

# And Now For Something Completely Different

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Architect Renaat Braem described Belgium as “the ugliest country in the world”, while Rem Koolhaas called it “the first drive-thru nation”. These and other reflections are gathered in *Something Completely Different. Architecture in Belgium* (MIT Press, 2024), a book by architecture writer and critic Christophe Van Gerrewey. Written in an essayistic and carefree tone, the publication blends theory and historiography with personal anecdotes that showcase Belgium’s cultural peculiarities from the inside. Unlike in his previous publication, *L’architecture en Belgique: 25 ans en 75 projets* (Lannoo, 2014), Van Gerrewey does not adopt a case-driven approach this time around. Instead, the book is structured around seven essays, each focused on a theme that generally transcends the boundaries of architecture. The common thread throughout these essays is how, at each historical moment, architects have responded to successive waves of modernization. Belgium proves to be a particularly revealing case study for this analysis because, despite its modest size, it harbors a remarkable political, cultural, and territorial complexity that, in Van Gerrewey’s hands, becomes an effective allegory for understanding similar processes in other Western countries.

The first chapter, “The Balance of Rivalries”, explores Belgium’s socioeconomic evolution, focusing on its formation as a nation in 1830, heavily shaped by the geopolitical interests of foreign powers. It addresses the ghosts of its colonial past, especially through buildings associated with the Congo, such as the Palace of Justice in Brussels, as well as the ongoing tension between the Flemish and Walloon regions. For Van Gerrewey, this complexity is reflected in the country’s architecture and urbanism, characterized by dispersion and the consolidation of detached housing as the predominant development model. Ironically, Belgium’s unplanned urban fabric contrasts with the bureaucratic character of its capital, home to the institutions of the European Union. The second chapter, “Flowers on a Dunchill”, delves into the role of the single-family home as the dominant domestic typology and cultural artifact of the 20th century. It examines how the lack of administrative control and the marginal role of architects gave rise to a built environment full of aesthetic irregularities, perceived by some as a typically Belgian form of “ugliness”. However, Van Gerrewey highlights how a minority of architects -such as Bob Van Reeth or the architect-artist Luc Deleu- embraced this condition with irony, rigor, and inventiveness. The essay ultimately underscores the potential of design strategies that break rules or exploit regulatory gaps, as seen in the work of

contemporary offices like Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu, OFFICE kgdvs, and Bovenbouw Architectuur.

Throughout the book, the selected case studies generally correspond to periods when Belgium played a leading role in the discipline, such as the art nouveau architecture of Victor Horta and Henry Van de Velde, or the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair. However, at times, the connection to the national context is more tangential. In the third chapter, “The Tenement of the Purest Form”, the origin of Le Corbusier’s *Maison Dom-Ino* concept is examined. Devised for the reconstruction of Flanders after the First World War, the Swiss architect sought to link its design to local housing models. Van Gerrewey questions this origin and instead places the prototype within the broader context of the industrialization of construction, a process that would progressively dilute the architect’s authorial imprint, a recurring theme in the book. This episode is followed by examples of modernist experimentation in collective housing, such as the proposals of Willy Van der Meer and his systematizations linked to CIAM, which laid the groundwork for large-scale housing block developments in urban peripheries. The chapter concludes with contemporary projects by De Smet Vermeulen Architecten and Dogma, which explore hybrid typologies halfway between apartment blocks and row houses.

The fourth and fifth essays, “Drive-Thru Nation” and “Splendid and Full-Blooded Chaos”, address the difficulty of organizing a highly dispersed territory. Often compared to that of the United States, Belgian culture and its built landscape are dominated by the logic of the automobile and characterized by a high degree of formal diversity linked to the individual expression of each household. Van Gerrewey explores the connections between domesticity and the automobile throughout the 20th century, from the Stoclet Palace -built when cars were a luxury reserved for the elite- to projects like Xaveer De Geyter’s Villa Brasschaat, which reflects the mass democratization of car ownership and the rise of suburban life. He also analyzes efforts to bring some coherence to this chaotic landscape through objects scattered along highways, such as Jacques Moeschal’s sculptures or contemporary interventions by 51N4E and NoA Architecten. These chapters also examine the rise of public competitions in redefining Belgian architecture, highlighting the 1988 Zeebrugge Sea Terminal competition as a key disciplinary moment. They also show how, by the end of the 20th century, figures influenced by OMA -like Jan Neutelings, Xaveer De Geyter, and Stéphane Beel- successfully channeled the energy of the ‘SuperDutch’ architects, thereby helping elevate the international profile of Belgian architecture through large-scale institutional projects.

In the penultimate chapter, “Pull Out a Chair”, Van Gerrewey focuses on the generation of architects that emerged in recent decades. He analyzes how the interventions by Kersten Geers and David Van Severen at the Venice Biennale can be read as a reaction to the collapse of the “neoliberal party” in 2008, and explains how OFFICE kgdvs has managed to articulate a sophisticated practice -capable of operating with realism and formal control- while embracing the potential of Belgium’s fragmented landscape. The work of this generation, distanced from

the spectacle of the ‘starsystem’ and backed by a healthy culture of public competitions, makes it possible to consider the 2010s as a high point for Belgian architecture. However, the acceptance of economic constraints and national contradictions also reveals a certain disciplinary retreat, as well as the definitive abandonment of the ambitions of the modern movement. Focused on present-day challenges, the final chapter, “We Will No Longer Build” argues that this golden age of Belgian architecture seems to have given way to new urgencies. The bulk of the most celebrated practices have shifted their focus internationally, leaving behind a local scene increasingly dominated by ‘copycats’. In response, offices like Rotor, RE-ST, and BC Architects have reoriented their practices toward material reuse, dismantling, and, in some cases, the explicit renunciation of building. This final essay proposes a critical genealogy that connects these practices to the ecological concerns already present in the 1970s, revisiting figures like the postmodern neotraditionalists Léon Krier and Maurice Culot, the simulated participation of Lucien Kroll’s proposals, or again, the work of the provocative architect-artist Luc Deleu. Van Gerrewey presents a current context marked by an ecological turn, which steers the discipline toward a collective and environmentally conscious architecture that questions traditional notions of authorship and permanence. However, he also warns of the risk that this “soft authorship” and the fetishization of material processes could lead to a new kind of aestheticization complicit with capital.

The figure of Geert Bekaert, the most prominent Belgian architecture critic of the 20th century and a major personal influence on Van Gerrewey, recurs throughout the book. Particularly relevant were Bekaert’s efforts in the 1970s to establish a distinction between building and architecture, as demonstrated in the exhibition *La Construction en Belgique 1945-1970*, which aimed to recover the architect’s critical agency in a context dominated by the banality of suburban sprawl. Bekaert’s approach can also be seen as an attempt to promote a national identity linked to the built environment. In contrast, Van Gerrewey does not seek to define a ‘Belgian’ way of doing architecture; rather, he aims to articulate the relationship between architecture and the various processes of technological, economic, and cultural modernization. Drawing inspiration from great ‘translators’ of modernity -such as Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt- the author analyzes the evolution of architecture in Belgium by revealing its constant oscillation between the utopian and the pragmatic, the absurd and the functional, the local and the global. Far from constituting a catalog of masterpieces, *Something Completely Different...* confronts a set of architectural attitudes with the major events that have shaped the discipline over the past two centuries: World Wars, the rise of the automobile, economic crises, and today’s environmental emergency. In Van Gerrewey’s hands, Belgium does not appear as an anomaly, but rather as a country whose architecture unusually clearly illustrates the fundamental dilemmas of the discipline. The book shows how every technological advance, every cultural shift, and every socioeconomic rupture leaves its mark on architecture, even as architecture’s responses have become increasingly modest and fragmented.