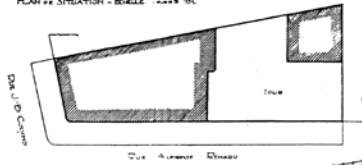
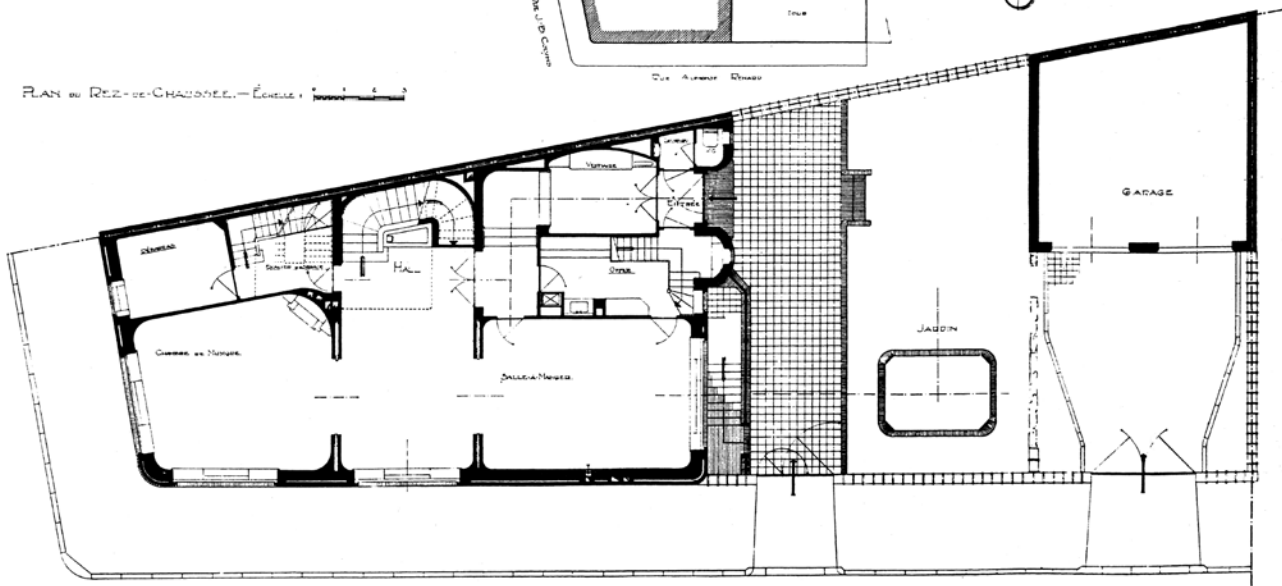


HÔTEL DE MONSIEUR ET MADAME R. WOLFERS  
à BRUXELLES.

PLAN DE SITUATION - ÉCHELLE 1:1000

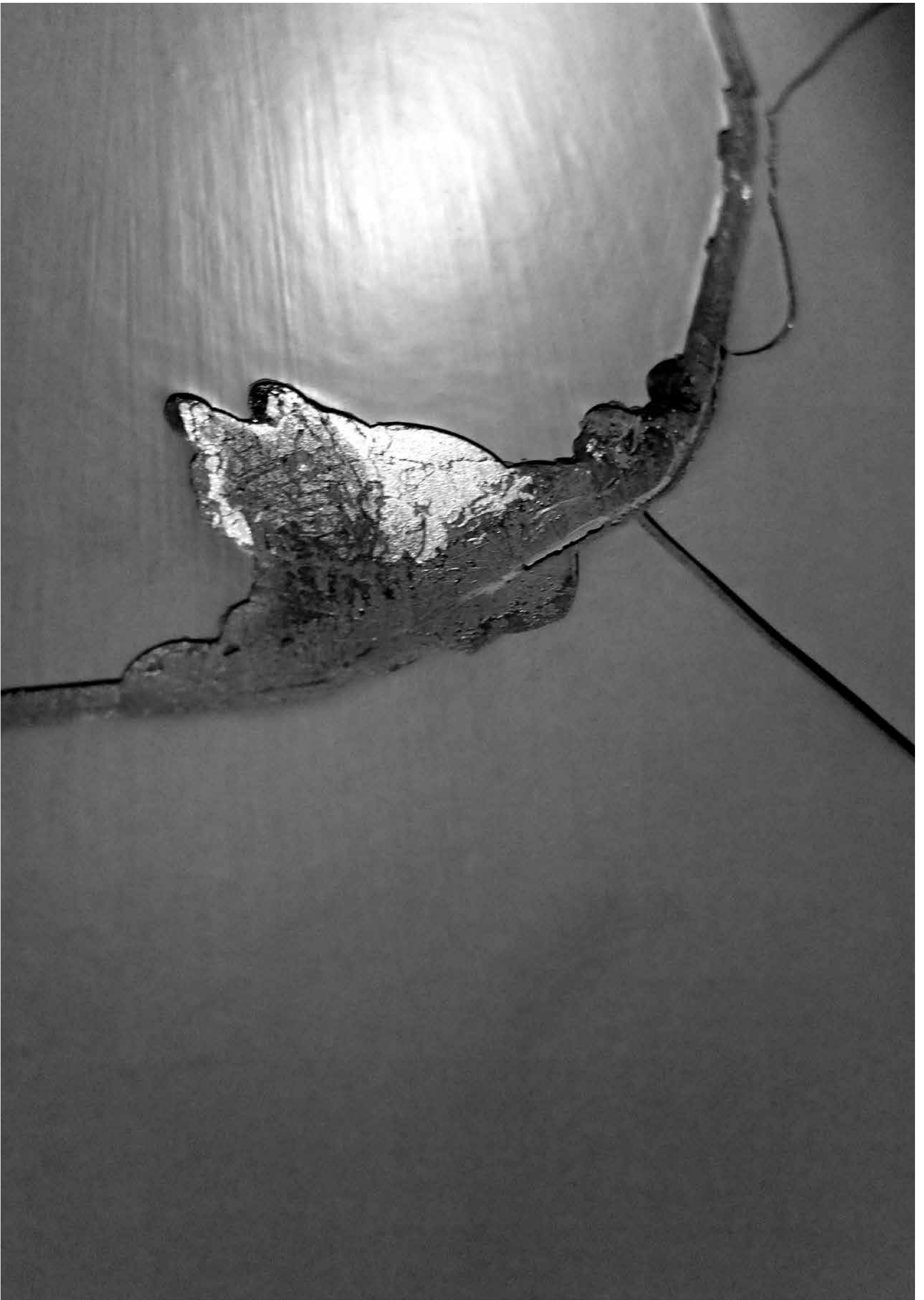


PLAN DU REZ-DE-CHAUSSEE - ÉCHELLE 1:200









About ten years ago, during a visit to the Hotel Wolfers by Henri Van de Velde, a series of pictures in a small showcase caught my attention. The pictures, taken by Willy Kessels in the thirties, show us a sparsely decorated bourgeois interior containing a table and chairs, rugs, small armchairs, a piano and some vases with flowers. The walls were mainly kept empty and painted in a light tone. Besides the pictures, fragments of cracked flakes of paint from the walls, windows and doors were also on display. The black and white pictures and these architectural testimonies of the building's original colours and materials, presented in the same showcase, triggered me and spoke about a particular attitude towards the building in its current and past time.

In Kessels' images everything seems harmonious and in the logic of early modernist aesthetics, except for the doors. Looking closer at them, one discovers that they were originally covered with a reflective silver leaf surface – a material that belongs more to an Art Deco context, but clearly used here by Van de Velde for more than decorative reasons. The reflective doors project the light between and through the spaces of the ground floor, while creating intense moments of transition across them. Intrigued by these light-reflecting planes I began to develop a project around these doors. The idea was to reconstruct one of them as a permanent intervention for the house. The project also foresaw an essay by Bart Verschaffel that he wrote in the framework of this project in 2004, which was first published in 2012 in his book *Van Hermes en Hestia. Over architectuur* (Tweede vermeerderde uitgave, A&S/books, Gent, 2010).

Now, more than ten years later, and thanks to the kind support of Herman Daled and Marit Storset, the reconstruction of the silver door has been realised. The text and the door can be finally presented together.

Richard Venlet, April 2015

THE HOUSE WOLFERS BY HENRY VAN DE VELDE, AS OCCUPIED BY HERMAN DALED

Bart Verschaffel

The Hotel Wolfers is a bourgeois townhouse in Brussels designed by Henry Van de Velde, built in 1930. After the Wolfers family a member of the Stoclet family occupied the house, followed by a paint Manufacturer whose widow lived there till 1977. The house was by then worn-out, repainted numerous times, and many rooms were left abandoned. The house was not significantly altered or renovated since its construction. The physician and art collector Herman Daled bought it in 1977 nearly in its original state, listed as a monument.

The Wolfers house is situated on a street corner in a well-off residential quarter in Ukkel. The parcel, with a long and a short side, outline the corner of two streets. The house has, as many of Van de Velde's later buildings, a robust and rather austere appearance. Both street facades have windows rising quite high above ground level and have no entrance doors. The long facade, extended as a garden wall, is only interrupted by a small porch leading to the garage and a small square garden. From here one is led to the main entrance door, situated at the backside of the house facing the garden, hidden from the street. This differs completely from the neighbouring buildings with their front doors facing the street. The original orderly garden design, in harmony with the architectural plan, is intact.

The plan and the spatial organisation are clear and strong. An outer staircase parallel to the garden façade leads down to the basement with the kitchen and the service rooms. The slightly elevated ground floor has an *enfilade* of three living rooms, connected by passages with door panels that slide into the walls: a music room in the corner facing both streets, a sitting room that takes the whole width of the house and opens up unto the main stairwell lit by roof light, and a dining room facing the garden, with no windows to the street side. Beside the dining room is a small service kitchen connected to the basement, and next to that kitchen the entrance hall that leads to the sitting room. By the side of the music room is a service circuit connecting the basement and the different floors with, high up, the maid's rooms. The bedrooms are on the first floor, with the master bedroom and bathroom facing the garden, and a small terrace situated above the front door. On the second floor there also is a small gym.

The house makes a firm and severe impression, the rounded edge unifies its two 'public' sides; seen from the street it looks as if made of one piece. The interior spaces are, however, airy and light. With the

sliding doors open the ground floor becomes a sequence of spacious and distinct rooms, protective and oriented to the garden, not exposed to the street at all. The placement of the hearth in the music room, the widening of the sitting room with the roof light shining in the inner core of the house, and the blind street wall in the dining room, protect the interior from the street and from turning into a long and narrow alley.



The interior has been painted over repeatedly. The inside doors leading from the hall to the sitting room, and the sliding door panels on the ground floor were originally covered in silver leaf. One would expect this in an art deco interior; much less in a late house by Van de Velde. The colorless shining surfaces capture the light and accentuate the spatial organisation, attracting the view away from the windows towards the inside of the house. They also dramatize and intensify entering the rooms: statures are darkened, their profiles appearing against a soft light, the faces lit in an ever changing way. It is likely that the back wall of the entrance hall was finished in silver too. If this was the case, the only light source in the hall coming from the front door, the ritual of entering and leaving the house was subtly esthetized, with a dim whitish light shining from the inner heart of the house, creating a flattering aura around the host. Details like these, that imply a certain theatricalisation of the daily life, may seem to diverge from the rational and neutral architecture Van de Velde advocated in the last phase of his career. They perfectly fit the way the Wolfers House is supposed to function and correspond to the prewar bourgeois way of life it was designed for. The house is spacious and luxurious, well organised, well equipped, and all in all very comfortable – if you live the life and have the resources of a well off pre-WWII bourgeois family.

The house Wolfers separates the dwelling and living quarters and the service area, keeping the stage for a life of leisure apart from the back stage of hired household labor and thereby isolating upperclass family life from the working life of the servants. The directive is that the view of labor and effort should not intrude

into the 'noble' family life of leisure and dignified social interaction. The social life in these 'public' rooms is theatricalized, and the spatial experience is esthetized, affirming the social status of its inhabitants. This separation does not imply that the basement and service rooms are less carefully designed, on the contrary: Van de Velde treats them with a lot of respect for the daily gestures and practical needs of life, lacking the expressive character and pride of the public part of the house. The service stairwell is, for example, modern and beautiful, but not meant as a stage 'to make an appearance'. The house Wolfers, with its double stairwells and its 'front side' and 'backside', still endorses a way of life that disappeared quickly after the war, and had become almost obsolete by the time Herman Daled bought the house in 1977. He bought a monument.

How to live with monuments? The monument is a modern invention and a place of contradiction. The very different and partly contradictory reasons to value an old building as a monument have been brilliantly analysed by Alois Riegl in his essay on *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus (1903)*.<sup>1</sup> A historical monument – unlike a commemorative monument dedicated to a person or an event, and different from a piece of work of art or craftsmanship judged and valued by the taste of the day – can be interesting in two ways: first, as a source of historical information, and second, as evidence of *time* gone by. In the first case respecting the monument and the historical past implies keeping the remains of the past intact, as complete and untouched as possible, in order to preserve the maximal amount of information. The second interest lies in a very different kind of 'memory value' (*Erinnerungswert*) that has little concern for exactness and detail: noticing the temporal heterogeneity suffices to be reminded of the Reality of Time and to value the 'oldness' (*Alterswert*) of things. Valuing a building's 'oldness' can easily be combined with renovating it and adapting it to new needs: the inevitable destruction of unique and potentially interesting historical material is acceptable. By contrast, the preservation or complete and perfect restoration *freezes* an object or a building in an ideal and perfect past condition.

Herman Daled has brought this tension to a climax. He consciously bought the House Wolfers, not to appropriate it and turn it into a cosy home, but to save and preserve an endangered architectural monument. He has treated the house as a mon-

1 Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung* (Vienna, 1903); "The modern cult of monuments: its character and origin," *Oppositions* 25, 1982, pp. 20–51

ument, strictly following the rules of the Venice Charter. He collected all the information available of its original state, old photo's and drawings and even paint samples from the walls to rediscover the original colours of the windows and the interior. He first restaured the original iron window frames and painted them in Van de Velde's typical dark green, and undertook the precious replacing of a long gone roof cornice in newly fabricated ceramic tiles, etc. While all this was going on, Daled lived there in a house that remained almost entirely in the state in which he bought it. He has lived for 30 years in a house in restauration in conditions that are, for todays standards, barely livable. The house was (and is) indeed not inhabitable, firstly, because the kind of life it was designed for belongs to the past. To live there properly one needs a large household and live-in personnel. There is, for example, a service kitchen next to the dining room, to serve and wash the dishes, but it is not equipped for cooking, and it is very unpractical to cook in the basement and then bring plates up and down the stairs all the time, just for the fun of dining in the dining room. However, it is equally unthinkable to replace and destroy this beautiful, original service kitchen just to install a new stove and a dishwasher. So the result is that the master of the house cooks and eats in the basement ... The dining room does have a table and a few chairs, for the rest it is left completely empty and undecorated, with only a small vitrine with old photos of the house and a collection of paint bladders. The room is seldom used and only rarely does somebody eat there. Another example: the two adjacent stairwells, one stately and one for service. What for?



A second reason why the house is uninhabitable is due to its status as a listed monument and to the restauration process. The end result of the very professional and minute restauration will certainly be a perfect house. The way Daled goes about it the work advances so slowly that it creates *de facto* an everlasting 'temporary' condition in which the house stays almost as he found it. The restauration will take much longer than Daled will live. So it becomes clear what he is really after: he doesn't want to see it finished ever. One

could expect that he would behave like other people when they move into a new house: make it 'their own' by choosing colours and curtains and new furniture, decorating the house with objects according to their taste and to who they are. In his case one could expect from the enlightened art collector and amateur of architectural monuments that he would choose for an exquisite arrangement of furniture and objects from the thirties. Nothing like that happened. Daled preserves the house and at the same time leaves it almost untouched and empty. Paint bladders fall from the ceiling and from the walls, the floor is bare, the rooms are empty, there are no curtains at the windows, the blinds are most of the time half closed. Daily life happens in the kitchen in the basement, the master bedroom and the bathroom. These rooms appear quite 'normal'. On the first floor there is a guest room and a study with a library. The furniture and the bookshelves dont touch the walls that ought to remain unblemished. The rest of the rooms are not in use – they used to be filled with boxes with Daled's art collection and archive, which is now for the largest part in the collections of the MoMa in New York.<sup>2</sup> Also the ground floor is vacant, with the exception of a table and two chairs in the middle of the sitting room, like chairs in a garden. One can imagine him in the evening, sitting in a seat or at the bare dining table, contemplating how the light falls in, just as one sits in his garden, only to be there and to look. In the 1980s, Daled has organized a few art exhibitions at Hotel Wolfers, with artists such as Niele Toroni and Dan Graham. Sometimes he invites a few guests to a 'garden party'. But, does one *live* in a garden? Herman Daled is nowhere 'at home'; it happens that he is *present* there: "Je n'y habite pas. J'y suis présent".

Some art collectors integrate their collection in their living environment and live surrounded by their art works. Others build their private museum next to their house. Daled, by contrast, is a radical modernist: for him art works are objects that don't 'fit' in the world (as it is). Art is no *décor*. A work of art should by definition not 'harmonize' with its environment, and living with art cannot be about 'installing' a work properly. What the artwork asks for is an attitude, is being met with full, concentrated attention. To live up to this demand, one better leave the art works in their boxes, unpacking them now and then

2 Daled and his partner Nicole Verstraeten, from who he divorced in 1977, were important collectors of conceptual art, intently involved in the European art scene. A major part of their collection, exhibited in 2010 in Haus der Kunst in München, was acquired by the MoMa in 2011. <http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/EAD/Daledb.html>

just as one opens a book, reads, and then close it again. Daled's dwelling strategy starts from the principle that one should not 'integrate' art in the world; by treating his house as a monument he equates it to a work of art. He thereby goes against the longing for a 'homely interior' and, in a way, against 'dwelling' as such, against comfort, against the feeling of being at ease in the world. What he possibly gains from this detachment is, I imagine, not only the possibility of experiencing the 'non-human', sublime materiality of things – the play of light, changing colors, the texture of things – and also a 'pure' architectural experience. *The deferral of dwelling makes architecture visible*. Daled creates for himself, as a regular situation, the exceptional condition in which the scandalous autonomy of architecture, usually hidden behind its social, servile appearance, and forgotten in daily use, becomes evident and is accepted. His experience as an art collector certainly helps him 'to hold this out', and propably even explains why the comfortable appropriation that goes with 'dwelling' is for him unbearable.



In the sitting room a piece of paper on the wall with a quote from Louis Kahn explains it all: "When a building is being built, there is an impatience to bring it into being. Not a blade of grass can grow near this activity. Look at the building after it is built. Each part that was built with so much anxiety and joy and willingness to proceed tries to say when you're using the building: 'let me tell you about how it was made'. Nobody is listening because the building is now satisfying need. The desire in its making is not evident. As time passes, when it is a ruin, the spirit of its making comes back. It welcomes the foliage that entwines and conceals. Everyone who passes can hear the story it wants to tell about its own making. It is no longer in servitude, the spirit is back."<sup>3</sup>

3 John Wesley Cook, Heinrich Klotz, Philip Johnson (eds.), *Conversations with architects: Philip Johnson, Kevin Roche, Paul Rudolph, Bertrand Goldberg, Morris Lapidus, Louis Kahn, Charles Moore, Robert Venturi & Denise Scott Brown*, Praeger, 1973.

It is to be expected that in the end, when Daled will no longer live there, the House Wolfers will be fully renovated, and either really become somebody's home or most probably get a proper cultural destination. It may become a public monument or a museum, just like the Haus Müller by Adolf Loos. Now only a very limited number of people a day can visit that house, where nobody "is present" anymore. Visitors have to stay together during the tour and to wear slippers. We understand that that is how things end, and it is not terrible. Radicality cannot be institutionalized. Each truly modern gesture stands alone; it can never become a norm or a habit. The situation Herman Daled has created for himself, therefore, is not a solution. It is a touchstone.

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**LOUIS KAHN, conversations with architects.**



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