

Brussels, Belgium

AgwA

The eastern end of Schaerbeek, between Vergote Square and Josaphat Park, has been slowly gentrifying over the years, attracting young couples and families for its cosy atmosphere reminiscent of London's Notting Hill, while prices still remain relatively affordable. Jacques Brel and René Magritte both used to live in the neighbourhood, and Victor Horta built his first significant house, the Maison Autrique, just a few blocks south of the municipality's elaborate town hall, inaugurated by King Leopold II in 1887. Today, the western side of Schaerbeek reveals a dramatically different picture. The walk up from the Brussels-North railway station does not portray the most glamorous views of the Belgian capital: home to deprived immigrant populations facing high unemployment rates (reaching 22 per cent in 2016), the neighbourhood has instigated several Neighbourhood Contracts in an attempt to revitalise itself.

AgwA's studio is located in an old industrial complex, a project that itself was the result of a Neighbourhood Contract. 'We set up the office here because it was affordable,' admits Benoît Vandembuleke, one of the two founding partners of the young practice. He tells me that the office is supposedly shut for the summer holidays, but they have two competition deadlines approaching and a small team is busy finalising the hand-ins. Most of their work is won through competitions yet, lately, they have too often been relegated to the most unfortunate outcome, the second position – their most recent disappointment was losing the Citroën showroom and factory conversion into Brussels' very own Centre Pompidou, a proposal they developed in collaboration with de Vylder Vinck Taillieu and 6a.

A lot of the practice's early projects were the result of Neighbourhood Contracts, challenging the architects to work with very tight budgets on small urban infill sites. In Brussels' southern neighbourhood of Forest, they built a narrow youth house where they opted for split-level floors in order to 'give the sensation of space': wherever you stand, you always see beyond the room you are in, up to the floor above or out onto the garden. Back in Schaerbeek itself, some two hundred metres away from their office, the Kriekelaar Flemish Community Centre required a new, fully insulated auditorium to host concerts and events housed within the existing building. Effectively a box within a box, the new theatre space is a disguised, facade-less piece of architecture, a purely pragmatic response to a problem of acoustics. While the brief by definition left the designers little manoeuvre to develop an

aesthetic proposition, they attempted to give each spatial component its own material characteristic: cement blocks for the auditorium, green timber slats in the corridor, a semi-circular arrangement of honeycomb clay blocks in the entrance hall, and a monolithic spiral staircase cast in concrete.

For AgwA's three partners Vandembuleke, Harold Fallon, and Benoît Burquel, architecture is about clean geometries and honest materials that speak for themselves to create spatial frameworks devoid of superfluous additions. Having also trained as engineers, they revel in stripping their architecture back down to the essentials, making it a personal challenge to devise a spatial proposition with an almost imperceptible physical presence. Beyond the technical defiance, they deeply believe in the importance to think about the efficiency and durability of a piece of architecture. 'Understanding architecture as big structural systems enables us to design highly flexible spaces', states Burquel, 'that have the potential to be used for different purposes in future.' When asked to extend the playground of a nurse school in Antwerp, they lightly dropped a scalene triangle sitting on stilts, acting as both a canopy for the courtyard and a new elevated playspace. By coming very close to the school's walls, the triangular structure creates new relationships between existing spaces.

So far, their work has been relatively small-scale, but they are slowly taking on larger projects and tackling more ambitious briefs, reaffirming some of their recognisable gestures. On the site of the old Ecole des Arts et Métiers in Brussels' southern neighbourhood of Saint-Gilles, they are re-purposing a heterogeneous ensemble of buildings at the heart of a dense housing block into a series of facilities: a school, offices, a sports complex and a neighbourhood park. Renovating existing structures adheres to the practice's belief in durability – although Vandembuleke likes to highlight the odd paradox that 'gutting it all out does not necessarily mean it'll cost less, but at least it gives more people work'. Slightly further out, in Wallonia's capital of Charleroi, they are collaborating with dVVT on the refurbishment of the city's Palais des Expositions, built by Joseph André in 1953. 'Our pared-down structures and de Vylder's eccentric attention to detail work well together', believes Burquel. Belgian practices often seek to win work in neighbouring countries but, after unsuccessfully trying their luck in France, AgwA is now looking further east: models for Beijing's Belgian embassy are scattered around their Brussels studio. *Manon Mollard*

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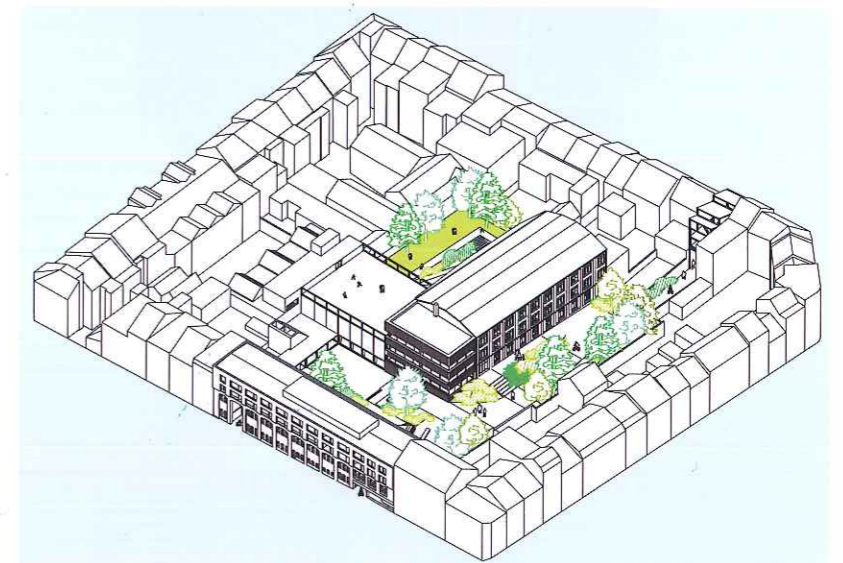
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MARIE-FRANÇOISE PLISSART



FILIP DUJARDIN

From top: elevated playground for the Prins Dries nursery school in Antwerp (2015); regeneration of Brussels' Ecole des Arts et Métiers; refurbishment of Charleroi's Palais des Expositions in collaboration with dVVT

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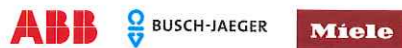
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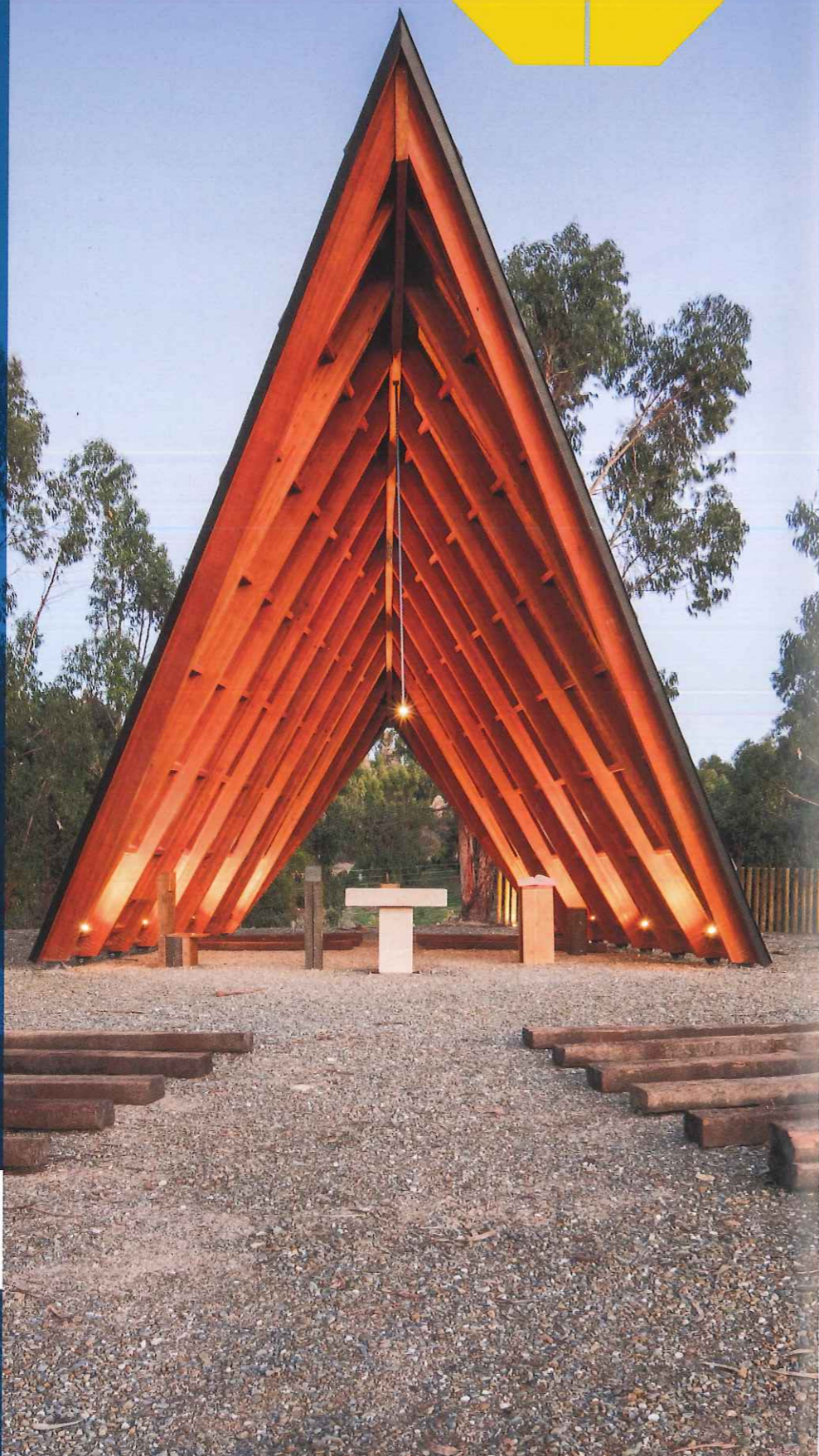
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