



Building up

Wallonia's burgeoning architecture scene is joining Brussels in winning international accolades

By Sarah Schug



• Perrett Hall by architect Pierre Hebbelinck



• MAC, Grand Hornu

© Serge Brison



As the birthplace of Art Nouveau, Brussels has had a prominent spot on the global architectural map ever since Belgian eminence Victor Horta and his contemporaries created the influential movement at the end of the 19th century. And while Horta's shoes (he's often-times dubbed the architect of Brussels) are hard to fill, a vibrant contemporary scene has been making its mark in recent years, not only in the capital but also in Wallonia.

"It's a fantastic moment for architecture in Wallonia right now," says Nathalie Brison, the project leader of Wallonie-Bruxelles Architectures, an organisation that supports local architects on the international stage. "The Architectural Review has even spoken of a golden age." Indeed, architects from Wallonia have attracted quite some

attention lately, with Liège-based Pierre Hebbelinck leading the way.

His studio, arguably the most prominent in Wallonia at the moment, has just received, with a French office, the AMO Award from the Association française des Architectes et des Maîtres d'Ouvrage for the impressive transformation of a derelict market hall in France into a cultural centre. The project also scored a nomination for this year's prestigious Mies van der Rohe Award. That award was won in 2017 by Brussels bureau MSA / V+ in the Emerging Architect category for their pioneering Navez social housing complex in the Brussels district of Schaerbeek.

Homegrown architects are also increasingly venturing abroad, such as award-winning Brussels studio Baukunst, which has opened

a branch in Lausanne, Switzerland. Besides the established offices, a bunch of young up-and-coming studios has been emerging, choosing their base not in the capital but in Namur (Specimen) and Liège (Binario).

International media coverage, prizes and projects paired with fresh talent are all vital signs of a dynamic sector on the rise. Pablo Lhoas, dean of the architecture programme of renowned Brussels art school La Cambre, explains it this way: "Brussels is now really connected with the main international architectural scene due to high-profile architects who teach and exhibit around the world, its schools, and the work of the city's master architect. This of course inspires and influences the entire region, which is very connected with what's happening in the capital. There is more creativity and experimentation now in Wallonia."



• Arsonic concert hall in Mons (former fire station), architects Holoffe Vermeersch



• L'Artothèque, Mons, by L'Escaut Architectures

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Urbanism and architecture joined forces to make peoples' lives better

Pablo Lhoas

The launch of the Institut Culturel d'Architecture Wallonie-Bruxelles (ICA) this November seems to have come at exactly the right time. By bringing together all the region's architectural actors with the goal to create links and increase visibility, it could give the already thriving scene an important additional push. "We want to build on

this momentum. ICA will fill a crucial gap and Wallonia will finally have the same kind of organisation as Flanders and Brussels already do," says director Audrey Contesse.

But is there a common denominator when it comes to architectural practices in Wallonia? Are there recurring characteris-

tics or trends? While all experts agree there is no general, prevailing style, there are a number of things that Walloon architects are especially good at. "They are known for their negotiating and compromising skills because of the multitude of laws and actors to consider," says Brison. "They are very used to reassessing and rethinking their propos-



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als. Urbanistic, architectural and energy-related rules are very strong in Wallonia and Brussels.”

Contesse’s analysis points in the same direction: “I used to say that they are great architects *despite*. Despite small budgets, despite lack of progress, despite the myriad regulations. Besides that, they are really hands-on, as opposed to architects in France or the United Kingdom for instance. Here, they need to have engineering skills as well, and it’s the architects themselves who visit the construction sites and follow the projects from A to Z.”

The regional architectural culture is charac-

terised by a mix of pragmatism and inventiveness paired with a human touch. It’s not by accident that MSA / V+ won the Mies van der Rohe prize for a social housing project, which Anna Ramos, director of the foundation, described as “an approach both heroic and ordinary”.

This willingness to connect with the everyday person is something that ICA cherishes and understands as part of its mission. Contesse: “One of our core ideas is to create quality by involving the general public. We want to be there for everyone, not just for the architects. Architecture can seem very complicated and intimidating, and we want to bring it closer to the people.”

Exemplary for this creative but down-to-earth philosophy with a social conscience is the case of Charleroi, a former mining town and Wallonia’s most densely populated city in what many locals refer to as the Black Country, Belgium’s biggest coal basin. With the closure of the mines, unemployment rocketed and the city experienced a lengthy period of post-industrial decline.

“The situation was quite desolate and dire,” Lhoas says. “But then, urbanism and architecture joined forces to make peoples’ lives better, and proved they can serve as an engine for development.” Largely thanks to the city’s master architect, Charleroi has seen a significant process of renewal and

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It’s a fantastic moment for architecture in Wallonia right now

Nathalie Brison



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• Kietude Housing, Namur, by Specimen architects

regeneration over recent years, bringing about a new dynamism and revival of a town presumed dead.

Large parts of its riverside have been transformed into a welcoming landscape of ramps, bridges, stairs and benches and a gigantic former bank building now hosts the stunning cultural centre Quai 10, centred on cinema and video games, remodelled by the Brussels-based practices V+ and L'Escaut, to name a few examples.

“Charleroi is a very influential case in terms of what architecture can achieve when academia, politics and economics work together,” Lhoas adds. In fact, it has even inspired the creation of a new master’s programme



© Valentin Bianchi

SPECIMEN, NAMUR

Founded in Namur in 2008, Specimen is one of the younger players blowing fresh wind into the Walloon architecture scene. This year, the self-described “multidisciplinary platform operating in urban planning, architecture and design” received a special mention at the Belgian Building Awards (BBA) as Rookie of the Year. The reason: the studio’s recent project Kietude Housing, in a street needing revitalisation in the founders’ hometown, Namur.

Imaginative, bold and pragmatic all at once, the five-floor residential building, now the tallest timber frame building in Wallonia, has attracted a lot of praise and attention. A standout feature is the eye-catching folded facade that includes an intriguing contemporary take on the Art Nouveau bow-window but also plays with shadows in a way that ensures the 10 small studios and apartments won’t overheat in the summer. At the same time, the original design maximises light and space.

This is not a luxury apartment complex, but one that was built for students and young couples. While Specimen’s portfolio features a lot of private homes, it is by no means limited to that. One of the studio’s flagship projects, nominated at the BBA, was the unlikely conception of a Belgian car wash, allowing them to break with the usual monotony of industrial zones, where the hiring of architects is rather rare. Specimen’s humble, respectful and poetic approach is also valued beyond Belgian borders: in Laos, the studio thought up a hotel in Vang Vieng, with the goal of preserving the original spirit of the resort made up of small bungalows. Saving as many trees as possible and preserving the natural slope of the land, the architects turned a concrete mega-structure into a contemporary interpretation of the bungalow using regional materials such as limestone, slate and wood.

specimenarchitects.com

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Audrey Contesse

dedicated to territorial urban development, a joint effort of the Free University of Brussels (ULB) and the University of Mons that attracts not only architects but also engineers and geographers.

About 60km west of Charleroi, in the town of Hornu, lies the MAC, an art museum reviving a former mining site that carries the Unesco World Heritage label. It was repurposed by the Pierre Hebbelinck studio. The mindset to repurpose existing structures can be found all over Wallonia. Architecture studios L'Escaut and Atelier Gigogne converted a former chapel in Mons into a museum, Baumans-Deffet oversaw the redevelopment of a former dairy factory complex in Dison into an art centre, and Holoffe Vermeersch transformed a fire station into a concert hall. "Many architects here work on projects giving a new life to historic buildings while respecting their heritage," says Brison.

Urban renewal in post-industrial cities, abandoned industrial sites, budgetary and legal constraints – the architects of Wallonia are facing a lot of challenges. But they have been responding to them with creativity, practicality and a sense of social solidarity that has given rise to a new kind of architecture.

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PERRETT HALL, MONTATAIRE

In collaboration with hbaat studio in Lille, France, the transformation of an abandoned market hall in the small French town of Montataire is the project that secured Liège-based architect Pierre Hebbelinck the AMO Award, as well as a nomination for the esteemed Mies van der Rohe Award 2019. One of Wallonia's most sought-after architects who can look back on a career stretching over 30 years, Hebbelinck is also the creative mind behind the MAC Grand-Hornu, the Manège theatre in Mons and the Liège theatre. In the case of the Perrett Hall, he shows a high level of appreciation for a kind of industrial heritage that usually doesn't get much recognition: he preserves the concrete framework of the unassuming warehouse and makes it an integral part of the new cultural centre, which houses a music school, dance school and recording studio. New and old elements merge into a sober concrete landscape bathed in natural light, evoking a raw kind of beauty. "The project enriches the depreciated remains thanks to acupuncture work that borders on magic. Could it be the famous 'Belgian touch'?" the AMO said.

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