

REAL ESTATE

A Horta House in Belgium With Art Nouveau Appeal

By DIANE DANIEL AUG. 11, 2016

BRUSSELS — When the Visser family relocated their tribal art gallery from Amsterdam to Brussels in 1999, they rented space adjacent to the Place du Grand Sablon, a lively hilltop area filled with cafes, chocolate shops and several other ethnographic art galleries.

The next year, Joris Visser informed his mother, Herma, that a nearby house was for sale. “Then later we found out it was a Horta house,” Herma Visser said, smiling at the memory.

The Belgian architect and designer Victor Horta (1861-1947) is considered by many to be the most prominent and pioneering among Art Nouveau architects. Four of his townhouses are on the Unesco World Heritage List and his work is showcased at the Horta Museum, housed in his former Brussels home and studio.

During the Vissers’ visit to the property for sale, Mrs. Visser recalled, “we walked in the hall and first saw the amazing stairs, and then the orange mosaic floor, and I grabbed Joris’s shirt and said, ‘this is it.’ We immediately started working on the house, and we’ve done quite a lot.”

With Mrs. Visser now retired and back in Amsterdam and her son planning to spend time in the United States with his American wife, the family has decided to sell what’s known as the Frison House. The four-story, 500-square-meter, or 5,381-square-foot, building was completed in 1894 for Maurice Frison, Horta’s

close friend and lawyer. The restoration-in-progress has an asking price of 1.7 million euros, or \$1.9 million and is listed with Brussels Sotheby's International Realty. It includes five bedrooms, three bathrooms, several sitting and dining areas and a rear garden of 98 square meters.

Because the building is classified as a historic monument, governing bodies must approve changes, but Mrs. Visser said that up to 80 percent of restoration costs may be reimbursed. The family, working with a team of architectural experts, has prepared restoration drawings and plans.

From the outside, the narrow building shows signs of Horta — protruding balconies with railings of ornamental ironwork. At ground level, the original facade was removed in the 1950s, but Mr. Visser said a reproduction could be added.

The iron railing along the restored marble stairwell that first captivated Mrs. Visser provides a dramatic entrance to the home, with its flowery, swan-like baluster emphasizing Horta's flourish. "There are hand-painted floral murals on the side of the wall, and really all over the house," Mr. Visser said. "Horta was obsessed with every detail."

The architect was known for his integrated designs, which included wall coverings, mosaics, furnishings, lighting, hardware and door handles. About three dozen original bronze handles remain in the house, while others were reconstructed. The sale includes one Horta lighting fixture, with an optional purchase of other furnishings designed by Horta or his contemporaries.

The Vissers have uncovered portions of the murals, but most remain hidden under coats of paint applied through the building's various incarnations. (The story goes that the Gestapo confiscated the house in 1942 and painted over the murals.)

Just beyond the entrance hall, an impressive stairwell about 30 meters deep allows light in from all floors.

"The stairs are the perfect size, so easy to walk on," Mrs. Visser said. "Horta sacrificed space for the stairway and hallways to give the house an open feeling."

Upstairs, the 40-square-meter grand salon features a decorative marble fireplace, oak parquet floor and a high ceiling with curves emphasizing the architecture. The imposing doors of American pine have curving handles ingeniously designed with counterweights to be opened hands-free by servers and stamped with a swirl of the owner's initials, M.F.

The crowning glory is the conservatory, which diffuses gold light through an arched stained-glass roof supported by tendrils of iron columns. Working with a professional team, the Vissers restored the 22 meter by 3 meter space in 2005, using old photographs to replicate iron work and stained glass. One of Horta's largest and most notable "winter gardens," its image can be found on postcards at the Horta Museum and on the cover of the book "The Brussels of Horta," published by Ludion.

"Before Horta, everything was so dark," Mrs. Visser said. "When Horta started building houses with all this light and using orange and yellows, you cannot imagine the impact he had."

The house, though quite livable, "isn't glossy," Mrs. Visser noted. "I think the person who will buy this house will be a collector who falls in love with it. It's not just a house."

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