The French Revolution marked the advent of a national conception of architecture: abbé Henri Grégoire pleaded for an understanding of architecture as a communal possession of the nation, of inestimable and everlasting value. The Belgian architecture critic and historian Geert Bekaert (1928) referred to Grégoire when developing his own architecture theory: architecture is a universal inheritance that belongs to all of humanity and not to one nation in particular. For Bekaert, the specific history of architecture in Belgium guarantees a free access to this universal experience of architecture. He writes the history of the architectural situation in Belgium – ‘a country without architecture’ – as universal, thereby suggesting Belgium as a true model country for contemporary architecture. Here, architecture can be concrete and universal, real and sensory, irreducible and exemplary. Therefore, (Belgian) architecture is defined as ‘commonplace’: it is ordinary, not special or spectacular, but always particular, as it does not want to be part of a national movement or of doctrinal schools of thought. By elucidating this concept via the writings of Loos and Marx, Bekaert develops an understanding of architecture that is both ‘marxist’ and ‘autonomous’. Architecture in Belgium does not fail to be architecture – it shows on the contrary how architecture could or should be all around the world. A closer examination of this theory, reveals not so much a post-national conception of architecture as a pre-national one: it will always serve as a historical and concrete backdrop for the doings and undoings of human beings. And that includes, among many other things, the possible construction of nations.

It’s naïve of you to think that any community other than the one we’re constructing deserves the name.

– Plato, The Republic

In 1794, the French abbé Henri Baptiste Grégoire coined the word vandalism to describe the destruction of artworks and buildings following the French Revolution. He did so, of course, by referring to the Vandals, an ancient Germanic people, associated with the senseless destruction as a result of their sack of Rome in 455. Grégoire addressed the Convention Nationale of the new France three times, on the topic of ‘les destructions opérées par le vandalisme, et sur les moyens de le réprimer’. ‘Je créai le mot pour tuer la chose,’ Grégoire said. After the Revolution of 1789, his fellow-countrymen had thought about destroying, indeed as true ‘vandals’, nearly every pre-revolutionary building. Works of architecture were regarded by them as reminders of the past, as expressions of an exiled monarchy or a hated clergy, and that was why, in modern French times, they had to be demolished. Before the
States General, Grégoire pleaded for an understanding of architecture as a communal – in the full sense of the word – possession of the nation and, therefore, of inestimable and everlasting value.

Abbé Grégoire is historically regarded – among other things – as one of the ancestors of the modern conservation of architecture. His project of guaranteeing the history and the future of the French Republic by conserving its architecture for the common good can be put side to side with his contemporary search for and promotion of his mother tongue. Grégoire devoted himself to one general French language, the 'language of liberty', as he called it; he tried to examine and unify as much as possible the different dialects spoken throughout the France of the end of the 18th century. It is by now clear that Grégoire was one of the first and most exemplary modern nationalists: he detested the monarchy, inequality, slavery and fundamentalism; but he knew that nation-building is based upon language, history and culture, exemplified by the domain of (historical) architecture.

That is why it seems at first strange to encounter this abbé Grégoire, founding father of French nationalism (and chauvinism), in a text by the Belgian architecture critic and historian Geert Bekaert, born in 1928 and active up to this day. In his seminal theoretical text *Architecture devoid of shadow* from 1988, Bekaert has used Grégoire’s argument and his plea to discuss broader issues – and to expose his own architecture theory. ‘It’s well known,’
writes Bekaert, 'that the systematic devastation which the French Revolution brought with it was more than an expression of the common people’s fury. It was ordered by official decree, which stated that all architecture reminiscent of the feudal regime was to be demolished. There was immediate protest, however, when this decree was announced.' Bekaert refers to Grégoire as the first to understand architecture’s general value that transcends the succession of political regimes. He does, however, not leave it at that: Grégoire’s view on architecture should be regarded outside of the national French context as well. ‘It’s merely one step further,’ writes Bekaert, ‘to an interpretation of this national architectural inheritance as a universal inheritance, belonging to all of humanity; a step for which the way had been paved long before by the curiosity of historians who acknowledged not only their own society, but that of all others known to them.’ And indeed it might be only one step further from ‘national French’ architecture to a quasi-historical interest in ‘general, universal and post-national architecture’, but it certainly seems a much larger step for most of the readers of these words than for the author himself. What it is then, that makes it possible and self-understanding to define Grégoire’s nationalistic notions of architecture and the upheavals of the French Revolution, as nothing more than the root of a conception of architecture that transcends borders and nations? Why is that it is possible to consider those moments, at the end of the 18th century, as the starting point for a progressive concept of architecture – for the definition of the need for architecture as exactly the characteristic that unites mankind in general?

In order to understand this, we have to fall back on another national and architectural situation, although one of much less grand appeal: that of Belgium, which was, ultimately, the intellectual context Geert Bekaert was writing in and for. Already in 1970 Bekaert wrote that ‘Belgium is a country without architecture’. Founded in 1830, Belgium does not possess a history mixed up with grand narratives; it has three very different national languages (Dutch, French and German); was considered for many centuries as the battlefield of Europe, and hardly has a cultural or intellectual elite. As for the case of architecture history, there are many Belgian churches from the Middle Ages up to the Renaissance and to modern times, but these are mostly considered impure or unimportant. Modern architecture brought two internationally known key figures at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century – Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde – but their legacy remained without much practical effects. No really important schools of thought, theory or building practice were active here (although there were some, for example La Cambre in Brussels). And the national or local governments have most of the time neglected architecture or urbanism, and
have never really considered it as a proper tool for nation building – a situation that has only started to change since the nineties of the previous century. All this has turned Belgium into a chaotic, spatially ‘liberal’ country where the freestanding house surrounded by little scraps of greenery is the norm – an exemplum of urban sprawl, to be short, fully fledged even before this term was invented.

Figure 2. Geert Bekaert, Francis Strauven, La Construction en Belgique 1945-1970, 1971, Confédération Nationale de la Construction, Bruxelles, Front page.

A country without architecture, indeed, and in a paradoxical way Geert Bekaert, the main Belgian architecture historian, has not tried to fight this absence by constructing other national narratives or art historical threads. His way of writing the architectural history of a country that has never had an architecture to speak of, consists exactly in making this absence of architecture universal. This means that in Belgium all the general circumstances are excellently at hand to understand, experience and enjoy the true nature of architecture at first hand – or rather, as this statement should actually be turned around: everything that could prevent us from gaining access to what architecture is all about, remains absent. In another short article, written at about the same time as Architecture devoid of shadow at the end of the eighties, Bekaert describes Belgian architecture as ‘commonplace’\(^7\). This means that the architecture is ordinary, not special or spectacular, but always particular, as it does not want to be part of a larger movement or doctrinal schools of thought; it is not anti-intellectualist either, because every form of intellectual fanaticism is absent. When trying to
describe this ‘commonplace’ character of Belgian architecture, Bekaert refers to two – international – important authors: Marx and Loos. Architecture is communal, he states, as Marx interpreted this word: not nationalistic but universal, in the sense of the proletariat, as the layer of the population that is on the one hand repressed, but that, on the other hand, can truly have access to the immediacy of life, the tradition of the ordinary and the experience of the everyday. And this architecture is experienced exactly as Loos wanted his own architecture to be experienced: not reducible to photographic images, but only threedimensional, direct and through the senses, as in the immediacy of the house of a farmer or of the work of a cobbler.

These references make clear that Bekaert’s theory of architecture is not as singular (or as strictly Belgian) as one might think: he succeeds in merging a marxist longing for the everyday and the ordinary (that can be found, for example, in the works of De Certeau or Lefebvre as well) with an autonomous and existentialist stress on the importance of the experience of architecture (that is, among others, linked with the writings of Bataille or Heidegger). ‘Nationalistic’ tendencies are, in this conception of architecture that is both ‘proletarian’ and ‘autonomous’, totally superfluous. And that is the paradox: by describing the architectural situation in Belgium – a country without architecture – as universal, Bekaert suggests Belgium as a true model country for contemporary architecture. Here, architecture can be concrete and universal, real and sensory, irreducible and exemplary.

Again, this putting aside of nationalism and the importance of nation-states in favor of architecture, is of course not so easy as it might seem. We are here, at least one might think, in the domain of a very current and contemporary conflict – no wonder then, that it has been described extensively by a philosopher such as Slavoj Zizek. The question is: can we be united without nations but on the same grounds as if there would be only one nation? Is it possible to be universal in a real way, not on the scale of one country, but on the scale of the world? This question involves, and therefore I quote Zizek, ‘a tension between this postmodern post-nation-state “concrete universality”, and the earlier “concrete universality” of the nation-state.’ To apply this to the architecture theory of Geert Bekaert could be simple. Abbé Grégoire considered the new French Republic at the end of the 18th century as a collection of ‘concrete universalities’, as a nation-state. That means: all the different inhabitants of France are indeed different, but they are united in their nationality and in their Frenchness: their language, their national boundaries, and their historical and contemporary architecture. Geert Bekaert, and his conception of architecture, on the other hand, could be considered as an exponent of this typically late-twentieth-century post-nationalism: every
human being, all around the world, should be permitted to exhibit his or her own specific architecture-as-lifestyle, as we are living in a globalized and capitalist world order whose universal features of market, human rights and democracy guarantee the equality of everybody – and the absolute futility of every form of nation building.

Exactly this last opposition is a false one. The architectural world that Bekaert proposes is certainly not a post-national one. We should not forget that he keeps on talking about Belgium, about the importance of Belgium, about this nation that is actually not a nation at all. He exercises the only kind of historiography that he still sees possible: national divides are attacked on all sides (and not only in the case of Belgium), but the very category of the nation is not entirely destroyed: it is only used continuously to indicate the epistemological uselessness of the category of the nation, but at the same time to prove the almost libidinous necessity of it. The same goes for the claim of universalism: what kind of historiography is it, that writes about history as if it is everywhere the same? Nations are still constructed, histories are still written, but as anti-nations and as anti-histories. A look at Bekaert’s book *Contemporary architecture in Belgium*, published in 1995[^9], proves – firstly – how difficult it is to write an architectural history of this country, as no one else has done it before or since – and secondly: how we still need the epithet ‘Belgium’ to write history – but it is a kind of history that untangles and sabotages itself from the inside.

[^9]: Figure 3. Geert Bekaert, *Contemporary architecture in Belgium*, Lannoo, Tielt, 1995, Front page.
It is therefore not so simple to just say: because we have modern architecture, we no longer need nations; because we can unite ourselves with the help of global architecture, there is no longer a need for any other form of unification or grouping. Bekaert, I think, does not consider architecture as post-national, but rather as pre-national. Architecture precedes nation building, architecture does not replace anything, because it leaves everything in place and it even makes everything possible. As in the case of the French Revolution: there is architecture at hand, there will be new architecture, but it will always serve as a historical and concrete backdrop for the doings and undoings of human beings. And that includes the construction of national countries as well.

We all know that in *The Republic*, his set of dialogues and discussions on politics and society, Plato thought that every good society should be ruled by philosophers and by the life of the mind. ‘There’s no one you’d rather force to undertake the guarding of your community,’ he wrote, ‘then those who are experts in the factors which contribute towards the good government of a community, who don’t look to politics for their rewards, and whose life is better than the political life.’ With the readings of both Grégoire and Bekaert in mind, we can wonder if Plato did not rather intend architects than philosophers as the true leaders of society. Architecture is in this case considered as the penultimate and necessarily first human act. What happens afterwards – the all too human but unavoidable business of politics, culture, nations, economy, warfare and so on – is maybe not unimportant, but it is never as fundamental as architecture is. In Belgium, at this very moment and during the last five years, a lot has been said about the dissolution of Belgium in favor of the smaller communities of Flanders and Wallonia. It goes without saying (I hope) that both national views are constructions, and that the second one is probably somewhat more unsympathetic, less solidary and even a bit untruthful and vengeful. Both constructions are, nevertheless, valuable – but no matter what country they will construct, independent forms of architecture will always come first, and they will always create their own conditions.
5 Ibidem.
10 Idem, note 1, 521b.