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ANOTHER
ARCHITECTURE



Flemish Provocations

BUILDING AT
3,912 M
Leap Factory

'SPACES SHOULD
HAVE A STORY TO TELL'
Hyo Man Kim

THE INTERLACE
IN SINGAPORE
Ole Scheeren

'GET RID OF PRIVATE
AUTOMOBILES'
Kent Larson

**'We spend a lot
of time educating
our clients'**



Lieve Nijs (left) and Bart Vanden Driessche.
Photo: Blaf Architects

Blaf challenges Belgian building conventions.

Text
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Photos
Stijn Bollaert



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The fertile soil of Belgium seems to be good for growing architects. The little kingdom is never short of offices that consistently produce remarkable buildings. Most of these practices remain small or medium-sized, including those with an international reputation, such as Robbrecht and Daem, Xaveer De Geyter and Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen. An architecture team with more than 20 members is hard to find in Belgium. Apparently, it's not necessary to grow bigger in a small country.

Fortunately, size is not a criterion for quality or relevance. Belgian architects enjoy controlling the building process from the first design phase to completion. This is certainly true of Blaf, a Lokeren-based firm founded by

Like many other young Belgian architects, you focus on the design of detached houses. Is it your choice, or is it due to the prevalence of small-scale residential projects in Belgium?

VANDEN DRIESSCHE: It's true that what we make is rooted partly in the Belgian building culture. In a country where so many people are either building or renovating their homes, beginning architects find it relatively easy to get commissions for small-scale projects. For a lot of them, designing private homes marks the dawn of their careers. That's how we got started, too. There are other ways, of course, but all the know-how we've gained about the business of building through our small-scale projects is invaluable. That knowledge is at the heart of our continuing evolution.

NIJS: In general, Belgium's natural environment, or context, is very fragmentary and thus more or less generic. In this country, a forest is no more than a couple of trees, a boundless landscape a few fields, and a mountain a gentle slope. We call that the 'nontext'. In terms of context and nontext, Belgium is both specific and multifaceted.

You've built up a reputation for sustainable architecture. The first project that brought national recognition was a zero-energy house in Asse. Isn't it strange to talk about sustainability in a suburban context that is per se unsustainable – with hundreds of thousands of detached houses claiming their individuality?

NIJS: You're right, and we're deeply aware of the contradiction involved. But we don't want to shirk our responsibility. When you're commissioned to build within this context, you simply have to do your best. Today, 60 per cent of the new housing in

Bart Vanden Driessche and Lieven Nijs in 2003, when both men had just graduated from the Sint-Lucas School of Architecture in Ghent. As part of an optimistic generation of Belgian architects, they began with what they describe as 'an almost blank CV and no big plans'.

Their work seems to be a constant search for a primordial architecture. Their buildings appear to be unfinished, playful, open and, at the same time, aware of issues like energy consumption, urban sprawl and sustainability. Two recent projects, in Ghent and Asse, are good examples. Both are private residences in suburban contexts, which might be typical not only of the work of Blaf but also of the 'Belgian condition' in general.

Flanders is built in housing estates. The goal for many Belgians is still a house with a garden, even though it's obvious that land available for housing is becoming scarcer – and more and more expensive. Nonetheless, Belgians cling stubbornly to the housing-estate rationale, instead of pushing for compact housing types and a higher degree of density. What you get are increasingly smaller plots, less distance between houses, and tinier gardens, yet building sites are still being filled with detached houses. Although it's clear that this model is unsustainable in terms of affordability, quality, environment, energy and physical planning, few people question its continued use. We spend a lot of time and energy 'educating' our clients, from private parties and property developers to government officials.

Sounds like an issue for town planners. How do you react as architects?

VANDEN DRIESSCHE: Let's consider House boW in Ghent, which is a compact volume that doesn't take up the entire site. By slicing off parts of the volume, we created useful, meaningful spaces inside and out. What regulates the level of privacy is the design of the house itself and not a fence or wall around the property. We haven't solved the problem of housing estates with this project, but it might prompt some sort of reaction.

House boW features an open floor plan comprising what you call 'a centrifugal space' at the centre of four rooms that seem to obey no hierarchy. Can you explain the strategy behind this concept?

NIJS: Four living areas of equal importance fan out from an open core. Each of the four has a distinctive character, thanks in part to its orientation and its relationship with the surround-

'Belgium's natural environment is very fragmentary and, consequently, more or less generic'

ings. We like the idea of a floor plan that can change over time, in keeping with the occupants, the seasons, the programme, the desired level of privacy and so forth. Architecture ought to both countenance and stimulate living.

Do you know how your clients are dealing with the open-plan design and the large windows?

VANDEN DRIESSCHE: They haven't installed roll-down shutters or curtains, which shows that architecture has ways of regulating privacy that are more interesting than the use of screens. Obliquely positioned walls greatly minimize the visual relationship with the street, for example.

How about the rough surfaces, exposed concrete beams and untreated wooden shelves – the entire 'unfinished' atmosphere of the house? Will the client leave it like this?

NIJS: The house is complete as it is. Raw materials have been used in an honest way, and the interior was designed to complement the textures and colours of the building materials. This strategy permitted us to complete the project on a low budget. The house is in balance, with an interior that is both hard and soft, raw and refined, cool and warm, dark and light.

The exterior of the house is clad in black rubber. You originally proposed a façade of metal panels and later rejected the idea. What happened?

NIJS: During construction, after the rubber had been applied, we decided against the use of metal panelling. Sometimes – when things look better, seem more honest and cost less than you'd planned – you have to find the courage to modify your design.

VANDEN DRIESSCHE: If the spray rubber offers less protection than expected, metal panelling can be added later. Allowing for that possibility are horizontal wooden bands on the exterior walls, which form an attractive pattern. Coincidentally, the façade now resembles a type of brick construction that connects the house to its brick neighbours in an abstract yet recognizable way.

When will it be finished? Is this a question you hear a lot? I'm wondering, because another recent project, House DnA in Asse, also has a rather unfinished exterior.

VANDEN DRIESSCHE: That question doesn't apply to House DnA, whose brick walls feature Flemish bond, a distinctive age-old masonry pattern that's more or less in our genes. Reused bricks are a further reinforcement of this reference to local building traditions.

NIJS: The construction of these walls gave us a special feeling, something like pushing the reverse button and building something that's been there forever. Memory and longing, with or without nostalgia, are important facets of our architecture. I believe the house in Asse will find acceptance rather easily,

because of its location and the familiarity of the material and how it's been used.

VANDEN DRIESSCHE: Our client had only one question, which pertained to the interior: whether or not to paint the wooden beams. We suggested leaving them as they were. They can always be painted later. I don't anticipate any changes, though.

I like that you've called it an 'intelligent ruin'. Can you elaborate?

NIJS: It's a term coined by architect Bob Van Reeth. He's referring to the fact that to realize a building you invest so much energy that the building needs to last longer than two or three generations. Whereas the words 'multifaceted' and 'flexibility' usually signify plural usage and adaptability in the short term, 'intelligent ruin' alludes to the chronological endurance of architecture and, in extremis, even the value of architecture in perpetuity. House DnA was conceived as a consummate, self-supporting shell. The interior is a light structure, an exchangeable decor. We wanted to design a house that later generations will find easy to adapt.

What can you tell us about the patio?

VANDEN DRIESSCHE: It lets you see the separation between interior and shell. Thanks to the patio, the self-supporting brick wall is visible from the interior. And the patio offers privacy. It mediates between public and private.

In most of your projects, you seem to be searching for forms and typologies that are almost primordial – a quest you combine with your interest in a monolithic, sculptural, abstract architecture. The resulting buildings are both striking and modest. They're embedded in their context or, in your words, their 'nontext'.

NIJS: That's right. In an interview, Chilean architect Mauricio Pezo said: 'To explain a building as an answer to a place is explaining the place, not the building.' We have no doubt that architecture has to go further than a solution-orientated combination of conditions or the production of shells that satisfy certain technical requirements. We believe in what we call an 'autonomy of architecture', something that escapes every form of prescription. It's not easily explained, but it speaks for itself. At the same time, the first priority of architecture is to serve: by exposing something; by adding to or changing something about how people use space together; and, in so doing, by teaching them something about one another.

VANDEN DRIESSCHE: We're often told that we design child-friendly houses. We take that as a great compliment, because it implies architecture that appeals to the imagination. And besides designers, who's got more imagination than children? ←

blaf.be



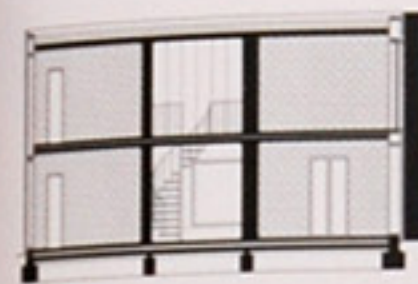
↑ Houses in this part of Wondelgem are only 2.5m apart.

← Posts and beams on the inside of House boW's timber frame form a system of tables and shelving. Certain components have been given less.

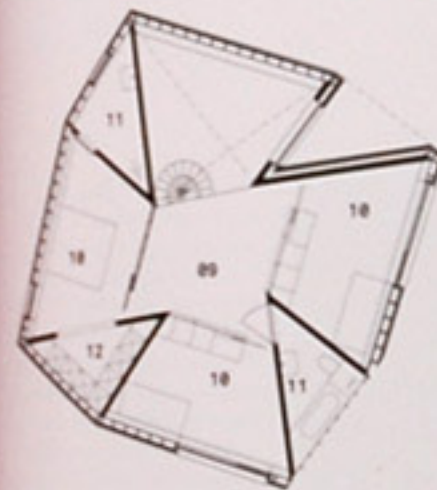
→ The timber formwork used for the concrete slabs ground level was cleaned and reused to finish the ceiling of the first floor.

'Besides designers, who's got more imagination than children?'

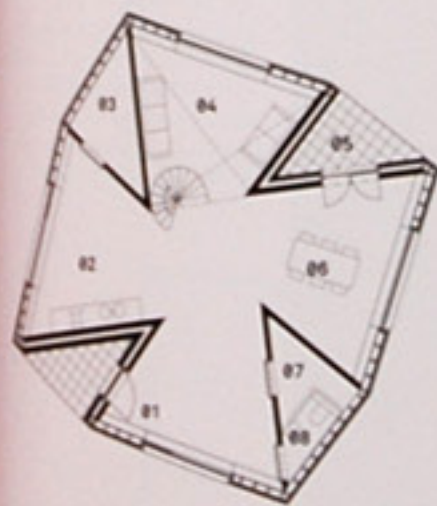
Section



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- 01 Entrance
- 02 Kitchen
- 03 Utilities
- 04 Living room
- 05 Terrace
- 06 Dining room
- 07 Storage
- 08 WC
- 09 Hall
- 10 Bedroom
- 11 Bathroom
- 12 Wardrobe



House boW
Ghent | Belgium | 2013

Located in Wondelgem, a northern suburb of Ghent, House boW was built for a man and his two sons. The frame features cast-in-place concrete columns and floor slabs. Interior walls are composed of concrete blocks; exterior walls are wrapped in a timber skeleton with thermal insulation on the outside, along with a finishing coat of black liquid rubber applied to make the building airtight. The original plan to conceal this outer layer with panelling made of perforated, corrugated steel was ultimately dropped.



↑ Different levels in the interior of the house are made outside, thanks to concrete lintels that extend to the corners of the building.

↗ The four L-shaped columns at the middle of the house are made of ebochi, an African timber also known as okoume often used in saunas. The wide columns serve as ducts for electricity and plumbing. Gable rafters are made of spruce.

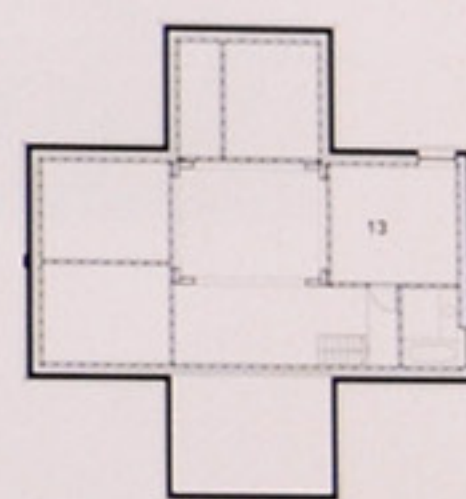
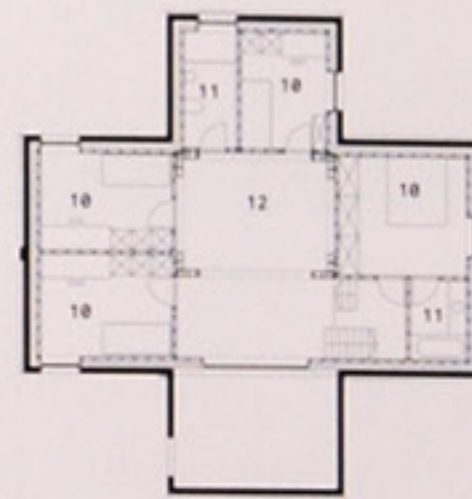
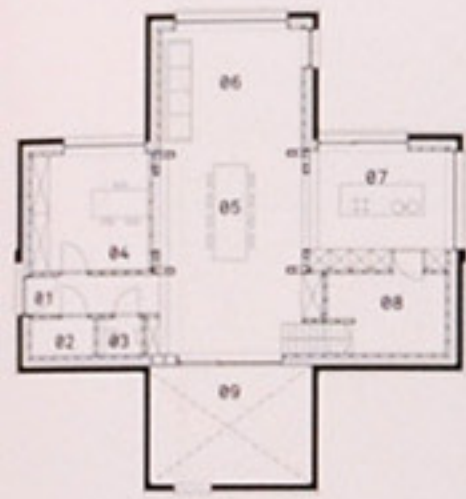
← A first-floor corridor doubles as a playroom. Light enters the space through a big window. Brick exterior walls shield the occupants, offering privacy and preventing them from being seen by from viewing activities inside.

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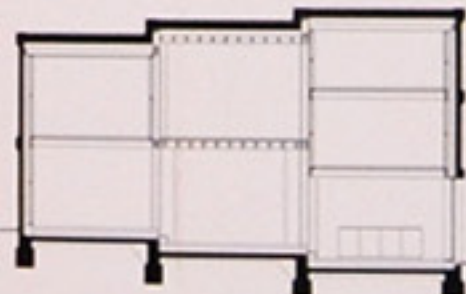


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Section



- 01 Entrance
- 02 Closet
- 03 WC
- 04 Study
- 05 Dining room
- 06 Living room
- 07 Kitchen
- 08 Utilities
- 09 Patio
- 10 Bedroom
- 11 Bathroom
- 12 Hall
- 13 Storage

House DnA
Asse | Belgium | 2013

This house was built for a couple (a lawyer and a graphic designer) and their three children. Inside, the ground floor has three distinct levels, a result of the gently sloping site. The house has a diagonal orientation in relation to the street, as has the neighbouring house to the south. Load-bearing external walls feature recycled bricks sourced from an old factory in Lokeren. Concrete lintels extending to the corners of the house provide structural reinforcement. The architects completed the outer shell before adding interior walls and floors.