

The Brussels Times

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on the Tour of Flanders

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Art Nouveau, Art Deco

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Victor Horta, Villa Empain, Palais Stoclet,
Hôtel Frison and Aegidium



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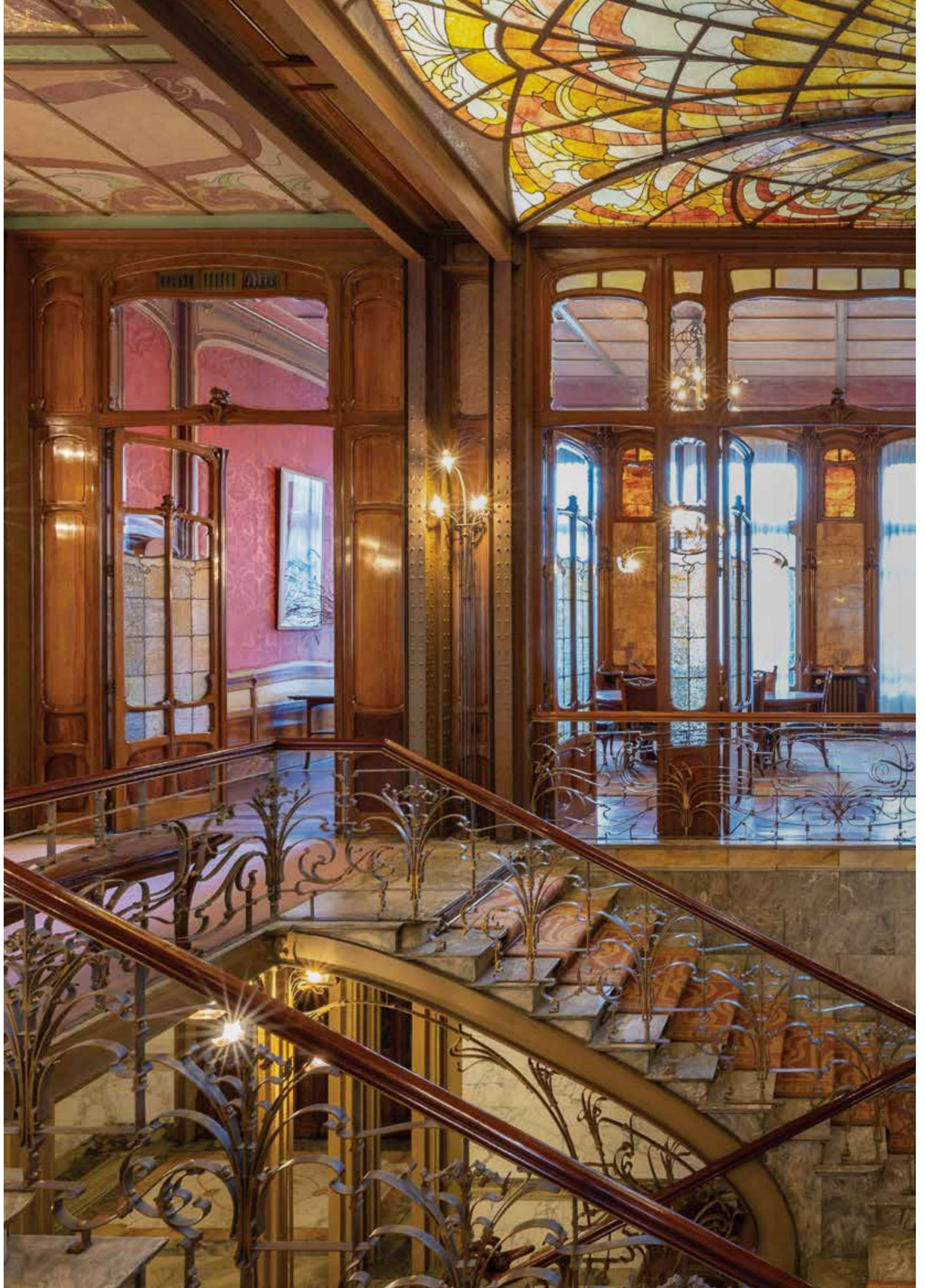
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The image shows the interior of the Hôtel Solvay, a masterpiece of Art Nouveau architecture. The ceiling is a large, arched stained glass skylight with intricate geometric and floral patterns. The walls are covered in dark wood paneling and large murals depicting figures in classical or allegorical settings. A prominent mural on the right shows a group of people in a garden-like setting. The floor is covered in a patterned rug with swirling, organic designs. On the left, there is a balcony with a decorative wrought-iron railing. The overall atmosphere is one of grandeur and historical elegance.

The most glorious house of all

Hôtel Solvay is the result of a unique partnership: the money of Armand Solvay and the genius of Victor Horta combining to create an astonishing mansion.

Angela Dansby visits the Art Nouveau masterpiece



Above, and right: Hôtel Solvay's majestic staircase

“ In addition to all furniture, Horta designed the carpets, light fixtures, tableware and even the doorbell. ”

The Hôtel Solvay in Brussels is currently under wraps. Scaffolding and curtains hide the wonderful, curvy Art Nouveau façade on Avenue Louise as workers rebuild and repaint the worn front. The newly restored exterior is only set to be unveiled in December when the delicate sandstone waves and the orange-painted wrought iron curls of Victor Horta's masterpiece will once again be revealed.

Hôtel Solvay is one of the best-preserved Horta buildings, his largest private design and the only that retained almost all its original furniture designed by the master himself. And yet, it's a miracle this turn of the century gem escaped the post-war Art Nouveau cull.

The story begins in 1894, when Armand Solvay, son of the Belgian chemical and industry baron Ernest Solvay, hired Horta to create a townhouse for him and his wife, Fanny Hunter. He gave Horta a carte blanche to create every single element of Hôtel Solvay: unlimited funds and total creative freedom.

Horta spared no expense on materials, such as marble, onyx, bronze, tropical woods, stained glass, bluestone and wrought iron. He used at least 23 types of marble and 17 types of wood. Given its size,

it was named Hôtel Solvay, referring to a “hôtel particulier”, which roughly translates as a mansion or grand townhouse.

Breaking tradition

The Hôtel Solvay's current owner, Alexandre Wittamer, says Horta used the *carte blanche* to push the artistic and architectural envelope. “He could use any material, worker or designer he wanted. He purchased two plots instead of one to build on Avenue Louise. It was twice as large as a regular house at that time,” Wittamer says.

The ground floor has a carriage entrance and hall, cloakroom, toilet, office and kitchen. Leading up to the main floor is a grand staircase that splits in two in front of a Neo-Impressionist wall painting by Belgian pointillist Théo Van Rysselberghe.

Upstairs is a contiguous billiard room, lounge and music room connected by glass walls that can be opened completely. Across the hall is a dining room facing a garden and former stable. Another bathroom is on the mezzanine before the second floor, which has a small winter garden, master bedroom and two offices. The third floor, excluded from tours, has a large room that can be rented for special events for up to 70 people.

Wittamer says Horta was far superior to his contemporary, Antoni Gaudi, the Catalan architect who is also associated with the Art Nouveau movement. “Horta went more into details, designing everything, and was a much better technician. He thought about many things that engineers do today,” Wittamer says.

Horta broke with architectural tradition in his time by using an iron frame typical of industrial structures in a private home in visible ways. He pioneered the whiplash motif – a sinuous line inspired by nature, often in an ornamental S curve to suggest dynamism and movement – which was previously only used in drawings. And he created curved lines, arabesques and plant motifs – complete with an indoor winter garden – because he wanted to illustrate vitality.

Adding to this is luminosity: natural light filters throughout Hôtel Solvay through two large skylights, bays and stacked windows. Electric lights were also installed from the outset, including several chandeliers. Green and orange tones dominate the interior in different coloured rooms. In addition to all furniture, Horta designed the carpets, light fixtures, tableware and even the doorbell. And he had a natural air conditioning system with continuous but adjustable ventilation that prevents condensation on the glass. Steam radiators provide heat.

Art historian Maria Sharoshkina-Brechet explains that Horta was both an artistic and industrial pioneer. “Hôtel Solvay is so



beautiful, rich and innovative,” she says. “It was created at the top of Horta’s creativity and career, and it included the best period and people of his life.”

Sharoshkina-Brechet, who is also a tour guide in Brussels, says the Art Nouveau movement was a reaction against industrialism. “But it was industrial in some materials,” she says. “Horta anticipated modernity with heating and air conditioning systems, adapting a house to the needs of an owner. In fact, he made a house a portrait of a person with total art, not just a façade. Engineering made him unique along with his combination of industrial and fine arts. He was the best architect in Belgium.”

“ Solvay gave Horta a carte blanche to create every single element of Hôtel Solvay: unlimited funds and total creative freedom. ”





Above: La Science, sculpture by Pieter-Jan Braecke in ground floor hallway. Below, the astonishing balustrade on the first floor stairwell

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War and Brusselization

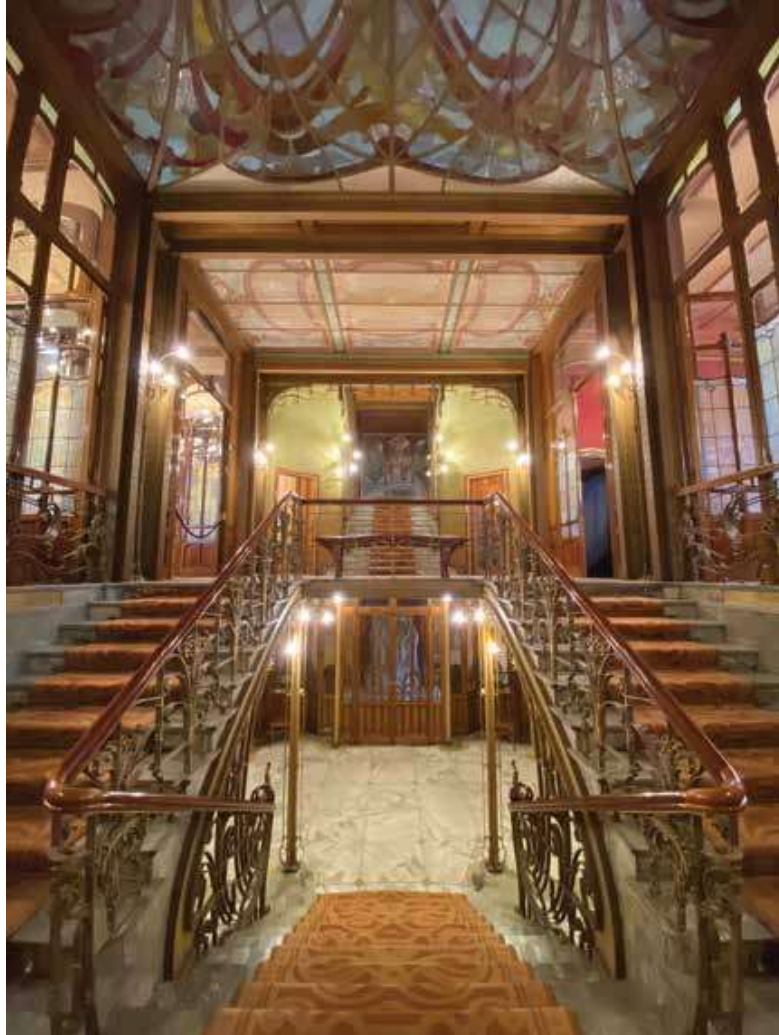
It took eight years to build Hôtel Solvay, which finally opened in 1903. The Solvays lived there until the brink of World War II, when they moved to Chateau de la Hulpe. This was a fortuitous move as Hôtel Solvay was damaged during the war and its main stained-glass dome demolished. The building was subsequently abandoned and put on the chopping block of the post-war haphazard urban redevelopment known as Brusselization.

By the 1930s, Art Deco had already overtaken Art Nouveau – dubbed “macaroni style” – but after the war, the style was seen as positively gauche. “Art Nouveau was out of fashion in the 1950s,” Wittamer says. “No one wanted to restore this magnificent building, which was built before the Titanic.”

Hôtel Solvay stayed empty until 1958, when Alexandre Wittamer’s grandparents, fashion designers Louis Wittamer and Berthe De Camps, bought it to set up an haute couture atelier. With their designers’ eyes, they saw the value of Horta’s masterpiece. “They were looking for a place to grow their business and fell in love with Hôtel Solvay, so they decided to save

it from demolition,” Wittamer says. “They never lived in it but asked people to visit. There was no interest in it initially, then it became recognized as artwork. In fact, my





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aunt wrote a few books and her post-grad thesis on it. And my father helped save it.”

For 20 years, the Wittamer family worked to restore Hôtel Solvay until the Brussels authorities declared it protected heritage in 1977, and official renovations began. “We kept all of the original furniture except one bed that was sold to the Solvay family because they wanted to keep it,” Wittamer says. “We tried to get it back unsuccessfully and now we don’t know who owns it. We have a project with a school in Brussels to reconstruct it.”

This item aside, all of Horta’s furniture has remained consistently in Hôtel Solvay in remarkable preservation. “A few other Horta mansions were saved but their interiors were changed, or the furniture was sold and bought back at auction,” he notes.

A foundation was also set up to help maintain Hôtel Solvay, and their work on the façade should be completed by the end of 2022. “It’s a complete refurbishment of the old lady,” Wittamer says. “We need to dismantle and rebuild some parts of the façade as well as clean it. This is the beginning of a master restoration plan in phases

over the next five years.”

Will Hôtel Solvay will stay in his family? “It’s not my main objective,” Wittamer says. “Rather that it remains protected and available to the public as an Art Nouveau treasure, even if one day we no longer own it.”

Heritage Hôtel

By 2000, Hôtel Solvay and three other major Horta townhouses in Brussels (Hôtel Tassel, the Horta House and Hôtel van Eetvelde) were declared UNESCO World Heritage sites as “some of the most remarkable pioneering works of architecture of the end of the 19th century.” The UNESCO citation was effusive in its praise. “These four houses, which bear testimony to the immense talent of this Belgian architect, achieve a remarkable sense of unity with meticulous attention to the smallest detail of the building..The stylistic revolution represented by these works is characterised by their open plan, the diffusion of light, and the brilliant joining of the curved lines of decoration with the structure of the building.”

In January 2021, the Brussels Capital Region formally recognized Hôtel Solvay as a museum to make it easier to open to the public and regulate tourism: Urban. brussels, the region’s agency dealing with cultural heritage, aligned it with the other museums involved in the Brussels’ Art Nouveau Pass.

The Brussels-Capital City Region is funding most of the restoration, with visitor access continuing during the works. A three-dimensional, virtual reality device will be available in early 2022 for physically challenged visitors to see what is not accessible to them otherwise.

“It’s a masterpiece, a complete work of immersion in Art Nouveau – better than Maison Horta itself,” says Pascal Smet, the Brussels Region State Secretary for urbanism and heritage.

Smet says that Brussels should take a leaf out of Barcelona’s book and promote its local heroes more. “Barcelona has done such a great job of promoting Gaudi that one would believe he invented Art Nouveau,” he says. Next year, Brussels will launch a publicity campaign to recapture the capital’s Art Nouveau heritage. “We are too modest in using Art Nouveau and Horta to promote Brussels internationally. Opening up Hôtel Solvay to the public was the start of a new period of promoting this outstanding heritage,” Smet says.