

# Gaston Eysseleinck and his Masterpiece. The Post Office Building in Ostend (1945-1953)



The city of Ostend became severely damaged during World War II. Practically all the main public buildings were destroyed: the City Hall, the Casino, the Horse Race-Track, the main Post Office building, etc. The city decided to rebuild a new Post Office on the location of the first construction. In 1945, architect Gaston Eysselinck (1907–1953) from Ghent was assigned to design the new main Post Office (PTT), including the telephone and telegraph offices (RTT) and the technical infrastructure. The project in Ostend was his first big assignment.

By Marc Dubois

As a young architect, Eysselinck figures on the 'legendary' group picture of the CIAM meeting in Brussels (1930). Eysselinck was able to present himself as the architect of several houses, and especially his own house in Ghent (1930–1932), a project that was included in Alberto Sartoris' *Gli Elementi dell' Architettura Funzionale* (1935).<sup>1</sup> He was the head of a group that worked on the urbanisation of the city of Ghent, a study that was supposed to be presented at the CIAM congress in Liège in 1939, although this meeting was cancelled. In 1945, Eysselinck moved to Ostend, where he died in a tragic way in 1953.<sup>2</sup> Eysselinck can be described as a "passionate functionalist", strongly influenced by Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos and Russian architecture.

In 1945, architect Jean Eggericx (1884–1963) was assigned as chief town planner of Ostend. As a Modernist, he became famous in the 20s with the "Cité Jardins" near Brussels. He was also professor at the ISAD in Brussels which was directed by Henry Van de Velde. One of his first interventions in Ostend was a broad, straight boulevard from the end of the motorway to the Casino, situated at the sea dyke.

In November 1945, Eysselinck presented his preliminary design which was heavily criticized by Eggericx. There was a lack of sculptures on the front façade and Eggericx advised him to decorate the exterior with bas-reliefs. The idea of a detached sculpture in front of the façade was rejected and the use of rough, unprocessed bluestone in certain parts of the façades was heavily criticized. It didn't seem to be appropriate for such a stately building. The hardest criticism was given on the whole volume of the building: the entrance wasn't well enough accentuated and the main volume had been moved further back by ten meters in comparison to the existing building line.

Starting in November 1945, Eysselinck made perspective drawings including the surroundings. The divi-

sion of the building in two parts is a clear sign of the organization of the building inside: the low building in the front is accessible for the public, while the high building was for the administration and the employees. The first and second floors contain the telephone exchange and on the top floor there is a kitchen and a large restaurant for the employees, including a terrace on the south side of the building. Throughout the whole design, the architect thought about the facilities for the employees, such as the small auditorium.

Another reason for the volume positioning was to give more light to the small side streets next to the building. According to Eysselinck, the division complied with the new boulevard that Eggericx himself had introduced. The lower part was designed regarding the scale of the street, next to the building, while the main part was designed according to the scale of the new boulevard. For Eysselinck, a convinced functionalist, the ground plan was "le générateur", the generator or motor of the project. Since the public part of the Post Office had to be much larger than the part for telephony and telegraphy, the entrance with stairs was placed asymmetrically. Both parts needed to be used during day time, while the RTT part was used 24/7. That is why Eysselinck provided the part above the stairs with a glass structure, so that there would be permanent illumination during the evening and night time. Through three revolving doors, the public entered the building. And with a big, movable partition, the part of the building for post services could be separated from the RTT part.

The division had an extra advantage: natural light could enter the building above the counter. The large hall of the post office contains a curved ceiling, made out of aluminum, which allowed the architect to make a soft transition between the main hall and the counter. The zenithal illumination above the counter strongly influences the whole space: it works as a propelling, orientating power from the dark entrance towards the counter.

Eysselinck stubbornly kept on refusing to move the main volume forward as Eggericx demanded. In the front façade, Eysselinck designed a big glass surface in green

< Post office Building project, February 1947.  
Photo from the Design Museum Gent, Archive Eysselinck.

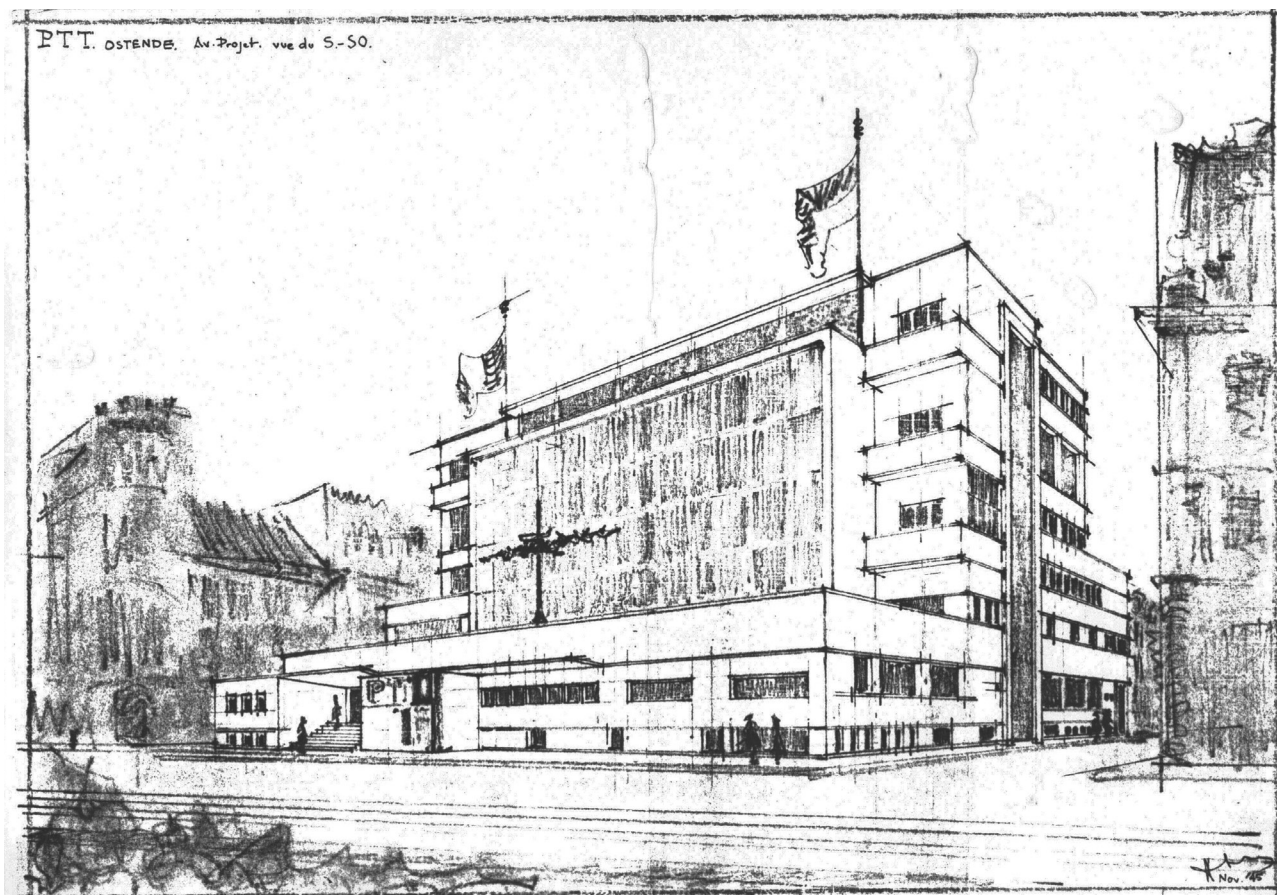


Figure 1. First project. November 1945. / Figure 2. Project, February 1947. —/ Figure 3. Building in the 60s with the sculpture of Jozef Condré. Photos from the Design Museum Gent, Archive Eysselinck.



glass which had a relation with the big brass sculpture. Eggericx asked him to divide the big surface so that the armature of the construction would be visible, a detail which we can see the architect adapted in the perspective drawings, and which was the main concession of Eyselinck. In 1946 he worked on the construction plans, in collaboration with engineer Mallebrancke and a team of young architects. In these plans, the architect drew everything: the grooves in the floor to place bicycles, the fixed furniture and even a design for the numbers on the telephone cabins. He even allowed artist Jozef Cantré (1890-1957) to draw his design for the big sculpture "De Vijf Werelddelen" (The five continents) on the building plans. The first stone was placed in April 1947 and during 1947 and 1948 some recently graduated architects came to work for Eyselinck, like Zdenek Králiček and Willy Van der Meeren (1923-2002).

### "New Monumentality"

At the end of the 30s, a lively discussion started, debating on the direction that new architecture should take.

A new type of architecture, less obsessed by the ascetics and nudity was under discussion. An outstanding example of this discussion is the design of the Shell building in The Hague by architect J.J.P. Oud (1937-1948).<sup>3</sup> For many people, this building represented a logical evolution, while the avant-garde architects considered the building as a step backwards, maybe even as a treachery. In 1943, Sigfried Giedion, the secretary of the C.I.A.M., argued in the text "nine working points for monumentality" for a 'return to this monumentality' and collaboration with visual artists.<sup>4</sup> This text was the result of a collaboration between Josep Lluís Sert and Fernand Léger. He repeated this idea one year later in a text called "the necessity of a new monumentality".<sup>5</sup> This 'new monumentality' was presented as a theme on the 6<sup>th</sup> C.I.A.M. in Bridgewater in 1947 by a group of people including Giedion.<sup>6</sup> For the first time, the C.I.A.M. paid attention to the aesthetical aspect and to the collaboration with artists.

At the same time, the PTT/RTT building was under construction. While Oud chose a tight symmetrical design for his Shell building, Eyselinck decided to go for a re-



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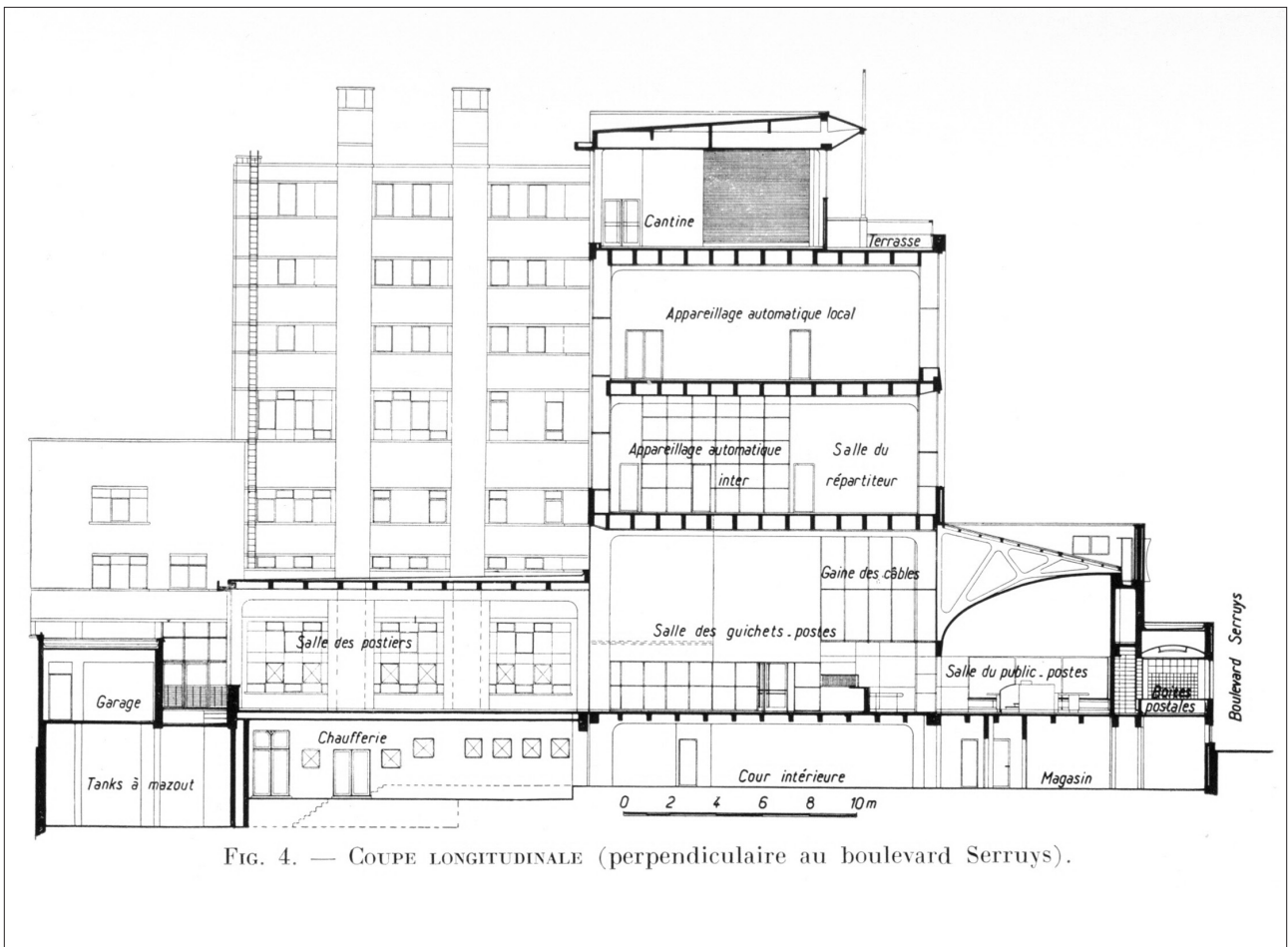
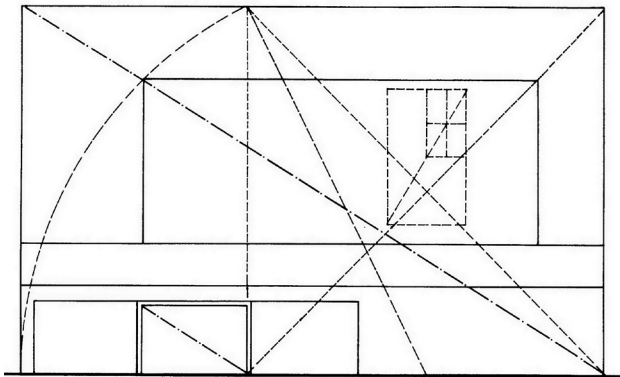


FIG. 4. — COUPE LONGITUDINALE (perpendiculaire au boulevard Serruys).



finned composition with a balance between symmetry and asymmetry. The ground plan stays the most important element of the design. Oud reintroduced the ornament, but Eysselinck rejected it. He chose a completely new way to reinforce the expressive power of a public building. There are two approach lines: the priority of the use of natural stone and the introduction of visual arts. By using granite, bluestone and travertine, the building doesn't seem to be

a cold and impersonal creation. The relation between nature and people was of crucial importance to Eysselinck. But most of all, he believed in the aesthetic joy one gets from high quality natural stone. The application of a band of rough bluestone wasn't only done for compositional reasons but also to break with the monotony of the facade. With this form of "New Brutalism", Eysselinck occupied a special position within Belgian architecture. In



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his striving for a diverse use of natural stone, we can see his big admiration for the work of Adolf Loos.

Eyszelinck knew very well the Russian architecture from the 20s. In 1930 his wife gave him the now legendary book of El Lissitzky about Russian architecture. In this book, there were four photographs of the Gostorg building, but also some pictures of the "Isvjestia" building in Moscow (1925-1927) by Grigorij Borisowitsch Barchin.

The stairs in the "Isvjestia" buildings are visible behind a window that covers the whole building. A detail picture of this vertical window, in combination with the balconies on each floor, evokes directly an associative image with the PTT of Eyszelinck in Ostend.

The PTT/RTT building—otherwise devoid of all classical elements—is completely and harmoniously organized according to the golden section principle, showing Eys-

selinck's conviction that architecture builds on the attempt to realize harmony and control of nature.

Eysselinck was opposed to the then current opinion of authorities and many artists on the relation between architecture and sculpture which was described as a sort of "mural aesthetics", which meant the installation of sculptural elements on the big and closed-off elements of the façade. The idea of adding a strongly, free standing expressive element to a functional building derives from Le Corbusier. The inspiration for Eysselinck was the way in which Le Corbusier placed the sculpture on the façade of the building of the League of Nations in Geneva. It can be considered as an autonomic, expressive volume that is brought to life by the work of shadows on the wall behind the sculpture. The walls are the domain of the architect, not of the sculptor. There is no other building in Belgium, with the sole exception of the PTT/RTT building, which received a large sculptural addition to the façade between 1945 and 1955.

Eysselinck also made room for ceramic works in the main hall of the Post Office. At both ends of the curved ceiling, two ceramic works are emplaced. They represent the old and the new post traffic in a metaphorical way. The ceramic works of art were done by the young Ostend artist Jo Maes.<sup>7</sup> In the public area of the telephone services (at the left side of the entrance), fourteen sand-blasted glass works of art are emplaced. They represent the history of telephony and telegraphy. These works are emplaced in a very interesting way; the daylight enters in the interior of the room through a horizontal window, and during the night the glass panels are visible through the illumination which was placed behind them. At the same time, it shows a horizontal line of light on the façade.

Nevertheless, there are big differences in the use of materials between the Post Office and his first works. Around 1930, for example, in his own house, the manifestation is determined by the painted plasterwork, which aims at a dematerialisation of architecture. His first buildings fit in with realisations and constructions that one can describe as "International Style" of New Building in Europe.<sup>8</sup> In his building in Ostend, the physical aspect of materials becomes a theme. Natural stone isn't plastered in a non material way; it is used as a '*matière brute*'. Eysselinck's change in style didn't happen suddenly, as it can be seen in some of his realisations from the end of the 30s. Once again, one can see a parallelism with the oeuvre of Le Corbusier in which the white purist villas from the 20s strongly differ from his works in the 30s and the post-war buildings, which have a more brutal character. In the interior of the Post Office, granite is also used for the fixed furniture, which shows Eysselinck's choice for durability and a dignified character. Little by little, we see a plastic-

ity coming forward in Eysselinck's work, like for example in the low ceiling in the PTT part of the building: there is no doubt that the organic design of Isamu Noguchi influenced this work.

For the Post Office building, Eysselinck also developed some interesting stone dressings. He also applied them in 1948 in his own house, redoing the façade with bluestone. We could say that his own house was used as a laboratory.<sup>9</sup> 'Durability' was certainly a necessity for Eysselinck, especially in a public building. He was convinced that one should even pay more attention to this characteristic when building on the sea side. For the top part of the building, he provided different types of natural stone. He also demanded bronze window frames, since the climate can be quite aggressive at the Belgian sea side.

Eysselinck's energy in the Post Office building went not merely to soundly work out the basic concept but to the technical elaboration as well. The Post Office building was apparently an attempt to prove that the application of classical building materials can be reconciled with Modern functional construction, and that the architect is obliged to count with the durability of his realization, especially when it concerns a public building.

In 1952 there was a rift between Eysselinck and his client. The city wanted to open the Post Office building without Cantré's sculpture, something unacceptable for Eysselinck. He and the engineer were expelled from their assignment and the Post Office Building was opened in 1953 and Cantré's sculpture was added in 1963. After Eysselinck's death, the building was extended twice, blurring the witty transition to the adjacent houses.

Simultaneously with the discussions on the relation between functionalism and aesthetics, Eysselinck realized his monumental building, superseding the rigid functionalism that would reach its summit from the 60s onwards. At the same time, the building also became a tragedy for Eysselinck: major resistance against the project and the loss of his loved one resulted into his suicide in December of 1953.

It was not until 1971 that the building received real appreciation, described by Geert Bekaert as "the first and most important realization after 1945".<sup>10</sup> The listing of the Post Office Building as a monument in 1981 contrasts with the incomprehension and negative criticism which it was confronted with throughout its turbulent generation history.

The City of Ostend bought the building in order to transform it into a cultural centre called "De Post" (The Post). The architectural firm B-Architects from Antwerp won the competition for the restoration and for the new addition; the second extension, which was not designed

by Eyszelinck, was torn down for the restoration. The opening is planned for the beginning of 2013.

For many reasons, the Post Office building is a unique document of its era and truly a "monument" in Belgian post-war architecture. It is a building that is incorrectly forgotten in the international historiography.

#### Notes

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2. Dubois, Marc, *De fatale ontgoocheling: architect Gaston Eyszelinck-zijn werk te Oostende 1945-1953*, Oostende, 1986.
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4. Novgorodsky, L., "Le nouvel immeuble de la Régie des Télégraphes et Téléphones d'Ostende", *La Technique des Travaux*, n° 7/8, July/August, Liège, 1954, 207-216.
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7. Giedion, Sigfried, "The Need for a New Monumentality", P. Zucker, ed., *New Architecture and City Planning*, New York, 1944, 549-568.
8. Mumford, Louis, "Monumentalism, Symbolism and Style", *The Architectural Review*, vol. CV, n° 628, April 1949, 173-180.
9. Van der Woud, Auke, *C.I.A.M.-Volkshuisvesting-Stedebouw*, Delft, 1983, 83.
10. Giedion, Sigfried, *A Decade of New Architecture*, Zürich, 1951, 31-32.
11. Jo Maes (1923) studied at the Academy of Ghent from 1939 until 1946. The two ceramic works of art in the post office building were produced by the firm Florizoone from Nieuwpoort. The glass panels in the telegraphy part of the building were made by Gustaaf Rigelle, from Ghent.
12. Eyszelinck built three plastered buildings: his own house in Ghent (1931), the Peeters house in Deurne (1932) and the Hoogenbemt-Contrijn house in Mechelen (1934). The first two works were included in the important publication of Alberto Santoris, *Gli Elementi dell' Architettura Funzionale*, from 1935. They were also published in the third edition of 1941 (together with the Rombouts house in Bosvoorde).
13. Eyszelinck, Gaston, *Natuursteen-Bekledingstechniek, Architectura*, n° 4-5, 1948, 56-58.
14. Bekaert, Geert; Strauven, Francis, *Bouwen in België 1945-1970*, Brussel, 1971.

#### Marc Dubois

Born in 1950, Architect and Professor of the Department of Architecture LUCA Ghent & Brussels, Association KULeuven. Member of **docomomo** Belgium. He is the author of a Monographic publication on Gaston Eyszelinck which will be ready in 2013.

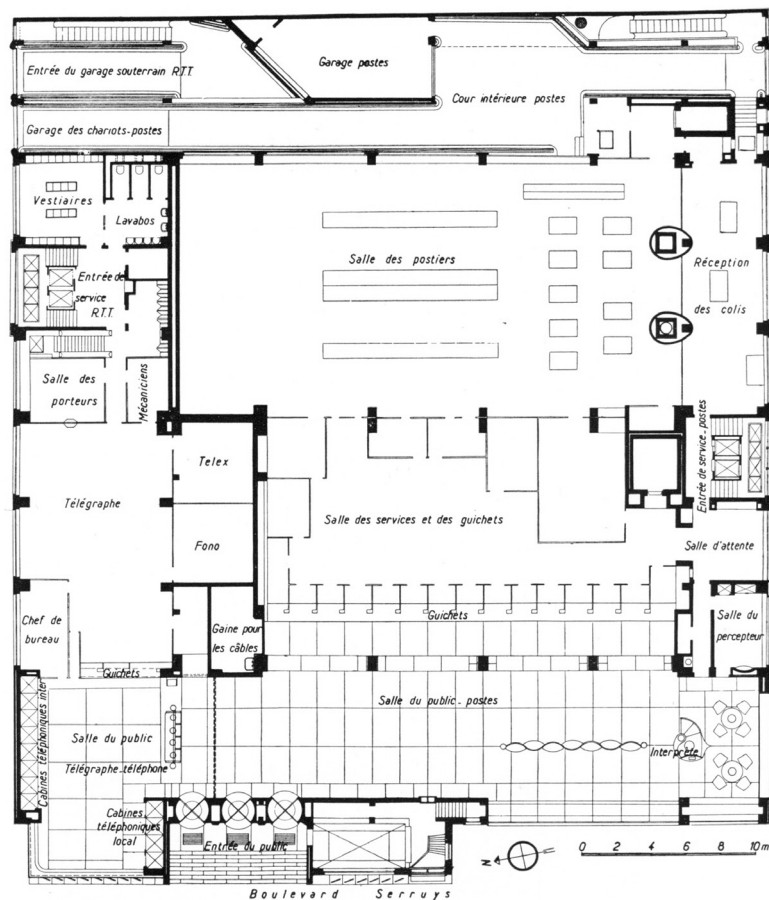


Figure 7. Plan at the lower part of the public area. Photo from the Design Museum Gent, Archive Eyszelinck.