Good Taste and Domestic Bliss

Art, Home and Well-Being around 1900

[MIEKE VAN DER WAL]

Long tailbacks on roads full of furniture shops, traffic at a standstill on motorway exits leading to furniture superstores, a wide range of interior design magazines and umpteen television programmes devoted to 'home and garden': these are the visible proof that at the start of the twenty-first century a great many people are extremely interested in their home environment and want to feel truly 'at home' there. Of course, the increased prosperity of the second half of last century has been an important factor in expanding this interest to its present scale. But something today's consumer will not be aware of is that the very first impulse towards concern among the general public for a good home environment actually dates from the nineteenth century. Developments that took place at that time in many fields radically changed the appearance of society. The rise of industrialisation in Europe played a very important part in this: on the one hand, it enabled products to be manufactured on a larger scale, while on the other workers were needed in the factories. The poor conditions in which they often had to work had repercussions for society and politics.

William Morris versus 'wonderful ugliness': the Arts & Crafts movement

The first time an extensive range of machine-made industrial products from all over the world was brought together was at 'The Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations' in London in 1851. This world exhibition was held in the Crystal Palace, designed by Joseph Paxton and constructed of iron and glass. The objects exhibited were in most cases lavishly decorated in various historical styles, as can be seen in the profusely illustrated catalogue.

With about six million visitors the exhibition was a great success, but at least one of them was not charmed: William Morris (1834-1896). This is apparent from the recollections of the publisher F.S. Ellis: '*I remember him [Morris] speaking many a time of the Exhibition of 1851, at which all the world was struck with unbounded admiration, and telling how, as a youth of 17, he declined to see anything more wonderful in it than that it was "wonderfully ugly", and, sitting himself down on a seat, steadily refused to go over the building with the rest of his family.*'

IKEA store in Groningen, the Netherlands.

Morris' visit to the Great Exhibition may well have sown the seeds for his later struggle against what he considered to be the poor industrial products of his time. His criticism was directed both at their appearance, smothered in ornamentation, and at the way they were produced. In his view the factory worker had become a 'slave' of the machine, and could no longer derive any satisfaction from his work. For this reason Morris argued for a return to traditional means of production, so that the employee would once again be responsible for the product he created, as had been customary in the Middle Ages. When it came to design, too, there should be a return to that time of simple forms and the honest use of materials.

In 1861, with a number of like-minded people, he established his company, Morris & Co., to put his ideas into practice and produce, among other things, furniture, upholstery and curtain fabrics and wall-coverings. Morris' initiative was soon imitated elsewhere in England and this led to the birth of the Arts & Crafts Movement. The influence of this movement was also felt on the continent; the Belgian architect Gustave Serrurier-Bovy (1858-1910) is generally regarded as the person who, after spending time in England in the early 1880s, introduced the Arts & Crafts style of furniture-making to the continent.

KUNST EN
MAATSCHAPPIJ
LEZINGEN VAN
WILLIAM MORRIS

Sjoerd de Roos, frontispiece and title page of *Kunst en maatschappij*: lectures by William Morris about 'arts and society', translated by M. Hugenholtz-Zeeven, with a short biographical sketch by Henri Polak. Amsterdam: A. B. Soep, 1903.

The palace as a house: changes in Belgium

The 1890s were a turbulent period in Belgium. Industrialisation took off earlier there than in the Netherlands. This had its positive side, including the creation of a large middle class, but it also had its negative side. In the early 1870s and the mid-1880s economic recession gave rise to social unrest, and in 1885 this led to several elements of the labour movement joining forces to form the *Parti Ouvrier Belge*. The POB gained much support and in the first parliamentary elections in which it was allowed to take part, in 1894, it even won 28 of the 152 seats. Following this success it built a new head office in Brussels to a design by Victor Horta (1861-1947). This '*Maison du Peuple*', built in glass, iron and steel and one of the earliest examples of Belgian Art Nouveau architecture, opened in 1899. The architect described his design as a '*palace that was not meant to be a palace, but a house, where light and air would be the luxuries that the workers have for so long had to do without in their slums*'.

As well as economic improvements, another of the POB's main aims was the intellectual and cultural development of the workers. In 1891, with this in mind, it set up its '*Section d'Art*', which would offer talks and courses. It also organised visits to exhibitions, including those by *Les Vingts*, an association of progressive artists founded in Brussels in 1883.

In artistic circles as elsewhere, the 1880s were a time of change and challenge to the established order. To give one example, the magazine *L'Art moderne*, established in 1881, repeatedly emphasised the social role of the artist and stated that in order to exercise real influence artists needed to apply themselves to practical matters, such as designing buildings, furniture, utility objects and even clothes. In the 1890s several artists from this progressive cultural circle became actively involved in the activities of the '*Section d'Art*', the best known among them being Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957).

A new art for a new world: Henry Van de Velde

Although Van de Velde trained as a painter, he owes his considerable fame to his work as an architect and designer of interiors and objects of practical use. His decision, taken in 1893, to concentrate entirely on this was inspired not so much by artistic motives as by social commitment. He also expressed this commitment in the form of courses, lectures and a range of publications, and from 1890 to 1894 he was editor of *L'Art moderne*. One of the ideas this magazine put forward in the early 1890s was that when the working-class struggle for a new society had ended in victory, a new art would emerge. It would not only produce more luxury goods, but also focus on the design of utility objects.

The growing interest in applied art could also be seen in the exhibitions by '*Les Vingt*', which from 1891 included not only paintings and drawings but also increasing amounts of applied and decorative art. Looking back on this, Van de Velde wrote: '*The artistic craftsman had won his place and status among the fine arts. The exhibitions no longer made any distinction between fine and applied art*'.

When Van de Velde met Maria Sèthe in early 1893 (they married a year later) it undoubtedly had a significant effect on the direction his career took. She too was extremely interested in the revival of artistic handwork and in William Morris' ideas; she even visited Morris in London in 1893. After her marriage

Chairs designed by Henry Van de Velde, from the '*Bloemenwerf*' house, c.1898. Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

Bench designed by Johan Thorn Prikker (made by Arts and Crafts), 1898. Drents Museum, Assen (on long-term loan from ICN).

to Van de Velde she became closely involved in the execution of his plans and she designed ladies' clothes and other items jointly with him. In 1895-96 they had a house built in Ukkel (a suburb of Brussels) in which Van de Velde put all his ideas into practice. He designed not only the house but also the entire interior, including the furniture, wallpaper, fabrics and so on. This house, called '*Bloemenwerf*', became not only a sort of 'showroom' for potential clients, but also a meeting place for kindred spirits. One of these was the Dutch painter Johan Thorn Prikker (1868-1932), who was influenced by these contacts to turn his talents to applied art.

Van de Velde's interior design activities soon caught the attention of Samuel Bing, the well-known Paris art dealer. In 1895, in the first exhibition he organised after refurbishing his 'Salon de L'Art Nouveau', he showed three room set-

tings by the Belgian designer. Exhibiting complete interiors in which all the objects were designed to harmonise with each other was a fairly new idea, but in the years that followed it became a regular feature at exhibitions and in art dealers' showrooms. Another firm that did the same was 'Arts and Crafts' in The Hague, which opened in 1898. It took its inspiration very much from Bing, with whom its founder, Johan Uiterwijk (1872-1958), was personally acquainted. Uiterwijk was also a friend of Thorn Prikker, who was in charge of artistic policy. On Thorn Prikker's advice, they made contact with Van de Velde and this led to the inclusion in the opening exhibition of a dining room and bedroom designed by him. Also on display was work by a range of other artists and companies, from both the Netherlands and elsewhere.

The style of much of the applied art exhibited was the curvilinear variant of Art Nouveau popular in France and Belgium. Not everyone in the Netherlands was so keen on this elegant style, however. A critical review in the magazine *De Kroniek* included the following: '*Artists like Van de Velde apparently started out from ornamental drawing, and only later moved into making furniture and architecture. The already rather flamboyant lines of their ornamentation were then automatically applied to the constructional elements of furniture, joinery and architecture and then, if both knowledge and thought are lacking, things are created that simply ignore all the demands of construction and material, i.e. style.*'

This critic was Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856-1934), who was to become one of the most important Dutch architects of the twentieth century. He too did not restrict himself to designing buildings, but also regularly took on interiors and designed furniture, objects of practical use and textiles. In marked contrast to Van de Velde's designs, his were typified by a rigid, austere form and a restrained use of decoration.

The Exchange as a community centre: H.P. Berlage

Like Van de Velde, Berlage was also involved in the socialist movement, which first appeared in the Netherlands in the mid-1890s. 1894, for example, saw the foundation of both the Socialist Democratic Workers Party, which would soon become the most important socialist party, and the General Dutch Diamond Workers Union (ANDB), the first well-organised trade union. The ANDB soon decided to build its own head office in Amsterdam, and Berlage was approached to design it. The union's administrators considered that the building '*should be as close as possible to the ideal house and should accommodate the workers in beautiful surroundings that in this capitalist society they cannot enjoy in their homes*'. The building opened in 1900 and was not restricted to meetings and political gatherings. All sorts of other activities were also provided for the members, many of them cultural in nature, and there was an extensive lending library.

At roughly the same time as the ANDB building, between 1898 and 1903, a new commodity exchange was also being built in Amsterdam, this too designed by Berlage. The basic principles for its decoration were formulated by Berlage's friend and kindred spirit, the poet Albert Verwey. One of the themes he came up with was the classless society in which money no longer played any part. At first sight, a rather odd motif for an Exchange. However, Berlage hoped that in the course of the twentieth century a new (socialist) society would arise in which there would no longer be any need for an Exchange. The building

Desk designed by Hendrik Petrus Berlage (made by ''t Binnenhuis'), c. 1905. Drents Museum, Assen.

could then be used as a 'huge community centre'. This utopian vision actually contained a greater element of reality in it than Berlage or anyone else around 1900 could have imagined: since 1987 his Exchange has been used as a cultural centre for exhibitions and concerts.

It was not only in major building projects that Berlage sought to realise his ideals. In 1900 he was also involved in establishing a new cooperative home furnishing company in Amsterdam, called ''t Binnenhuis'. Harm Ellens (1871-1939), one of the artists involved, recalled that it was intended as a counterbalance

Berlage's Exchange in Amsterdam, 1889-1903.

to 'Arts and Crafts': '*When "Arts and Crafts" opened in The Hague, many people feared that the health of our young movement would be damaged by this firm with its dubious and non-Dutch approach. We put our heads together and a company was set up with the aim of creating a place where Dutch applied artists could show and sell their work*'. That the enterprise was established for idealistic reasons is clear from the following, written by Jac. van den Bosch (1878-1948), a furniture designer and friend of Berlage, who managed the business. In 1907 he wrote that the purpose of the enterprise was '... *to achieve a communal art, a form of*

Jac. van den Bosch,
Cover of a ''t Binnenhuis'
catalogue.

Interior of ''t Binnenhuis'.

art that would fill the objects we use with all-embracing beauty and put them within everyone's reach'. The furniture, which was characterised by simple lines and a minimum of decoration, was made in the company's own workshops. The limited use of machines for the coarser work was not totally ruled out, but Van den Bosch did make the following comment: '*But what I do want, to encourage the blossoming of every craft, is that the use of machines be developed in such a way that all the work needed to implement a design, and which steals too much of a man's time, and can be done just as well, or perhaps even better, by machine, should be done in this way, but that the finishing, which is what makes the object a work of the mind, a living work of art, should absolutely be done by the artist him-self. Only in this way is it possible to achieve a work of art that radiates vitality.*'

Despite the partial use of machines, the retail prices of the products worked out so expensive that they turned out to be beyond the means of the general public. It was precisely the traditional manufacture of the furniture that made it so expensive that it remained out of reach of the workers, the target group such businesses as ''t Binnenhuis' actually had in mind. As a result, in practice the company's clientele was to be found largely among the well-off and the intellectuals. As long as many artists maintained their aversion to switching to industrial mass production, the aim of making these products affordable to everyone could not be achieved.

Cupboard designed by
Jac. van den Bosch, 1903.
Drents Museum, Assen.

To educate the general public

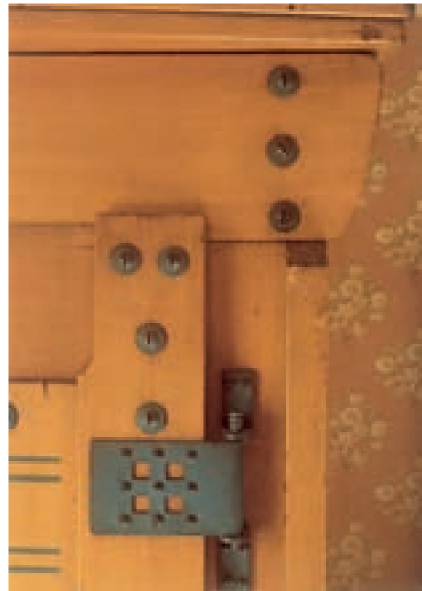
Whereas in Belgium the development of the applied arts movement seemed to lose impetus at the end of the nineteenth century (as is also apparent from the diminishing attention paid to it in magazines and exhibitions), in the Netherlands of the early twentieth century the initiatives necessary to support the applied arts were actually taken. A variety of mostly small firms were established to make 'sound' products and shops selling well-designed furniture and applied arts products appeared in several towns. In 1904, a number of artists working in the applied arts founded their own association, the Dutch Association of Crafts and Applied Arts (VANK; Nederlandsche Vereeniging van Ambachts- en

Chair designed
by Willem Penaat
(made by Amstelhoek),
c.1900.
Drents Museum, Assen

NijverheidsKunstenaars), one of whose aims was to '*restore the proper relationship between the artist and society*'.

One of the founders of VANK, the furniture designer Willem Penaat (1875-1957), was also involved in setting up 'Art for the People' in 1903. This was one of the associations established in the early years of the twentieth century with the aim of offering cultural education to a broad public, and specifically the (skilled) working population. In 1905 'Art for the People' organised the 'Furniture and Household Goods' exhibition in Amsterdam; it was also known as 'Against Ugliness', and Penaat wrote the articles for the accompanying catalogue. The intention was to develop the visitors' sense of good taste by showing well-made and crudely produced machine products alongside one another. The exhibition included a 'good' and a 'bad' interior of a worker's home, the first being furnished in a simple and austere style and the second in a more opulently decorated, vaguely historical style. A questionnaire showed that most visitors preferred the 'bad' interior, showing just how difficult it was to instil better taste in people.

Detail of 'Silex' furniture
by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy,
c. 1905.



Same aim, different approach

Nowadays the public is no longer subjected to this sort of patronising attitude . However, the notion of a clear link between a 'good' domestic environment and well-being is still universally endorsed. Amid all the attention paid to interior design in magazines and television programmes, one still finds the idea that some interiors are 'better' and 'more proper' than others.

Since the aversion to industrial mass production was vanquished in the course of the twentieth century, sound design by good designers has become much more widely available. It is partly to this that furnishing stores such as IKEA owe their huge success. Another element of this successful formula also originates from the early twentieth century: it was back in 1905 that Serrurier-Bovy designed his 'Silex' furniture, which was made of standardised components and was thus the forerunner of IKEA's flat-pack furniture. ■

Translated by Gregory Ball

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