Georges Vantongerloo (1886-1965) completed his academic training in sculpture in Antwerp and Brussels, and he exercised the profession with some success until the outbreak of the First World War. He was injured in the early days of the war, with damage to his lungs, thereby being exiled to the Netherlands, set up a studio together with his brother in The Hague, studied Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics* in great depth, and married Woutrina Kalis, all of which led to a change in his chosen form of artistic expression. Initially, he started making two- and three-dimensional works, abstract figurative images and sculptures, ordered orthogonally and usually with an oval or spherical perimeter. From the spring of 1918 onwards, he interacted closely with Theo van Doesburg and became one of the signatories of the De Stijl manifesto. He opted for relatively small formats specifically for his sculptures – they were just large enough to fit into a person’s hands. His idea was that they could equally exist on a far larger scale. And in this way, a first architectural dimension entered Vantongerloo’s oeuvre. He decided with retroactive effect from 1917 to give his works consecutive numbers and entered them all in a hand-written catalogue of his oeuvre (thereafter the individual works discussed here were identified by the ‘GV’ number assigned them as a prefix).

After moving to live in Menton in the South of France, he busied himself, among other things, creating furniture that in the final instance was to have been used in the house he planned and designed in 1926. Of the house, a model and several plans have survived (GV 33). In terms of the interior, the shape of the dining room complete with furnishings is likewise known (GV 34 + 35). The façade, subdivided by numerous recesses and projections, was reflected in sculptures he made at the time, in particular the *Rapport des volumes émanant de l’ellipsoïde* (GV 31). The exterior of the house can be compared with projects by members of the De Stijl group, specifically those involving the collaboration of Cornelis van Eesteren or Pieter Oud. As regards the colour scheme, Vantongerloo rejected the ‘triple harmony’ of blue-red-yellow. The model of the house thus has a colourless exterior. And in the living room, the walls were simply divided into grey and white fields. The furniture was all reddish-brown, the carpet blue. Both the aforementioned sculpture and the houses are structured around the principle of an ellipsoid. The residence was never built, presumably for economic reasons.

Since Vantongerloo often spent shorter periods in Paris, he no doubt will have visited the 1925 ‘Exposition nationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes’. Not only did the exhibition include interesting and pioneering pieces of architecture, but Le Corbusier was present in the form of his Plan Voisin – housed in the Pavillon de l’esprit nouveau that the renowned architect had designed. The plan envisaged tearing down an entire district of Paris and redefining it. It was an idea that evidently preoccupied Vantongerloo for some time afterwards.

In 1928, the Vantongerloos moved to Paris. He worked intensively on two projects there, a city with an airport (GV 44) and a bridge over the Schelde in his hometown of Antwerp (GV 50). Both projects are very demanding in terms of urban design, with dimensions that went far beyond those customarily adopted and in terms of scale taking up the classicist, monumental and utopian revolutionary architecture of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Etienne-Louis Boulée at the end of the eighteenth century. Vantongerloo focused here primarily on a structured arrangement of work and living zones, on the basis of an infinite faith in technology. In this regard, the thrust was very akin to Le Corbusier’s project. For him,
mobility must have played a crucial role, as both automobiles and aircraft are omnipresent in his projects as the main means of transport. The vertical links are provided in the form of elevators of different sizes and special levels assigned to pedestrians. The railways and trams as well as the omnipresent buses are, on the other hand, invisible.

The Aéroport plus armature: type A, série A project (GV 38) is actually the core piece of the City with Airport (GV 44). What is striking is the sub-structure – modelled on the Eiffel Tower but based on circles, such that the contours describe the curve of a cone. The same formula is used for the contours of the undersides of the projecting structure. On top of this substructure, Vantongerloo then places an orthogonal volume with a seemingly thin surface that extends far outwards as a runway for aircraft. Vantongerloo used the same curve function in 1929 to create his sculpture Construction des rapports des volumes qui émane de l’hyperbole équilatère $xy=k$ (GV 54) and for the picture Composition émanante de l’hyperbole équilatère $xy=k$ avec accord vert et rouge (GV 57). The projected city would have been composed of a set of cube modules and these would have differed by their respective corner colours, whereby each house had a colour of its own – this trailblazing orientation concept has more or less escaped notice as one of the pioneers of today’s colour-coded signage systems.

Vantongerloo took the competition for a tunnel under the Scheldt River in Antwerp as an occasion to propose a bridge (GV 50), again constructed on the basis of the $xy=k$ hyperbola function. The project proposal he submitted entailed a suspension bridge with an overall length of 740 m and a width of 100 m. The total height of the bridgeheads was about 85 m. In the plan, autos drove into the bridgeheads at ground level, entering three large elevators, and then travelled up to the level at which they would traverse the bridge; once they reached the other side, they were transported by elevator back to ground level. Pedestrians would likewise first have travelled upwards to a first floor, and then on up to the pedestrian walkway, located above the bridge’s car deck. The storeys in-between housed businesses, the administration and the technical facilities.

Another study for a bridge (GV 51) forgoes any openly visible elements relating to the hyperbola and likewise dispenses with a suspension system. The result is a closed volume such as Vantongerloo had also had in mind for the City with Airport. For the purposes of scale, there is an ocean liner sailing under the bridge.

His Aéroport type B série A, designed in 1929 (GV 40), was a full 500 m long, and 74 m high. The entire building again has different levels for businesses, administration, a hotel and a library, all accessed by elevator. Vantongerloo adds a large car park for autos in keeping with the wish for mobility and in advance of his day. In the model, the step-like staggered shape of the main storeys, which he termed a plate-forme, seem incredibly modern, and thus related to the above bridge study. Yet, in Vantongerloo’s oeuvre there is no picture of sculpture reflecting it. It could, perhaps, very broadly be compared to Kazimir Malevich’s study for The Pilot’s Plant House (1924), which also features a roof that projects out well over the walls, or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s 1929 Barcelona Pavilion, which, however, only has a single storey. Most utopian of all is Aéroport type A série B (GV 39), a 220-m-high tower crowned by a 102-m-long takeoff and landing pad. Here, again, vertical access is by elevator only. The base platform is home to a bank, with administrative offices and apartments as well as a hangar for the aircraft above it.

With all the projects Georges Vantongerloo pursued ardently and worked on intensely with a view to possible commissions, no one ever even tested whether they could in fact be realised. Vantongerloo was concerned with studying a problem, developing an idea for it, and then giving it a shape. He knew that he was not expert enough to handle the remainder of the task and he would have delegated it to others. He was not able to provide the cost proposals requested given his lack of specialist knowledge. We can conclude from all this that
he was acutely aware that he was not an architect but solely able to offer sculptural ideas for the path architectural solutions should take. We can essentially attribute this to the fact that with the means available to him Vantongerloo tried with his projects to realise a social vision. Since he viewed himself more as an artist than an architect, at the end of 1930 he took part in the show ‘L’aéronautique et l’art’, and the Aéro-Club de France as organisers honoured him with a medal. Intellectually speaking, this shows his affinity to Kazimir Malevich, who with his Arkhitekton (1926-1927) series created structures that likewise were ambitious in architectural terms but had little prospect of being realised as such, yet also did not, as did Vantongerloo, with his care for detail, reveal the inner organisation of the projects. Malevich was interested here precisely not in architecture but instead in the sculptural structure of the volumes involved coupled with transposing socialism into the urban world.

In 1930, Vantongerloo created his last major architectural concept, the Ville gratte-ciel (GV 70, 1939). It is meant as an ideal city, autos as the guarantor of mobility are only permissible on the ground level, and presented there without lanes and directions being defined. Airplanes, the other tool of mobility, stand on the flat roof or the other large projecting surfaces. They serve as a kind of flying taxis to bridge middle distances, from a main airport to downtown. The entire remaining area is reserved for pedestrians and they are rendered nonsensically small (almost like ants). Either they have to move on projecting, peripheral platforms and in tunnels leading through the buildings, or on the roof terrace, which the stores mounted on its edges have transformed into a pedestrian shopping area. Basically, the complex consists of three main storeys. These are then subdivided into further floors whose internal structure is not visible. The different building modules that constitute the edges of the structure are illuminated by inner courtyards and individual bridges link up other complexes.

It bears noting with regard to all these examples that the different means of transport are kept separate (even by floor); vertical access is generally by elevator, and you will in vain look for staircases. When not driving autos or arriving by plane, people can only move in the pedestrian levels. Especially in the case of the Ville gratte-ciel, its realisation would have seen utopian theory swiftly come into conflict with human reality. Vantongerloo’s ideas were undoubtedly interesting, but for all the urban design aspects were merely partial solutions with a utopian thrust.

Vantongerloo’s last architectural study was an Aérodrôme souterrain (GV 72, 1931). Here, key functions are placed underground, whereby the external monumental scale of the prior projects is no longer quite as obvious, even if the notion of mobility is just as strongly evident as ever. It can be no coincidence that Vantongerloo’s sculptures dating from 1931 were larger and more open, and distinct in terms of subject matter from the themes of his pictures. The turn away from the domain of architecture is also related to the foundation, likewise in spring 1931, of the ‘Abstraction – Création’ artists’ group; Vantongerloo became vice-president and later managing director of the group, and in doing so laid a different set of foundations for his own oeuvre.

Translation: Jeremy Gaines
Nederlandse vertaling op p.118

Recent literature on Georges Vantongerloo


Guy Brett (ed.), Georges Vantongerloo: A Longing for Infinity (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009)

Christoph Brockhaus and Hans Janssen (eds.), Für eine neue Welt: Georges Vantongerloo und seine Kreise von Mondrian bis Bill (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009)
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Vliegtuigen, het andere mobiliteitsinbeeld van de stad waardeert en worden daar in ongeorganiseerdheid sterk gezien. Zij staan voor de mobiliteit, zijn als de ideale stad: de auto’s, die gratte-ciel architectonische concept de Ville gratte-ciel niet goed bevorderen, maar ondanks stedenbouwkundige aspecten slechts deeloplossingen van een utopische dimensie.

Als laatste architectonische studie ontwerpt Vantongerloo een Aérodrome souterrain (GV 72, 1931), waarin hij de belangrijkste onderdelen onder de grond plaatst. De uiterlijke monumentaliteit van de eerdere projecten is niet meer evident aanwezig, maar wel nog steeds het idee van mobiliteit. Het is zeker geen toeval dat de sculpturen van Vantongerloo uit 1931 groter en open zijn en zich thematisch ook van de schilderthema’s onderscheiden. De breuk met het architectonische idee van een 3D-theorie en menselijke realiteit een probleem zijn geworden. De ideeën van Vantongerloo waren zeker interessant, maar ondanks stedenbouwkundige aspecten slechts slechts een deel als oplossing van een utopische dimensie.

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