Displaying Authenticity and Progress
Architectural Representation of the Belgian Congo at International Exhibitions in the 1930s

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AUTHENTICITY AND PROGRESS IN THE DISPLAY OF COLONIES

The representation of colonies was an intrinsic part of international exhibitions since their inception. The Universal Exhibition of 1851, however, introduced a change in these displays and sought to present a new spatial concept for the exhibition grounds. For the first time, separate pavilions were now also erected outside the main exhibition hall, and henceforth, the participating nations would present themselves increasingly by means of an individual section or pavilion, using its design to evoke their own identity. Consequently, a visit to the exhibition became an architectural tour du monde, in which colonial pavilions brought distant and exotic cultures into view. This tour du monde and the evocation of identity in these colonial sections were, of course, highly ambiguous and eurocentric. The display of colonies was, in fact, determined by a duality. The organisers of these settings claimed to offer an accurate, realistic representation of the colony’s environment, the key notion in their discourse being the ’authenticity’ of the display. Such ‘authentic displays’ are to be understood as architectural displays that refer, in one way or another, to the native architecture or material culture of the colony: colonial pavilions were sometimes designed as replicas of existing colonial buildings, but more often these so-called ‘authentic displays’ were hybrid mixtures of European and indigenous architectural languages, in which morphological elements selected from the native built environment were recombined according to western design rules. Often the section’s claim of authenticity was enhanced by informal mise-en-scènes, like the ’Rue du Caire’ (1888) or the ’Village Sénégalais’ (1913). The presence of indigenous peoples, temporarily brought over for these events, was to secure the realistic character of the colonial setting in which the visitor was immersed. Because these authentic displays underscored precise
ideological goals, they can be regarded as a translation into architecture of what Eric Hobsbawm has called the ‘invention of tradition’.2

The colonial sections were also, of course, essentially a legitimisation of colonialism itself. To convince visitors of the civilising mission of colonialism, a large emphasis was placed in the presentation on ‘progress’, progress as imported into the colonies. Progress, as defined in the discourse accompanying the colonial sections, encompassed the religious, educational and cultural upheaval of the indigenous population, as was particularly emphasised in the presentations of missionary congregations. But progress also stood for modernisation as implemented through technology, that mirrored, or even represented, the advance of the western world itself. It is in this particular sense that I will refer to progress here, because the display of this modernisation became increasingly important in colonial sections from World War I onwards. An exotic setting, however, remained crucial for appealing to the general public. One can thus argue that at international exhibitions of the 1920s and ’30s the main characteristic of colonial sections, and of the architecture of their main pavilions in particular, was the simultaneous display of authenticity and progress.

Such a simultaneity profoundly marked the representation of the Belgian Congo during the 1930s. In comparison to earlier exhibitions, the Congolese sections of this era are particular for two reasons: firstly, the large emphasis put on progress was stimulated by specific economic and political conditions. In answer to the world-wide economic crisis that left its mark on both Belgium and the Congo, trade possibilities with the colony were presented in Belgian colonial propaganda as a solution to Belgium’s financial difficulties as late as 1939, as politicians and industrialists had never been eager to invest in the colonial project. During this decade, moreover, several other nations also tried to claim parts of the immense territory in the Belgian colony, while in the European political forum voices were raised in favour of a general international control that would substitute the authority of all colonial powers. Within such a context, the Belgian government was forced to present convincing demonstrations of its ‘civilising mission’ in the Congo if it wanted to maintain its absolute rule there. Therefore, technological progress in the Congo was given due attention in the presentations at international events, albeit accompanied by a philanthropic discourse emphasising the efforts made in the realm of education and medical services.3

Secondly, designing an authentic setting to represent the Belgian colony had proven to be a problematic undertaking for Belgian architects, and it was not until 1931 that a Congo pavilion was built that was unmistakably inspired


3 The economic and political goals of the 1931 Congolese section have been analysed in detail by Etienne Deschamps in ‘La Participation de la Belgique à l’Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris/Vincennes 1931. L’affirmation d’une politique coloniale sur le scène internationale’, unpublished thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1994.
by the built forms of central Africa. Combining a convincing representation of Congolese culture with a display that evoked the modernised colony presented a specific architectural challenge. From 1930 onwards, architects addressed this challenge and proposed a wide range of divergent design solutions. A consideration of the Congolese sections from the 1930s sheds light not only on shifting interpretations of authenticity within the colonial milieu, but also on issues closely linked with architectural practices at the time.

THE PROBLEMATIC DISPLAY OF AUTHENTICITY

Although the Congo only became a colony in the true sense of the word in 1908, there had been Congolese sections at international exhibitions since the 1885 Antwerp Universal Exhibition. The last event in which the Congo was presented as a colony was the Brussels World’s Fair of 1958. Even though ethnographic research on Congolese peoples had received a great deal of attention in the colonial milieu as early as the end of the nineteenth century, colonial officials, architects and critics all agreed that the Congo lacked a proper native architecture worthy of attention. Central African building forms were considered unsuitable sources of inspiration for the design of the Belgian Congo exhibition pavilions at World’s Fairs, as well as for the elaboration of a contemporary colonial architecture. The Livre d’Or of the 1905 Liège Universal Exhibition, declaring why the Congo pavilion bore no reference to African built forms, gives us a telling example of the mainstream argument: ‘Because no relic of an indigenous public building of importance is to be found anywhere in the Congo, it is meaningless to search for representative [morphological] elements amenable to transformation in a stylistic manner.’ As illustrated by Émile Bayard’s popularising book L’Art de reconnaître les styles coloniaux de la France of 1931, published as a kind of guidebook for the ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’, this argument applied to the whole of l’Afrique noire: its native built forms, ‘les pâillotes’, could not be described in terms of contemporary western architectural conceptions such as ‘monumentality’, ‘durability’, and ‘history’.

Not surprisingly, in the first Congolese sections, the authentic atmosphere had depended less on the architectural image of the pavilion itself than on the informal reconstructions of Congolese villages, crowded with natives in indigenous garb. Due to their difficult acclimatisation to the Belgian weather, several of these Congolese died during the 1897 Universal Exhibition in Tervuren — an incident which put an end to this practice at future exhibitions. As a result, the representation of the Belgian colony became wholly dependent on the architectural design of the section. Yet, precisely because of the preconception that the Congo did not possess a built environment that could qualify as architecture, there was no clear answer to the question as to what the nature of an exhibition architecture for representing the colony was to be. This was not so for the architects commissioned to design authentic displays for the north or west African colonies. The former could be inspired by the Islamic architectural tradition, resulting in what François Béguin has called arabisances, the latter were most often modelled on the mosque architecture of Djenné and Tombouctou. A similar design strategy — inventing a native architecture by mixing indigenous and European architectural forms — was initially considered inapplicable for the representation of the Belgian colony. As a result, several formal approaches had been followed or proposed for the design of the Congo pavilions since 1885, ranging from Beaux-Arts classicism.


5 It is significant, for instance, that Émile Bayard, apart from focusing mainly on those colonies with a monumental heritage — the built environment of l’Afrique noire is treated only marginally — also repeatedly tries to link impressive architectural ensembles, like the mosques of Djenné, to stages of western civilisation. See Émile Bayard, L'Art de reconnaître les styles coloniaux de la France, Librairie Garnier, Paris, 1931, pp 118, 125.

Nouveau offered an evocation of the native culture that was truly successful among the visitors: due to the interior decoration of the 1897 Congolese section in Tervuren (a design by Paul Hankar, Henry Van de Velde and other representatives of the Art Nouveau movement) this style became popularly known as the ‘style Congo’. The Congo pavilion built at the 1930 ‘Exposition Coloniale, Maritime et d’Art Flamand’ in Antwerp, however, leaves no doubt that until then the Congo was still not credited with an architecture of its own. Even in the Rapport Général, it was admitted that the pavilion was oriental, rather than Congolese, in appearance. The organisers relied on the architect’s use of decorations based on indigenous patterns for their defence of the design; close analysis reveals this decoration to be superficial and mediocre.

**INVENTING A CONGOLESE ARCHITECTURE**

In 1931, just one year after the Antwerp World’s Fair, France organised the ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’ in Paris (Vincennes). This event marked a turning point: for the first time (as was noticed in several contemporary commentaries) the visitor was confronted with an authentic architectural representation of the ‘traditional Congo’. The architect Henri Lacoste had succeeded in inventing a native architecture by integrating a large number of elements from the Congo’s material culture in the building’s design. In the contemporary architectural and colonial press, the project was praised unanimously for its powerful and realistic impression. A French critic compared its effect to the Cameroon section, suggesting that in both cases the architects ‘proved that they had understood the plain and instinctive grandeur of art noir and had succeeded in interpreting it without deforming its essence’.* In historical studies, however, the design has been harshly criticised. Jean-Claude Vigato writes of an ‘overblown and regularised hut’, while Peter Greenhalgh saw it as an example of a ‘mock African’ exhibition architecture only serving as a stage set ‘in an attempt to mentally transport the visitor away from Europe’ and lacking all ‘serious architectural considerations’.* If there can
be little doubt that the essence of Lacoste’s design was precisely such mental transportation, I would like to counter some of these criticisms.

First of all, one has to remember that Henri Lacoste was the first architect who did not a priori reject African built forms as a source of inspiration. If he had not actually travelled in the Congo at the time he designed the project, he did make a conscientious effort to study African and Congolese culture. Extensive research in museums and contemporary publications enabled him to develop a profound knowledge of African art, as is proven by his use of rare Congolese sources. Instead of using geometric velours de Kasai motifs (which had already become very popular in the decorative arts by the end of the 1920s), Lacoste inserted animal motifs inspired by little known Yombé textiles in the mosaic floors of the main pavilion. But he also used motifs of non-Congolese origin: references to the cave paintings recently discovered by Léo Frobenius in Rhodesia and South Africa, as well as to artefacts from the Ivory Coast and Gabon, can be traced in the decoration of the 1931 Congo pavilion, revealing the influence of the 1930 Brussels exhibition ‘L’Art nègre: Les arts anciens de l’Afrique noire’ on its design. It is obvious that the artefacts used as sources of inspiration were chosen according to aesthetic, rather than ethnological, principles, but this predominance of aesthetic criteria reflects the reception of indigenous art in Europe at the time. Louis Madeleine, a French architect and close friend of Lacoste’s, wrote of the design that ‘all its details are based on authentic indigenous sources, but have been applied according to a knowledge and approach that belongs only to Europe’. Within the French ethnographic milieu, moreover, it was only at the time of the ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’ that the aesthetic presentation of indigenous objects began to be questioned.

In its use of decoration, Henri Lacoste’s design also sheds light on the role of ornament in architecture, a fundamental theme of contemporary architectural debate in Belgium at the time as well as elsewhere. Jean-Claude Vigato has argued that, since the 1925 ‘Exposition des Arts Décoratifs’ in Paris, architects had been seeking to ‘reinstate the architectural symbol at the peak of social signification’. In his view the ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’ of 1931, because of its particular ideological programme, offered an ideal context for implementing this ambition. It is significant in this respect that Marcel Temporal, a critic who wrote a commentary on the exposition for L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui in 1931, vehemently reacted against the empty formalism of many pavilions built in the ‘modernist’ style. The most contemporary designs, according to Temporal, were not the undecorated cubist constructions, but the pavilions ‘uniting the spirit of the colonial style, which they should represent, with a formal logic resulting from functional demands’. The examples he used to
illustrate his statement were the pavilions of Madagascar, Togo/Cameroon, the 
Dutch Indies and the Belgian Congo — curiously enough all hybrid reinter-
pretations of native architectures. Within this selection, Lacoste’s design is par-
ticularly interesting for its efficient combining of divergent design practices. On 
the one hand, through the accurate positioning of the three building parts, 
Lacoste created a visual symmetry from a privileged point of view, with 
cupolas marking the centre of the volumetric composition. This approach 
seems to coincide with what Jean-Claude Vigato has described as colonising 
the vocabulary of exotic architecture through the architectural principles of the 
Ecole des Beaux-Arts. On the other hand, when one analyses the conception of 
the plans and structure of the pavilions, Lacoste’s handling of the programme 
and the interior layout proves to be in tune with some of the major tenets of 
arbitrational functionalism, as suggested by Temporal. Ingenious solutions 
for illuminating the pavilion were also applied, using new technologies for 
artificial, indirect lighting.

The apparent dichotomy between the interior and exterior of Lacoste’s 
design — the stage set-like outer appearance versus the very functionally 
organised interior — is partly dissolved in the striking design of the cupolas, 
which clearly refer to native architecture. These cupolas consist of a structural 
wooden frame, left unconnected on the inside and covered with straw on the 
outside. The frame is made of prefabricated elements, permitting easy 
assemblage on site and allowing large spans without secondary supports. At 
the time, this structural solution was regarded as highly innovative. In 1937, 
the leading periodical l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui would still describe this 
charpente à lamelles as a totally new concept offering promising prospects for 
future constructions. Yet, as was already noted in 1931 by several critics, the 
frame simultaneously refers to the construction of indigenous building forms 
of what were still considered ‘primitive’ cultures. In its duality — being both 
‘modern’ and ‘primitive’ — this structural solution of the cupolas blurs precon-
ceived notions of colonial imagery, and embodies the intriguing hybridity of 
Lacoste’s design.

OPPOSING CLAIMS OF AUTHENTICITY

If the Congo pavilion at the 1931 ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’ was 
applauded as one of the most remarkable constructions of the event, it did not 
succeed in setting a standard for the representation of the Belgian colony in the 
years to come. Marcel Schmitz, an influential Belgian architect and critic, 
formulated a fundamental critique on this kind of ‘authentic display’. In his 
opinion, colonial sections should function as laboratories for developing a 
contemporary colonial architecture, rather than as displays for evoking the 
native culture. Lacoste’s design thus offered no solution for future events: The 
hut, used in a very pleasing decorative way indeed by the architect Lacoste in 
his design for the Belgian pavilion,” Schmitz argued, ‘is for current 
[architectural] practice not an apt source of inspiration. Its essence is too 
indigenous in nature.’ Schmitz’s critique was echoed in a letter addressed to 
the Minister of Colonies in 1933 by Raymond Cloquet, one of the few Belgian 
architects residing in the Congo at that time. If even as gifted an architect as 
Lacoste had failed to design a convincing display for the Congo, this was, 
according to Cloquet, because the documentation assembled in museums and 
catalogues remained ‘empty of life, if one had not experienced it on the spot’.
Cloquet, and Schmitz also in a sense, thus suggested that claims of authenticity
could only be made in reference to the contemporary situation in the Congo, not in reference to an invented past.

During the preparation of the 1935 Brussels World’s Fair, two projects for the Congolese section were submitted to the Ministry of Colonies that reveal this shifting interpretation of authenticity. The first proposal had already been put forward at the end of 1931 by Raymond Moenaert, the architect who had won the competition for the construction of the new governor general’s residence in Leopoldville, without doubt the major public building commission in the Belgian colony. Moenaert regretted that the Belgian colony had until then always been represented by phantasmagoric images. In his view, a new concept was needed and he therefore proposed to build the governor general’s residence at the 1935 Brussels exhibition. Even if the economic crisis had temporarily halted the construction of the actual residence in Leopoldville, this proposal, in his view, was the most authentic display imaginable: by reconstructing his residence project, the Congolese section would become ‘a [contemporary] part of Kinshasa, imported and implanted in Belgian soil’. If Schmitz had known of this proposal, he would surely have supported it, because at various occasions he had praised Moenaert’s residence project and its ‘style hispano-colonial’ as a rare example of a truly contemporary colonial architecture for the Congo.

The contrast with the second proposal for the Congolese section in Brussels in 1935 could not have been more striking. Submitted by Henri Lacoste in 1933, the proposal consisted of a huge exhibition hall containing a panorama atmosphérique that would offer the visitor the experience of an expedition that crossed three climate zones in the Congo: the savannah, a tropical forest and the mountain range of the Ruwenzori. Lacoste’s proposal can be seen as a reinterpretation of the informal African villages at previous expositions, yet its claims of authenticity were even more emphatic: the latest engineering technologies, it was argued, would be used to replicate environmental conditions, and the panorama would generate visual, as well as tactile, olfactory and auditory sensations. Lacoste originally thought of masking the exhibition hall with an overblown version of his design for the ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’ of 1931. In the end, however, he changed the outer appearance completely and clad the gigantic hall with a striking modern façade. This change clearly reveals the ethno-centric character of the project.
In fact, the panorama atmosphérique was based on the blunt confrontation of the so-called ‘primitive’ African regions, experienced inside, and the contemporary civilisation of the West, as presented at the exit, where an impressive view over the city of Brussels was offered. Thus, the panorama legitimised the civilising mission of Belgian colonialism in the same way as nineteenth century colonial sections had done. Within only two years, Lacoste seems to have lost all the subtlety and productive ambivalence that had marked his design approach for the Congo pavilion of the 1931 exhibition.

CELEBRATING A CINQUANTENAIRE

The Brussels exhibition of 1935 marked the 50th birthday of Belgian colonialism. It should have been a glorious event, but in reality, it was disillusioning. Because of the economic crisis, the colonial government made only a minor investment in the Congolese section. The proposals by Moensert and Lacoste were rejected, and in the end the official Congo pavilion was built by an engineer-architect of the Ministry of Colonies, René Schoentjes. Schoentjes’s design approach was an attempt to invent a native architecture, very similar to what Lacoste had done in 1931. Schoentjes used a wider range of references, however, combining sources from Central African, Islamic and Egyptian material culture. This approach was reviewed very differently by his contemporaries. While a prominent connoisseur and promoter of African art, Gaston-Denys Périer, was enthusiastic about the design, the Commissaire Générale of the exhibition harshly criticised the fact that Schoentjes applied decorative patterns from contemporary catalogues of commercial interior design, which, in his view, completely undermined the harmony of the design. While Schoentjes’s design shows several similarities with the 1931 Congo pavilion, a comparison of both projects quickly reveals the former’s lack of subtlety and skill in the formal treatment as well as in the handling of space.

Furthermore, the Congo’s representation at the 1935 Brussels exhibition lacked the unity that had been so characteristic of the Congolese section at the ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’. This was partly because the several parts of the Brussels section were designed by different architects. Two colonial pavilions flanking the official building were designed by Victor Bourgeois, the most prominent figure among Belgian modernist architects. On close analysis, Bourgeois’s designs did not really address the issue of representing the Congo in an architectural manner. The ‘Leopold II’ restaurant stayed completely in tune with the

The front facade of the Congo pavilion at the Brussels World’s Fair of 1935 (architect: Rene Schoentjes)
sober modernist style characteristic of Bourgeois’s œuvre and, apart from the food served, only the frescoes in the interior, depicting curious Congolese figures, reminded the visitor of its connection with the colony. But it is in the pavilion that housed the Congo’s tourist industry displays that Bourgeois’s failure to create an architectural language capable of referring to the colonial programme, while remaining in accordance with the tenets of modernism, is most apparent. At one stage of the design-process, Bourgeois even produced a design solution for the entrance reminiscent of the three cupolas of the 1931 Congolese section, which fails to be more than an immature paraphrase.

**REPRESENTING THE MODERN CONGO**

For many visitors, the Congolese section at the Brussels exhibition of 1935 was pervaded with a sense of déjà-vu, because of the reuse of exhibits and displays from former exhibitions. Moreover, the section had not functioned as an architectural workshop in which a contemporary colonial architecture could be developed. Interest in the topic, however, was minimal among Belgian architects, even if, from the late 1920s on, initiatives had been made to stimulate a debate on colonial building. That colonial architecture was not a priority on the political agenda of the government — a fact most clearly illustrated by its decision to abandon, albeit temporarily, all initiatives for building the new governor general’s residence in Leopoldville in 1932 — was no doubt a major reason for this lack of interest in the architectural milieu. That the Ministry of Colonies had resorted to the approach of an invented native architecture for the 1935 Congolese section was probably also due to the public success of the 1931 section and the conviction that most visitors were still enchanted by the exotic exhibition architecture. Yet, Schoentjes’s and Bourgeois’s rather mediocre designs made it clear that such a display was gradually becoming untenable, as it was incapable of representing contemporary colonisation in the Congo.

This was the reason, at least in part, why the organisers of the Congolese section at the Paris ‘Exposition des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne’ of 1937 explicitly chose an opposite strategy. They claimed to give the visitor an impression of the modern way of life in the colony, suggesting at
the same time that ‘ideas of tradition and exoticism by no means have to stand in opposition to a sense of transformation and new conceptions’. The colony was presented by means of an elegantly designed bungalow with an encompassing veranda, representing the ideal home of a Belgian colonial.\textsuperscript{26} The pavilion was modelled on the colonial bungalows that had been imported in the tropics since the late nineteenth century and which had provided Europeans with comfortable living conditions in this tormenting climate. At the time of the Paris exposition, however, such bungalows were no longer the most common type of housing for white colonisers in Congo. Due to emerging urbanisation in the colony, they had been replaced since the early 1920s by designs that were based on the middle-class villas of Belgian garden cities.\textsuperscript{27}

The 1937 Congolese section thus cultivated the romantic image of the domestic life of colonial pioneers, rather than offering an accurate view of contemporary daily life in the Belgian colony. It failed to define an architectural image for the ‘new Congo’ that was characterised by gradual modernisation. In fact, the section placed only a minor focus on technological progress; and the visitor was reminded only in a subtle way of the importance of the expanding industries in the Congo. Delicately arranged displays illustrated how many contemporary products were derived from raw materials of Congolese origin. In comparison, the display of technological progress in the Congolese section at the ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’ had been far more straightforward. In the interior of the pavilions of the 1931 section, the different infrastructural networks and mining exploitation in the colony had been presented through impressive stands that showed part of a bridge, for example, and an aeroplane. This interior display of the modernised Congo formed an ambivalent alliance with its exterior design that aimed at representing Congo’s native culture. In this sense, the Congolese section at the ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’ of 1931 exemplifies an ‘architectural ambivalence’ in the sense that the ‘invented hybrid exterior acts as mediator between a prestigious western presence in the interior and an absent, native environment, considered not worth showing’.\textsuperscript{28}

THE END OF AUTHENTIC DISPLAYS?

If representing the Belgian Congo by means of an authentic display of the colony’s native culture had been a primary concern at the 1931 ‘Exposition Coloniale Internationale’, by the end of the 1930s such concern for authenticity was no longer considered important. Colonial propaganda now almost

Fragment of a bas relief on the outside of the Belgian pavilion that marked the Congolese section at the New York World’s Fair of 1933 (sculptor: A. Dupagne)
The Congolese section at the Exposition Internationale de la Technique de l'Eau, Liège, 1939 (architect: Henri Lacoste), contemporary postcard (collection: Denys Lacoste)

exclusively focused on the modernisation of the Congo — a shift in attention which can be illustrated by reviewing the two Congolese sections that were designed for international exhibitions in 1939. The first section was built at the New York World’s Fair, organised on the theme 'The World of Tomorrow'. As the presence of the Belgian colony at this fair was primarily a marketing strategy to promote the Congolese diamond industry in the United States, the organisers did not make any efforts to create an authentic display. The Congolese section was not even housed in a separate building, but formed a part of the Belgian pavilion. The architects, who included Victor Bourgeois, had avoided all exotic formal vocabulary and used a modernist idiom. On the outside, only a bas-relief revealed the presence of a Congolese section. In the luxurious but sober interior, elements referring to Congo’s native culture were restricted as much as possible.  

The representation of the Belgian colony in New York contrasted greatly with the Congolese section at the Exposition Internationale de la Technique de l’Eau, held in Liège the same year. At this event, the Congolese section was meant to promote Belgium’s civilising mission in the colony by displaying the progress made in hydraulic engineering, water purification and water supply. The overall architectural co-ordination of the exposition was given to a team of young architects who imposed strict design rules, based on a functionalist doctrine. This did not, however, prevent Henri Lacoste, commissioned to design the Congolese section, from repeating his design approach of 1931. He submitted a proposal for a phantasmagoric Congolese setting, placing four gigantic golden elephants in the canal running in front of the pavilion. Due to financial restrictions, the design was strongly simplified, and, in the end, the elephants were replaced by a huge, totem pole-like construction, decorated with Congolese masks and armoury. If such an approach had been apt for the
'Exposition Coloniale Internationale' in Vincennes — which, in the end, was the ultimate 'Théâtre des Colonies' — it was rather out of place at the Liège exhibition. Lacoste's design was not capable of grasping the essence of the 'Exposition de l'Eau', which was purely a celebration of technological progress, nor did it create a meaningful image of the emerging 'new Congo'.

In only a few years, the strategy of inventing a Congolese architecture had been outstripped. But the Congolese section at the New York World Fair could hardly be regarded as a suitable alternative, as the mental connection with the colony's culture was established not through the architectural design but by purely decorative means. The architectural representation of the Belgian Congo thus remained problematic, all the more so because from 1945 onwards, indigenous populations' struggles for independence could no longer be neglected. The Congolese section of the Brussels World's Fair of 1958, however, made it rather shamefully clear that this new situation was not yet fully understood. 32

32 Leprun, op cit, p 212.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATIVITY

One can legitimately criticise the various Congolese sections I have discussed here for their underlying ethnocentric preconceptions. The 'voice of the colonised' was totally absent in these representations of the Congo. Moreover, the general assumption that the Congo did not have a native architectural tradition worthy of attention was never questioned by architects, most of whom had never even been to the colony. Given his projects for the 1935 and 1939 expositions, not even Henri Lacoste fully deserves to be noted as an exception, despite the fact that his design for the 1931 'Exposition Coloniale Internationale', in my view, offers a rare glimpse of hybridity, capable of breaking open fixed notions of colonialist imagery. Because of the general acceptance that a native architectural tradition was non-existent in the Congo, there were no appropriate models available for the Belgian architects who were commissioned to design a Congo pavilion. But this situation should not necessarily be regarded as restrictive: it actually offered architects a rare opportunity for creativity and imagination. While the native architectures of north or west African colonies offered French architects ample inspiration, just as the built heritage in India provided models for the British, designing these pavilions could easily become a dangerous routine. Sylvianne Leprun has rightly blamed the 'désèchement créatif' in French colonial sections. 33 As the many divergent design solutions discussed here illustrate, in Congolese sections this 'desiccation of creativity' was much less to be feared. This is not to say that Belgian architects always succeeded in designing pavilions that were innovative from an architectural point of view, or that they offered that rare quality of hybridity. Still, I believe that analysing these colonial displays offers particular opportunities to reveal specific aspects of contemporaneous architectural practices. Through such analysis we might gain a more nuanced understanding of architecture as visual representation and as a discipline, as well as of the role of architecture in the realm of colonialism.

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