

Modern architecture meets new education

Renaat Braem's design and the Brussels Decroly school (1946)

FREDERIK HERMAN¹

Doctor of Educational Sciences – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

ANGELO VAN GORP²

Associate Professor – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

FRANK SIMON

Full Professor – Ghent University

BRUNO VANOBBERGEN

Guest Professor – Ghent University

MARC DEPAEPE

_____ Full Professor – Sub-faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (Kortrijk)

1. DESIGN APOTHEOSIS IN THE HEART OF BELGIAN EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL

A number of ambitious and innovational plans were sketched in the course of the twentieth century for L'École Decroly l'Ermitage, a progressive school for "normal" children founded in 1907 by Ovide Decroly (1871-1932).³ Among

¹. Frederik Herman was a research assistant at the *Centre for the History of Education* (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven). For the past four years, he has worked on his PhD thesis on school culture(s) in the twentieth century in Belgium. This project consisted of four main case studies: the application of school regulations and the punitive measures; the use of school notebooks; the 'moulding' of the school architecture by the teachers and the architects and, finally, the development of the school desk and the feasibility of the different designs. The research was supervised by Professor Dr. Marc Depaepe and Professor Dr. Angelo Van Gorp, and was conducted in close cooperation with Professor Dr. Frank Simon.

². Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Frederik Herman: Frederik.Herman@hotmail.com; Angelo Van Gorp: Angelo.VanGorp@ped.kuleuven.be; Frank Simon: frank.simon@ugent.be; Bruno Vanobbergen: bruno.vanobbergen@ugent.be or to Marc Depaepe: Marc.Depaepe@kuleuven-kortrijk.be

³. Decroly, a Belgian neurologist and psychiatrist, is primarily known as an educational reformer, for he developed his own educational method and is considered to be one of the pioneers of the New Education Fellowship. Starting from criticism on the "old school", and considering that a child observes things globally, he presented the subject matter not in

them were the 1946 plans of architects Renaat Braem (1910-2001) and Jack Sokol (1911-1977) and the 1972 design of the *Groupe Brederode* (cf. Figure 1).⁴ The latter design dates back to the period in which the school, located on the edge of Terkamerenbos in Ukkel (south of Brussels), was threatened with expropriation because of the plans to expand the Brussels Ring.⁵ At this time, architects Emmanuel de Callatay, Michel Lamy and Georges Vranckx were aware of the possible sale of undeveloped land in Ukkel. They first sketched a design for a residential park. Only later, in anticipation of the search by the school administration for a new location and new facilities, they incorporated a pavilion school into their design. However, the plan was developed without there having been any consultation between them and the school administration.⁶ For this reason, we put aside the plan of the *Groupe Brederode* and will concentrate on the design by Braem and Sokol. This project of 1946 attracted our attention for a number of reasons.

First, modernistic school buildings and designs, such as the one of Braem en Sokol, were rather an exception in Belgium in the 1940s. The rise of Modern Architecture during the interwar period, with the International Congress of Modern Architecture as its zenith, until then had yielded little more in Belgium than a handful of modern schools (Verpoest, 1992; Braeken, 2009, 3).⁷ Nevertheless, the modern school construction in the surrounding countries was gazed at in wonderment from Belgium already in the thirties. This is

subjects but in larger wholes. The subject matter, which had to be processed actively and expressively, was linked to the so-called centres of interest of the child, which were organised around four biological needs: the need for food, protection, and defence (these all went back to the basic need for self-preservation), and the instinct of solidarity or the basic need to assure the survival of one's own species. From this perspective, much attention was devoted to social development. The Decroly Method has often been summed up in the slogan "pour la vie, par la vie" (for more details, see, Van Gorp, 2005).

⁴. These design drawings are preserved in the *Centre d'Études Decrolyennes* (CED) and *les Archives de l'Architecture Moderne* (AAM). Since there is no reliable classification system in the CED, and for the sake of not burdening the notes and glosses unnecessarily, we refer to the sources with the abbreviation CED or AAM, the file name, supplemented with a title or a description of the document, and – where possible – the name of the author and the date.

⁵. The route of the Ring was revised in 1972 (CED, file: Le Ring 1970). The 1927 site has been retained up to the present.

⁶. Interview with Emmanuel de Callatay, 17/03/2009 (Kindermansstraat 5, 1050 Ixelles).

⁷. *Les Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM), founded in 1928 by Le Corbusier and others, and closed down in 1959, were international platforms for modern architects such as Hendrik Berlage, Hugo Häring, André Lurçat, Ernst May, Hannes Meyer, Louis Herman De Koninck, and Huib Hoste. The first four congresses – of a series of ten – were held in 1928, 1929, 1930, and 1933 in La Sarraz (Switzerland), Frankfurt, Brussels, and Athens.

shown, for example, by the richly illustrated publication *Onderwijs en Scholenbouw in België en Nederland* (Education and School Construction in Belgium and the Netherlands) of 1931. In it, the modern school architecture was greatly praised, particularly the New Pragmatism, the Rationalism, and the International Functionalism among our northern neighbours.⁸ A number of important Dutch architects such as Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856-1934), Willem Marinus Dudok (1884-1974), and Jan Duiker (1890-1935) and their creations, which have become generally well-known, were reviewed in detail.⁹



FIGURE 1: DESIGN OF THE GROUPE BREDERODE (1972)

Second, the design is also striking for its typology; it broke, as it were, from the blueprint which until then had guided school construction in Belgium (cf. Burke, 2010, 655), and which had found its origin in the mid-nineteenth-century lament over the sometimes wretched conditions in which education was provided. In Belgium and, more generally in the West,¹⁰ the location, the size, the style, the materials, the construction method, the lighting, the

⁸. Vlaamse Opvoedkundige Vereniging (VOV), *Onderwijs en Scholenbouw in België en Nederland*, Antwerp, 1931, pp. 1-80.

⁹. Among others, Johannes Duiker's *Openluchtschool voor het gezonde kind* in Amsterdam (1929-1930) and the various schools in Hilversum designed by Willem Dudok.

¹⁰. See, e.g., Barnard (H.), *School Architecture*, New York, 1848, pp. 40-62.

heating, the ventilation, as well as the school furnishings¹¹ were described and specified ever more technically and in ever more detail (Bertels, 2008, 263-273; Vanmeirhaeghe, 2006; Verpoest, 1992).¹² This message was repeated for a long time and further refined in all sorts of pedagogical publications.¹³ The Belgian school treatises of the nineteenth century were committed to the development of model schools, which were intended to make systematic school construction possible (Vanmeirhaeghe, 2006, 64).

The authorities provided the primary impetus for this in Belgium. With the organic law on primary education in 1842 and the organic law on secondary education of 1851, the government for the first time became a "serious"¹⁴ player in the educational field, whereas "free education" – in other words, Catholic education – was already firmly established, having made eager use of the freedom of education that had been written into the Belgian constitution of 1831. In order to get a foothold, a large number of official schools had to be built, requiring a rational allocation of resources. Also with the introduction of eight years of compulsory school attendance in 1914 and 1917, whereby a larger group of children were brought to school for a longer period of time, the same rationality had to be applied.¹⁵ The descriptions (for example, cost estimates, materials, hygienic and technical specifications) and the appended building plans served as the model. These plans provided "a certain" unity in the diversity for the applicable regulations actually did allow for some architectural freedom, which resulted in stylistic differences and variations in construction forms and types (Braeken, 2009, 1; Verpoest,

¹¹. See, e.g. Happel (J.), *De geschiedenis der schoolbank*, Antwerp, 1875, pp. 1-56.

¹². Attention was also given to school architecture under Dutch rule (1815-1830), see, among others, *Over de belangrijkheid van goede schoolvertrekken* (1818); *Circulaire betreffende de daargestelling van eene provinciale commissie voor het lager onderwijs* (1822), and *Afteekening van wel ingerigte schoolgebouwen* (1828). After Belgian independence: Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Instructions ministérielles concernant la construction des maisons d'écoles primaires communales*, Brussels, 1852; Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Instructions concernant la Construction & l'Ameublement des Maisons d'École*, Huy, 1875; Narjoux (F.), *Les écoles publiques construction et installation en Belgique et en Hollande*, Paris, 1878.

¹³. See, for instance, Edmond (G.), *Manuel de Pédagogie*, Tours, 1909, pp. 1-345; Sand (R.), *La Santé de l'écolier*, Brussels, 1923, pp. 1-285.

¹⁴. The government initiatives and interventions under the regime of the foreign powers Austria, France, and the Netherlands can be considered rather marginal. Education and educational policy were not matters of priority to the Belgian government.

¹⁵. The Law of 1914 on general compulsory education was applied during the First World War in occupied Belgium and, on 1 February 1917, also in the non-occupied portion. The war conditions, nevertheless, created many difficulties, and the implementation did not go smoothly even after the Armistice. Supervision, however, was intensified by the Law of 18 October 1921 so that school attendance up to the age of 14 was generalised during the 1920s (See ASLK, 1986, 29).

1992). In this regard, Jo Braeken (2009) refers to the *École Modèle* with its characteristic *préau* (covered playground) as a central space, the preferred form in the Brussels metropolitan area at the end of the nineteenth century, and the closed U-form, which was preferred in the Antwerp region. In spite of the regulations, "an almost endless series of new or, better, other school typologies" was developed (Vanmeirhaeghe, 2006, 70). The design of Braem and Sokol is a good example of this. With its somewhat deviating typological program, the design was an extension of the argument that gained in volume internationally in the first half of the twentieth century to break with the traditional ordering, design, and location of school buildings (Burke & Grosvenor, 2008, 19-20, 73, ff.).¹⁶

Third, we have become fascinated with the figure of Braem, at the time both loved and hated because of his clear political position (cf. *infra*) and his sometimes controversial statements. Illustrative of this is his *Het lelijkste land ter wereld* (1968) (The Ugliest Country in the World) in which he lashed out at the urban-architectural chaos and the lack of 'methodicalness' in Belgium.¹⁷ Nowadays, he is considered one of the most important representatives of modern architecture and urban planning in Belgium (Strauven, 1983, 9). The imbedding in the most progressive educational heritage also exercised an import power of attraction for us. An additional argument is the apparent tension between the visions of Decroly and the Decrolians on school architecture and what they wanted to see realised. Braem's design is difficult to harmonise with the previous reluctant attitude – on the rhetorical level, at least – of the Decrolians with regard to "renewing" school architecture (Herman, Van Gorp, Simon, & Depaepe, 2011).

1.1. Object of the research

In this article, we focus on the architectonic school "representation" or, in other words, the manner in which the thinking about school construction – and simply 'keeping school' – was translated into documents, architectural drawings and the like (Engel & Claessens, 2007, 7).¹⁸ We started from the

¹⁶ For example, within certain reform pedagogical circles. See also, Adolphe Ferrière's maximum program: a school could refer to itself as "on the way to the New School" if, for example, a rural boarding school had a domestic character (Van Gorp, 2005, 206; Imelman & Meijer, 1986, 113).

¹⁷ Braem (R.), *Het lelijkste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1968.

¹⁸ In this respect the authors refer to Foucault's *L'archéologie du savoir* (1969) and *L'ordre du discours* (1971).

materialised form of these representations: intermediary sketches, the definitive design, and the texts accompanying the design authored by Braem. In addition, we used a number of manuscripts about school architecture – produced by the clients – and a pencil sketch of the ideal school by Ovide Decroly himself. These architectonic products are meaning bearers or phenomena. They are the result of intentional or goal-oriented actions of one or more people in a specific, non-neutral situation (Cuypers, 2002). Thus, for example, a plan can be the response of the designer and/or client to an unfavourable situation, such as a critical lack of space in a school, or to an "appropriate" architectural design. Ideological considerations, too, such as dissatisfaction with the existing social order and the desire to achieve distinction or to provoke, can constitute significant motives behind a design.

Thus, for a considerable period of time, the free and the official educational systems in Belgium used their own style – in this case neo-Gothic versus neo-Classicism and neo-Flemish renaissance – to distinguish themselves from each other and to accentuate the contrast between the two networks (De Maeyer & Verpoest, 2000; Braeken, 2009; see also, Heynicks, 2008). Verpoest (1992) speaks here about the 'architectural school battle'. Equally illustrative is the manner in which the Socialists and the Communists (for example, in France) dived into modern architecture in the thirties. With it, they sought to become progressive and revolutionary and, with a socialist/bolshevist society on the horizon, control and/or form the masses (see, e.g., Cohen, 1989). Intense ideological currents over time would throw differing architectural models and styles into the fray to justify their position. Architectural drawings and works are thus cumulative points of differing story lines, each with their own antagonists and protagonists, structure, and plot.

These significations can also vary and evolve over time and depending on the creator, spectator, and user (Lawn & Grosvenor, 1999; Whyte, 2006; Gasparini & Vick, 2008, 141). Thus, for example, the assignments of meaning by the architect, the client or clients, and the general public do not necessarily coincide. Some architectural plans can also have a long period of re-use and reproduction. The functions/significations of these reproductions are often not the same as those of the original design. The plan around which we construct our story illustrates this perfectly. Braem's design was recently still included, as a page-filling illustration, with a very summary caption, in the memorial book of the Decroly School: *Cent Ans _ Sans Temps*.¹⁹ With it, the "ambitious" plan was registered in the "ambitious" past of the school.

¹⁹. Guillaume (F.), Gutt (H.) & Charlier (M.), *École Decroly. Cent Ans_Sans Temps*, s.l., 2007.

Recently it became an integral part of the *œuvre* catalogue of Renaat Braem (Braecken, 2010, 35-37). In this article, it will now function as a source, in combination with other sources, for history of education research.

However, within the framework of this article, we are not interested in those contemporary meanings of the design but rather in the significance that Decroly and his supporters, on the one hand, and the architects, on the other hand, attached to it at the time (*history of meanings*) (Whyte, 2006, 153; Markus, 1993, xix).²⁰ The central research question, therefore, is, "What are the stories behind Braem's design?" Or, in other words, "What sedimentations of meaning can we reveal?", and this in order to arrive at a fragmentary *Verstehen*, an understanding that Hans-Georg Gadamer (1963, 87) described as,

"to mediate between the present and the past is to develop in oneself an entire continual series of perspectives whereby the past presents itself and addresses itself to us".

In order to bridge the historical distance between the moment of production and use and the moment of interpretation, the design must be put in the context within which it was produced (see, e.g., Benito, 2003; Engel & Claessens, 2007, 8-9; Tilley, 1990; Crotty, 1998, 87; Ricoeur, 1973). The central research question, therefore, comprises several sub-questions: Who exactly was the client? Why was the design made? Why did Braem and Sokol receive the commission while the plan has not been realised? From whence came the inspiration for the design? What did the buildings look like as regards form, style, etc. (*history of forms*) (Whyte, 2006, 153)? How did the parties involved "understand" the architecture? Did they believe in a potential impact of architecture on the "residents"? If so, in what direction did they then want to direct the future residents? In order to answer these questions, we also consulted the correspondence between the architects, the client, and other people involved, as well as a number of minute books of the various school committees, and works "by" and "about" the architects.

For the sake of clarity, we have opted for a more thematic approach. In the next section, we will lay out the framework within which the plan was developed. The way in which the architects were informed about the educational method and the conditions which the design/school building had to satisfy will be discussed in the third section. Obviously, we will also have to lay out here the opinions which Decroly and the successive generations of Decrolians had about school architecture. In the concluding section, we will

²⁰. In this respect Whyte refers to Bonta (1979, 232).

discuss the design and the underlying architectural vision as well as ideological convictions of the architect.

2. THE AMERICAN DREAM

Shortly after the liberation, in October 1945, Jean Ronsse, the managing director of the school, commissioned architects Braem and Sokol to design a new school. The existing school, a hodgepodge of old buildings (Herman, Van Gorp, Simon, & Depaepe, 2011), had fallen into disrepair during the war years.²¹ In addition, it was expected, after the sharp decline of the number of pupils during the Second World War, that the pre-War level would be quickly exceeded, thus potentially causing an acute shortage of space. The design, therefore, had to be used for the construction of a new school complex, but the resources to realise this dream were lacking. The school, which received no government subsidies for the acquisition and the maintenance of the school buildings, itself hardly had any "direct" capital. Previously, they could fall back on a broad money-raising base of indirect capital: among other things, the fortune of the Decroly family and gifts from parents and sympathisers to supplement the school fees. The flow of funding had gradually dried up during the war years, and the Decrolians were of the opinion that the depressed economic situation would not immediately improve in postwar Belgium.

They believed in 1945 they could get out of this financial impasse only if a new source of funding could be found. With a large-scale fund drive in the United States, they hoped to be able to collect the round sum of one million dollars – current value approximately 11,000,000 dollars – which could be used to finance the new construction project.²² This campaign, in addition to the collection of money, also focused on the propagation of the "Decroly Method".²³ The post-war climate of confusion seemed to be the right time to stage a coup against the "old" educational regime. The existing educational system had failed, that was the message. It had not been able to prevent the horrors of the Second World War; "their" school, however, had produced

²¹. Braem (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987, p. 81.

²². CED, file: s.n., Plan de campagne en vue d'obtenir 1.000.000 \$ pour l'École Decroly, s.n. (s.d.), pp. 1-8.

²³. CED, file: s.n., Lettre pour le Ministre de l'Instruction Publique, G. Gallien (16 November 1945), pp. 1-2.

many resistance fighters. In the words of directress Lucie Libois-Fonteyne at the *Congrès National Decroly* (cf. *infra*):

"1940. War. No renunciation, no abdication. The principles were affirmed in the Resistance, calmly, without concession. The entire social organisation of the School was expanded and completed in the service that became a constant concern and was intensified from month to month".²⁴

The Decrolians assigned to themselves an important role in the reconstruction and the reformations of education both nationally and internationally:

"The Decroly School courageously resisted all the trials of the war. At that time, it occupied a place in the forefront, not only in Belgium but also throughout the world. An experimental school for almost 40 years, it is called to play a major role in the renewal of education".²⁵

"The Decroly School is called to serve as a model for the new schools: thus, it must respond to what is expected of it".²⁶

In order to be able to give substance to this pioneering role and to put the required force behind it, the *Comité d'Initiative pour la Rénovation de l'Enseignement en Belgique* was formed. This committee, under the leadership of F. van den Dungen (Research Commissioner and Pro-Rector of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*, ULB), consisted of teachers from the Decroly School and professors from the ULB:

"Its object is to examine the situation of education in Belgium and to develop reform projects that take account both of the economic requirements of the country and the latest advances in science and technology".²⁷

It sounded like sloganeering: "a new School for everyone".²⁸ A new world would dawn if the future citizens were able to enjoy a "total formation" with and according to the Decroly method.²⁹ Therefore, they suggested extending compulsory education (raise it to age 16) in order to be able to provide such a comprehensive curriculum. Their first achievement, a National Decroly Congress (2-4 September 1945) and the next three training days for educators (6-8 September 1945) drew more than 500 participants. This success inspired

²⁴. CED, file: s.n., Exposé de Madame L. Libois au Congrès Decroly (1945), pp. 1-4 (p. 2).

²⁵. CED, file: s.n., Letter, Propaganda Committee/Committee Former Pupils (1945).

²⁶. CED, file: s.n., Letter to Ion Rhodes-Boulenger, s.n. (1945), pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

²⁷. CED, file: s.n., Letter to Ion Rhodes-Boulenger, s.n. (1945), pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

²⁸. CED, file: s.n., Exposé de Madame L. Libois au Congrès Decroly (1945), pp. 1-4 (p. 4).

²⁹. The Decrolians conceived "total education" as education in which attention was given to the physical, the intellectual, the moral, the technical, the scientific, the artistic, and the literary development of the child as well as to the cultivation of a sense of civic responsibility.

the committee to organise an International Decroly Congress in December of that same year (Moens, Tyssens, & Simon, 1997). Here, too, resounded the creedal affirmation: the Decroly Method would resurrect education like a phoenix out of its ashes, better than ever before. If they really wanted to fulfil the role of being an example in various areas – for example, as regards method and material facilities – then the building and expansion plans had to be accelerated.³⁰ The material conditions should in no way hinder this mission. Their new school building would also be able to serve as a model school for the schools to be built newly in Belgium. In this sense, they hoped to be able to "profit" from the widespread destruction (cf. Burke, 2010, 655).

In the fund-raising appeal, attention was paid to the state of education in Belgium in light of the ravages caused by the war. It was emphasised that many educational establishments had been destroyed and it was hoped that the new Decroly School would be the model for the new schools in Belgium for its buildings, its educational methods, as well as the training of the new Belgian teachers.³¹ Ion Rhodes-Boulenger,³² who was living in New York, in 1945 was appointed as contact and leading woman of the campaign in the United States. Her selection is easy to understand. Her father, Dr. Maximilien F. Boulenger (1873-1930), was a good friend and also a colleague of Ovide Decroly.³³ After he died, her mother, Alice Van Langenhove, continued the work of her husband as director of the *Ferme-École Pour Enfants Anormaux* in Waterloo.³⁴ This institution worked closely with both the *Institut médico-pédagogique* (an Institute for Special Education), which Decroly had founded in 1901, and the *École Decroly*, where she sat on one of the committees.³⁵ Rhodes-Boulenger insisted on the development of a strong dossier containing the necessary documentation which could be used to quickly convince the Americans of the importance of this initiative. Speed was of the essence

³⁰. CED, file: s.n., Letter to Libois (Comité Decroly), I. Rhodes-Boulenger (19 March 1946), pp. 1-6 (p. 6).

³¹. CED, file: s.n., Plan de campagne en vue d'obtenir 1.000.000 \$ pour l'École Decroly, s.n. (s.d.), pp. 1-8 (p. 7).

³². Telephone contact on 2009-06-03. She recalled very little about this campaign with the exception of a number of names (such as Renaat Braem) and the winding up of the campaign, *in casu* a donation to the *Friends of Decroly Schools*.

³³. In 1904, Decroly and Boulenger received their temporary appointment, and in 1905 their permanent appointment as assistant physicians for municipal special education (Van Gorp, Depaepe, & Simon, 2004).

³⁴. Association pour la Rééducation et l'Aide à la jeunesse, "Hommage au Docteur Maximilien, F. Boulenger", *Revue de la Fédération des œuvres d'enseignement spécial du Brabant*, 2-3, 1974.

³⁵. CED, file: s.n., Letter of Recommendation, A. Boulenger (01 February 1946).

because America threatened to fall into an inflationary spiral and because of the growing fear of a "Red" Europe.

The documentation that the Decrolians had in mind was just as "ambitious" as the amount that they wanted to collect. No effort or expense were spared to give the project the necessary splendour. In the wake of the American campaign, a second Belgian campaign had to be launched in order to cover the costs of the propaganda stunt.³⁶ Thus, among other things, the aim was to produce a new propaganda film about the Decroly School (which would cost 200,000 BEF), to shoot a new photographic report, to publish new brochures, and to establish a broadly based patronage committee (honorary committee) in the United States consisting of American politicians, businessmen, former members of welfare committees, teachers, philanthropists, and members of education-related foundations as well as leading educational renewers such as John Dewey.³⁷ All sorts of motivation letters had to add weight to the dossier. International figures such as J.A. Lauwerys (on behalf of the New Educational Fellowship),³⁸ Carleton W. Washburne (Director of Education),³⁹ Robert Leigh (teacher and former director of Middlebury College), Charles M. Fonck (Belgian Department of Education and Special Advisor in the USA) supported the project and praised the school in their writings.

On the ninth of January 1946, the first batch of documentation was sent to America, including school newspapers (*le Courrier de l'École*, volumes 1939-1945), press releases from 1932 to 1939, and a catalogue of the works of Decroly. In 1947, a second packet followed containing, among other things, a 16-millimeter sound film and the architectural drawing by Braem and Sokol.⁴⁰ This drawing was sent intentionally for two reasons: to serve as a possible model for future school construction in the United States and as a means to induce large backers to cover the costs of specific parts of the

³⁶ CED, file: s.n., Plan de campagne en vue d'obtenir 1.000.000 \$ pour l'École Decroly, s.n. (s.d.), pp. 1-8.

³⁷ CED, file: s.n., Plan de campagne en vue d'obtenir 1.000.000 \$ pour l'École Decroly, s.n. (s.d.), pp. 3-5. One suggested American former cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, and consuls such as Joseph E. Davies, Pinckley Tuck, and Edmund Wilson. From the business world, the directors of the National City Bank, of the American Radiator Co., and Ford Co. were named. Also the Hoover Commission, the Fondation de l'Université de Louvain, the Carnegie Foundation for Peace, the Belgian American Educational Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation were listed.

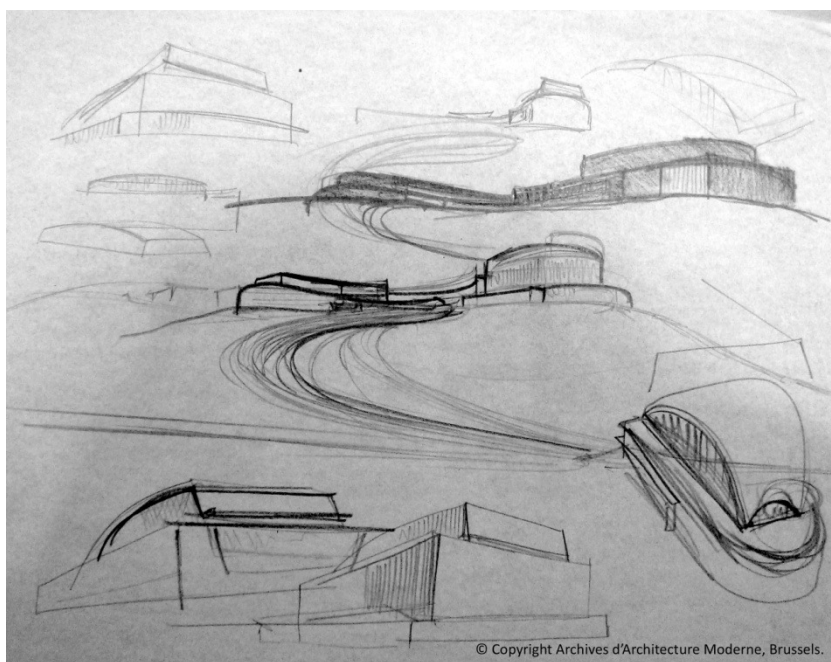
³⁸ CED, file: s.n., Letter of Recommendation, J.A. Lauwerys (1946-01).

³⁹ CED, file: s.n., Letter of Recommendation, C.W. Washburne (1946-01-24).

⁴⁰ CED, file: s.n., [Summary of mailings], s.n. (s.d.).

complex. Institutions and/or wealthy private individuals that responded to the plea would be honoured with a memorial stone or plaque.⁴¹

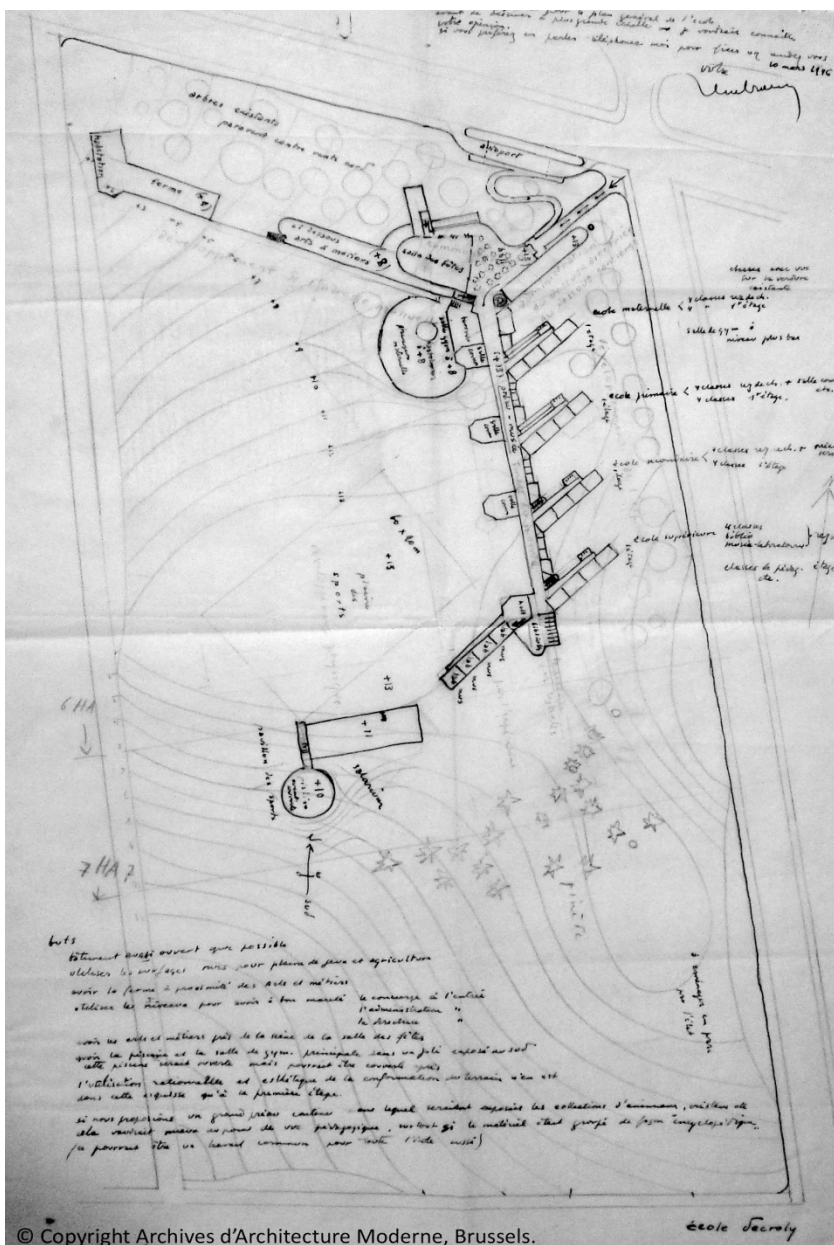
Why virtually nothing came of the entire project, and the design remained – according to the architect – a 'dream castle', is not clear.⁴² Did the involvement of several people who were enthusiastic about communist ideas (cf. *infra*)⁴³ spoil the game or did the economic crisis in the United States at the end of the nineteen-forties have something to do with it?



⁴¹. CED, file: s.n., Plan de campagne en vue d'obtenir 1.000.000 \$ pour l'École Decroly, s.n. (s.d.), 1-8 (p. 6).

⁴². Braem (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987, p. 81.

⁴³. Among others, Louis Herman de Koninck, Ion Rhodes-Boulenger, Renaat Braem, and Jack Sokol. Architect L.H. de Koninck had answered in 1930 for the expansion of the Decroly School. He also offered to help Lucie Fonteyne in the writing of the article *Enquête ouverte par la Cité sur les nécessités d'adaptation des bâtiments scolaires aux méthodes pédagogiques nouvelles*, which appeared around 1935 in the Belgian architectural journal *La Cité*.



The latter, at least, explains the re-orientation or, better, the inversion of the project whereby the Belgian wing (*Les Amis de l'École Decroly*) would offer logistical and financial help to the *Friends of Decroly Schools*, an organisation founded in 1947 advocating the dissemination and consolidation of the works of Decroly in America.⁴⁴

Most probably, however, the main reason why the whole business turned out to be a fiasco lies in the Decroly School itself. Jean Ronsse, who served as the intermediary, instructed architects Braem and Sokol to prepare the preliminary design and a scale model, which would serve as propaganda material in America.⁴⁵ It looked very much as though Ronsse, who appointed himself as consulting engineer for the project, was acting primarily on his own initiative and made fee agreements with the architects involved.⁴⁶ He probably dreamt that the project would "once" be realised whereby he could cream off something for himself financially and be able to share in the glory of the major building project. Both the ambition and the "solo play" of Ronsse did not escape the architects:

"[H]is name may be associated with the project as engineer, but not as architect-author ... We have to be certain that we're not working for the King of Prussia".⁴⁷

There were grounds for their fear. The payment of the fees (50,000 BEF), the estimate that was agreed upon orally with Ronsse at the start of the project, met with opposition from the Board of Directors of the school. An initial payment of 20,000 BEF was made in November 1947 – a year after the completion of the design. Only in 1948 did the Board agree, after much urging from the architects, to effect payment of the remaining 30,000 BEF instead of the 10,000 BEF as had first been proposed by headmistress Germaine Gallien.⁴⁸

⁴⁴. CED, file: Comité des Parents, Notules Amis de l'École Decroly, s.n. (10 May 1948).

⁴⁵. AAM, file: no. 42, Correspondence between Braem & Sokol (02 October 1945; 12 November 1945, 23 January 1946).

⁴⁶. AAM, file: no. 42, Correspondence between Braem & Sokol, (02 October 1945).

⁴⁷. AAM, file: no. 42, Correspondence between Braem and Sokol (1945-10-02).

⁴⁸. Question concerning fees, see CED, file: s.n., Correspondence between Sokol & Gallien (23-01-1948); Correspondence between Gallien and Sokol (14 February 1948); AAM, file: no. 42, Correspondence between Sokol & Braem (05 March 1948).

3. INITIATION INTO THE THOUGHT OF DECROLY

Braem was brought into the project by the like-minded Sokol (Braeken, 2010, vol. II, 35).⁴⁹ Since both were active in the Communist Party after the liberation (Strauven, 1983, 221), it is likely that they had met each other in these circles and received the commission through the same channels. Indeed, these were the circles in which a goodly number of Decrolians moved at the time. Further, one may expect that Sokol, who had his offices quite near the school (Rue de l'Ermitage 28, Ixelles), belonged to the network of acquaintances of the Decrolians. The design was worked out virtually in its entirety by Braem without much consultation with Sokol, who had primarily an advisory role, and/or the client(s).⁵⁰

In the autobiographic *Het Schoonste Land ter Wereld* (The Most Beautiful Country in the World), Braem stated that he and Sokol had studied the Decroly system on site and that they also made use of a total program (*in casu* a brochure and a short manuscript).⁵¹ It seems to us that this is a gross exaggeration, for we can conclude from the correspondence that Braem had visited the school only twice, the first time to receive the "program" and the second time to visit the proposed site.⁵² There is no mention of two-way flows of knowledge and expertise between the architects and the educators (after Burke, 2010, 669) or direct observation of the praxis. Presumably, two documents in particular constituted the guide for Braem's design process: the brochure *Les Beaux-Arts à l'École Nouvelle* (1940), which had been written by Amélie Hamaïde (1888-1970), and the four-page manuscript *École Expérimentale Nouvelle – Enfants de 4 à 18 ans*.⁵³ These documents were an integral part of Braem's file, which is kept in *Les Archives de l'Architecture Moderne* (Brussels). Before describing the contents of these manuscripts, we make explicit the views of Decroly and his adepts with regard to architecture. Indeed, both documents elaborate further on these concepts.

⁴⁹. AAM, file: no. 42, Correspondence between Braem and Sokol (05-09-1945); Braem (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987, p. 81.

⁵⁰. AAM, file: no. 42, Correspondence between Braem and Sokol (1946-03-10).

⁵¹. Braem (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987, p. 81.

⁵². AAM, file: no. 42, Correspondence between Braem and Sokol (1945-10-02).

⁵³. Hamaïde (A.), *Les Beaux-Arts à l'École Nouvelle*, Brussels, 1940; AAM, file: no 42, *École Expérimentale Nouvelle* (s.l., s.d.), pp. 1-4.

bottles.⁵⁶ Nor would these last construction projects result in better learning effects as long as the "old" pedagogical-didactic praxis continued to be applied. The Decrolians were thus clearly of the opinion that the innovational architecture would not bring about a catharsis among the (veteran) teachers.

Decroly did leave a pencil sketch of an ideal school in which he linked the desirable functions – primarily courses and/or skills such as weaving, book-binding, metal working and woodworking – to specific spaces (workshops).⁵⁷ Precisely these functions and spaces continue to function in the later descriptions (and designs) and are constantly being filled in further with, for example, spaces for psycho-medical examinations and the production and transfer of science (teacher-training school). Decroly's sketch seems to hover between a diagrammatic representation of the idea(s) which he wanted embodied in the school building and an architect's plan for the school building.⁵⁸ As regards the design, Decroly opted for the "cloister model" (Verschaffel & Van Den Driessche, 2006, 114), whereby the four wings enclosed a central inner space (cf. sketch). In addition, we can deduce from Decroly's early design that he "dreamt" of gathering a small community of initiates or – still better – a "community of faith" around him. In his sketch, he provided an entire wing for housing for the teachers. Ideally, living and working would take place within the same walls – an idea that would return later in Braem's design.⁵⁹ As regards its form, at first glance it looks like a "turned-inward school", one that is closed off from the rest of the world. Decroly, however, did not advocate an isolated school, rather he – like John Dewey (1899)⁶⁰ – argued in favour of an "organic connection" with the life of society. The learning environment did not end at the classroom door or the school gate. The entire school site and the near environment, *in casu* the woods (nature)

⁵⁶ Decroly (O.), "Le Programme d'une École Dans la Vie" (1908) in: s.n. (ed.), *Causeries du docteur Decroly*, Uccle, 1999, pp. 7-8, CED, file: Construction 1907-2000, Réponse de M^{lle} Lucie Fonteyne à l'enquête ouverte par "la Cité", Libois-Fonteyne (1935), pp. 139-142 (p. 140).

⁵⁷ CED, file: l'Ermitage, Pencil sketch with notes, Ovide Decroly (s.d.).

⁵⁸ Cf. Dewey (J.), "The School and Society" (1899) in: J.A. Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey. The Middle Works, 1899-1924. Volume 1: 1899-1901*, Carbondale, Edwardsville, London, Amsterdam, 1976, pp. 1-109: 56.

⁵⁹ As Braem put it: "The close community of teachers forged through the willingness to make sacrifices in the struggle for better education would be housed within the walls of the school (above the administrative offices)." AAM, file: no. 42, *Bij het ontwerp voor de Decrolyschool*, Renaat Braem (s.d.), pp. 1-5.

⁶⁰ Dewey (J.), "The School and Society" (1899) in: J.A. Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey. The Middle Works, 1899-1924. Volume 1: 1899-1901*, Carbondale, Edwardsville, London, Amsterdam, 1976, pp. 1-109: 55-56.

and the city (culture), constituted essential extensions of the classroom.⁶¹ A school building, according to Decroly, could never be completed once and for all. The design had to be "guided by" and had to "evolve with" the "meso-logical experiences",⁶² the science – *in casu* 'environmentology' – that studies the influence of the life environment on people, animals, and plants. The changing target group, variable contextual factors, new scientific insights, etc. would require a constant process of adaptation.

There is a direct parallel present between Decroly's notion of *pédagogie évolutionniste* and his idea about kinetic school architecture. As the Decroly method was a symbol for "education in evolution" – it had to be a flexible method that could be continually tested as a model of true applied educational science (Van Gorp, 2006, 43) – the school building had to be "in evolution" as well. In other words, "active pedagogy" required a "kinetic architecture".⁶³ A chameleon-like school building was a means to support the variable method, a working method that, in its turn, was the means to achieve the highest possible learning benefit for the child. The school building had to coincide like a flexible mould with the program and the population it housed (cf. Vanmeirhaeghe, 2006, 75).⁶⁴

Haimaïde's brochure mentioned above begins by pointing out the importance of the practice of the Fine Arts and the doing of handwork for the cognitive, physical, and moral development of the child. Then she deals briefly with a number of organisational aspects, such as the role of the teacher (as guide), the form of grouping (various age categories together), the fixed scheduling of the practice of the Fine Arts (each afternoon), the starting from the centres of interest of the children, and – more important here – the material conditions:

"Disposition of the workshops – One will understand that, to make such activity possible, the use of such important equipment by so many children does not suit the traditional organisation of the class. One must transform the auditory classes into laboratories and workshop classes. Thus, no more lecterns or fixed benches but movable tables, simple planks on trestles, movable sawhorses, light stools".⁶⁵

⁶¹. See, for example, Decroly (O.), "Le Programme d'une École Dans la Vie" (1908), in: s.n. (ed.), *Causeries du docteur Decroly*, Uccle, 1999, pp. 5-19, p. 8; Decroly (O.) & Monchamp (E.), *L'initiation à l'activité intellectuelle et motrice par les jeux éducatifs. Contribution à la pédagogie des jeunes enfants et des irréguliers*, Neuchâtel/Paris, 1932, p. 180.

⁶². CED, file: l'Ermitage, Pencil sketch with notes, Ovide Decroly (s.d.).

⁶³. According to Van Bogaert (A.F.), *Logica en Actie in de Scholenbouw*, Brussels, 1972, p. 218.

⁶⁴. Van Bogaert (A.F.), *Logica en Actie in de Scholenbouw*, Brussels, 1972, p. 141.

⁶⁵. Hamaïde (A.), *Les Beaux-Arts à l'École Nouvelle*, Brussels, 1940, p. 12.

She then went into detail about the various essential workshops (with a specialised teacher leading them) and the various *arts* that were practiced there: a print shop, a woodworking shop, a workshop for making dolls, carton products, lino-cuts, theatre decors and costumes, sewing, clay modelling, drawing, weaving, embroidery, braiding, singing, dance, and theatre workshops.

The second document probably was written by Lucie Libois and dates back to about 1935. It begins with a point-by-point enumeration of a number of basic principles of the Decroly method,⁶⁶ which had led to the "proposal of a new school in the vicinity of a large city and in the form of separated pavilions⁶⁷ spread out over a park of about six hectares". The imaginary site consisted of eight main pavilions, which housed the *école maternelle* (3-8 year olds), *primaire* (8-12 year olds), *secondaire* (12-16 year olds), *supérieure* (15-20 year olds), athletic activities (gymnastics, swimming, showering), art education and handwork (trades), a farm and, finally, the central pavilion, which included a hall, offices for director and the administrative services, a teachers' room, a caretaker's residence, a refectory, a *laboratoire psychologique* and *des classes de pédagogie* (teacher-training school). The dormitories would be situated in a number of blocks spread out around the park between various recreation areas and sports fields. In a related document from the same period, Libois wrote:

"The pavilion system is certainly the one that responds the best to the ideas of Dr. Decroly. However, the pavilion must be considered as a way of promoting relations with the outside and not as a process of isolation. A pavilion would house several groups, each of which would have direct access to the garden ... For 300 to 500 children, it would have, for example, a classroom pavilion, a workshop pavilion (print shop, carpentry shop, a book bindery, a forge, weaving and sewing, plastics), a laboratory pavilion (chemistry, physics, biology, library), an administrative pavilion (administration, psychology, medical service, pedagogy), an education

⁶⁶. For example, the rural location of the school, coeducation, accessible to all levels of society, organisation of the classes in workshops and laboratories, and taking account of the mental development of the children.

⁶⁷. The idea of housing the school in various pavilions, however, was not new: the Frenchman Tony Garnier in 1899 and the Swiss Joss and Klauser in 1908 already played with the idea. It was only a few decades later that the first pavilion schools were built, for example in 1939 in Bruderholz in Bâle (according to Forster, 2004, 6). Also illustrative here is the design of the 'Trotter' Open-Air School of Milan (ca. 1922-1977) by engineer Giuseppe Folli, which was revised by the engineers Luigi Secchi and Luigi Beretta in 1928 (Thyssen, 2009). They probably borrowed the idea from architects who were working on 'isolating' hospital architecture (see, e.g., Kisacky, 2005).

pavilion, a reception pavilion (above: terrace, solarium) a kitchen pavilion, a farm pavilion".⁶⁸

All the various activities – from acting to sunbathing – which were discussed in these two documents received a "drawn" space in Braem's design. In this sense, Braem's detailed preliminary plan is a "translation" of these educational programs. As regards design, however, he clearly departed from the proposal of Libois to house the school in several pavilions.

"La Escuela es la arquitectura de la infancia, pero también la infancia de la arquitectura (Ruiz, 2007, 7)".⁶⁹

4. THE DOGMATIC MODERNIST DESIGN OF BRAEM

The eyes of the Decrolians fell on the sloping and wooded site of about ten hectares situated across from the existing school, which had been chosen by Decroly in 1927 because of the nearness of nature and the city.⁷⁰ Braem, who underwent a move toward nature in the post-war period, probably could agree with this choice (Braeken, 2007, 2; see, also, Strauven, 1983, 60).⁷¹ Braem suggested that the old buildings, because of their proximity, could continue to serve, perhaps, as a boarding school.⁷² The second through the fifth wings would house *l'école maternelle, primaire, secondaire, and supérieure*, respectively (2-5). These wings, consisting of two stories, would house a total of about thirty classrooms facing southeast. Braem described these spaces as "temporary work centres. They are not the only rooms in which activity takes place. They are only the nuclei from which the activity is organised."⁷³

⁶⁸. CED, file: Construction 1907-2000, Réponse de Mlle Lucie Fonteyne à l'enquête ouverte par "la Cité", Libois-Fonteyne (1935), pp. 139-142 (p. 142).

⁶⁹. The school is the architecture for the child but just as much the child of architecture.

⁷⁰. The site was part of the *Terkamerenbos* (state property). It was bordered by the *Gendarmendreef*, the *Terhulpsessesteeuweg*, the *Lorraine-dreef*, and the *Kleine Maarschalkdreef*.

⁷¹. The conditions for a liberating (housing) climate were the three *joies essentielles*: light, air, and space. The person must be placed in an environment that permitted him to regain unity with nature.

⁷². AAM, file: no. 42, Bij het ontwerp voor de Decrolyschool, Renaat Braem (s.d.), pp. 1-5.

⁷³. AAM, file: no. 42, Bij het ontwerp voor de Decrolyschool, Renaat Braem (s.d.), pp. 1-5.

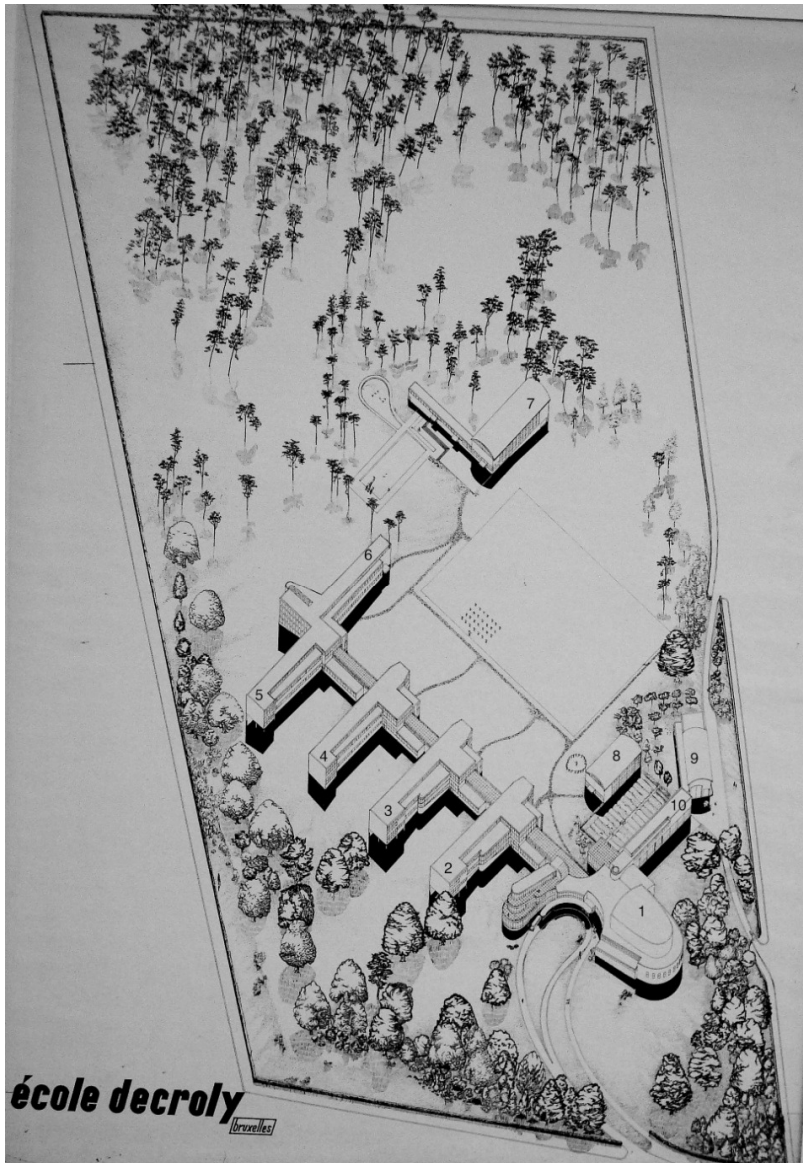


FIGURE 4: DEFINITIVE DESIGN BY RENAAT BRAEM & JACK SOKOL (1946).
 © COPYRIGHT ARCHIVES D'ARCHITECTURE MODERNE, BRUSSELS

Braem opted for a strongly segmented structure in order to optimise the lighting while allowing for phased construction of the wings.⁷⁴ Indeed, the building would advance as the funding came in.

Each division had a small playground, several sun terraces, a medical consultation room, and, for the smallest children, also a quarantine room for suspicious cases of illness. The four parallel wings were connected by means of a continuous "corridor", which, in addition to serving as a circulation axis, was also conceived as a meeting place and exhibition space or also – in Braem's words – as "a large classroom".⁷⁵ The *école supérieure* offered, in addition to practice rooms for geography, chemistry and physics, also extra space for a library and a museum for the natural sciences (6, see Figure 4). In order to set off the elevation differences of the land, Braem worked with partially "floating" volumes (supported by columns) with staircases and with sloping surfaces. At the back of the site was a sports complex (7, see Figure 4) with a large open-air swimming pool, sanitary facilities (showers and toilets), dressing rooms, and a sun terrace on the first floor. A second gymnasium (8, see Figure 4) for the pre-school children and the primary-school children was on the other side of the large playground. The school farm (9, see Figure 4) with outbuildings and an orchard were situated on the edge of the site. Block 10 housed several workshops (*les arts et métiers*), including a print shop, a bookbindery, a carpentry shop, a smithy, a modelling room and a drawing room. On the first floor were situated primarily – as Braem called it – "les travaux féminins": weaving, sewing, ironing, and domestic arts. In addition to this complex, there were the kitchen gardens of the children (included by 8-9-10, see Figure 4). The showpiece and the central eye-catcher was the entry pavilion with a large hall (1, see Figure 4). Further, this building housed the administrative services, the caretaker's residence, the director's residence, the dining room for the teachers, several salons, a library, a psychological laboratory, the administrative offices, a meeting room, a consultation room, and, finally, on the second floor, the teachers' rooms.

The freer design of this last complex with a plastic combination of arc forms points to a burgeoning organic approach of functionalism. Braem will further develop this approach in his later career (Braeken, 2010). Apart from these playful curves of the entry pavilion, the whole complex reflects a dogmatic modernism with orthogonal volumes, columns, roof terraces, and wide expanses of glass (*Ibid.*). The whole leaves a sober and rigid impression. This sobriety, so characteristic for modernism, suited the Decrolians. They did not want a *petit palais du peuple* (Forster, 2004, 4) – the sneering name for the

⁷⁴. AAM, file: no. 42, Bij het ontwerp voor de Decrolyschool, Renaat Braem (s.d.), p. 3.

⁷⁵. AAM, file: no. 42, Bij het ontwerp voor de Decrolyschool, Renaat Braem (s.d.), p. 4.

monumental and ostentatious school constructions of the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the twentieth century – from which they precisely wanted to distance themselves. The "new approach", as it were, had to be reflected in the new style and the new materials and techniques, without it offending potential donors. They wanted to be ahead of their time, and with this modernistic project they were.

The design fits well with the large-scale projects of Braem's student years and with the foreign school architecture of this period, which he himself found pioneering, such as the *Groupe scolaire Karl Marx* in Villejuif (Val-de-Marne), a building which Braem had visited during his studies (1936-1937) with Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, 1887-1965) (Braeken, 2010).⁷⁶ This concrete and glass school building was designed at the behest of the Communist municipal authorities by the like-minded Frenchman André Lurçat (1894-1970), who belonged to Braem's circle of acquaintances (Braeken, 2010, vol. II, 37).⁷⁷ The building dates back to the beginning of the 1930s. The site comprises four pre-school classrooms, eight classrooms for boys and as many for girls, a gymnasium, and a stadium. A number of characteristics of this school can also be found in Braem's design such as the many glass strips over the full length of the gable, the roof terraces, and the columns that bear the girder-formed volume. The school building is situated in the middle of the site (Forster, 2004, 5), and Braem also spread out his design over the entire site. Other sources of inspiration for Braem were probably the school buildings in Hilversum by Willem Marinus Dudok (1884-1974) – such as the *Vondelschool* (1929) or the *Calvijnschool* (1930) – or one of the largest Bauhaus projects, namely the *Bundesschule des Allgemeinen Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes* of the Communist-minded Swiss Hannes Meyer (1889-1954). For it was this Meyer – alongside figures like Walter Gropius (1883-1969), Ludwig Karl Hilberseimer (1885-1967), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), Hugo Häring (1882-1958), Hans Scharoun (1893-1972), Werner Hebebrand (1899-1966), and Ernst May (1886-1970) – whom he admired as a leftist.⁷⁸

This summary reveals Braem's unbridled interest in the complex landscape of converging and/or diverging architectural trends, such as the Expressionism of the Amsterdam School, Bauhaus, international Functionalism, Russian Constructivism, the International Style, New Realism, Italian *Razionalismo*, and Art Deco. To consider these architectural trends and sub streams in detail, the way in which Braem experimented with them, and how he made

⁷⁶ See, also, Braem (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987, p. 46.

⁷⁷ Braem (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987, 175.

⁷⁸ See Braem (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987, p. 57.

their language of forms his own and fulminated against them, would lead us too far afield. Moreover, the design is situated in the period that Braem had partially thrown off the yoke of these trends and had formulated his own concept of architecture.

Particularly from the middle of the thirties on, Braem frontally attacked the dominant architectural trends, which presented themselves as new and renewing. In his view, the "false" modern architecture suffered from thoroughgoing and naïve formalism. It missed a social basis. The apolitical modernistic architects did not question the prevailing social order and in no way envisioned its overthrow. It was an avant-garde mask for the old regime, the capitalistic and bourgeois system. "Truly" modern architecture, the art of organising the total human milieu, on the contrary, was a weapon in the social struggle, a means of hastening a more just economy, a lever for the construction of a liberated socialist society.⁷⁹ He believed in the strength of such a socially oriented architecture, an architecture that would visualise the possibilities of a new society and that would place its residents in liberated and open relationships (Strauven, 1983, 32). The true modernistic architect had, as it were, to breathe a "spirit" into his creations whereby the building would exercise an "ennobling influence" on its users and would form the new person (*Ibid.*, 24, 30). His politically charged architectural ideology also appears from the information he provided along with his design:

"If we demand from a truly 'modern' architecture not only that it provides a well-fitting frame for the vital functions that take place in it but also that, by the organising and the designing of the space, it guides this life in a specific direction [in casu, in the direction of humanitarian socialism/communism], then the modern architect stands for a very responsible task in the design of a school. If we see architecture as one of the means to liberate our fellowmen physically and spiritually, then we have to take this social mission all the more seriously when it is a matter of creating a framework in which the education of the youth is taken up. The child, whose thinking has not yet degenerated into using rigid ideas, will come more strongly under the influence of the space in which we place it than the adult, whose capacity of judgment already, because of living in a social milieu that responds as regards content to obsolete concepts, is wedged into a set of prejudices. The schools we now see being built, however technically perfect they may be equipped, however apparently 'modern' their plastic appearance, generally do not respond, as regards content, to any progressive striving. The sun does shine in them, but they certainly do not foster freedom. Corresponding to the nature of the society in which we live, it is a question of forming suitable, competent workers, not of

⁷⁹. See also Berlage (H.P.), *Schoonheid in Samenleving*, Rotterdam, 1919.

raising independently thinking people. These schools have the look of a prison and continue to be a prison for the mind".⁸⁰

This design, just like his other creations, bears and interprets these convictions. Intentionally, he organised the spaces, and he spoke a language of form that was once subtle, then explicit. A few examples: Braem often devoted extra attention to the implantation and the architectural form of the "social centre", the middle point of the community life (Braeken, 2007, 2). Here, the entry pavilion with the hall fulfils this function. The idea of open relations is given form in, among other things, the multiplicity of meeting places – for the children, the teachers, and the parents – and the long corridor that links the various wings and the entry pavilion with each other. In regards to this corridor, Braem wrote that this space, as it were, would be a large classroom that links all the pupils of the Institute with each other (*Ibid.*, 4). The linkage with the environment (nature) and the other "residents" was expressed by the transparent outer skin. The columns, which allowed the volumes to partially float, are probably the most powerful symbol: it stood for the socialisation of the land (Strauven, 1983, 67-68). The architect also barred all symbols of the past, the signs of suppression. He wanted – contradictorily enough – a building that, free of representation, would be a symbol for liberated society.

In the design of the school, Braem applied the same 'methodicalness' as in his design of the ribbon city. In the first half of the 1930s, he drew a 100-km long city (between the metropolises of Antwerp and Liège); an interpretation or reinterpretation of *la Ville radieuse* of Le Corbusier, the *Wereldstad* of Juliaan Schillemans, and/or the plan for the reconstruction of Stalingrad by Miljutin. With it, he was reacting against the spatial chaos, which he held to be responsible in part for the economic chaos. Moreover, it would be the ideal environment for a Planned Socialist society, which organised itself around the production chain (according to the Communist Five-Year Plan). This design was characterised by the various ribbon zones, each with its own function, such as transport, industrial, small-agricultural, recreation, and housing. With some effort, we can distinguish a similar clustering in the design for the Decroly School. That Braem opted for a modern majestic construction can be understood on the basis of the pessimistic economic situation in which many yearned for monumentality, a grandeur that suggested power and stability (*Ibid.*, 33-36). Therefore, it seems that Braem and the Decrolians wanted to perpetuate symbolically the power and the combativeness of, respectively, Socialism and the Decroly Method.

⁸⁰ AAM, file: no. 42, Bij het ontwerp voor de Decrolyschool, Renaat Braem (s.d.), p. 1.

5. CONCLUSION: THE TEMPLE BUILDERS

Braem's "translation" of the written programs of the Decrolians was more than purely a means to the higher end: the building itself (Engel & Claessens, 2007, 7). The building plan was an integral part of a fund-raising campaign at the same time a propaganda campaign aiming at propagating 'Decrolianism'. Braem described the design in his autobiography as "an architectonic realisation of a spatial organisation focusing on free education".⁸¹ The typological program anchored or materialised the attention of the Decrolians to the trinity of playing, working, and learning. The points of departure of the method were transposed into a multiplicity of meeting places, consultation rooms, exhibition spaces, all sorts of workshops, an extensive sports infrastructure, medical consultation rooms, quarantine facilities, and a teacher-training school. In fact, the entire school was conceived as a psycho-pedagogical laboratory and a temple of science where future teachers would be initiated and where teachers would work and live in a community (of faith). The school had to become a new pilgrimage site from which it would send out its "sons and daughters" (just like the present Decroly School). The Decrolians described the design as a suitable mould for the rite, a model for future school construction in Belgium and far beyond.

Braem, "who counted himself among the builders of the temple" (Strauven, 1983, 95), imposed just as much his personal ideological concepts on the design. It was not purely "a design in the spirit of Dr. Decroly", as Braem indicated in the concluding sentences of the accompanying text, but it unquestionably also bears his own stamp. He was convinced of the deterministic linkage between society and the architectural forms. As a fiery humanitarian socialist/communist, he thus wanted to liberate society by means of modernistic architecture. He clearly found in the Decrolians allies for his struggle for "freedom". Whether they postulated the same freedom and socialist/communist form of society, however, is still unclear. However, on the basis of the invitation the Liberal Party sent to Decroly to pay his contribution, we think we may conclude that he was a sympathiser of the Liberals. That we can give no definitive answer to this is due to the absence of ideological or political traces in Decroly's archives. Presumably, they were largely removed in the course of the years. We do know that many socialists and communists were concerned with the Decroly School or were involved in

⁸¹. Braem (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987, p. 81.

it. The question remains, however: who approached whom and why? Were they, perhaps, attracted to each other because they were both marginalised? Whether their political agendas coincided or not, both targeted the "old school". After the period of the German occupation, they eagerly used the metaphors of "barracks" and "prison" for the prevailing suppression under the "old" educational regime and the "old" society. Their monumental design was "their" record of a proclaimed freedom and happiness, their *Utopia*.

The design for this school is indisputably the "child" of its militant and contemporary "parents": they lived in a period of burgeoning faith in a new, different future and a period of experimentation with another language of forms, new techniques and materials. They revolved in a discourse of innovation, thereby forgetting that the bond with the grandparents may well be denied but cannot be undone.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAM	Les Archives de l'Architecture Moderne
CED	Centre d'Études Decrolyennes
CIAM	Les Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne
ULB	Université Libre de Bruxelles
VOV	Vlaamse Opvoedkundige Vereniging

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sources

Archives

Centre d'Études Decrolyennes, Avenue Montana 15, 1180 Brussels.

Les Archives de l'Architecture Moderne, Kluistraat 55, 1050 Ixelles.

Published Sources

Association pour la Rééducation et l'Aide à la jeunesse, "Hommage au Docteur Maximilien, F. Boulenger", *Revue de la Fédération des œuvres d'enseignement spécial du Brabant*, 2-3, 1974.

BARNARD (H.), *School Architecture*, New York, 1848.

BERLAGE (H.P.), *Schoonheid in Samenleving*, Rotterdam, 1919.

BRAEM (R.), *Het lelijkste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1968.

- BRAEM (R.), *Het schoonste land ter wereld*, Leuven, 1987.
- DECROLY (O.), "Le Programme d'une École Dans la Vie" (1908) in: s.n. (ed.), *Causeries du docteur Decroly*, Uccle, 1999, pp. 5-19.
- DECROLY (O.) & BOON (G.), *Vers l'École rénovée. Une première étape. Classement des écoliers. Programme d'idées associées. Méthode des centres d'intérêt*, Brussels/Paris, 1921.
- DECROLY (O.) & MONCHAMP (E.), *L'initiation à l'activité intellectuelle et motrice par les jeux éducatifs. Contribution à la pédagogie des jeunes enfants et des irréguliers*, Neuchâtel/Paris, 1932.
- DEWEY (J.), "The School and Society" (1899) in: J.A. BOYDSTON (ed.), *John Dewey. The Middle Works, 1899-1924. Volume 1: 1899-1901*, Carbondale, Edwardsville, London, Amsterdam, 1976, pp. 1-109.
- EDMOND (G.), *Manuel de Pédagogie à l'usage des écoles catholiques*, Tours, 1909.
- FOUCAULT (M.), *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris, 1969.
- FOUCAULT (M.), *L'ordre du discours*, Paris, 1971.
- GUILLAUME (F.), GUTT (H.), & CHARLIER (M.), *École Decroly. Cent Ans_Sans Temps*, s.l., 2007.
- HAMAÏDE (A.), *Les Beaux-Arts à l'École Nouvelle*, Brussels, 1940.
- HAPPEL (J.), *De geschiedenis der schoolbank: de oorzaken der verkrommingen van de ruggegraat, de ribben, de schouders, het bekken, de beenen en de armen*, Antwerp, 1875.
- Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Instructions ministérielles concernant la construction des maisons d'écoles primaires communales suivies d'une instruction spéciale sur le chauffage et la ventilation des salles d'école et d'une série de plans modèles*, Brussels, 1852.
- Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Instructions concernant la Construction & l'Ameublement des Maisons d'École, suivies de plans et de devis types*, Huy, 1875.
- NARJOUX (F.), *Les écoles publiques construction et installation en Belgique et en Hollande: documents officiels – services intérieurs et extérieurs – bâtiments scolaires – mobilier scolaire – services annexes*, Paris, 1878.
- SAND (R.), *La Santé de l'écolier*, Brussels, 1923.
- s.n., *Over de belangrijkheid van goede schoolvertrekken*, s.l., 1818.
- s.n., *Circulaire betreffende de daarstelling van eene provinciale commissie voor het lager onderwijs*, s.l., 1822.
- s.n., *Afteekening van wel ingerigte schoolgebouwen*, s.l., 1828.
- VAN BOGAERT (A.F.), *Logica en Actie in de Scholenbouw*, Brussels, 1972.
- V[laamsche] O[pvoedkundige] V[ereniging], *Onderwijs en Scholenbouw in België en Nederland*, Antwerp, 1931.

Literature

- ASLK – Dienst culturele activiteiten, *De lagere school in België Van de Middeleeuwen tot nu*, Brussels, 1986.
- BENITO (A.E.), "The School in the City: School Architecture as Discourse and as a Text", *Paedagogica Historica*, XXXIX, 2003, no. 1, pp. 53-64.
- BERTELS (I.), "Technical discourses on primary educational buildings: governmental publications in XIXth century Belgium" in: J.-P. GARRIC, V. NÈGRE, & A. THOMINE-BERRADA (eds.), *La construction savante. Les avatars de la littérature technique*, Paris, 2008, pp. 263-273.
- BONTA (J.P.), *Architecture and Its Interpretation: A Study of Expressive Systems in Architecture*, London, 1979.

- BRAEKEN (J.), *Wonen na 1945*, s.l., 2007.
- BRAEKEN (J.), *Scholen om te leren*, s.l., 2009.
- BRAEKEN (J.), *Renaat Braem 1910-2001: Architect*, Brussel, 2010.
- BURKE (C.), "Putting education in its place: mapping the observations of Danish and English architects on 1950s school design", *Paedagogica Historica*, XLVI, 2010, no. 5, pp. 655-671.
- BURKE (C.) & GROSVENOR (I.), *School*, London, 2008.
- COHEN (J.-L.), "Architectures du Front Populaire", *Le Mouvement social*, 1989, no. 146, pp. 49-59.
- CROTTY (M.J.), *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*, London, 1998.
- CUYPERS (S.E.), "Filosofie van de sociale wetenschappen" in: P. SMEYERS & B. LEVERING (eds.), *Grondslagen van de wetenschappelijke pedagogiek. Modern en postmodern*, Amsterdam, 2002, pp. 53-72.
- DE MAEYER (J.) & VERPOEST (L.) (eds.), *Gothic Revival: Religion, Architecture and Style in Western Europe 1815-1914. Proceedings of the Leuven Colloquium, 7-10 November 1997*, Leuven, 2000.
- ENGEL (H.) & CLAESSENS (F.), *Wat is architectuur? Architectuurtheoretische verkenningen*, Amsterdam, 2007.
- FORSTER (S.), "Architecture scolaire: regard historique tourné vers l'avenir", *Bulletin de la CIIP [l'Architecture Scolaire]*, 2004, no. 15, pp. 3-9.
- GADAMER (H.-G.), *Le problème de la conscience historique*, Louvain, 1963.
- GASPARINI (F.) & VICK (M.), "Place (Material, Metaphorical, Symbolic) in Education History: The Townsville College of Advanced Education Library Resource Centre, 1974-1981", *History of Education*, XXXVII, 2008, no. 1, pp. 141-162.
- HERMAN (F.), VAN GORP (A.), SIMON (F.), & DEPAEPE (M.), "The Organic Growth of the Decroly School in Brussels: from Villa to School / from Living Room to Classroom" in: S. BRASTER, I., GROSVENOR, & M. DEL MAR DEL POZO (eds.), *The Black Box of Schooling: A Cultural History of the Classroom, 1700-2000*, Brussels, 2011 (In print).
- HEYNICKX (R.), *Meetzucht en mateloosheid: kunst, religie en identiteit in Vlaanderen tijdens het interbellum*, Nijmegen, 2008.
- IMELMAN (J.D.) & MEIJER (W.A.J.), *De Nieuwe School, Gisteren & Vandaag*, Amsterdam/Brussels, 1986.
- KISACKY (J.S.), "Restructuring Isolation: Hospital Architecture, Medicine, and Disease Prevention", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, LXXIX, 2005, no. 1, pp. 1-49.
- LAWN (M.) & GROSVENOR (I.), "Imagining a Project: Networks, Discourses and Spaces – Towards a New Archaeology of Urban Education", *Paedagogica Historica*, XXXV, 1999, no. 2, pp. 380-393.
- MARKUS (T.A.), *Buildings & Power. Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types*, London, 1993.
- MOENS (O.), TYSENS (J.), & SIMON (F.), "De dag van de opvoeders is nu op komst: onderwijs-hervormingsvoorstellen rond de Tweede Wereldoorlog" in: M. DEPAEPE & D. MARTIN (eds.), *De Tweede Wereldoorlog als factor in de onderwijsgeschiedenis. La Seconde Guerre mondiale, une étape dans l'histoire de l'enseignement*, Brussels, 1997, pp. 17-61.
- RICOEUR (P.), "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text", *New Literary History*, V, 1973, no. 1, pp. 91-117.
- RUIZ (F.B.), *La arquitectura del aula – Nuevas escuelas madrileñas, 1868-1968*, Madrid, 2007.

- STRAUVEN (F.), *Renaat Braem: de dialectische avonturen van een Vlaams functionalist*, Brussels, 1983.
- THYSSEN (G.), "New education within an architectural icon? A case study of a Milanese open-air school (1922-1977)", *History of Education and Children's Literature*, IV, 2009, no. 1, pp. 243-266.
- TILLEY (C.Y.), *Reading material culture: structuralism, hermeneutics and post-structuralism*, Oxford, 1990.
- VAN GORP (A.), *Tussen Mythe en Wetenschap. Ovide Decroly (1871-1932)*, Leuven, 2005.
- VAN GORP (A.), "Ovide Decroly, a Hero of Education. Some Reflections on the Effects of Educational Hero Worship" in: P. SMEYERS & M. DEPAEPE (eds.), *Educational Research: Why 'What Works' Doesn't Work*, Dordrecht, 2006, pp. 37-49.
- VAN GORP (A.), DEPAEPE (M.), & SIMON (F.), "Backing the actor as agent in discipline formation: an example of the 'secondary disciplinarization' of the educational sciences, based on the networks of Ovide Decroly (1901-1931)", *Paedagogica Historica*, XL, 2004, no. 5, pp. 591-616.
- VANMEIRHAEGHE (T.), "De School als Apparaat" in: M. VAN DEN DRIESSE & B. VERSCHAFFEL (eds.), *De School als Ontwerpogave: Schoolarchitectuur in Vlaanderen 1995-2005*, Ghent, 2006, pp. 64-86.
- VERPOEST (L.), *Twee Eeuwen Scholenbouw*, Brussels, 1992.
- VERSCHAFFEL (B.) & VAN DEN DRIESSE (M.), "De school: optimale leeromgeving of ideale wereld?" in: M. VAN DEN DRIESSE & B. VERSCHAFFEL (eds.), *De School als Ontwerpogave: Schoolarchitectuur in Vlaanderen 1995-2005*, Ghent, 2006, pp. 104-119.
- WHYTE (W.), "How Do Buildings Mean? Some Issues of Interpretation in the History of Architecture", *History and Theory*, XLV, 2006, p. 153.

Waar moderne architectuur en reformpedagogiek elkaar treffen Renaat Braems ontwerp voor de Brusselse Decrolyschool (1946)

FREDERIK HERMAN, ANGELO VAN GORP, FRANK SIMON,
BRUNO VANOBBERGEN, & MARC DEPAEPE

SAMENVATTING

Aan het einde van de Tweede Wereldoorlog werden de architecten R. Braem en J. Sokol gevraagd om een nieuw schoolgebouw te ontwerpen voor de *Decrolyschool L'Ermitage*, een progressieve elitaire priv school die in 1907 in Brussel werd opgericht door Dr. O. Decroly. Het oude complex was enerzijds in erbarmelijke staat en anderzijds vreesde men dat de school te klein zou worden door het toenemende leerlingenaantal. De school, het

kloppend hart van de Belgische onderwijsvernieuwing gedurende de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw, beschikte echter over weinig financiële middelen. De Decrolyens waren dan ook genoodzaakt een overzeese geldinzamelactie op touw te zetten, die naar verluidt uitdraaide op een sisser. Het bouwproject paste evenzeer binnen de grote propagandacampagne die de Decrolyens gelijktijdig wilden opzetten om de 'Decrolymethode' uit te dragen. Hun schoolgebouw zou (net als hun onderwijsmethode) als model kunnen fungeren voor de toekomstige scholenbouw (en het schoolhouden) in binnen- en buitenland.

Het discours van de Decrolyens over het elitaire karakter en de pioniersrol van hun school weerspiegelt overduidelijk de idealistische en ideologische architectuur(opvattingen), zoals voorgesteld in verschillende tussentijdse schetsen, onuitgevoerde bouwplannen, begeleidende beschrijvingen en notulen. Het ontwerp van 1946 is echter niet louter een vertaling van Decroly's onderwijsmethode. Ook Braem legde duidelijk zijn ideologie en zijn visie op 'waarlijk moderne' architectuur in het ontwerp. 'Echte' moderne architectuur was in zijn ogen de hefboom tot het realiseren van een bevrijde socialistische samenleving. Beide partijen wilden zich met dit ontwerp zowel profileren als afzetten tegen de bestaande architectuuropvattingen, de dominante onderwijspraktijken, de heersende maatschappij- en mensbeelden. Het hoeft dan ook niet te verwonderen dat zij deze 'verzetsdaad' voorstelden als een duidelijke breuk met generationaliseerde en gestandaardiseerde schoolgebouwen van de tijd; de oude tempels waarin men het oude geloof beleed. Het ontwerp werd nooit gerealiseerd; het bleef bij een neerslag van een droom van een nieuwe en andere toekomst.

Où architecture moderne et éducation nouvelle se rencontrent Le projet de Renaat Braem pour l'école Decroly à Bruxelles (1946)

FREDERIK HERMAN, ANGELO VAN GORP, FRANK SIMON,
BRUNO VANOBBERGEN, & MARC DEPAEPE

RÉSUMÉ

À la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les architectes R. Braem et J. Sokol furent invités à élaborer le projet d'un nouveau bâtiment scolaire pour l'*École*

Decroly l'Ermitage, une école privée élitaine progressiste qui avait été créée en 1907 à Bruxelles par le Dr Ovide Decroly. D'une part, l'ancien bâtiment était en piteux état et, d'autre part, on craignait que l'école ne devînt trop petite à cause de la croissance du nombre d'élèves. L'école, qui était le cœur de la rénovation de l'enseignement belge au cours de la première moitié du vingtième siècle, ne disposait toutefois que de peu de ressources financières. Les "Decrolyens" furent dès lors contraints d'organiser une campagne de collecte de fonds outre-mer qui semble s'être soldée par un échec. Le projet de construction s'inscrivait également dans le cadre de la grande campagne de propagande que les Decrolyens voulaient mettre parallèlement sur pied afin de diffuser la "méthode Decroly". Leur bâtiment scolaire (tout comme leur méthode d'enseignement) aurait pu servir de modèle à la construction (et à la gestion) des écoles de l'avenir, en Belgique et à l'étranger. Le discours des "Decrolyens" sur le caractère élitaine et le rôle pionnier de leur école se reflète de manière flagrante dans les conceptions architecturales idéalistes et idéologiques, présentes dans divers croquis intermédiaires, plans de construction non exécutés, descriptions et notices d'accompagnement. Le projet de 1946 n'est toutefois pas une simple traduction de la méthode d'enseignement de Decroly; Braem y a également intégré son idéologie et sa vision de l'architecture "véritablement moderne". La "véritable" architecture moderne était à ses yeux le levier permettant de réaliser une société socialiste libérée. Avec ce projet, les deux parties cherchaient tant à se profiler qu'à s'insurger contre les conceptions architecturales existantes, les pratiques d'enseignement prépondérantes, les images dominantes de la société et de l'être humain. Il n'est dès lors pas étonnant qu'ils aient présenté cet "acte de résistance" comme une rupture nette avec les bâtiments scolaires rationalisés et standardisés de l'époque; les anciens *temples* dans lesquels on pratiquait l'ancienne *croyance*. Le projet ne fut jamais réalisé; il resta dans les mémoires à l'état de trace d'un rêve d'avenir nouveau et différent.