

INTERVIEW: "MADAME NON" SPEAKS OUT ON THE BELGIAN LANGUAGE CRISIS

THE BULLETIN

MARCH 2010

ISSUE 3 €4.90

BRUSSELS • BELGIUM • EUROPE

Special report

Big bang, JPEG and inline skating: Belgian inventors who changed the world

THE SMART ISSUE

INVESTIGATION

Casualties of the recession: no closure for factory workers after Opel Antwerp shutdown

CULTURE

We lift the curtain on the Monnaie theatre

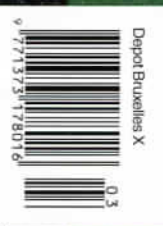
PAST LIVES

How Marvin Gaye found sexual healing in Ostend

TRAVEL

Sex and the city: Vienna's naughty underbelly

RAW EXPOSURE:
WORLD PRESS PHOTO 2010



Doing it up right

Crazy for Art Nouveau, a couple with five young children bought a noble ruin without knowing that their future home in Brussels was classified inside and out. **Cleveland Moffett** tells of their surprise and the meticulous restoration they have carried out



“It was mad, quite mad. We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. All we knew was that when we first saw this house with its fantastic façade, ruined though it was, and found out that the place was for sale, well, it was one of those *coups de foudre* - we just had to have it.” Young, unmade-up, steady-eyed, not given to superfluous smiling, Delphine Laforge runs her communications agency from a small room in a corner of her vast mansion, the Hôtel Albert Ciamberlani. Named for the Belgo-Italian artist (1864-1956), the house was a gift from his doting mother, who commissioned architect Paul Hankar (1859-1901) to build it in 1897 during the years when Art Nouveau was still new, revolutionary and admired by the enlightened minority who could afford it. Hankar and Victor Horta had both built their first one-of-a-kind houses just four years earlier, at once becoming friendly rivals for the title of pioneer.

Unlikely as it sounds, Laforge claims that when she and her husband decided to buy 48 Rue Defacqz they had no idea it was a listed building. “We assumed



A lived-in room with a view seen through one of the finest windows in all of Brussels - or anywhere, for that matter

that the famous façade would be listed, but that with the rest of it we could do more or less as we pleased. Not at all.” Every square centimetre of the 12-metre-wide building was protected; the Commission Royale des Monuments et Sites (CRMS) had to consider and approve (or not) even the slightest modification in the original plan. That made the task of restoration arduous enough; what complicated matters even more, they soon discovered, was that not one but two architects were responsible for the state in which they found it.

After Ciamberlani moved out in 1927, a new owner moved in with ideas of his own about what was then modern and desirable. Art Nouveau, after spreading

Hankar's palatial Hôtel Ciamberlani and residents, resplendent after five years of painstaking restoration



elaborate sgraffiti by Adolphe Crespin were still visible but scarcely legible. Determined to do things right and encouraged by the CRMS, who turned out to be an essential help rather than a hindrance, Delphine and Olivier Laforge assembled a team of expert cabinet-makers, glaziers, ceramists and painters, not to mention plumbers and electricians. What had threatened to be a daunting ordeal turned out to be rewarding collaboration.

"To find the original colours of walls that had been repainted more than once," says Laforge, "a restorer had to scrape down through the layers with something like archeological care." Some of the colours – the stunning turquoise of the ver-

randah, for example - clearly show that Ciamberlani had his studio elsewhere (it, too, built by Hankar). Colour, he seemed to think, interfered with the message that his immense murals were meant to convey. The best extant example of his work, a monumental fresco in the Maison Communale of Saint Gilles, shows muscular, bare-chested farmers with ploughshares and oxen standing about in classical poses in a bucolic landscape, all in subdued tones of brown, beige and grey.

To appreciate fully the dimensions of the Laforge project, it helps to know that Delphine, who supervised the work, consulted historians and dealt with the government departments willing to provide subsidies, is the mother of five energetic children. The youngest, Timothée, was born the year the enterprise got underway. And now, she is planning to open the Ciamberlani house to businesses impressed by the uniqueness of the premises and eager to make use of it for conferences or entertainment. Guided tours are also scheduled for visitors curious to know what lies behind the fabled facade.

To give clients and the public an idea of what has been going on for the last five years of restoration, Laforge has compiled a handsome book of essays by members of the team, each describing the anguish and delight of the difficulties they encountered and overcame. *Hankar et l'Hôtel Ciamberlani, un palais déguisé en maison de ville*, begins

rapidly across much of the world, had died a slow death before World War One, and the *dernier cri* was now Art Deco. So Adrien Blomme (1878-1940) was called in and instructed to make over Hankar's meticulous design, enlarging, updating and generally improving it, at least to the owner's satisfaction. Where he could, Blomme respected his distinguished predecessor, but when he added two metres to the back of the building he felt he had the right to do it his way. As a result, the Hôtel Ciamberlani wears strikingly different faces on its street and garden sides.

When the Laforges signed the deed in 2004, the accumulated years of neglect had reduced the property to a pitiful parody of its once bright and lively self. The

Years of neglect had reduced the property to a pitiful parody of its once bright and lively self

gives a detailed account of the painstaking work of restoring the sgraffiti, which had been worn by weather and indifference to virtual invisibility. Other experts tell the stories of their research and solutions to complex challenges.

That it took a couple from Paris to rescue a jewel of Brussels architecture could be considered too bad by anyone parochial enough to think that Belgians know best when it comes to saving their architectural heritage. But if Brussels is to get used to the idea of being the Capital of Europe (virtual or real), it needs to learn to be grateful for any help it can get from the European community. We're all in this together, or should be. ●

with an appreciation of Paul Hankar by his foremost biographer, François Loyer. Guy Vanbelligen recounts the career of Albert Ciamberlani, Anne Van Loo describes the fate of Hankar in the hands of Blomme and Claire Fontaine