

## Villa Les Zéphyr, Westende

Villa les Zéphyr was built in 1922 as a country house by the sea, at the request of a Ghent doctor's family. In that period of post-war reconstruction, all stops were pulled out to turn the villa into a beautiful, cosy holiday home.

Today, this makes it a charming witness of the housing and living culture of the interwar period and offers visitors a walk through the history of the bourgeoisie's mentality by the sea.

After a whimsical journey through the 20th century, the villa is now protected and still displays the nostalgic charm of an authentic interior and furniture, some parts of which could only be assigned to none other than Henry van de Velde during the final restoration in 2006.

So explore that Art Nouveau interior, soak up the atmosphere of the rich bourgeoisie on holiday. While strolling around the villa, relive the memories and holiday stories of the then residents.

## WESTENDE

The seaside resort of Westende was created in 1896, one of the last on the coast, and did not grow organically like the original Westende village, first mentioned in 1087. Westende-bad was planned out in advance.

The Brussels senator and tramway builder Edouard Otlet (1842-1907) bought a 64-hectare empty dune area here in 1888, where he sometimes came to hunt with his Brussels friends.

For son Paul Otlet, the idea of building an exclusive seaside resort here was born. He was also the later pioneer of library science, forefather of the internet.

French architect Alban Chambon (1847-1928) was asked to plan a seaside resort, from scratch. That plan was further developed in 1903 by Ghent architect Octave Van Rysselberghe into a strictly guarded urban planning concept, based on the English garden suburb idea. Here, the buildings had to display the "clear characteristics of villas, pavilions and cottages".

Then, in 1896, those first villas appeared 'en plein dune'. The first streets were laid out and on the new seawall came the grand Westend Hotel and a first little Kursaal in wood in 1898.

In 1911, the prestigious Grand Hotel Bellevue was built, a luxury hotel with 225 rooms, equipped with running water, electricity, central heating and toilets.

Yes, the high-ups from Brussels had big plans for the new seaside resort. They profiled Westende as the 'plage de l'élite', as a would-be artists' colony, following the example of Knokke.

You could play tennis, network and socialise at the Kursaal, go to exhibitions.

And then, in 1914, the lights went out ...

## WAR & RECONSTRUCTION

Westende was barely 7 kilometres from the front line on the Yser during the First World War. The new seaside resort shared in the rubble. Apart from the skeleton of a Grand Hotel Bellevue built in reinforced concrete, hardly a stone or a coastal villa remains standing.

After the catastrophe of World War I, the world is looking for a new beginning, a new balance. Our country, too, is pulling itself together again. After the inferno of long, bitter years of war, people in the Westhoek and coastal regions have begun to rebuild from the ravages.

Buses are being put in so that English and Belgian tourists can visit the front region head-shakingly, tourism is also picking up at the seaside.

After 1918, only the basement remains of Shamrock Cottage. This makes it a plot "with the right to war damage". When Ghent doctor Henri Muyshondt decides to build his holiday villa on that site, he can appeal to the High Commission for Reconstruction. Moreover, that immense organisation is headed by entrepreneur and statesman Emile Coppieters, his neighbour in Ghent. This may have helped determine the choice of Westende.

The family decides not to rebuild the pre-war villa, as most do, opting instead for a design by Ghent architect Oscar Van de Voorde.

Architect Oscar Van de Voorde based the villa in Westende on his 'Modern Dwelling', which he showed at the 1910 Brussels World Fair.

He also based the plans for his own holiday home in Deurle (1910-1914) on this model house.

## OSCAR VAN DE VOORDE

Oscar Van de Voorde (Ghent, 1871-1938) was an architect, furniture designer and teacher. He played an important role in architectural education in Ghent. For instance,

he was first a teacher (1898) and later director (1922-1935) of the Royal Academy of Ghent.

He designed a model house for the World Expo in Brussels in 1910, which served as the basis for his own villa in Deurle, for a villa for painter Domien Ingels in Drogen and for villa Les Zéphyrus in Westende.

He was chief architect of the 1913 World Fair in Ghent.

Van de Voorde was also a founding member (1898) and later president of the association Art and Knowledge, which underlined the importance of the decorative arts with publications and exhibitions. There is still an Oscar van de Voorde prize for decorative arts today.

During the period of reconstruction after WWI, he headed the Ghent Society for Cheap Housing in Ghent from 1919. For this, he designed several social garden suburbs in Ghent.

Other important realisations are the art nouveau restaurant Cambrinus in Vlaanderenstraat, Ghent (1897), together with Albert Van huffel, the building for the Belgian Bank of Labour in Voldersstraat, Ghent, the Kasteel Carelshof in Sint-Amandsberg and Blekkervijver castle in Aalter.

#### MUYSHONDT FAMILY

The villa named 'Les Zéphyrus' (cool, gentle west wind) (but not mentioned anywhere on the property) has several occupants, but the stamp of the Muyshondt family proved decisive.

Henri Muyshondt (Zelzate, 1872-1947) was a doctor. He married Emilie Conard (Brussels, 1880-1940) in 1909 and they had three children:

Marie-Louise Muyshondt (1911-1972),

Henriette Muyshondt (1912-2014),

Josette Muyshondt (1915-2006).

From their marriage in 1909, they lived in a stately home at Dierentuinlaan no 3 (today: Franklin Rooseveltlaan) near Ghent South Station.

During World War I, Henri enlists as a volunteer in the Belgian army.

He was wounded at the front and then, together with his family, was forced to stay in Great Britain. He was put in charge of a hospital in Birtley (near Newcastle).

During that stay, Mrs Muyshondt underwent nurse training.

After the war, Dr Muyshondt was attached to the Ghent military hospital. He also has a thriving private practice in Ghent, Mouscron and Bruges.

The Muyshondt family belongs to the better bourgeoisie in Ghent. They keep a maid and a chauffeur. The daughters enjoy an education befitting their standing; they play an instrument and paint.

These artistic ambitions and the high status of the family are beautifully reflected on an illegibly signed family portrait in family possession.

On this canvas, the family members are depicted in a classical-looking interior lavishly decorated with paintings and bronze statues, as was the custom of the belle époque. Father and mother are sitting in front of the fireplace, while Marie and Josette are playing music and Henriette is probably singing.

Years later, with a view to restoring the villa and turning it into a museum, the sisters Henriette and Josette (in 2005, when they were 93 and 90 years old!) are interviewed at length by author Diane De Keyzer. The stories are put down in the book 'Met Madame Aan Zee' (2006, Van Halewyck).

It is thanks to the memories of Henriette and Josette, and the benevolent cooperation of the descendants, that we still know so much today about this special era, this beautiful villa and its most important residents.

## THE VILLA

The Muyshondt daughters tell us that when they first went on holiday by the sea, the villa was still half a yard. The surrounding streets were still full of rubble or had not yet been built, most of the villas in the area were still under construction:

"I suspect the whole of Westende was destroyed, all the villas were in ruins. The villa 'Les Mouettes' (next door) was already finished at that time, though," Henriette says.

Josette remembers that the church (the Theresia Chapel) was not yet there and that from the villa they had a view over the fields (and the Badenlaan) as far as the main stone road (today the Westendelaan), about a kilometre inland.

The beach was nearby, barely 250 metres away.

Typical of the façade, then and today, are the two arched dormer windows under the cornice. The current blue and white joinery of the windows and doors also reflects the original design.

Doctor Henri Muyshondt insisted that the house had a garage. Henriette Muyshondt recalls that dad was a great enthusiast: "My father had to go to hospitals outside Ghent,

even as far as Mouscron. He loved driving a decent car. He didn't drive himself though, but left that to (servant) Adolf."

"Father had a Hupmobile, a kind of limousine. The funny thing was that there was a letter H on the front of the bonnet. I thought that referred to his first name."

## THE GARDEN

Anyone who checks in at the tourist counter to visit the villa today will immediately see a sitting area with an art nouveau cabinet and seating. This room is Mr and Mrs Muyshondt's former bedroom. That room overlooked a large garden, which has unfortunately disappeared today.

The garden was Henri Muyshondt's pet child. When he found the time to come to Westende on Sundays by chauffeur, he took care of his roses. Daughter Henriette says: "We had three kinds of roses around the house: the white rose Alberique, a 'Caroline Testou' with big pink flowers on one side of the front door and on the other side grew the fragrant cream-coloured 'Gloire de Dijon' with a pale yellow pinkish heart.

Doctor Muyshondt loved gardening. That is why he bought some additional land behind the villa. In the scarce free time he had, the doctor also dared to wield the spade himself. Josette says: "The garden was special. That had been my father's work to build it. There was a small pond, a pergola and a colonnade with round columns. All that was overgrown with ligustrum. There was a small gazebo there. Even when it was very windy, we could sit there to drink coffee."

## EXPLORING THE INTERIOR

The exterior of the villa is charming, but what immediately stands out today is the interior decoration. This turned out to be right up Mrs Muyshondt's street.

She showed her preference for the more stylised Art Nouveau style, which would evolve into Art Deco from 1925. This style preference can be seen in the door handles, the fastenings of windows and doors, the stained glass of the windows and the tiles in the bathroom and basement kitchen.

And of course with the pièce de résistance, the furniture purchased for the dining room and fumoir, a design by top designer Henry van de Velde.

Mrs Muyshondt bought that ensemble in 1922 at an auction in Ghent, for the then considerable sum of 10,000 francs (about a year's salary for dad Henri), a beautiful ensemble of fixed and loose furniture, panelling and a mantelpiece.

The pieces came from the Ostend villa Mignonne, owned by a certain Baron Albert de Fierlant. That villa had been designed and furnished by Henry van de Velde.

Much later, in 1989, this unique interior of the villa Les Zéphyr, although not recognised, was noted as valuable, leading to a protection of the villa in 2000.

It was not until the decision to turn the villa into a museum (2006) that experts discovered the true story and its important designer!

So it may be considered a miracle that today we can still admire this early work by Henry van de Velde, created around 1897 in his joinery workshop in Ixelles, albeit no longer in its original location and no longer complete. Because during and after the Second World War, all loose elements, such as the dining table, chairs and sofa, disappeared.

## THE DINING ROOM

Three fixed elements fortunately did survive: the copper mantelpiece, finished with blue tiles with a cabinet element above it, the walls finished with panelling integrating two sideboards.

The loose furniture that disappeared during World War II was replaced during the refurbishment by a dining table with accompanying chairs by Liège furniture maker Gustave Serrurier Bovy (1858 - 1910), a contemporary and acquaintance of Henry van de Velde.

Besides Henry van de Velde's preserved interior, all the stained-glass windows are still authentic. They show stylised leaf motifs, in a transitional style between floral art nouveau and art deco.

According to daughter Henriette, Fritz Coppieters supplied the plans, but this is not certain. Fritz is the son of Emile Coppieters, High Commissioner for the Devastated Regions, and neighbour of Henri Muysshondt.

Fritz Coppieters was also a pupil of Oscar Van de Voorde and co-architect for the villa. So he certainly had input.

The sitting area or 'fumoir' is part of the dining room. Here the family could take a breather after meals, entertain themselves by reading, playing games, reading the newspaper or listening to music.

According to Henriette Muysshondt, the sitting area contained a sofa, "just below the 'oeuil de boeuf'", which was part of Henry van de Velde's ensemble.

An oeil de boeuf - bovine eye - is a type of window. It is a term from historical architecture and represents a small round, oval or octagonal window in the facade of a building. In Latin, it is called oculus.

Henriette: "We played cards at the big table in the dining room. We read. There was no radio, but there was a phonograph. My parents subscribed to the magazine 'L' Illustration', but we also read a lot of books. I read David Copperfield, that story appeared in installments in 'La petite illustration.

## THE MYSTERY

The interior was only unmasked by experts during the 2006 restoration as an authentic Henry van de Velde. Talk about a surprise. The question arises: did Mrs Muyshondt know the designer's name?

Neither the notarial deed of the sale on 23 October 1922 nor Mrs Muyshondt's household accounts indicate who the designer was. Yet Mrs Muyshondt was willing to pay a serious sum for it, topped with the cost of having it integrated into her interior in Westende.

When the municipality bought the villa from her daughter Henriette in 1999, she did explicitly refer to the valuable Art Nouveau elements, but without mentioning Henry van de Velde's name...

Perhaps she had indeed noticed Henry van de Velde's marks during the viewing days and was therefore perfectly aware of who the designer was. After all, this is a signed work.

She apparently did not pass on that knowledge to her children. That the interior quietly kept its secret all these years and was also literally preserved in the villa may therefore be called a small miracle.

## CELLAR KITCHEN

The basement room was the servants' work area. The walls were completely tiled with so-called underground tiles, interspersed with blue tiles from the well-known tile company Gilliot in Hemiksem.

The coal cooker was the central element: you could cook on it and use it to heat the room.

The most beautiful element of the tiling were the frieze tiles depicting a Dutch landscape, bordered with an Art Nouveau-style decoration.

The countertop was done in terrazzo technique, following the example of the bathroom. That countertop and the underlying cabinets were the only remaining pieces of authentic interior. The remaining pieces were supplemented during the restoration.

There was also a hand pump in the basement that could be used to pump groundwater to a reservoir in the attic. From there, there was running water in several places in the house. The hand pump in the basement was preserved.

Henriette says: "Just before entering the kitchen, you had a pump to pump the water from the water reservoir (upstairs) to the lower rooms. We were raised with light military discipline: we each had to take turns pumping."

## CORRIDOR AND STAIRWELL

At the top of the stairs, we find another piece of colourful wallpaper that originally helped define the oriental look of the entrance hall. This piece of wallpaper was discovered during the restoration works.

The villa's entrance hall was deliberately given an oriental-inspired design. Daughter Henriette says: "The hall was completely decorated according to my mother's taste. Here, the theme was oriental! That was very much in during the 1920s. The wallpaper was very colourful. There was an octagonal lamp in black lacquer wood, between the wooden slats was rice paper with Chinese figures on it. On a piece of white wall hung Chinese fans."

## BATHROOM

Mrs Muyshondt wanted the luxury of a bathroom. So a semi-circular extension was provided with a sunken bathtub and a toilet. Henriette says: "The bathroom is something special. Our house - also in Ghent - was filled with all kinds of modern objects. Mother loved going to Paris and discovering novelties. She would take a train ticket for five days. She always brought some object or other, which we found amusing."

The sunken bath and floor were done in the Italian terrazzo technique. This involves incorporating natural stone granules into a concrete mortar. This technique was popular during the interwar period.

The walls of the bathroom were completely finished with tiling above the panelling. A rosette with a floral motif was applied in the ceiling.

## FINISHING AND DECORATION TECHNIQUES

There is no certainty about the designer of the stained-glass windows. Documents in the family archives point in the direction of E. Lebrun's stained-glass studio in Ghent.



The Muyshondt daughters point to architect Frits Coppieters, the son of Emile Coppieters, their neighbour in Ghent. The latter might have pointed father Muyshondt to an interesting piece of land in Westende.

Fritz Coppieters appeared to be involved in the follow-up of the construction works anyway. Some more unusual decorative techniques were used in furnishing the villa.

The interior doors and the insides of the windows were finished in the 'faux bois' technique in which lesser woods were given the appearance of a more expensive variant. This wood imitation was a common painting technique at the time.

The wooden panels of the bulkhead lift, which was added to the van de Velde ensemble in Westende, are clearly of much lower quality than the original elements.

Some floors, including in the bedrooms, were finished in the 'jasper' technique. In this technique, paint is applied with a sponge to give it the appearance of a carpet.

Henriette, however, is not convinced. "There was a plank floor and on a good day that floor was given a coat of varnish, which was applied to it with a sponge. The result was a kind of yellowish, marbled effect. I thought it was horrible."

## EPILOGUE

Mrs Muyshondt died on 9 May 1940, the day before the German invasion of Belgium. Villa Les Zephyrs was occupied from 1 July 1940 by refugees and eventually by German troops. These turned it into a fortified site and built a giant concrete bunker in the garden.

However, the interior ensemble survived not only the artillery attacks, but also the requisitions of the war industry. The villa's yellow copper or brass mantelpiece, for instance, was apparently unclaimed by the occupying forces, which did eagerly collect such non-ferrous metals elsewhere.

Perhaps the German officers did not want to damage their own quarters, or compromise their thermal comfort by dismantling the mantel lining. Nevertheless, during 1943, several pieces of loose furniture were removed from the villa by order of the German Kommandatur and transferred to a warehouse. The claimed lot included three tables and eight chairs, two of which were broken.

After Henri Muyshondt's death in 1947, the holiday home became the property of daughter Henriette, who mostly rented it out. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the villa stood empty for a while, offering a neglected impression. The threat of demolition was real, until the Westende city council rented the property as a tourist office in early 1972.

Despite its public function, Henry van de Velde's remaining fixed furniture remained unnoticed. It was finally discovered in 2006 during the villa's thorough restoration and declared authentic.

EDITOR

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