



Constantin Brodzki's 1970 HQ for cement firm CBR in Brussels.

Constantin Brodzki is less than enthusiastic, to say the least, whenever he hears of one of his buildings being renovated. At 93 years old, the Belgian architect is still very much engaged with the architecture world, and he's eager to point out the ways in which he would like his modernist legacy to be preserved. 'I have experienced catastrophes before, so I'm suspicious,' Brodzki admits, taking out plans and photos to show how some firms have botched his former projects.

One of his designs, the former HQ of the cement company CBR in Brussels, is currently being converted into a new outpost for Antwerp co-working concept Fosbury & Sons. Close to the Sonian Forest, it's just ten minutes from the high-end Avenue Louise. For Fosbury & Sons' founders Stijn Geeraets and Maarten Van Gool, the initial impetus to take on the modernist office building, with its characteristic façade of curved concrete modules, was all about the immediate visual impact. But as they started to explore the building, the full package captivated them.



A spiralling concrete staircase conceived by Brodzki for the CBR HQ in Brussels

‘The character of the building, its history, its exceptional architecture, the spirit of the age in which it was built, it just fitted,’ says Geeraets. It has an extraordinary architecture that is also super functional. And everywhere, there’s this James Bond-slash-Mad Men vibe, which made us feel right at home.’ The starting point was the building itself, he explains: ‘We didn’t want to change anything; we wanted to preserve it, and update the technical side, so that the spaces feel like new, in terms of electricity, ventilation, all the comforts of a contemporary office.’

Brodzki, born in Rome and raised in Italy and Finland by his Belgian mother and Polish diplomat father, moved to Belgium before the Second World War. From age seven, he says, ‘I knew I wanted to be an architect. I was always drawing.’ In Belgium, he studied at La Cambre, where ‘we could see Henry van de Velde, a true genius, in the hallways’. After graduation, he travelled to the United States, and found a placement working on the United Nations HQ, for which the board of design included Niemeyer and Le Corbusier.



Designed to showcase the material's qualities, its façade is made of 756 prefab convex oval concrete modules

'I did that for six months,' Brodzki reminisces. 'Working on what, at the time, was the most modern building in the world. It was heaven.' Upon his return to Belgium, he felt hopelessly out of place. 'The tragedy was that when I came back, I was 15 years ahead of Belgium in terms of design and methodology,' he says. 'So for ten years, I had to bide my time.'

Brodzki still considers the CBR building to be 'the most modern building in Belgium', and insists that 'it doesn't have to be renovated'. It's true that the structure's remarkable façade, with its strong grid and monolithic feel, has aged beautifully. The sculptural forms, unusual for office buildings at the time, gave rise to a new current in Belgian architecture, and the CBR building's characteristics were emulated by dozens in Brussels during the following decades. It earned Brodzki an inclusion in the 1979 MoMA exhibition, 'Transformations in Modern Architecture' – he was the only Belgian architect to be referenced.

'It's the most modern building in Belgium. It doesn't have to be renovated'

Brodzki, born in Rome and raised in Italy and Finland by his Belgian mother and Polish diplomat father, moved to Belgium before the Second World War. From age seven, he says, 'I knew I wanted to be an architect. I was always drawing.' In Belgium, he studied at La Cambre, where 'we could see Henry van de Velde, a true genius, in the hallways'. After graduation, he travelled to the United States, and found a placement working on the United Nations HQ, for which the board of design included Niemeyer and Le Corbusier.

'I did that for six months,' Brodzki reminisces. 'Working on what, at the time, was the most modern building in the world. It was heaven.' Upon his return to Belgium, he felt hopelessly out of place. 'The tragedy was that when I came back, I was 15 years ahead of Belgium in terms of design and methodology,' he says. 'So for ten years, I had to bide my time.'

Brodzki still considers the CBR building to be 'the most modern building in Belgium', and insists that 'it doesn't have to be renovated'. It's true that the structure's remarkable façade, with its strong grid and monolithic feel, has aged beautifully. The sculptural forms, unusual for office buildings at the time, gave rise to a new current in Belgian architecture, and the CBR building's characteristics were emulated by dozens in Brussels during the following decades. It earned Brodzki an inclusion in the 1979 MoMA exhibition, 'Transformations in Modern Architecture' – he was the only Belgian architect to be referenced.



The reception desk of the CBR HQ selected by Brodzki



Fosbury & Sons Founders Stijn Geeraets and Maarten van Gool, the CBR HQ's new tenants. They are transforming the listed building into a 7,000 sqm co-working space, the company's first in Brussels

Brodzki's main takeaway from his time in New York was the pragmatic way of working, developing plan after plan and fine-tuning the stages of building in order to maximise efficiency – figuring out the exact way to achieve curved shapes within that short window of time when concrete is still liquid, for instance. 'The most important thing I learned in the US is that when they start to work on something, they begin with the idea that they don't know everything, but want to find out,' Brodzki smiles. 'In Belgium, they start work assuming they know it all.'

The result of his meticulous planning is a building that still astounds in its functionality. 'When we went to take a look at the building's structure, it became clear immediately that it was very cleverly designed,' says Geeraets. 'Brodzki obviously thought it all through extensively – he conducted multiple studies before starting the construction phase. When our interior architects Going East looked at the plans and layout of each floor, they could only observe that the building is self-explanatory.' Fosbury & Sons will occupy 7,000 sq m, spread over seven of the building's nine floors, with three extra floors below ground for parking and storage.

Every material, detail and finish was chosen by Brodzki, from the very start of construction in 1967 until the year of completion, 1970. For some of the furniture inside it, Brodzki collaborated with his Brussels friend and neighbour Jules Wabbes. These pieces, along with other original furniture, built-in units and authentic details like door handles, radiator caps and wooden casings of windows, will be preserved, confirms Geeraets. ‘We’re not demolishing anything; instead, we’re dismantling parts of the interior, then reinstating them while taking into account the original materials used.’

Art from local Brussels galleries will dot the spaces, events and lectures will take place, and there’s a small auditorium where movies can be projected, as well as a restaurant, bar and a small club. The function of Brodzki’s masterpiece remains intact. ‘Brodzki was very forward-thinking, and we still reap the benefits of that today,’ says Geeraets. ‘If you look at what that man has achieved, I feel like he’s been left in the shadows for too long, quite undeservedly.’
§



The Canteen at the CBR HQ conceived by Brodzki