

## History of Architecture and Culture – 5

### Lecture 14

#### Works of Victor Horta -1

Victor Horta was a leading architect and designer of Art Nouveau movement. His style inspired a lot of modern artists all across Europe. He famously influenced the aesthetic ideals of them, Avant-Garde group of artists in Belgium, such as 'Les Vingt' and 'La Libre Esthetique'. After studying drawing, he also studied textiles and architecture at the Fine Arts Academy in Gent. He went on to establish his own practice in Brussels. Out of all Victor Horta's buildings and houses, four of them are included in the list of World Heritage sites for UNESCO, how famous is that? By 1885, Victor Horta had already started to work on his own firm and he was commissioned to design three houses which were built, in that particular year. In 1885, he was hardly 24 years old. In that same year, he also joined the Central society of Belgian architecture. In the next few years, Horta did what young architects do at that particular age. He started attempting all public competitions that came his way. He also won a lot of prizes in them as well. He primarily focused on the curvature of his designs which gave him a little edge over all his contenders and competitors because everybody else were either doing Gothic revival architecture or Neo-classical architecture while Victor Horta was doing it entirely different. He focused on curvatures of his designs, believing that the forms he produced were highly practical and not artistic affectations. He does not believe in pure artistic creation. Even the art that was to perform a certain function.

He introduced Art Nouveau into architecture but Art Nouveau was introduced to him in an exhibition in 1892, that is when Horta was inspired to do Art Nouveau in architecture. Immediately after 1892 exhibition, in 1893, he was commissioned to design a house for professor Emile Tassel. He transfused the recent influence into Hotel Tassel and completed it in 1893. The design had a groundbreaking semi open floor plan because floor plan was pretty much very ancient at that particular point of time. Even though they could change all the visual elements, the aesthetics and everything, the essence of the building is the floor plan which still remained classical or neo classical at that particular point of time, that is what Victor Horta changed in his building primarily. He incorporated a curvilinear botanical form, later described as 'biomorphic whiplash'. If you'd recall, we studied about whiplash in the previous lecture.

Ornate and elaborate designs in natural lighting were concealed behind the stone facade. The stone facade is what you see in the picture, in front of you. Natural lighting was concealed behind the stone facade to harmonize the building with the more rigid houses next door. What Victor Horta could do apart from the fact that he was able to make an open floor plan, he was able to include bio morphic whiplashes. What Horta could not do was change the elevation

drastically. Since in that same street, there were a lot of other buildings which were very rigid in elevation. His elevation needs to necessarily correlate and comprehend with the neighbouring houses, that is what Victor Horta did. Since then, after the completion of this building, it has been recognized as the first appearance of Art Nouveau in architecture.

Take a look at the interior of the building. If you can remember this sketch earlier from the beginning, we saw this sketch as a famous example of Art Nouveau. This was designed by Victor Horta. I wasn't even showing you about how the flooring, the staircase, the railings, the column base, the column capitals, even the lamps; everything reflected Victor Horta's idea of Art Nouveau. These are some more pictures of the building. More pictures of Victor Horta's designs.

The only thing Victor Horta could do in elevation, in the Art Nouveau style was to design the railing as per his ideas, the column base and capitals, window grills, the grills of the door; these were the only things which Victor Horta was able to do as per Art Nouveau style because all the other buildings must correspond to other elevations on the street that looked similar to this picture. If you look at the complete street, the entire street looks traditional. If he designed Art Nouveau building here, this building would not correlate with the other streets and it would stand alone entirely that would disturb the entire harmony of the whole street. So, he kept in mind the harmony of the whole street and he worked towards a greater goal in achieving the overall harmony of the neighbourhood by designing the Tassel hotel elevation in accordance with the elevation that existed on the street.

### **Works of Victor Horta -2**

Maison Antique was one of the first town that was ever built by Victor Horta. This dwelling was already innovative for its application of Novel Art Nouveau decorative scheme but did not include any references to other historical styles. However, the floor plan and spatial composition of the Maison Antique remained rather traditional. But what makes Maison Antique not so famous as the hotel Tassel is the floor plan. The whole floor plan and spatial composition of Maison Antique remained rather traditional. Instead of being contemporary in what Horta designed in Hotel Tassel. Tassel is a town house but hotel actually means Townhouse in that language. Town house built by scientist and professor Emily Tassel. It is generally considered as the first true Art Nouveau building. Together with this and the other three buildings including his own house is listed in UNESCO World Heritage Site buildings. Let's take a look at another interior view of the hotel.

If you look at the plan of the building, on the deep and narrow building plot, the rooms were organized in a traditional scheme using the most Belgian town houses at that time. It

considered a suite of rooms on the left side of the building plot flanked by a rather narrow entrance hall with stairs and a corridor that led to a small garden at the back. From the three room suite, only the first and the last had windows which made the room in the middle pretty much gloomy.

This is what the plan looked like. These are original drawings that were published in 1895. In the project, Horta definitely broke with this traditional scheme, this traditional scheme of doing the corridors and then the rooms on one side was totally broken. The fact that he built a house that consisted of three different parts, was the most interesting fact. The first part was between two conventional buildings, one in brick and one in natural stone. On one side of the street and on the other side of the garden. He designed two different buildings, one on the street and one near the garden. One with brick and one with stone. These were linked by a steel structure which was covered by glass on the top. The entire steel structure in the middle was acting like a composition in such a way that it consisted of staircases and landings that connect at different levels and at different rooms. This is the connective part of the whole hotel. Through the glass roof, it functions as a light shaft and brings natural light into the building. The middle room which was traditionally gloomy was no longer gloomy because of the central staircase and glass element that brought in a lot of light to the room. These were some of the sketches that Horta tried to get before he perfected his design. Look at the pictures he drew inspiration from, from floral motives, animal insect forms, feathers, butterflies, plant elements, he even tried out a tendron kind of thing which was later abandoned because it was considered a little too much. The front part of the house could also be used for receiving guests, Horta made the maximum of his skills as an interior designer. He designed every single detail, he not only gave the floor plans but also worked on the wood work, panels, stained glass windows, door handles; right from the door knobs, the mosaic flooring and furnishing, everything. Horta did the complete ensemble. He succeeded in integrating the lavish decor without masking the general architectural structures. The problem with Art Nouveau people was they make large lavish decoration which kind of makes the entire structure also not look like a structure, the column will no longer look like a column. The window will no longer look like a window after they've done. But what Horta did was, he used the decoration lavishly but he used it without masking the general architectural structures. For this only reason, the pure architectural innovations were not largely followed by other architects.

Most other Art Nouveau buildings in Belgium and other European countries were actually inspired from Horta's 'whiplash' decorative style which is mostly applied to a more traditional building. This is a section of the building in the image.

## **Horta Museum**

Next, we will look at another interesting building, the Horta Museum. Now called the Horta Museum, dedicated toward the work and life of Belgian architect and Art Nouveau architect Victor Horta and his architectural time period. The museum is housed in Horta's former house and atelier, Maison and Atelier Horta (1898) in the Brussels municipality of Saint-Gilles. In the splendid Art Nouveau interiors, there is a permanent display of furniture, utensils and art objects designed by Horta and his contemporaries as well as documents related to his life and time. That is the museum and this is the plan of the Horta museum. On the ground floor, we have the parlour and the cloak room, the main staircase that leads to all the spaces. We have the cellar, the kitchen here. This is the servant's staircase and in the next building, we have the cloak room which is for the office and then we have a book shop. On the Bel-etage level which is the Street level, this is the music room, the main staircase again, the dining room, salon and the same Servant's staircase that keeps going up. On the office path, this is the Horta's Salon and waiting lounge. This is Horta's office.

On the first floor which is actually second floor from the street level, we have Salon - Cloakroom, Main staircase, we have the bedrooms, a front dressing room area near the bedrooms and the bathrooms with the servant's staircase running straight through to service all these spaces. Here, in the office space we have a library and an office for museum staff. On the second floor which is the third level from the street, we have the guest room, the main staircase, Simone Horta's room, A Winter terrace overlooking the garden, Regular terrace with a servant's staircase in between. Above the terrace you have the Attic, with some office space for the Museum staff. The first aspect that stands out is the clear distinction the architect has made between in both house and studio elevation. There is a house and a studio that exists parallelly, if you look into the plan. Horta made sure that people know which is the house and which is the studio. He clearly made the distinction. In both facades, the proposal also raises asymmetrical compositions, in rebellion against the canons of the time. However, both buildings maintain an ongoing dialogue in terms of composition, form and proportion of openings, materials and colours, and integrate themselves smoothly with other properties on the street. This is the section of the office, the grey part is the section of the house. The coloured part is the section of the office in which you can see the different levels; ground level, street level, first, second and third attic levels. The studio's facade was developed in three levels, the first two more massive than the third. Taking advantage of the structural strength of steel, he could arrange discontinuity between the openings in the first and second level, this was in stark contrast with the neighbouring houses wherein the space between the windows and columns are repeated on every floor. That did not happen in Horta's building. The studio's last level is basically completely glass, framed by thin ochre-colour metal columns.

Here is another section, a section through the house. You can clearly see the different levels and the staircase that keeps going throughout the building. The facade is completely covered in stone and it highlights the work done in the metal balconies. Make contrasting materials and make sure one does not overpower the other, one must exemplify the use of the other. Supported by a steel beam that runs along the first level. The quality of the details and the dialogue between both the stone and the metal elements that make up both facades is remarkable. They often conceal specific and mundane functions behind their elaborate stylistic forms. Let's take a look at how the interior of the house looks. Now, it has been modified several times and it reflects the vicissitudes of the architect's life, including his divorce and his professional needs. There have been a lot of changes that has happened on the interiors. In 1919 Horta separated the two buildings and sold them to different people. The house and studio are divided into 5 levels, a basement ground floor, the piano nobile (or second level from the street) and the first and second floors (or third and fourth levels from the street). The difference in level is because in each country, the floor numbering is different. In India, we call ground floor, first floor, second floor etc, while in certain European countries, they don't have the concept of ground floor. The ground floor is actually the first level for them. Sometimes, if there is a mezzanine, they also count that as a floor in some countries. In some countries they don't count mezzanines. All these variations happen only because of local levels, local ways in which you term different street levels. Nevertheless, it is a five level plan. These levels extend with their mezzanines or the semi-levels around the central staircase. Overall the house is much brighter and has warmer colours than other contemporary houses. We were talking about contemporary houses earlier, in which the first and third rooms get light and the room in the middle is always dingy and doesn't have light but Horta innovated the whole use of a staircase in which the entire house is brighter and has warmer colours now. He used electric lighting to replace the use of glass (which was very dirty and so was forced to use dark colours on the walls). This is the elevation on which he designed his house and studio. You would have designed in principles of architecture about rhythmic composition of street elevations. Each building here in this elevation has two parts. The A part which is small and contains the entrance. The B part which is slightly bigger that contains the balconies and large windows. Each house definitely has a A part and B part. Even in this house, the A part is small which houses the entrance and the B part is the one with larger windows, balconies and other stuff. He saw the entire street elevation, he saw the sketch that looked like this, he analyzed what has happened in this kind of architecture. When he was building his house and studio, he did not do anything out of this frame otherwise it would look totally incongruous with what is happening here. He used the same AB format for his house separately and AB format separately for his studio precisely because he wanted his studio and house to be two different entities. Even with regard to elevation, it looks very different. Studio is a bit more open, has a large amount of openings, smaller in height whereas the house is a little more grandiose and taller. In the house

again, he uses two different kind of things where he has the main entrance over here and the balconies and large windows on the B portion. Similar to his studio where he has the door in the A portion, a very wide window and other aspects in the B portion. However accomplished we are in the style that we are building, we may be the key proponents of famous style and regarded as pioneers of that style but we should never forget all the lessons that we have learnt because the lesson teaches us that if we build something out of the ordinary, if we build something that is in congruence with the others, this will stick out like a sore thumb and anything that sticks out, gets beaten up. There is a famous Chinese proverb that states "the nail that sticks out gets beaten up first". Just like in wooden genery, anything that does not go well with what is happening around, doesn't gel with its surroundings, is definitely not good, not in art, not in culture, not in any other form of architecture or art. Horta understood this intense deep context. Even though he was the pioneer of the art movement, he kept the Art Nouveau style to the very minimum without compromising on his ideals.

Even in these buildings, he tried to use a lot of Art Nouveau elements with the roof, the window opening because all the other windows were either segmental, flat or semi-circular but here is where he has tried out a different form of arch in this building. There is a stark contrast between this building all the other buildings. The contrast is clearly seen, it is evident that this is Horta's new design in Art Nouveau architecture but does not stick out like a sore thumb or a piece of nail, it is in unison with the rest of the elevation. Look out how Horta's has paid attention to how the building must be looked from the street because how the building looks not only belongs to Horta, not only belongs to the person who is looking at it from an Art Nouveau point of view, the house also belongs to the street. If a person is working on the street, he has to feel as a part of the street, he has to belong there. This is what Horta use the same rhythm pattern A and B in this building too, but he has used his own concept of Art Nouveau, infused that into the rhythmic A and B and then produce this. This is the genius of Victor Horta.