The year 1893 sees the official birth of Art Nouveau in Brussels with the construction of two emblematic houses: the Hôtel Tassel built by Victor Horta and the private house of the architect Paul Hankar. They are both located near the prestigious tree-lined avenue Louise in a trendy new area of the capital which has been known since then as the cradle of Art Nouveau. This new quarter attracts the wealthy bourgeoisie, who build their mansions in the eclectic style which then dominated Brussels. The city is unique in being a capital where people live in single-family houses instead of apartment buildings. These houses are characterized by a plan consisting of three successive rooms and a stairwell placed along the common wall. This plan restricts light and circulation and hinders creativity. The Art Nouveau architects fought against this standardised architecture that didn’t really evolve but was simply repeated over and over again. Two young men were an exception among the future inhabitants of this new quarter near avenue Louise: Emile Tassel, an engineer and friend of Victor Horta, and the architect Paul Hankar.
Octave van Rysselberghe is a pioneer, a visionary architect who in 1882, more than ten years before the birth of Art Nouveau, had already built a house that was a break with the traditional styles, the Hôtel Goblet d’Alviella. In his Memoirs, Horta mentions his admiration for van Rysselberghe and beyond. Architect Paul Hankar builds his own mansion at 71 rue Defacqz. Strongly inspired by Viollet-le-Duc's theories, Hankar develops an architectural style dominated by rationalism. Unlike Horta's Hôtel Tassel, the aesthetic revolution is best seen in the facade; the floor plan follows tradition. Instead of the traditional symmetry, Hankar divides the surface into several panels, separates the windows and uses an impressive array of materials: red, grey and ochre stones, red bricks and iron. Another new feature is the facade's relief treatment. The oriel window for example, a common element in Brussels architecture, was never seen before in such dimensions or colours. Hankar moreover decorates the facade with sgraffitos depicting animals (a cat, a fox, two swallows and a bat, symbolising the different moments of the day), actually designed and realised by Adolphe Crespin. Above the door, the sgraffito indicates the year of the architectural turning point.

The Hôtel Tassel

Emile Tassel meets Horta in the Freemason Lodge Les amis philanthropes (The philanthropist friends). He commissions the young architect to design a mansion, to be built on a large terrain in the rue de Turin (known today as rue Paul-Emile Janson). Tassel gives carte blanche to Horta, who draws an original floor plan with which he definitively breaks away from the traditional scheme. The plan of the Hôtel Tassel is dictated by the owner's personality, for whom Horta imagines individualised spaces. In fact he builds a house consisting of three different parts. Two rather conventional buildings in brick - and stone one on the street side and one on the garden side - linked by a steel structure covered with glass, providing a flood of light into the winter garden and stairwell. It is just as if Horta had the brilliant idea of cutting the house along its width, allowing natural light to enter the centre.

Circulation, hindered in the traditional houses, is also freed in Horta's design. He removes the inside walls as much as he can, replacing them with an iron supporting structure, the beams of which he bends as if they were flower stalks or liana. He designs every single detail: door handles, woodwork, panels, stained glass windows, mosaic flooring as well as the furnishings. The facade, dominated by a large bow window corresponding to Tassel's office and the smoking room, becomes the mirror of the ground plan. In his Memoirs, Horta says the following about the Hôtel Tassel: twelve years of my career, thirty-two years of my life are gone. This spectacular work receives its award: the architecture I had wished, personal and living.¹

Paul Hankar’s private mansion

Two streets away, another construction revolutionises the art of building - both in Brussels

¹. Horta, Les Amis philanthropes, 1888.
The Bloemenwerf

In 1895, van de Velde draws the plans of the Bloemenwerf, a house for himself and his wife, the artist Maria Sèthe, to be built at Uccle, then located in the countryside near Brussels (today, this charming old village is part of the city). Like Horta did for Tassel, van de Velde designs a total art work, as a guarantee of the couple's harmony. Inspired by the picturesque silhouette of English cottages, he draws an octagonal plan centred around a large hall.

The Bloemenwerf, strongly influenced by the ideas of the Arts and Crafts, is also a call for a return to the roots of creation. van de Velde's building approach is led by his will to get back to a primitive way of creating and by his faith in men's creative potential. In his Memoirs, he writes that everyone who desires to live according to his tastes, will and heart can build his own house; invent, draw everything: furniture, but also any object indispensable for a young couple, create original patterns for tapestries and decoration; choose the fabrics and even design the dresses Maria would wear at the different moments of the day, according to the circumstances and the different tasks she has to accomplish.

The partnership with van Rysselberghe

In 1896, van de Velde forms a partnership with the architect Octave van Rysselberghe for the construction of a mansion in Brussels. It is commissioned by Paul Otlet, a man who made a fortune in the world of finance - by that time Belgium is Europe's second most industrialized and rich country - but who is also a patron.

Octave van Rysselberghe is a pioneer, a visionary architect who in 1882, more than ten years before the birth of Art Nouveau, had already built a house that was a break with the traditional styles, the Hôtel Goblet d'Alviella. In his Memoirs, Horta mentions his admiration for van Rysselberghe, in particular for this house which he considers a real masterpiece of classical interpretation. On an irregularly shaped terrain, van Rysselberghe imagines a plan in the centre of which he places the stairwell. This original choice would influence the future design of Horta's Hôtel Tassel. The facades of Tassel and Goblet d'Alviella are quite similar, for example in the use of columns or in the squat proportions of the ground floor.

The Hôtel Otlet

Fourteen years after construction of the Hôtel Goblet d'Alviella, Van Rysselberghe designs a new mansion for Paul Otlet, this time with Henry van de Velde. Van Rysselberghe designs the floor plans and the facades; van de Velde
the internal spaces and furniture. Like in the Hôtel Goblet d’Alviella and the Bloemenwerf, circulation is the main element that determines the overall plan. The centre of the house is completely empty and is illuminated through a glass roof. A large wooden staircase wraps around the luminous centre, interrupted by a series of landings leading to the rooms that are located on various levels.

As a consequence, the heights of the ceilings are different from one room to another: high in the dining room where the guests are invited during the receptions; lower for a living room intended to provide intimacy. The house is no longer a stacking of two or three floors above a ground floor, but a complex set of volumes situated at different levels of the house, each with its own height. The stairwell becomes a room in itself, animated by the circulation of the mansion's inhabitants like the theatre of family life.

Henry van de Velde designs a fairy tale decor made of wood panels, stained glass windows, mosaics. A curved line, full of strength and vitality, dominates his design. At that time van de Velde also draws the interior decoration of Samuel Bing's gallery in Paris. There he discovers the wave pattern that is omnipresent in the work of Japanese artists such as Hokusai or Hiroshige and had also inspired Horta for the design of Hôtel Tassel's smoking room. Van de Velde also designs all the furniture of the Hôtel Otlet, creating another total art work.

In the street, the facades reflect this amazing space and express the energy and strength of the internal circulation. Like a skin stretched on a skeleton, the walls are animated with ridges and hollows, punctuated by the silence of the plain wall located on the corner. At the far left side of the mansion there is an artist's house and a workshop.

After Art Nouveau

In the late 1890s, van de Velde works more and more often in Germany. In 1900, the van de Velde family leaves Belgium and settles first in Berlin, then in Weimar. They return to Belgium in 1920 and would stay there until 1947. Very active as an architect, van de Velde founds the École de la Cambre, an art school based on the Bauhaus model. His formal language simplifies over the years and his designs smoothly shift towards the modernist style.

Notes:

1. Horta Victor, Mémoires, Communauté française de Belgique, Bruxelles, 1985, p. 34
2. Van de Velde Henry, Récit de ma vie, Versa-Flammarion, 1992, p. 79
3. Horta Victor, Mémoires, Communauté française de Belgique, Bruxelles, 1985, p. 76