

Marcel Smets. *Charles Buls: Les principes de l'art urbain*. Liege: Mardaga, 1995. 305 pp. 205 FF (cloth), ISBN 978-2-87009-590-4.

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## Charles Buls (1837-1914): A Competent Amateur

“L’existence sans aspiration vers un idéal, sans une recherche de la beauté, sans satisfactions intellectuelles désintéressées, mène droit à l’égoïsme, à la sécheresse, au spleen et au suicide. Les administrateurs d’une ville ont à se préoccuper non seulement de la santé physique de leurs administrés mais encore de leur hygiène morale, sentimentale et intellectuelle.” [1]

That’s the way the former Brussels burgomaster, Charles Buls, saw, in 1906, the challenges that urban officials had to take up.

Marcel Smets, a Professor of town planning in Leuven, places Buls’s work and ideas in the context of a wider debate about modernity and its antinomies. If Buls (Brussels’ burgomaster from 1881 to 1899) believed in the idea of progress, and the rise of humanity, he was also convinced that modernity caused social and cultural dislocation. The author, through a detailed study of Charles Buls’s numerous publications and papers kept in the Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, leads us to discover the consistency of an “amateur” who felt attached both to rationality, modernisation and to conservation and preservation of the patrimony.

The “amateurisme” of Charles Buls

The French word *amateur* means two different things. First, an “amateur” is a person who is not a specialist. And secondly, the word designates someone who has passion for a lot of different fields. Buls was an amateur in both senses. Smets divides his life in three periods; the burgomaster may have adopted the same di-

vision (p. 144). The first period concerns his youth. The young Charles Buls, son of a jeweller, studied art. To perfect it, he travelled a lot; he spent one year in Paris and went to Italy for a few months. As a self-taught man, he read and thought about the history and development of art. Then he discovered Gottfried Semper’s work[2] and he felt a real interest in Industrial Art.

The second period is linked to his activity as administrator. He rapidly became a talented politician, showing a real *savoir-faire* in local political life. He was first elected burgomaster of Brussels in 1881. Our curiosity is piqued by the way he managed his city. Smets considers Buls’s running as a kind of pragmatism. We mustn’t lose ourselves in considering his municipal running a posteriori, i.e. thanks to the reading of his later written works. Thus, as Smets sees it, a lot of authors have exaggerated the differences between Anspach’s (Buls’s predecessor) and Buls’s administration. The great change in Brussels’ urban policy might be dated from 1879. Buls’s administration cannot symbolize a real break. The author suggests that his municipal administration, above all, was a sort of practical school for the burgomaster. Facing a lot of financial constraints, he managed to innovate, as illustrated by the implementation of municipal-owned companies, probably the only way of bringing new resources to the town. Moreover, Buls surrounded himself with specialists to be as efficient as possible. But the burgomaster was also clever—this adjective is used by Donatella Callabi in the preface—especially when he ensured the support of different social groups.

The experience of “Bruxelles Attraction” was very instructive in this regard. It was a private association of merchants and notables, with Buls as its president. This dominant social group was preoccupied above all with the tourism planning of Brussels. Hence they intervened in public debate and also, under Buls’s control, they suggested initiatives to the Municipal council.

But Buls was also the “amateur,” the passionate man who knew that he could leave politics. From 1895, he foresaw the end of his career as burgomaster. In 1899, he retired from political life. Then, in the final part of his life, he became a sort of representative, an adviser, a competent “amateur” in demand everywhere, author of many books and articles. He travelled and often intervened in different committees or societies; his presence alone was a real guarantee of competence in town planning. His consulting services were sought as the famous author of *L’Esthétique des Villes*, published in December 1893 when Buls wanted to intervene in the conflict relating to the transformation of the Montagne de la Cour (an area of Bruxelles) (p. 79).[3] Smets’s book is based on the refusal to reduce Buls’s thought to this most famous work. He wants to explain the evolution of the man’s thought and activities. Nevertheless, the book stresses the coherence of Buls’s life. The connecting thread running through his life may be his attachment to didactics.

The passion Buls felt to make people understand should be linked to his conception of modernity. If modernity has two sides, a positive one (the benefits of progress) and a negative one, (social dislocation), the reading of Smets’s books teaches us that Buls searched throughout his life for a solution to this conflict. In the 1860s, the burgomaster had already participated in the foundation of the *Ligue de l’enseignement*. [4] We can also find this desire to make a better world through education in his 1874-1875 idea to create a Museum of Industrial Arts. The purpose was to encourage people to think about their daily life and, more generally, to associate Art and Industry: art could be a remedy for the ills the machine might cause. Smets insists that Buls considered the city itself as a didactic tool (p. 49). His reading of the German philosopher Shopenhauer, his conviction that daily confrontation with beauty would strengthen the morals and to uplift the population (p. 229) permitted him, after 1893, to present himself as one of the greatest representatives of “Art Public,” a movement based on the goal of bringing art into the streets in order to heighten the intellectual level of the citizens. His commitment to “Art Public” helps us understand why Buls was in favour of modernisation but was also a real defender of the conserva-

tion and preservation of the historical areas in the towns as well as, more generally, a lover of the architectural patrimony. Charles Buls belonged to the international elite (p. 19), which regretted the “uprooting” caused by the unceasing transformation of society and who deplored the disappearance of common ideals. These men tried to limit change but without opposing progress.

The book leads us to wonder whether this international elite existed. How can it be perceived, studied? It seems very difficult to answer this question. The book mentions, here and there, the influences of Buls’s ideas abroad. Germany and Italy were very attentive to the former burgomaster’s work. France, generally, didn’t pay attention to his ideas. Louis Bonnier, chief architect of Paris, after the London Congress of 1906, was interested by his work. And from 1903, the propagandist de Souza had invited Buls to join the Parisian debate about replacing the fortifications. The United States, except for an issue of the influential journal *Municipal Affairs*, didn’t seem to feel any real interest. That’s why it may be very difficult to evaluate the influence Buls had, as it seems nearly impossible to characterize this international elite. Nevertheless, Smets suggests Buls should be considered as the spokesman of a movement, as an exemplary representative of this international circle interested in embryonic modern town planning.

When we close the book, a question persists: Was Buls a forerunner of scientific “town planning”? Or must his thought be associated with another set of ideas about the city? Once again, it seems very difficult to give a single answer. If Smets says that his death in 1914 coincides with the end of a period, we can also realize that his hope to find a solution to the contradictions of modernity in cities became a necessity after the First World War. Municipal officials had to change, as Buls had suggested, at the beginning of the century. These reflections could lead us to a new study; let’s notice nevertheless, that symbolically, it was in 1913, during the Ghent World Fair, that some officials decided to invite the town council members from all the countries, preoccupied by the organisation of municipal life and by “municipal science.” This Congress, which permitted the creation of the International Union of Local Authorities, was placed under the vice presidency of a man we know about thanks to Marcel Smets’s work. The “amateur” Buls seemed to pass on the baton to a new generation of competent leaders.

#### Notes

[1]. Charles Bul, “L’esthétique de Rome” *Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles*, 1903, p. 409.

[2]. The German author, Gottfried Semper, published *Der Stil* in 1869. He developed a rational approach to artistic production: he tried to find the logic and the laws explaining the appearance of styles, of forms (a kind of science of styles).

[3]. Smets notes the fact that the break between the two burgomasters' town planning policies was not as great as it has often been said.

[4]. The Belgian League of Education was in favour of a huge reform of education. Charles Buls had participated in its foundation in 1864.

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