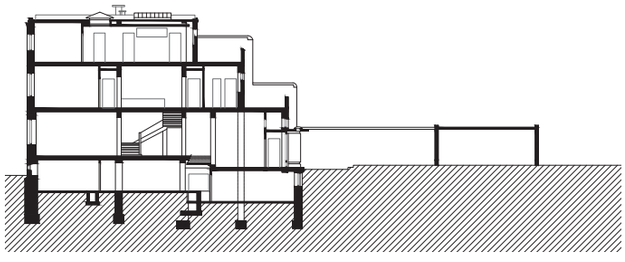
42 Hôtel Wolfers

COMPLETION: 1929
ARCHITECT: Henry Van de Velde
ADDRESS: Alphonse Renardstraat 60 rue Alphonse Renard, 1050 Brussels
NUMBER OF UNITS: 1
UNIT FLOOR AREA: 772 m² + garden 245 m², terraces 25 m²
HOUSING TYPE: Semi-detached house

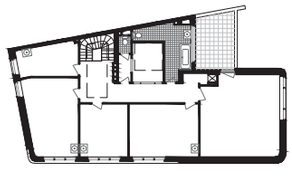
This corner house (see also p. 126), built for the master goldsmith and jeweller Raymond Wolfers, was erected on a funnel-shape plot of land. The building is extended by a garden designed by the landscape architect Lucien Boucher. It houses a double garage and it is closed off from the street by a brick wall. The house does not have a direct door to the street. It is accessed through a metal gate in the garden wall that leads to an access path. The entrance to the house is located at the back of the plot under a canopy. It initiates a longitudinal service bay parallel to the party wall, which accommodates the circulation spaces including a main and a service staircase. On the street side, there is a row of three rooms: a dining room, a living room, and a music room. On the first floor there are three bedrooms, a boudoir, and two bathrooms as well as a terrace on the garden side. On the second floor there are four bedrooms, a gym, and a second terrace. The three-storey building under flat roofs offers a play of recessed volumes. The façades are made of light-brown bricks on a blue-limestone base. They are ornamented with wall-finishing black-glazed brick as well as green wooden shutters and canopies. Today, the residence is home to the artist Richard Venlet who has decided to let the building age without intervention.



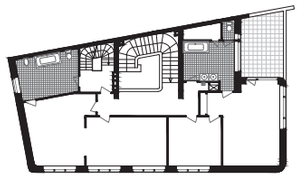
Façade 1:500



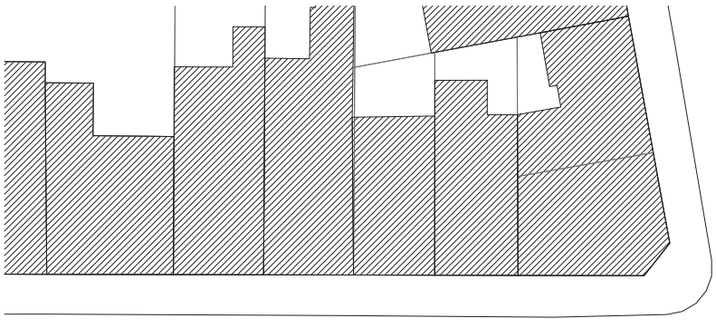
Cross section 1:500



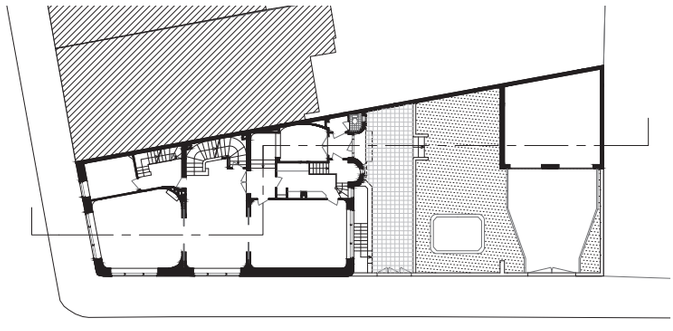
Second floor plan 1:500

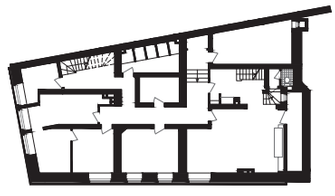


First floor plan 1:500



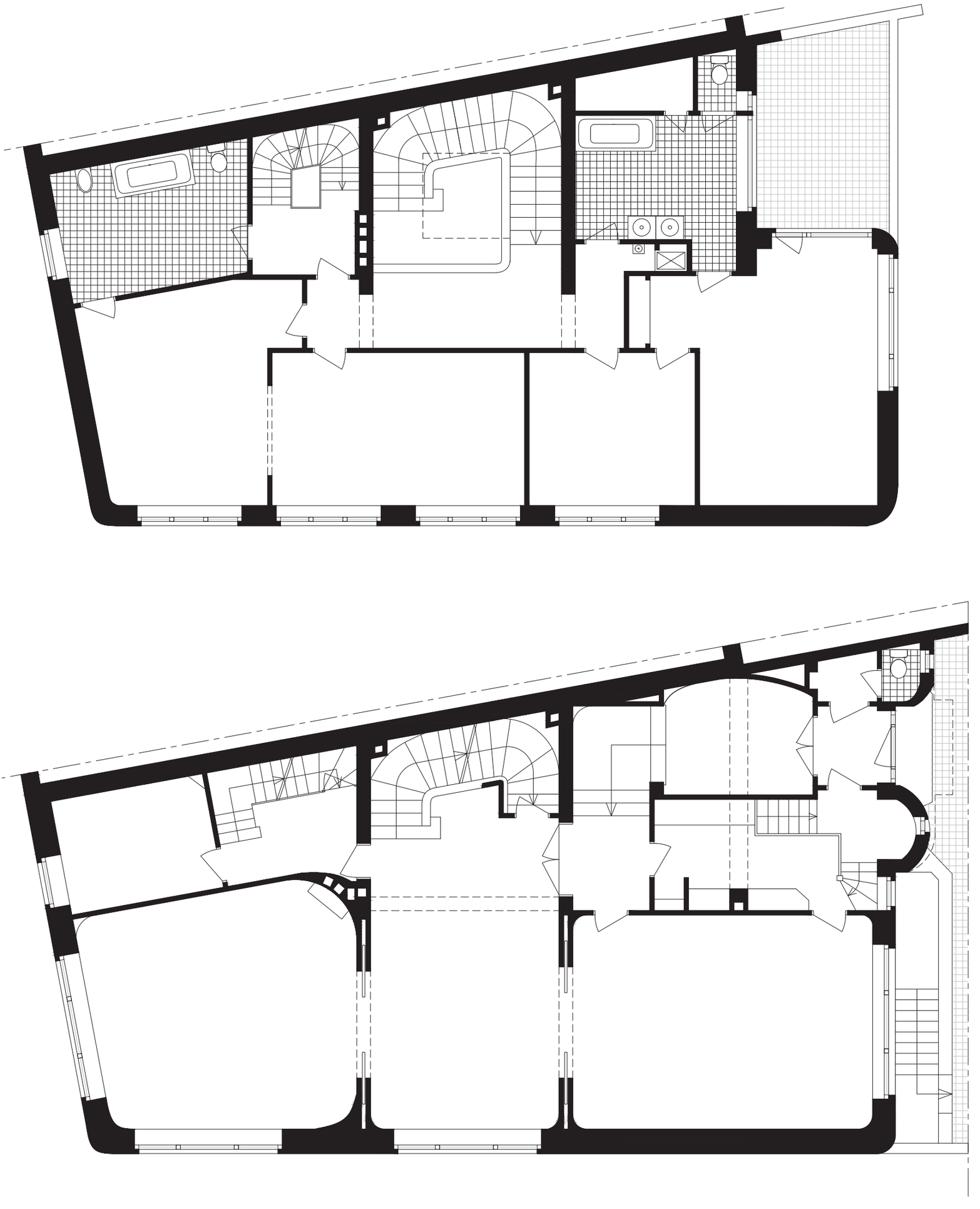
Ground floor plan 1:500





Basement floor plan 1:500

0 25 m



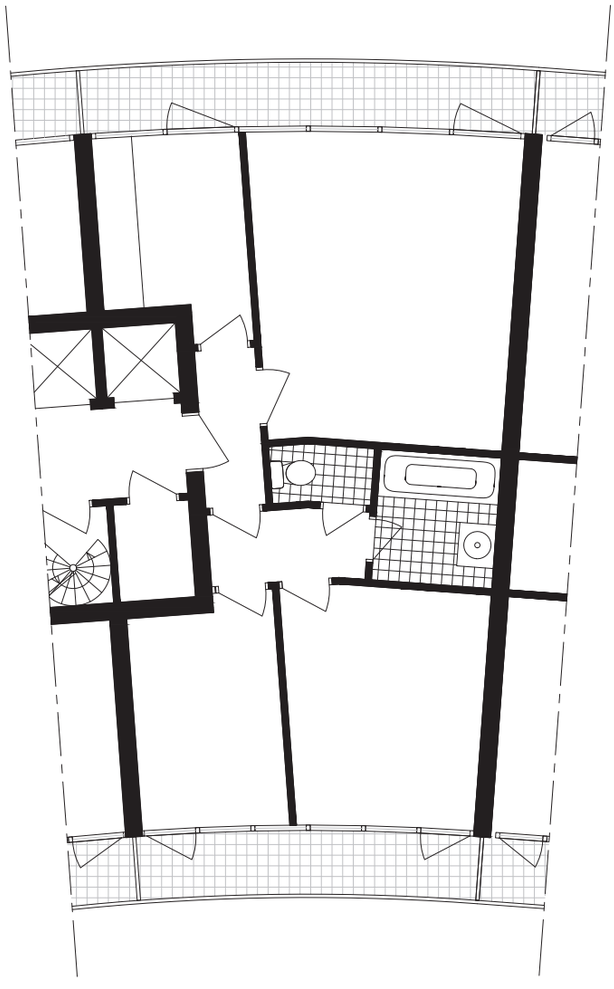
Unit plan 1:100

0 5 m

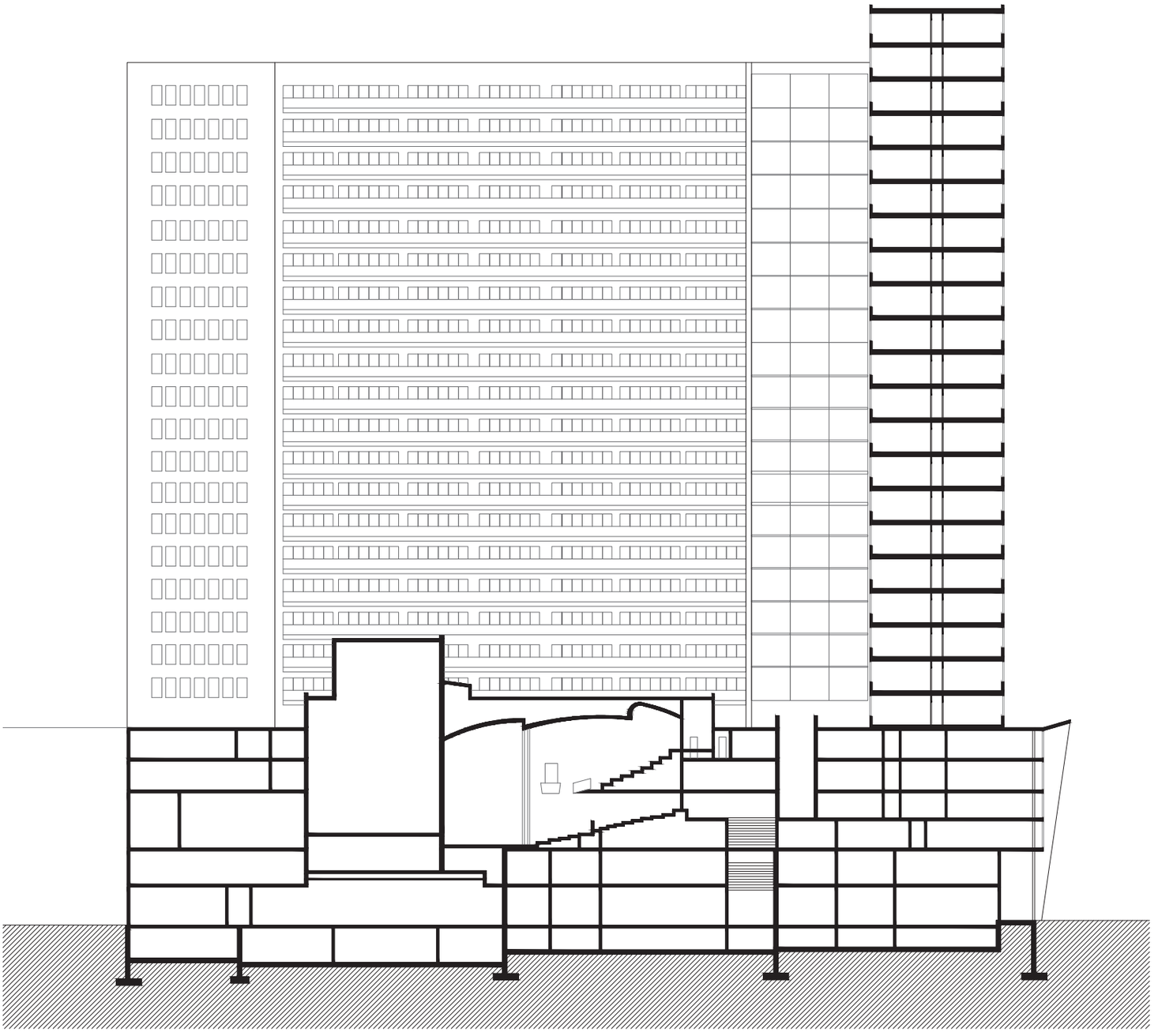
61 Centre International Rogier

COMPLETION: 1961
DEMOLITION: 2001
ARCHITECT: Jacques Cuisinier, Serge Lebrun
ADDRESS: Karel Rogierplein 10–15 place Charles Rogier, 1210 Brussels
NUMBER OF UNITS: 120
UNIT FLOOR AREA: 57 m² + terrace 11 m²
HOUSING TYPE: Multi-use apartment building

Also known as the Martini Tower after the bar it housed on its top floor, this building was undoubtedly one of the most emblematic examples of post-war modernism in Brussels. Located on Place Rogier, one of the main squares on the city's inner ring road, the tower was built on the site of the former Gare du Nord, which was moved a few hundred metres further north. The volume of the building developed in three stages: a two-storey-high gallery and a four-storey base topped by a 22-storey tower. With its eclectic programme, the more than 60,000 m² building was a real city within the city: it accommodated shops, exhibition and conference rooms, offices, and housing, as well as two performance halls for the Théâtre National. On the ground floor, a Y-shaped gallery ran through the building. In addition to serving shops, this gallery also gave access to the apartments found in the rear part of the tower. These dwellings were organised in pairs around the vertical cores. Benefiting from balconies running continuously along the front and rear façades, the apartments were organised along two poles: bedrooms to the west and living rooms linked to the kitchens to the east. In terms of façades, the building's load-bearing concrete structure was fitted with glass-and-aluminium curtain walls.



Unit plan 1:100



Cross section 1:500

0 25 m

Alessandro Porotto

The Search for Quality Housing: From 2000 onwards

Envisioning Brussels in the 21st Century

Over the past two decades, housing has once again become a matter of urgent debate. Challenges brought about by a series of crises and changes that began in the 20th century have required the development and implementation of new strategies. This is the situation that any innovative housing agenda must face as we transition into the 21st century.[1]

Issues Inherited from the 20th Century

Fragmented government meant 20th-century Brussels lacked coherent urban-planning policies. Planning, even for such sizeable sites as the European Quarter and the Northern Quarter, responded to local development opportunities rather than following any overall structural plan. While some post-war housing is remarkable, the post-war period nevertheless left a complex legacy at the beginning of the 2000s that must be taken into account.

From an urban point of view, a typological genealogy of overlapping housing types resulted in an extremely fragmented built environment. Indeed, from the 1950s onwards the state strongly encouraged Belgians to leave the city, promoting suburbanisation and the building of so-called *pavillionaires* – groups of detached houses in suburban settings. The resulting urban sprawl turned the Brussels-Capital Region into a "horizontal metropolis", a concept defining extended urban spaces characterised by complementarity, loose hierarchies, and territorial synergies.[2] In terms of the built environment, housing in this metropolis extended across administrative boundaries, creating on the one hand the compact city described in this book, and on the other the surrounding Brussels hinterland.

From a social point of view, this suburbanisation generated a massive exodus, so that while the population in the urban agglomeration continued to grow from 1965 onwards, this growth was outside the Brussels region.[3] International immigration, meanwhile, was unable to compensate for internal emigration, bringing about a slow yet persistent population decline. This trend was reversed in the Brussels-Capital Region from 1995 onwards, and the population is expected to increase progressively into the 21st century.[4] Furthermore, new types of households emerged in the 2000s as the result of demographic evolution and migration;[5] these took their place alongside the nuclear family, which had been the central model for post-war initiatives.

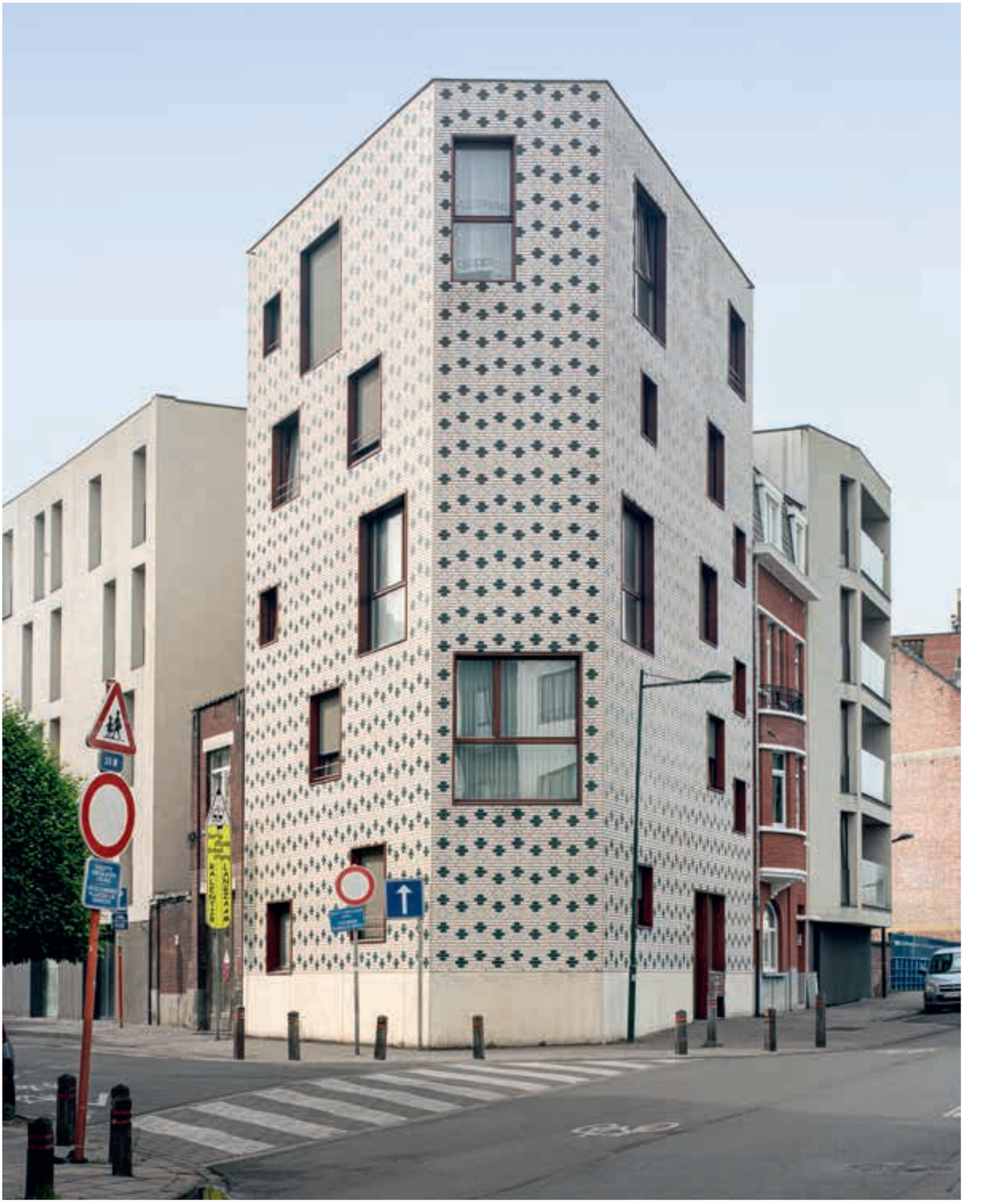
From an economic point of view, housing became very expensive for the middle class in the years leading up to 2000, while social-housing production was drastically reduced after the 1970s.[6] In particular, the establishment of the Capital Region's borders initiated residential relocation away from Brussels, forcing many young families to migrate in order to reduce their cost of living. In terms of affordability, therefore, housing alternatives were required to provide a larger, higher-quality housing offer that also accommodated new social structures. New housing policies needed tools that could establish conditions allowing denser occupancy in quality urban homes. In essence, they were forced to answer the question: how can people live in the city today?

< A city of invention and urban renewal (Parkdreef – Drève du Parc)

1 Porotto, Alessandro and Gérald Ledent. "Crisis and Transition: Forms of Collective Housing in Brussels." *Buildings*, vol. 11, no. 4, 162, 2021, pp. 1–31. **2** The concept of "horizontal metropolis" as defined by Studio Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò emerged in the study *Brussels 2040.* Dejemeppe, Pierre and Benoit Périlleux. *Bruxelles 2040.* Brussels, Region de Bruxelles-Capitale, 2012. **3** Deboosere, Patrick et al. "The Population of Brussels: A Demographic Overview." *Brussels Studies*, no. 3, 2009, pp. 1–16; Dehaibe, Xavier et al. "Projections démographiques communales bruxelloises 2015–2025." *Les Cahiers de l'IBSA*, Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'Analyse (IBSA), 2016. **4** Berns, Hannah et al. "Towards a paradigm shift in the residential appeal policy of the Brussels-Capital Region." *Brussels Studies*, no. 172, 2022, pp. 1–31; Dehaibe, Xavier et al. "Projections démographiques communales bruxelloises 2015–2025." *Les Cahiers de l'IBSA*, Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'Analyse (IBSA), 2016. **5** Casier, Charlotte. "The transformation of demographic structures and the geography of Europeans in Brussels between 2000 and 2018." *Brussels Studies*, no. 138, 2019, pp. 1–16; Deboosere, Patrick et al. "The Population of Brussels: A Demographic Overview." Ibid. no. 3, 2009. **6** Dessouroux, Christian et al. "Housing in Brussels: Diagnosis and Challenges." *Brussels Studies* no. 99, 2016, pp. 1–31.

Re-inventing the *maison bruxelloise*: the role of roofs and gardens

Voorzittersstraat 45 rue du président
House William, pp. 312–313



Reviving the 19th-century city blocks

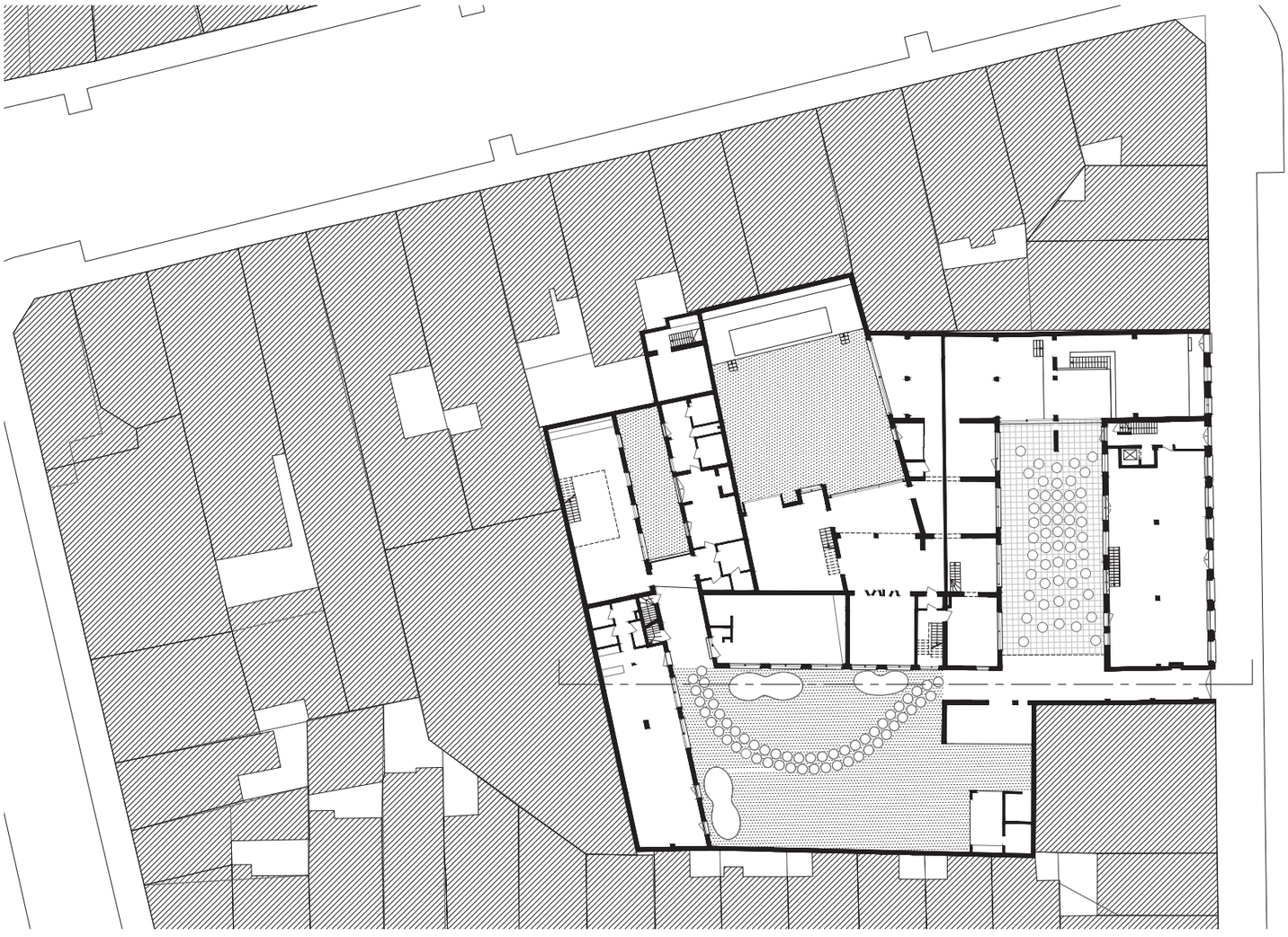
Navez 111, pp. 306–307
Portaels 158, pp. 308–309

76 P.NT²

COMPLETION: 2007
ARCHITECT: BOB361 Architects (original architect: J. Schockaert)
ADDRESS: Poincarélaan 28–31 boulevard Poincaré, 1070 Brussels
NUMBER OF UNITS: 18
UNIT FLOOR AREA: 176 m² + terrace 86 m²
HOUSING TYPE: Co-housing apartment building

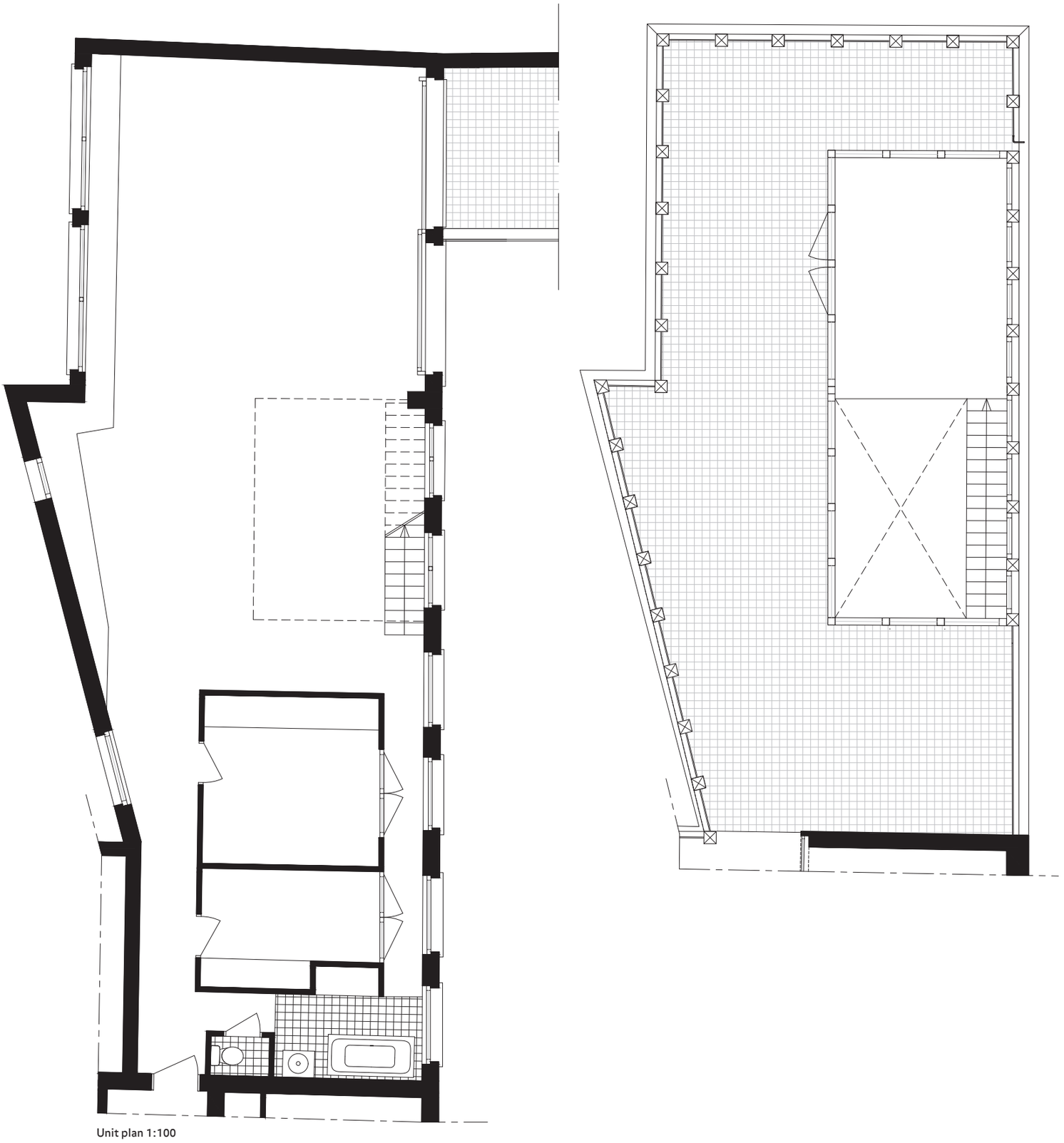
This project (see also p. 260) stems from the transformation of former goldsmithies located on Brussels' inner ring road. Starting from a group of very dense buildings, several demolitions created a suitable environment for 18 dwellings, offices, and a commercial space organised around four outdoor areas. On the boulevard, there is a commercial space and the entrance to the site. Behind this first threshold, a semi-public paved courtyard serves the office spaces of the architectural studio BOB361. Further in, a private garden is shared by all the dwellings while two smaller green spaces form the heart of the northernmost apartments. On the upper floors, the dwellings are accommodated in the old industrial structures, producing a great typological and spatial variety. Their spaces are spread over large areas and are completed by terraces between green roofs. Several communal spaces are provided, such as a summer kitchen in the collective garden and a bicycle room. The original façades of the buildings are mostly in red brick, while the new additions are mainly in concrete both inside and outside. All the window frames are made of wood except for those of elements such as greenhouses, which recall the industrial character of the site. In the first courtyard, holes have been cut in the concrete floor, which are used to create a passageway to the first garden.

Cross section 1:500



Ground floor plan 1:500

0 25 m



Unit plan 1:100

0 5 m

Brussels housing is extremely diverse, as anyone walking around the city will readily appreciate. Its traditional urban block consists of single-family terraced houses, usually two to three storeys high and with a garden at the rear. Here, this bourgeois housing type evolved into a particularly broad range – including the well-known Art Nouveau residences – and still forms the "DNA" of the city. Today, many other housing forms have emerged in the city; thus, Brussels' residential building types comprise narrow gabled-roofed houses standing side by side with modernist apartment buildings, 19th-century mansions, and brand new condominiums. This typical Belgian layering of housing solutions makes for a visually poetic chaos, creating at times a surreal cityscape but also providing answers for the challenges of housing design.

The three chapters of this publication explore Brussels' housing typologies from the origins of the city to the present day. More than 100 selected case studies are documented with scaled drawings and photographs. The works by photographer Maxime Delvaux trace a promenade comprising an expressive journey through the Belgian capital and its varied cityscapes. The book offers a broad panorama and a history of the architecture and urban development of Brussels.

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