THE INTERIOR AS A WITNESS: INTERWAR INTERIORS IN FLANDERS CAPTURED BY FORENSIC FILES

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ABSTRACT

The common resources for studying historic homes offer staged and idealized representations of interiors which reveal little about how these spaces were inhabited and by whom. With a rather limited scope of sources available for reliable images of “real,” vernacular home environments, I advocate for the use of forensic photography and files in interior design historical research to broaden our image and understanding of such modes of living. As a case study, I examine, by close inspection and visual analysis, 40 crime cases from the Belgian provinces of Antwerp and East-Flanders, recorded between 1929 and 1937, containing interior photographs, floor plans, and judicial reports. The sample spans different social strata and building types, living circumstances, and locations—urban, suburban, and rural, demonstrating how many of the people in that era lived in older houses, deprived of the newest sanitary, heating, and lighting amenities. It attests to the passing down over generations of rugs, furniture, utensils and decorative objects, and the randomness of their presence, with traces of gradual modernization, from washing machines to radios, club seats, and fashionable wallpapers. Forensic photographs offer a nonstaged representation of reality. Thus, they provide a reality check, showing how mainstream interiors were really used and how they evolved over a period of time.

INTRODUCTION: A “NEW” TYPE OF EVIDENCE FOR DESIGN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

As Penny Sparke noted, the “problem of the retrieval of the ‘real’ modern home,” is the limited scope of sources that could provide a reliable image thereof. Magazines, trade and exhibition catalogues, novels, inventories, diaries, and other accounts, which are the most common source types for studying the twentieth-century home, offer representations and descriptions of (parts of) interiors. However, such images are often staged, ideologically constructed, and idealized, making the modern interior an “object of desire.”¹ It is still “difficult to reconstruct whole living environments and even harder to understand how they were inhabited.”² This is all the more so for modest and mainstream interiors, which were seldom considered worth the effort of being depicted. If one finds any such images, they are usually chance hits, which are less suitable for systematic research.

Forensic files possess great potential for overcoming these lacunae, as the author seeks to demonstrate. Because murders, robberies, and sexual offenses often occur indoors and in all strata of society, crime scene investigation (CSI) files form a most valuable source type for studying a wide range of “real” historical interiors in a specific area, at a specific time and from a cross-section of the population. Containing reports and witness accounts, these files provide manifold data on the occupants at the time—whether they were owners or tenants: age, gender, social class, profession, financial situation, family composition, interrelatedness, and even personal character. Mainly information about the victim(s) is useful, but when the perpetrator also lived in the same dwelling, this information is relevant too. Next to a ground plan, at least of the floor(s) relevant for forensic investigation, photographs of the exterior and interior of the dwelling were also added beginning in the late nineteenth century, but only systematically from the late 1920s in Belgium. Newspapers also reported about serious crimes with the most salient details and sometimes published additional pictures taken on the spot. Such press accounts can
easily be traced since the victim’s name and the dates of the offense and trial are known. Together, all these documents form an unusually rich source for interior design historical research.

Yet, while crime scene photos of police department archives worldwide received some consideration, starting with Luc Sante in 1992,3 this source type is seldom used for interior design historical purposes. Jérémie Cerman utilized police records from belle époque Paris as one of many sources for his research into Art Nouveau wallpaper, but while he thematized this in his exhibition on the topic at the Musée du Papier Peint in Rixheim in 2015, he devoted little attention to this source of information in his book.5 The 20 detailed dollhouse-sized dioramas of domestic crime scenes created in the 1930s and 1940s by Frances Glessner Lee—America’s first female police captain—as instruction tools, called Nutshell studies of unexplained death, have received some interest but as a subject in themselves rather than as a source type.5

While the police investigator questions a crime scene and the images made thereof from a “whodunit” point of view, searching evidence, the interior design historian maintains yet another perspective, inspecting the setting for its own sake. This asks for a transposition of the gaze, focusing on the interior design elements and setting, apart from the knowledge of what happened there. Whereas the images’ purpose was the registration of the material traces of a violent act, such as blood stains, bullet traces, a corpse’s position or the altered appearance of a piece of furniture, which is made manifest in the indications often drawn and written on the surface of the printed photos, the researcher is urged to ignore and neutralize these, so as to bring the background to the fore. The space itself and its different facets, from wallpaper to furniture and candelabras, become an opportunity to investigate the domestic environment of common people. Through their arbitrary exposure as crime scenes, interiors that would otherwise never have been photographed or studied are now disclosed for scrutiny.

In this article, I explored the potential of forensic files for an integral study of historic interiors, including the plan layout and utilities, floor and wall coverings, and the furniture and objects—which are the three parts of this text. Forty crime cases investigated by the Belgian judicial police from 1929 through 1937 and now kept in the Belgian State Archives at Ghent and Antwerp-Beveren, are the sample.6 The selection criteria were the presence of a floor plan and a minimum of two photographs sufficiently showing a domestic interior (e.g., Figure 1). Mainly assize files were examined, as these quite often contained such resources due to the seriousness and nature of the facts. In Antwerp-Beveren, glass negatives were additionally studied. These are more easily skimmed visually; afterwards, the judicial files—not all assize files—for which they were made were searched via the old inventories. Most inhabitants in the sample were from the lower and middle classes—farmers, workers, and petty bourgeoisie—who were also most numerous in reality, but the houses of higher social strata are also to be found in the files. It concerns dwellings in the provinces of Antwerp and East-Flanders, where forensic laboratories were established in 1924 and 1925 respectively.7 They systematically started photographing crime scenes—next to investigating traces and drawing plans—as of the late 1920s, explaining the set timeframe. This was three decades later than the Paris police department, where Alphonse Bertillon instigated forensic methods, setting an international standard.8

Much of the literature on interwar housing in Belgium addresses modern(ist) housing—here understood as “a technical and aesthetic program, manifested in the years between the two world wars, known as the Modern Movement.”9 Modernist architects and designers designed for a cultural and financial elite. Since ca. 2000, traditionalist and regionalist housing forms and vernacular architecture have also received more attention.10 The studied forensic exhibits, around 130 photographs and 40 plans, can add to the knowledge of housing in interwar Flanders because they highlight a so far undisclosed vernacular architecture and material culture. They attest to more continuity than change—the idea of discontinuity being so essential to the literature of modernity: the continued living in old houses along traditional living practices,
and the passing down over generations of floors, furniture, utensils, and decorative objects. Advice on home renovation with a view to better hygiene, health, and more comfortable living conditions, which were disseminated internationally from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and increased during the interwar period, seem less widely followed by house owners and residents than we might expect from publicity and articles in contemporary architectural and women’s magazines. These primarily depicted newly built modern houses, fashionable and rational interiors ex novo, material-technical novelties, innovative household goods, and not (so much) the less aesthetic or less sophisticated interiors in older houses of a majority of the population, which represent slow modernization and accretion over time. After all, many households could, would, or did not always keep up with the latest interior design trends, for whatever reason: taste, disinterest, or finance—Belgium experienced an economic depression following the stock market crash of 1929. Many households and demographics were squeezed financially and held on to what they had acquired in the 1920s.
Nevertheless, if one zooms in, the photographs do display signs of the inhabitants being up-to-date, attesting to the constant modification of interiors “as life goes on within them,” to the versatility of domestic material realities and to the complexity of the notion “modern.” As such, forensic files could add to a more nuanced defining of modernisms—plural—as “a multiplicity of responses to modernity including and exceeding the strictures of the Modern Movement in architecture and design, responses that negotiate with tradition as well as newness,” and that includes oppositions such as “modernity and nostalgia; urban and rural; past and future.” As Penny Sparke argued: “Modern interiors could be clothed in period styles as well as in contemporary ones.”

Via visual analysis and close inspection of the selected crime scene photographs and plans, I demonstrate the source’s potential to broaden our image and understanding of vernacular interiors and more or less modern living conditions, using these examples from interwar Flanders as a case study. It does not concern aesthetic designs, idealized images or top-down recommendations from normative bodies, but uncensored images of a bottom-up, everyday use of banal spaces and things. In many respects, the materials confirm findings by Leen Meganck and by Sofie De Caigny, based on a wide variety of other sources, about the “nineteenth-century” housing situation of the lower and middle classes in interwar Flanders, that housing professionals and household experts wanted to improve.

The sample includes rental and owner-occupied properties in the city centers of Antwerp and Ghent, their suburbs, and the countryside, and diverse building types. Only the rooms relevant to the CSI were pictured, so that we only get a partial image. Crucial spaces for getting an idea of the living comfort, such as kitchen, bathroom, and toilet, could be missing, with the risk of being misleading. However, over the whole of the files, a diversity of rooms comes to the fore, and floor plans and judicial reports often unravel additional spaces, mention their function, and add information, such as the placement of furniture (e.g., Figure 1b) and who slept where. One of the greatest assets for interior design historical research is that forensic photographs offer a nonstaged representation of interiors as real, lived-in spaces. There was no time or permission to clean up, resulting in unmade beds and dirty socks. Therefore, one gets the uncomfortable feeling of being a shameless voyeur watching an indoor intimacy without the residents’ consent; no visitor was expected here, except for the “best room.”

**KEEPING UP APPEARANCES: BOURGEOIS PLAN LAYOUT AND MODEST UTILITIES**

The studied cases involved various housing types: workers’ (11) and bourgeois (16) terraced houses and mansions (5) in towns and villages, detached farms (5), country houses (2), and a cottage villa in the countryside. The premises were built between approximately 1860 and 1936. In no less than 14 cases, the domestic function was combined with a commercial one—café (11 cases) or retail—in the front room(s) of the building, often kept by a live-in woman, generating a spatial porosity between the private and the public, between women’s unpaid work in the household and her (badly) paid labor. Only in a few cases was the entire building inhabited by a single nuclear family. More often—and in all five mansions—it was divided into flats or rooms rented to various households. Family members across generations often lived under the same roof. In an Antwerp flat, for instance, when separated from her husband, a woman and their two children moved in with her mother, sister, and brother. The grandmother and two grandchildren shared the largest bedroom, the two adult sisters another one, and their brother had his own room. In the example from Niel in 1934, the youngest daughter shared the room with her live-in aunt, a widow. While housing counselors recommended separate furnished children’s rooms, a separate function for each room, and the installation of bedrooms on the upper floors, many a bedroom was located on the ground floor due to lack of space (Figure 2). In an Antwerp case from 1929, two elderly sisters shared a bedroom on the second floor and rented out the remaining rooms to four immigrants. Next to these, there were four...
Figure 2 Photographic service of the Antwerp judicial police, view of the parents’ ground-floor bedroom in a terraced house in Antwerp, glass negative, 1929. Belgian State Archives of Antwerp-Beveren (RA8n), Labo. GP Antwerp, box nr. 395, neg. nr. 2157.

Figure 3 Photographic service of the Antwerp judicial police, view of a bedroom/living room in a terraced house in Antwerp, glass negative, 1930. RA8n, Labo GP Antwerp, box nr. 409, neg. nr. 3008.

Figure 4 Photographic service of the Ghent judicial police, view of the first floor room of a woman in a terraced house in Ghent, black-and-white photograph (original print), 1937. RAG, HA Oost, box nr. 931, file nr. 8404.
one-room flats, in which people slept, cooked, ate, and washed (Figures 3 and 4). Such a minimal housing formula—scarcely mentioned in scholarly literature—was a reality for a substantial part of the population, especially for single people. Particular in Antwerp was a lodging house for long-term residents in a 1890s mansion near the Museum of Fine Arts, with a communal dining area with some standing and an impressive hallway with marble and a statue of a woman holding a lamp on the staircase pole.

In simple farmsteads or narrow workers’ houses, on the contrary, the front door directly opened into the living room, as was also the case for commercial premises such as a pub house or shop. In a few houses, the kitchen was located in the basement, which indicates that, at the time of construction, kitchen staff was assumed, which increasingly became a luxury during the interwar period, internationally and in Belgium. Live-in service personnel was mentioned for two spacious, detached residences—the cottage villa and a country house—which included a library, a smoking room with ‘‘sofa and club chairs,’’ and a garage for their car. Most of the studied crimes took place in row houses with a traditional nineteenth-century bourgeois plan layout (e.g., Figure 1b), with a division between front rooms, meant for representation and leisure, and a back, for (women’s) household work—cooking, cleaning, laundry, and sewing (foot treadle sewing machines were present in at least four cases). During the interwar period, approximately 60% of all bourgeois houses in Ghent had up to four indoor toilets, and 87% of the newly-built middle-class houses had at least one. In two Antwerp houses, pictured in 1929 and 1931, the water closet (WC) was located on the mezzanine between the first and second floors, as a protruding volume at the back, with a small window. Yet, in many of the studied cases, the latrine—sometimes merely a primitive privy—was only accessible through the courtyard, and was thus supplemented by a night bucket or “po(t)” in the nightstand.

Belgian architect Victor Horta integrated toilets with water flush and odor sealing, even on the upper floors, of the Brussels town houses that he designed from the 1890s onwards, and the urban bourgeoisie soon followed this ideal. In the 1930s, some newly-built villas in and around Ghent had up to four indoor toilets, and 87% of the newly-built middle-class houses had at least one. In two Antwerp houses, pictured in 1929 and 1931, the water closet (WC) was located on the mezzanine between the first and second floors, as a protruding volume at the back, with a small window. Yet, in many of the studied cases, the latrine—sometimes merely a primitive privy—was only accessible through the courtyard, and was thus supplemented by a night bucket or “po(t)” in the nightstand.

A separate fitted bathroom was present in the two most spacious and quite recently built premises, as the judicial reports and a sales advertisement reveal, but no photos were taken of it—there were no bathroom crimes in the studied sample. In an Antwerp apartment pictured in 1929, there was a dressing room with a porcelain washbasin with tap water, and care...
products on the shelf, and access to a bathtub with gas water heater in an adjacent room (Figure 6a). Even though the presence of a bathroom in newly-built bourgeois houses in Ghent in the 1930s rose to 91%, only about 1 in 10 inhabitants had (access to) a bath by 1947.31 This required a connection to the city water and gas networks, which were not yet available for many older houses.32 In one Ghent case, the resident was said to wash herself at the pump.33 Ghent villas, bourgeois houses, and flats were connected to the city water network during the interwar period, but in many working-class houses the water was still pumped up from a private water well.34 The forensic materials contain few images of taps but several references to cistern water: a pump on the courtyard, ewers in various styles on the marble-topped cabinets in the bedrooms, or a bluestone sink called “pump stone” in sculleries and kitchens.

In the kitchen of a newly built country house in Kapellen, photographed in 1936, there was a fixed sink with double taps and two dish racks on the left and right, in front of a horizontal window35 (Figure 7), just as drawn in Christine Frederick’s Household engineering; scientific

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**Figure 5** Photographic service of the Antwerp judicial police, view of a kitchen in a terraced house in Deurne, black-and-white photograph (original print), 1935. RABn, HA Antwerp, file nr. 3617.

**Figure 6** (a) Photographic service of the Antwerp judicial police, view of two upstairs rooms in a terraced house in Antwerp, glass negatives, 1929. RABn, Labo GP Antwerp, box nr. 401, neg.nrs. 2431 and 2429. (b) Photographic service of the Antwerp judicial police, view of two upstairs rooms in a terraced house in Antwerp, glass negatives, 1929. RABn, Labo GP Antwerp, box nr. 401, neg.nrs. 2431 and 2429.
management in the home (Chicago, 1920). Frederick’s “laborsaving kitchen,” focused on efficiency and conceived from the perspective of declining domestic staff, inspired Grethe Schütte-Lihotzky for the design of her functional Frankfurter Küche (1926). Such international insights also found their way into Belgium, among others, through architectural and women’s magazines. Shortly afterwards, the Belgian architect Louis-Herman De Koninck designed a modular, fitted kitchen, which was exhibited in 1930 in the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts on the occasion of the third Congrès Internationale d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Marketed as “Cubex” by the fabricating firm Van de Ven, it was first installed in a modernist Brussels house in 1931, with a fixed sink with double taps in front of the window. A drawing of “a modern kitchen sink” featuring a similar arrangement was published in 1932 in a Flemish women’s weekly. The fitted kitchen would, however, become mainstream in Flanders only after World War II.

In many lower- and middle-class cases, the living conditions were like those in the late nineteenth century, as described by Marie Du Caju in De Degelijke Huisvrouw (The Decent Housewife) from 1898. Particularly, the small rural dwellings and the older, urban workers’ houses lacked the basic sanitary, heating, and lighting facilities that arose in newly-built houses during the interwar period. Only photographs of the recently built country house and villa show radiators (5% of our sample), indicating central heating, presumably coal-fired (Figures 7 and 8). In the 1930s in Ghent, 87% of newly-built villas for the upper classes had central heating, compared to 37% of newly-built middle-class houses. Most common in the studied photographs, though, are the labor-intensive, cast-iron wood and/or coal stove, for instance the multifunctional nineteenth-century flat-tube stove (“Leuvense stoof”), columnar stoves of the Godin brand (e.g., type 2003 from 1920) or Les Fonderies Bruxelloises (type Favori) (Figure 9), and especially the cast-iron cooker (cuisinière) on (wood, peat, and/or) coal—distinct from the coal bin with coal scoop next to it (Figures 1, 3–5). In workers and farmers’ dwellings, as well as in some flats, there was sometimes only one multi-purpose heating appliance with a cooking function around which life revolved, especially in winter, whereas in middle-class homes, a cooker in the kitchen was supplemented by stoves in the living areas.

Gas stoves, odorless and easier, cleaner and cheaper to use, were on the rise during the interwar period, first in and around the bigger cities. In 1929, a few compact ornate examples of the Brussels Nestor Martin or “AP” brand were photographed in dwellings in the center of Antwerp (Figure 6b). In around a third of the investigated cases, the photographs and/or floor...
plans also featured a compact table-top gas cooker (réchaud) with usually two burners, a handy novelty to complement the cuisinière, especially in summer (Figures 4 and 5).\textsuperscript{48} While electric cookers too were actively promoted in Flemish advertisements and magazines in the 1930s,\textsuperscript{49} there is no trace of them in the studied sample.

Yet, most of the pictured premises featured electricity and electric lighting, operated by a rotary or rocker switch made of Bakelite or porcelain. The Ghent electricity network, installed in 1904, was greatly expanded between the wars; by 1947, almost 9 out of 10 houses were electrically lit.\textsuperscript{50} In the 1930s, manifold articles on the “electrified house” appeared in the Brussels magazine Bâtir: Revue mensuelle illustrée d’architecture, d’art et de décoration. On some forensic photographs, there are still examples of kerosene lamps and gas lighting but its rarity seems to
While Modernist architects advocated indirect lighting and several light points, the number of light sources in the crime scenes was generally limited to one pendant lamp per room (sometimes even a bulb was missing). Next to simple round lampshades in (green) enameled metal plate or opaline glass, the photos show Art Nouveau bell-shaped and Art Deco closed models made of frosted or opaline glass. Other shades were made from modern fabrics with trimmings, fringes, or beads, some in Art Deco zigzag shapes (Figures 4 and 5).

**AN ECLECTIC DECOR OF DAILY LIFE: LASTING FLOORS AND VARIEGATED WALL COVERINGS**

The ceiling, floor, and wall coverings in the studied interiors are at odds with the stereotypical Modernist image of plain white walls and minimalist furnishings, which has already been corrected by many scholars. The forensic images demonstrate that the interwar period was indeed also the era of Art Deco, and testify to a great diversity of older styles too, such as neo-styles and Art Nouveau. The black-and-white photographs show the patterns of floor and wall coverings but not their colors—a limitation of the source as these interior components seem to have been strikingly colorful and variegated.

As floors were laid at the time of a building’s construction, and since their renovation involved a great investment of time, effort, and money, many floors photographed in the 1930s were still the originals. In the surviving houses, some original floors are still there today. Terrazzo floors, also known as “granito,” which were popular in the 1930s, were observed twice (Figure 5). References to parquet floors were found for the cottage and an Antwerp manor house. Furthermore, the ground floor was mostly tiled. In three cases, there were worn pavers. More often, they were square, hexagonal, or octagonal ceramic tiles or their cheaper and somewhat larger cement versions (Figure 9). In seven dwellings (17.5%), it seems from the pictures that monotone gray square cement tiles—that were the cheapest and very common in product brochures of the time—were laid in half-brick bond, and in another seven they were black and white, laid in a checkerboard pattern, which was recommended to give a somewhat outdated interior a modern cachet. Such tiles were presented in pre-war and postwar trade catalogues from various Belgian firms, such as Ch. Eggermont & Soeur and Dutry-Massy in Ghent (Figure 10). More often still (in 11 cases or 27.5%), decorative, abstract (floral) patterns were used, sometimes with a decorative border (more expensive), in Art Nouveau or Art Deco style. On the ground floor of a house in Ledeberg, built around 1900 and photographed in 1936, three different tile designs could be recognized (Figure 1a). In the hallway and kitchen, there were two diverse colorful ceramic imitation mosaic tiles with rich borders, laid identically to “combinaison no. 9” in a 1905 trade catalogue of a ceramic firm from Saint-Ghislain, and “disposition no. 129” in a trade catalogue of La Céramique Nationale from Wilkenraedt, respectively. In the scullery, that was possibly added later, one can recognize, through an open door and on an additional newspaper photo, a more modern tile pattern that is identical to no. 107 in a trade catalogue from 1903 for a tile factory in La Louvière. The popular square black-and-white tiles with a star design found in East Flanders and Antwerp were offered by several companies, such as Boch Frères & Compagnie and the Ghent cement tile factories Dutry-Massy and Fièvé, according to their trade catalogues from the belle époque (Figure 10). In a terraced house in Deurne, photographed in 1930, such a floor was laid in two variants: a light star against a dark background in the front room, with an Art Nouveau border, and the other way round in the adjoining bedroom, with an Art Deco zigzag border.

The upper stores were invariably fitted with plank flooring (Figures 4 and 10). In four cases, they were painted or stamped with a carpet imitation, as advised by Du Caju for easier maintenance and because “they do not absorb moisture and unhealthy vapors like without.” For comfort reasons, plank floors were covered with fixed carpet (one case) or—more often—woven or
In some instances, they were covered with “balatum” or linoleum, an affordable and simple way to modernize the home (Figure 8). Not only could it be laid by the resident himself, “balatum” was “economical,” “practical,” and “decorative,” and attractive for “its impermeability, softness of contact, and ease of maintenance.” In two bedrooms, there were lined animal skins (tiger and bear) (Figure 6b). These were popular in middle-class interiors in the second half of the nineteenth century, as illustrated by Henry Havard’s *L’art dans la Maison* (1884) and Belgian interior paintings, such as those by Gustave De Jonghe or Frans Verhas. Around 1900, “lined and trimmed” animal skins were sold “with or without head” at the Brussels department store *Au Bon Marché*, among others. It seems that such skins made a comeback in Flanders in the 1930s among the higher classes; a large polar bear skin with head features prominently in a picture of the highly modish master bedroom, fully furnished in 1938, in the sumptuous villa of Marie Decoene and her husband in Courtrai.

Although Modernist architects officially rejected wallpaper as a wall covering, and household and home experts internationally and in Flanders began advocating paint as a more hygienic alternative from around 1900 onwards, wallpaper remained the most common wall covering in the late 1920s and 1930s in Flanders, as judged from the photographed crime scenes. Only for certain spaces is it uncertain and one court file attests that the occupant himself had painted the stairwell. Bâtir stated in 1935 that “wallpaper triumphs once more, an economical and infinitely flexible material that pliably follows the caprices of fashion.” Moreover, wallpaper camouflaged irregularities, mold and moisture stains, and it brought color and coziness indoors. As it was easier and cheaper to replace than floor coverings, the pictured walls generally look more modish than the floors. Nevertheless, in some crime scenes, the paper looked shabby or detached from the wall. In a terraced house in Gentbrugge, two rooms on the first floor were redecorated by the new tenants (a newly married couple) upon their arrival in 1935, assisted by...
a friend.  

Apparently, no professional was involved either in two other cases, judging by the amateurish way in which the wall was papered. In a crime scene in Temse where a reconstruction of the facts took place 2 months later, the wallpaper that had been damaged with vitriol by the perpetrator had been replaced in the meantime. The application of the new paper can thus be dated fairly precisely, between April and June 1933. This is, however, no guarantee for the age of the paper or its design; the first wallpaper seems at first sight more modern than the newer one.

The wallpapers and wall arrangements in the forensic photographs offer a glimpse of the great diversity of trends during the interwar period. In terms of design, there were vertical stripes on a light background, naturalistic or stylized floral motifs, and multi-colored abstract, geometric shapes, as well as combinations of these (flowers over a geometric pattern). A 1936 case presented an oriental decor including elephants, pagodas, and parasols on a dark background (Figure 9). In some cases, the wallpaper photographed could be linked to a specific design, for instance, a striped wallpaper from 1920 to 1921 by the Brussels firm Usines Peters-Lacroix (U.P. L.), or to preserved samples from elsewhere, such as three interwar fragments found in Brussels houses.  

Frequently, the papered wall was divided into panels (panneaux) surrounded by (plain) borders separated by a “galloon,” as was promoted internationally and in Belgium around 1930, even though this was more expensive and labor-intensive (Figure 1a). Printed or stenciled friezes occurred four times (Figure 6a,b).

Paneling, to protect the bottom wall and to camouflage rising damp, was standard, sometimes in marble or wood, but much more often (in half of the cases) their cheaper substitute: wallpaper, painted marble- or wood imitation, or asbestos sheets with wood impressions. Fireplaces were lined with veined marble or natural stone slabs (or their cheaper, painted imitation), according to more or less modern styles, but rarely on the sides, which were usually papered—the cheaper option (Figures 2, 4, 8, and 9). Twice, the plastered ceilings were also papered; in two other cases, they were painted with a high-gloss varnish—easier to wash, and three unpainted beam ceilings occurred. The interior carpentry was usually dark, varnished, stained, or painted in wood imitation or in a light color. With one exception, the interior doors were predominantly panel doors, sometimes equipped with textured, etched or stained glass, and possibly made at the Dutch Bruynzeel factory, founded in 1921, which soon exported to Belgium.  

FILLED RATHER THAN FURNISHED: A HETEROGENEOUS ASSEMBLY OF FURNITURE AND OBJECTS

Forensic photos provide evidence of the slow modernization or change of the interiors represented, and accretion over time. As such, they form a counterpoint to the staged pictures and drawings of mostly ex novo interiors in architectural journals and popular magazines, which mediated (interior) architectural designs. Such images often displayed homogeneous furniture arrangements as designed, artful scenographies of modern life (styles), often before the actual occupation. The crime scene interiors, conversely, especially those of the lower and middle classes, seemed filled—rather than furnished—with vernacular furniture and objects. Together, they formed a heterogeneous vocabulary of random pieces jumbled together—like the saying “something new, something old, something borrowed, something blue.” Some furniture was passed on by previous generations, which may explain why even in the most modest living quarters, there was usually a (heirloom) piece with a certain quality, such as a neo-Flemish Renaissance sideboard and/or a neo-Baroque wardrobe (Figures 3 and 4). Wardrobes were often given or bought—new or second-hand—on the occasion of a wedding, as part of a matching bedroom ensemble.

The investigated crime scenes confirm Van Caudenberg’s and Heynen’s earlier “suspicion that the kitchens of most readers of those [architectural] magazines were still a mishmash of purchased and
self-made furniture” and that in Flanders in the interwar period “the fully standardized and built-in kitchen, promoted by architectural discourse, had not yet found actual application in most middle-class and bourgeois families.” While fitted furniture, such as the Cubex kitchen, emerged in the houses of Belgium’s economic and cultural elite in the 1930s, the forensic photos present only detached furniture, except for a built-in bed with “fixed closet,” which was, however, more reminiscent of the alcove condemned by household experts. One bluestone sink was joined by a simple fitting kitchen counter with open shelves and a beveled corner so as not to obstruct the passage. This was custom-made, possibly by the resident—a carpenter, as the judicial file reveals. 

Many of the photographed interiors were characterized by simplicity and (multi)functionality—actually hallmarks of modernism too; while modernism was constructed as contrary to former means of living, it contained a lot of not so radical components. The furniture in the forensic photos was mostly essential (it served to eat, sleep, wash, and dress), and logically positioned, reflecting a need: the washbasin with mirror near the window for sufficient light, the table (often with a cutlery drawer) near the cuisinière for preparing and consuming meals, the armchair by the stove for warmth, a chair next to the radio to listen attentively, etc. Although personal taste must have played a role—and presumably women had a central part in this—these interiors and goods first had to function for their occupants. It mainly involved basic furniture types—cupboards, (arm)chairs, tables, beds, wardrobes, and commodities—except for some examples of an étagère (Figure 1), a barbière (Figure 6), sellette (plant or statuette stand) (Figure 9), and sechoir (drying rack) (Figures 5 and 6a). A sofa—a regular feature in typical salon ensembles—was surprisingly rare (e.g., Figure 1b) but some bedrooms had a reclining sofa of the chaise longue or méridienne type, upholstered in exotic or fashionable fabrics (Figures 2 and 6b). Even folding chairs and seats designed for the garden showed up regularly in Flemish interbellum interiors (Figure 9). Most items were the product of local design traditions and can be considered “vernacular furniture.” They were mostly solid, traditional wooden (period) furniture with turned pieces, made by unrecorded craftsmen from local materials, typically dark in color—from a varnish, polish, or more expensive wood type. An exception was the so-called “English bed” (Figure 3). This economical, mostly white lacquered metal-bedstead, which was recommended because of its hygienic and practical advantages, and featured prominently in trade catalogues of Belgian department and furniture retail stores from the late nineteenth century on, was possibly imported from Birmingham. The light, elegant chairs in bent wood seen in 14 cases (Figures 1 and 7) could have been the originals of the German-Austrian Thonet company, which had sales points in Belgium from 1865 onwards and later opened its own stores in Brussels and Antwerp. They may also have stemmed from the Köhn company from Vienna, which had a sales outlet in Antwerp until at least 1920, or from the Estonian firm Luther, established in 1877 and specialized, until 1940, in thin plywood (contreplaqué). However, judging by the leg connections, most chairs visible in the forensic photos seem locally manufactured. Belgian companies such as Cambier Frères and F. Carton Herman from Ath produced analogous, affordable chairs from local bent beech wood from the 1880s onwards, although with small differences and typical characteristics, such as a special bracket connection (entrelacs) for which the Cambier firm obtained a patent in 1899. Both companies had their peak during the belle époque, when they had hundreds of employees, their own shops, and won prizes at world fairs. In a crime scene in Turnhout stood Carton-Herman’s chair no. 212, based on Thonet’s no. 20, and in yet another site were Cambier’s chairs nos 653 and 143½ (Siège trapèze Entrelacs), based on Thonet’s no. 56 and no. 100 “La Verna,” popular in cafés. Rattan chairs, sold by local stores and by “strange peddlers,” were present in at least seven cases.

The photographed chairs, tables, and cupboards ranged from simple country-style with piping, over Neo-Flemish Renaissance, to more refined dark models. Most bedroom furniture was crafted in French Louis-styles, except for an Art Deco wardrobe with stylized flowers in woodcarving in a modern terraced house in Deurne, and two bedroom ensembles in the bambou style (Figure 2). The latter, which featured in belle époque trade catalogues from Belgian department stores, tied in with “the taste for the everyday exotic in the home.” The Kapellen country house contained...
the most modern piece (Figure 7): a cabinet that was wider and more stylized than traditional buffet cupboards (Figures 1 and 4), and that became modish in modern kitchens internationally from the mid-1920s, before the breakthrough of the fitted kitchen. It had simplified shapes and no ornament—more efficient as it attracted less dust, but still had two glass doors as a showcase and a deeper center section where the residents put ceramic cachepots and a clock on a crocheted piece—impracticalities against which household experts reacted.

Appliances made their slow appearance. While some interiors still featured buffet pianos and a gramophone with a horn, there was a radio in at least four kitchens/dining rooms. In 1933, an affected family in Temse not only owned a lamp radio in Bakelite housing and black lacquered wood, probably of the Philips brand, but also an electric washing machine. Even though women’s magazines made ample publicity for such washing machines, they were still expensive and thus exceptional. In this case, the resident perpetrator was an electrician who occasionally manufactured and repaired radios at home and helped his boarding family to “improve and enlarge the house.” An advertisement for the sale of the contents of the Merksem cottage shortly after the crime also mentioned a washing machine and a “radio with furniture.” No reference to a refrigerator was found, although it was an upcoming trend among the affluent.

The forensic photographs feature a broad typology of mainly mass-produced kitchen utensils and household goods in and on cupboards and shelves, made of various, more or less precious materials: crockery, cutlery, glasses, decanters, pots, pans, saucers, whistling kettles, coffee and tea pots, coffee grinders, cups, storage jars, butter dishes, and salt shakers, but also irons, buckets, tubs, soap dishes, etc. They provide an image of the interwar consumer culture, still containing many things from the belle époque, challenging an easy association of mass-produced goods with modernity.

The pictures also offer a sample of the linen present in modal Flemish interiors: sheets, pillowcases, table- and dishcloths made of plain or printed cotton, for which Ghent was an important production center. In the Kapellen country house, the light-checked fabric of the tablecloth was identical to that of the curtains (Figure 7). Floral curtains were more common. Embroidered and crocheted coverings, which protected and decorated beds, seats, cupboards, and mantelpieces were numerous and presumably often home-made (Figures 1, 2, 6b, 7, 9).

Regardless of an increasing focus on sober, modern furnishings, the forensic photographs demonstrate a clear penchant for decoration. Walls and chimneys were decorated with framed wall clocks (régulateur), mirrors with ornate cornices in neo-styles or Art Deco (Figures 1, 2, 4), framed studio portraits of family members (daguerreotypes in a one-room flat), art reproductions, (religious) prints or exceptionally, paintings. In one case, the perpetrator gave the resident “paintings to decorate her drawing room.” A Flemish magazine for farmers’ wives advocated “reproductions of great painters,” but Mother Mary “must also have a place in the living room.” Indeed, in Catholic households, one sees prints of Mother Mary, saint’s statues under a bell jar, and crucifixes on the wall or mantle (Figures 2 and 4). Mantelpieces and sideboards housed the most cherished accessories: precious or industrial showpieces and trinkets, inherited or received as (wedding) gifts, such as statuettes of female figures, children, or animals (Figures 8 and 9), symbols of a nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. Classically, a mantel clock (often Art Deco models) is flanked by matching candelabra, vases or aiguëres in neo-styles, Empire, Oriental, Art Nouveau, or Art Deco (Figures 1, 2, 4–6, 8). In addition to their aesthetic, religious or emotional value, these possessions ensured a minimum of coziness, homeliness, and (bourgeois) status, for as Du Caju observed: “The way of life, the domestic habits and the activities of the family are revealed to the visitor by the household goods.”

**CONCLUSION**

The studied sample of forensic files from a nine-year period (1929–1937) discloses a multitude of living conditions in Flanders, especially of the lower and middle classes. Technical and stylistic
innovations in architecture, interior design, and household appliances did not penetrate into the average interwar home as quickly as one might expect from contemporary publicity and press, and more recent handbooks on the histories of architecture and design, often focusing on novelties and modernity. The files reveal vernacular interiors with often relatively limited comfort and a mix of old and new things, through purchase or inheritance. They were presumably guided mainly by budgetary and practical considerations. The material provides additional contemporary evidence for the findings of architecture and design historians such as Leen Meganck, Sofie De Caigny, and Hilde Heynen, who studied housing in Flanders in the interwar period.

If electricity, gas, sewage, and tap water were not installed when the house was built, they were not so easily done afterwards. Floor coverings and carpentry, fixed during the home’s construction, were durable and not quickly replaced, so the images show floors that were laid during the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. Wall coverings, conversely, were more subject to wear and tear, easier and cheaper to replace, and therefore followed mainstream fashion trends more closely, so that the images provide a sample of popular wallpapers in Flanders during the 1930s, among which were many variegated Art Deco patterns. Over time, the interiors were filled rather than furnished, with a heterogenous assemblage of pieces of furniture and objects. Solid wooden cupboards, tables, and closets and dining and bedroom ensembles in various neo- and more modern styles, which were inherited, bought, or given on marriage, often had to last long. They were complemented by lighter, cheaper chairs, wicker armchairs or “English” metal-bedsteads, which were acquired second-hand or bought new depending on a household’s needs. Thus, the forensic images display manifold objects from the belle époque in combination with more timely features and devices.

The images and plans reveal interiors as they really were, as signs of a slow modernization process and incorporating long-lasting characteristics such as simplicity and functionality. Hence, based on our Flemish case study from the 1930s, forensic archives form a still unexplored but most useful source type, providing visual and textual evidence and a reality check when researching historical interiors. The materials attest to how, then as now, various styles, old and new, tradition and modernity, and all in-between on a wide continuum, were combined in organically grown interiors according to budget, time, habits, and taste. Thus, archival crime scene investigatory documents concerning interior spaces possess great potential for future interior design historical research.

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ENDNOTES


Sparke, The Modern Interior, 12.

Sugg Ryan, Ideal homes, 92, 60.

Sparke, The Modern Interior, 10.

Meganck, “Bouwen te Gent”; De Caigny, Bouwen aan een nieuwe thuis.


On the often “invisible” rental of rooms or apartments in one-family houses during the 1930s, see Meganck, “Bouwen te Gent,” 150–51.

RABn, Assize Court Antwerp (HA Antwerp), file 3569.


Also mentioned in newspaper articles, for example, Het Handelsblad, March 21, 1929, 3.

Carpets were especially recommended in winter against cold feet, e.g. in Du Caju, Brussels, State Archives, War Damage Files, doss.nr. 3,024,805, photos. For example, publicity sheet, 1899, no. 18; Album no. 15, 1908, 4: ‘dalles’ nrs. 1–2. On tiles in Belgium, see Mario Baec’s publications, a.o. “De schoonheid van het materiaal: Belgische vloer- en wandtegels in het interbelluminterieur,” Gentse Bijdragen tot de Interieurgeschiedenis 35 (2006): 127–58. As Baec advised, the tile size and thus the material—ceramic (15 × 15 cm) or cement (20 × 20 or 25 × 25 cm)—can be deduced from e.g. a doorway or chair of standard size on the photographs.

Trade catalogues from the Compagnie Générale des Produits Céramiques (Société Anonyme) (Saint-Ghislain, 1905), 11; La Céramique Nationale, Société Anonyme (Welkenraedt, n.d.), W. 323, ‘Disposition no 129.’ (with thanks to M. Baec and P. Rakhovitch).

Moordzaak in de Frans Latourstraat te Ledeberg,” De Gentenaar, November 3, 1936, 1; Trade catalogue Société Anonyme des Carrelages du Centre, La Louvière. Fabrique de carreaux en laitier: système breveté. Spécialité de dessins riches, Album nr. 2 (La Louvière, 1903), nr. 107 (with thanks to M. Baec and P. Rakhovitch).

Du Caju, De degelijke huisvrouw, 80.

Examples in the Ghent Industrial Museum: inv. nos. V08502, V35134. Various photos show flytraps with adhesive strips hung next to the lamp. For instance, photos with neg.nrs. X015323, X024787 and 20,054,046.

Trade catalogues from the Grands Magasins du Centre sold identical folding chairs as ‘garden furniture’ (UG BIB.VL.BL HIfI.M.059.02).

As defined by Bernard D. Cotton, “Furniture, vernacular,” in Grove Art Online, 2003, 10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T030234


*Carton-Herman*, s.p.

For example, the Ghent furniture retail stores of Ad. Paternotte and G. Theunissen sold wicker furniture, and warned against “strange peddlers” offering “imitations.” (UG BIB.VL.BL.HFI.A.031.09).

Sugg Ryan, *Ideal homes*, 163. For example, trade catalogues of François Pelsener fils Fabrique de meubles (copies at Ghent University Library). Art Deco beds, such as those illustrated in an article by Maurice Deletang on modern beds in *Bâtir* (50 (1937): 1028–29) were not found in the photographs.

De Caigny, *Bouwen aan een nieuwe thuis*, 95–96; Sugg Ryan, op.cit., 124–125. Similar models e.g. in the trade catalogues of the Brussels Galerie du Meuble (“Tout en ordre”) [copy at Grimbergen, MOT, RCB 0172.01].

De Caigny, *Bouwen aan een nieuwe thuis*, 143.

The model resembles Philips types 834A and 938A from 1933 (copies in the Ghent Industrial Museum).


RAG, Assize Court East-Flanders (HA Oost), 906, file 8334: “Akte van beschuldiging.”

Schoone Meubelen.”


For terminology and use, see a.o. Du Caju, *De degelijke huisvrouw*, 26–35, and contemporary advertisements from the belle époque, e.g. for the Brussels *À la Ménagère* (UG BIB.VLBL.HFII.M.011.09).

Women’s magazines in the 1930s such as *Het Rijk der Vrouw* were full of illustrated DIY articles for women to create or decorate their own textiles and handicrafts for the home.

RAG, HA Oost, 906, file 8334.

*De Boerin* 16, no. 7 (1928): 141–42. Du Caju (*De degelijke huisvrouw*, 37) recommended “a couple of neatly printed stone plates, with oak frames.” Common too were functional tear-off calendars (*almanacs*).

Pre- and post-war trade catalogues contain countless examples of “garnitures de cheminées,” e.g. for the Brussels *Grands Magasins du Centre* (UG BIB.VLBL.HFII.M.059.01–04).

Du Caju, *De degelijke huisvrouw*, 13.

**BIOGRAPHY**

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