



COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

eug

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of broad, expressive brushstrokes in various shades of teal and dark blue. A prominent, dark, textured square, resembling a piece of fabric or a different material, is positioned in the center-right area, overlapping the brushstrokes.

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TOMO I

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a la era digital

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del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

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Urban Concerns in Curatorial Assemblages: An Inquiry into deSingel's Architecture Programme around the 1990s

Preocupaciones urbanas en ensamblajes curatoriales: una investigación sobre el programa de arquitectura de deSingel en torno a los años 90

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Abstract

Este trabajo examina el programa de arquitectura de deSingel, operativo de 1985 a 2010 en Amberes, Bélgica, enfocándose en exposiciones y actividades culturales dirigidas a sensibilizar al público sobre cuestiones urbanas. Considerado una plataforma clave que contribuyó a moldear la cultura arquitectónica local antes del Instituto de Arquitectura Flamenco en 2001, deSingel abarcó una variedad de exposiciones (monografías, retrospectivas, grupales y temáticas), charlas y publicaciones. En la década de 1990, las discusiones sobre la interacción entre arquitectura, planificación urbana y entorno construido cobraron impulso, en medio de cambios institucionales en el discurso espacial y gobernanza pública. Al examinar el contenido y formatos de exposiciones seleccionadas y su alineación con desarrollos contextuales clave, esta exploración busca comprender las conexiones entre prácticas curatoriales y debates emergentes sobre cultura arquitectónica, condiciones urbanas y política espacial a medida que se desarrollaban en Flandes.

This paper examines deSingel's architecture programme, which was operational from 1985 to 2010 in Antwerp, Belgium, with a focus on architecture exhibitions and cultural activities aimed at raising public awareness about urban issues. Considered a significant platform that contributed to shaping local architectural culture prior to the establishment of the Flemish Architecture Institute in 2001, deSingel's programme encompassed a wide range of exhibitions (monographs, retrospectives, group and thematic shows), talks, and publications. Around the 1990s, discussions about the complex interplay between architecture, urban planning, and the built environment gained momentum amid institutional shifts in spatial discourse and public governance. By examining the thematic content and presentation formats of selected exhibitions and their alignment with key contextual developments, this exploration seeks to draw a better understanding of the connections between curatorial practices and emerging debates on architectural culture, urban conditions, and spatial policy as they unfolded in Flanders.

Keywords

Exposiciones de arquitectura, discurso urbano, cultura arquitectónica flamenca, gobernanza espacial

Architecture exhibitions, urban discourse, Flemish architecture culture, spatial governance

In a 2015 interview published in the Belgian architectural journal *A+*, Katrien Vandermarliere recounted her tenure as head of the architecture programme at the deSingel arts centre in Antwerp, a role she held from 1991 to 2001 before assuming the directorship of the Flemish Architecture Institute until 2010. She shared:

L'accent a d'abord été mis sur l'architecture en tant que discipline artistique autonome. Ce n'est que plus tard qu'il a été question d'agenda caché'. L'absence flagrante de politique architecturale en Flandre a créé le besoin de se doter d'instruments de gouvernance capables notamment de garantir la qualité des marchés publics. Avec nos expositions thématiques, nous voulions nous adresser aux jeunes architectes, mais aussi toucher la politique architecturale et les commanditaires publics.¹

The “hidden agenda” mentioned by Vandermarliere likely does not come as a surprise to the local architectural community active at the time. Nor does it particularly appear as contentious, given that the 1990s are widely acknowledged as a pivotal period that propelled the field forward. In fact, this period was characterized by the convergence of three overlapping agendas: The Flemish Government's ambition to reinvigorate its infrastructures and nurture a distinct cultural identity. Architects and urban designers advocating for transparency and opportunities particularly in the realm of public commissions. And cultural actors seeking greater support to establish more cohesive platforms for showcasing local and international architectural designs, stimulating critical discussions, and safeguarding architectural heritage.

Vandermarliere's statement alluded to a potential role of architecture exhibitions in the development of architectural policy. How did this aspiration manifest in the thematic content and presentation formats of these exhibitions? Operating between 1985 and 2010, deSingel's architecture programme hosted and/or produced around 100 exhibitions under the direction of three successive programme makers. In this paper, I will focus solely on a subset of their endeavours. Celebrations of historical and contemporary (inter)national designers, matters of architectural heritage, style and typology, and artistic explorations recurrently appeared among the topics explored in deSingel's cultural agenda.² However, I will highlight a selection of exhibitions and activities more specifically centred on urban issues. This focus underscores a then persistently debated extending domain of architecture to encompass practices more broadly concerned with built environments. Related initiatives, albeit

¹ [The initial focus was on architecture as an autonomous artistic discipline. It was only later that there was talk of a ‘hidden agenda’. The current lack of an architectural policy in Flanders created the need for governance instruments that could guarantee the quality of public commissions. With our thematic exhibitions, we wanted to address young architects, but also to reach out to architectural policy and public clients] Interview of Katrien Vandermarliere by Wouter Davidts and Stefaan Verwoort, “L'expérimentation est devenue une constante”, *A+*, n.º 253 (2015): 37.

² List of exhibitions and archival material from deSingel's architecture programme. Source: deSingel International Arts Centre archives. This investigation relies on documentation preserved within deSingel's physical and digital archives, which contain among others meeting notes, correspondence, project briefs and plans from the exhibition's production process, opening speeches, video footage, communication material, exhibition views, and newspaper clippings of critical reviews.

not exclusively, seem closely interwoven with key events and institutional developments transpiring Flanders' architecture and planning culture tied to the public realm. Through this approach, my aim is to elucidate how exhibition practices, alongside their supportive platforms, function as cultural agents and discursive vehicles entwined with evolving social and spatial realities, collectively producing meaning over time.

Foundation (around 1990)

DeSingel was founded as a non-profit organization in 1982 with the support of the Flemish Community. Its establishment followed the expansion of the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music, which had taken root since 1968 within Antwerp's 19th-century green belt, which evolved into the city's principal ring road encircling the historical centre. With the impetus of the Minister of Culture, Karel Poma, and deSingel's inaugural director, Frie Leysen, the building's concert and theatre venues were put at the service of the broader cultural community.³ Swiftly, it emerged as a paramount platform for the presentation of contemporary music, theatre, and dance productions within Belgium, a cultural resonance that reverberated well beyond the national confines.

The 1980s marked a remarkable surge in public interest directed toward architecture, characterized by the proliferation of publications, exhibitions, awards, and media coverage presenting historical and contemporary facets of the discipline. While dedicated public institutions⁴ were founded in Belgium's neighbouring countries, in Belgium, the involvement of public authorities remained absent. However, several local initiatives were gaining momentum.⁵ Prominently, the Fondation pour l'Architecture in Brussels and the Stichting Architectuurmuseum (S/AM)⁶ in Ghent, both established in 1983, alongside deSingel's architecture programme launched in 1985, emerged as platforms that consistently showcased architecture exhibitions and engendered important discussions in the architectural milieu. In 1988, deSingel was invited to participate in the professional congress *En Europe: Les galeries d'architecture*⁷ organized at the Institut Français d'Architecture in Paris. This event provided an opportune stage to emerging international public institutions, organizations, and commercial galleries for sharing their distinct situation, mission, and modes of

³ Housed in a vast building complex designed by the modernist architect Léon Stynen, deSingel cultivated its own distinct cultural programming, its auditoriums and studios were also rented out to external organizations. Jasper Croonen, *deSingel 1980-2020* (Ghent: Borgerhoff & Lamberigts, 2022).

⁴ Among others the Institut Français d'Architecture in Paris, the Centre d'architecture Arc-en-Rêve in Grenoble, the Deutsches Architekturmuseum (DAM) in Frankfurt, and the Nederlands Architectuurinstituut (NAi) in Rotterdam.

⁵ Sofie De Caigny and Katrien Vandermarliere, "More than Punctual Interventions Cultural Events, Competitions and Public Debate as Impetus for Architectural Culture in Flanders, 1974-2000" in *Autonomous Architecture in Flanders*, ed. by L. Schrijver, Katrien Vandermarliere, Caroline Voet et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016), 48-61.

⁶ [Foundation for Architecture and Architecture Museum Foundation]

⁷ [In Europe: Architecture Galleries] The congress took place on the 6th and 7th June 1988 at the Institut Français d'Architecture in Paris.

operation. Carolina De Backer, deSingel's first architecture programmer,⁸ travelled to Paris to present its growing activities, already encompassing a consistent range of monographic exhibitions of both international and Belgian architects and several thematic explorations.⁹ De Backer articulated her vision for a programme that embraces a diverse audience taking advantage of its distinct position as non-commercial and multidisciplinary cultural hub. She further underscored: “... les critères pour l'élaboration du programme sont: international, innovateur, et qualité. Le Singel veut présenter à côté d'importantes personnalités artistiques du moment, les grands de demain; les talents reconnus et les nouveaux talents du pays et de l'étranger.”¹⁰

That same year, deSingel organised its second exhibition centred on the work developed within OMA While in 1985 mostly unrealized projects were unveiled that resonated with the discourse ignited by Rem Koolhaas's provocative manifesto *Delirious New York* (1978), by 1988, several of these projects had materialized. They integrated this second compilation titled *OMA en de moderne Stad*,¹¹ which underpinned OMA's distinctive urbanistic approach. The show focused on a comprehensive presentation of the Nederlands Dans Theater, inaugurated in 1987 in the periphery of The Hague's historic centre. The exhibition displayed a diverse range of materials, encompassing early conceptual sketches and technical studies, alongside documentation from an antecedent project for the Danstheater in Scheneningen (1980-1984). This ensemble was complemented by OMA's design for the Milan Triennale Pavilion (1985) and their proposal for an architecture museum in Rotterdam (1988).¹² The exhibition's thematic account, highlighting the form and function of cultural institutions in the city, not only addressed arresting contemporary issues, but it also particularly resonated with deSingel's own context in Antwerp.

Following exhibitions, organized by Carolina De Backer and her successor, Katrien Vandermarliere, taking over deSingel's architecture programming in 1991, sustained a comparable emphasis on urban projects. A notable instance was the exhibition *Fumihiko Maki: Stedelijke ruimte en architectuur*¹³ (1990), which underscored the Japanese architect and urban designer's latest works and ideas on reimagining the modern city. Akin were the exhibitions *Norman Foster & Partners: Recente stedenbouwkundige ontwerpen*¹⁴ (1993)

⁸ De Backer worked in close collaboration with architectural historians and critics Geert Bekaert and Mil de Kooning. De Caigny, Vandermarliere, “More than Punctual Interventions Cultural Events...”, 52 (note 6).

⁹ Among others OMA (1985), Charles Vandenhove (1986), Aldo Rossi (1986), A.W.G. (1987), Luc Deleu (1987), Marc Dessauvage (1987), “Adolf Loos-Le Corbusier: Raumplan versus Plan Libre” (1987-1988).

¹⁰ [... the criteria used to develop the program are: international, innovative and quality. Alongside the leading artistic figures of the moment, Singel aims to showcase the greats of tomorrow; established and new talent from home and abroad] Excerpt from a transcript of De Backer's presentation “Présentation du programme des expositions et de la politique du Singel à Paris, I.F.A. – 6 juin 1988”, dated 24th May 1988. Source: deSingel International Arts Centre archives.

¹¹ [OMA and the Modern City]

¹² *deSingel programme booklet* (1988): 140. Source: deSingel International Arts Centre archives.

¹³ [Fumihiko Maki: Urban Spaces and Architecture]

¹⁴ [Norman Foster and Partners: Recent Urban Planning Projects]

and *Hans Kollhoff: Ontwerpen voor Berlin*¹⁵ (1994). These too took the form of monographs, spotlighting internationally acclaimed architects whose expertise extended to large-scale architectural and urban design ventures. The exhibition titles effectively encapsulated the architects' field of operation: the urban fabric, a scope that predominantly foregrounded architecture and urban design projects, which through their scale and/or function bridged architecture and urban planning, space and society (fig. 1).

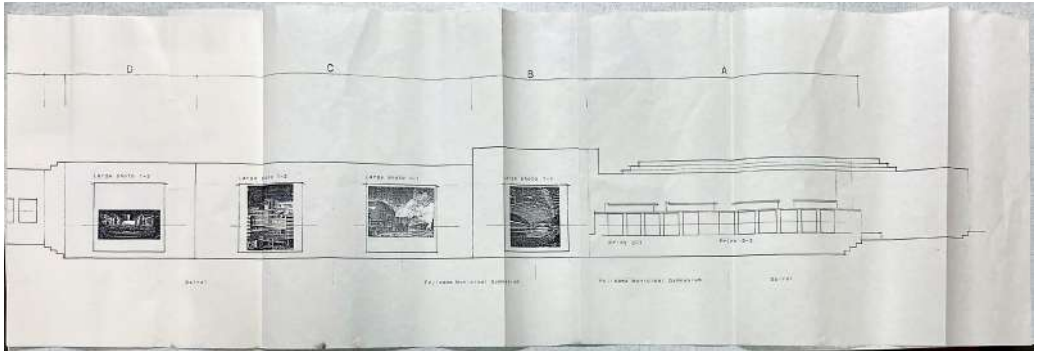


Figure 1. Work document with the wall layout of the exhibition *Fumihiko Maki: Stedelijke ruimte en architectuur*, installed at deSingel, Antwerp, February–March 1990, ©Fumihiko Maki. Source: deSingel International Arts Centre archives.

Several of these offices were engaged in concurrent design undertakings within Belgium. Their presence in the region presented an opportunity to arrange an exhibition, thereby advancing their work before a local audience and fuelling public discussions on the latest development in the field of urban design and planning.¹⁶ Remarkable were the debates that erupted around 1990 linked to the organization of three expansive international urban design competitions in Antwerp, Zeebrugge, and Kortrijk, marking an inaugural instance within Belgium where ambitious plans and new procedures were pursued with the participation of notorious international design offices. The competition known as *Stad aan de Stroom*¹⁷ launched through a local initiative in Antwerp sought to rethink the city's riverfronts and former industrial port area. Manuel de Solà Morales, Toyo Ito, OMA, AWG,¹⁸ or TOP Office¹⁹ figured among the participants. Several of them already featured in exhibitions at deSingel, which as cultural partner organised artistic interventions during a related city festival in 1991 when the competition entries were revealed to the public. DeSingel was also involved in the design competition for the development of a seaport terminal in Zeebrugge on behalf of the local port authorities. OMA, Fumihiko Maki, A.W.G., Charles Vandenhove, and

¹⁵ [Hans Kollhoff: Projects for Berlin]

¹⁶ Christophe Van Gerrewey, "Polemiek in de niet-metropolitane provincie. RemKoolhaas in de Lage Landen", *De Witte Raaf*, n.º 167 (2014): 9-11.

¹⁷ [City on the Stream]

¹⁸ ArchitectenWerkGroep (A.W.G.) was founded in 1971 by bOb Van Reeth.

¹⁹ T.O.P. Office (Turn-On Planning Office) was founded in 1970 by Luc Deleu.

Aldo Rossi, who all previously held monographic shows at deSingel, were implicated. The arts venue was used for the exhibition of the five competing submissions, and it staged the formal proclamation of OMA's winning entry announced during an eloquent ceremonial address²⁰ (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Excerpt from a newspaper clipping with Paul Vermeulen's review published in *De Standaard der Letteren*, April 26 (1990): 3, illustrated by an exhibition view centred on OMA's winning design entry for a seaport terminal in Zeebrugge. Source: deSingel International Arts Centre archives.

These developments translated the growing significance vested in the commissioners,²¹ whose visionary perspectives and aggregating role were applauded for rendering such ambitious projects feasible. The presentation of competition entries in exhibitions (typically presenting basic display strategies including scale models and presentation panels) and the orchestration of the ceremonial proceedings within a prominent artistic milieu like deSingel therefore also served as means to amplify the commissioner's distinct sensibilities to policymakers, local administrators, architects, and contractors invited to the party.

Transition (mid-1990s)

After WWII, the Belgian government did not assume a robust position as reliable client for architecture and urban design. Public commissions were predominantly entrusted to big contractors through opaque private-public partnerships. Emerging architects were struggling to secure project commissions beyond individual housing, prompting them to advocate for increased support from the public sector. The recent consolidation of the Flemish

²⁰ Paul Vermeulen, "Metropolitane architectuur: Projekt-Koolhaas voor Zeebrugge", *De Standaard der Letteren*, April 26 (1990): 3.

²¹ Bart Lootsma, Mariëtte Van Stralen, "De opdrachtgever als visionair. Koolhaas blaast de klassieke rol van de architect nieuw leven in", *Archis* 5, n.º 5 (1990).

Government²² spurred new expectations directed towards the improvement of practices and objectives for enhancing the built environment. While the government's engagement in this domain was lagging behind, local initiatives gradually exerted a mobilizing influence that eventually compelled the government to consider architecture as a potent instrument for cultivating a distinctive local cultural identity.²³ S/AM, for instance, coordinated the first representation of Belgium at the 1991 Venice Architecture Biennale with the exhibition *Architetti [della Fiandra]*,²⁴ showcasing the latest production of local architects, encompassing both realized buildings and projects formulated for urban design competitions, which were picked up in other presentations and critical reviews to raise public awareness.

Further insights were also gleaned from exemplar practices abroad invited to present their oeuvre in Flanders. After the failure of the Stad aan de Stroom competition to garner the needed public support for its realization,²⁵ Antwerp's tenure as the European Capital of Culture in 1993 provided the opportunity to continue the discussions surrounding urban planning. Operating in the margins of the festivities, deSingel was once again enlisted as a cultural partner. Adding to the architecture-related activities steered by the initiative Open Stad,²⁶ deSingel, in collaboration with Centre Pompidou, scheduled a series of lectures by various international speakers invited to talk about their practice and vision on Europe's urbanization processes.²⁷

In the backdrop, a first mention of the imperative to uphold architectural quality within Flanders surfaced in the coalition agreement of the Flemish Government on January 29, 1992. Acting on this intention, the Ministry of Culture of the Flemish Community created an informal architecture workgroup within its Administration of Visual Arts and Museums. Katrien Vandermarliere and other protagonists affiliated to deSingel appeared among its members.²⁸ The Ministry also tasked the architectural critic Pieter Uyttenhove with the

²² After a series of state reforms initiated since 1971, Belgium became a federal state and parts of its competences were distributed upon its three subnational regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels-Capital, as well as its three linguistic communities: Dutch, French and German-speaking.

²³ This matter of concern was regularly put under scrutiny in local debates. See among others: Geert Bekaert, "Architectuur + Beleid (achter het masker van het architectuurbeleid)", *De Witte Raaf*, n.º 79 (1999): 20-21.

²⁴ [Architects (from Flanders)] Marc Dubois and Christian Kieckens (eds.), *Architetti [della Fiandra]* (Ghent: S/AM, 1991)

²⁵ Christophe Van Gerrewey, "De stad is dood. Antwerpen en de vzw Stad aan de Stroom", *De Witte Raaf*, n.º 138 (2009): 19-20.

²⁶ [Open City] This initiative was curated by Pieter Uyttenhove and comprised three components: Observatorium, Studio, and Forum Open Stad. It remained operational for another decade, turning its attention to Brussels.

²⁷ Contributors to the lecture series "Visions on European Urbanism" (1993) were: Elizabeth Wilson, Bruno Fortier, Johann F. Geist, Richard Sennett, Norman Foster, Karel Kosik, Marcel Smets, Richard Rogers, Peter Cook, Ed Taverne, and Marc Augé.

²⁸ The members included: Jan Verlinden (chairman), Mil De Koning, Marc Dubois, Hilde Heynen, Francis Strauven, Herman Stynen, Jan Thomaes, Pieter Uyttenhove, Katrien Vandermarliere, Jan Vermassen, and Luc Verpoest. De Caigny, Vandermarliere, "More than Punctual Interventions Cultural Events...", 61 (note 6).

compilation of an exhaustive inventory of cultural initiatives intertwined with architecture and the built environment. This comprehensive survey, conducted between 1994 and 1995, not only probed the large diversity of actors’ expectations regarding architectural culture and policy, but also yielded novel proposals for the field’s development. Notably, deSingel’s spokesperson advocated for the establishment of an architecture institute akin to the Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, encompassing three core functions: conservation and archiving, research and reflection, and the dissemination of knowledge to the public.²⁹

In 1994, the Ministry launched the “Flanders Architecture Yearbook,” a triennial survey of regional advancements in architecture and urban planning. Vandermarliere assumed responsibility for co- editing and producing the Yearbooks as part of deSingel’s architecture programme. These publications proved instrumental in reflecting the most pressing concerns to a public audience: on the one hand, about the search for policy instruments, procedures, and responsibilities, and on the other hand, about the transformation of the built environment and the criteria for achieving architectural quality.³⁰

Concomitant with the Open Monumentendag³¹ of 1995, the study day “Publieke gebouwen en ruimten, een culturele uitdaging”³² was convened at deSingel. This assembly congregated architecture historians, researchers, and critics, alongside political stakeholders including Luc Martens, the Flemish Minister of Culture, and Wytze Patijn, the Dutch Government Architect. The colloquium fostered a dynamic exchange of perspectives on the governance of public space and buildings within Flanders, underscoring the role of architectural culture therein. A consensus prevailed around the principle that the task of the government implied generating the necessary conditions for quality to arise, including the strengthening of cultural awareness, rather than the enforcement of strict legislation.³³ Salient insights brought up during this encounter were subsequently assimilated into various exhibitions showcased at deSingel, adhering to a similar framework: thematic exhibitions displaying a group of international designers.

In 1995, the arts centre produced the exhibition *Het Landschap: Vier Internationale Landschapsontwerpers*.³⁴ It aimed at spotlighting the growing contribution of landscape architects within the discourse and shaping of spatial environments, particularly within suburban contexts. Photographs, schematic drawings, plans, and scale models showcased the undertakings of four distinguished international offices: Desvigne and Dalnoky

²⁹ Pieter Uyttenhove, *Een architectuurcultuur in Vlaanderen en Brussel? Een enquête over associatieve en institutionele cultuurinitiatieven in verband met architectuur* (Vlaamse Gemeenschap/Administratie Kunst, 1995).

³⁰ The Flanders Architecture Yearbooks were regularly criticised for their paradoxical layouts, which included, on the one hand, attractive architectural portfolios favouring illustrations over text, and on the other hand, long critical essays expressing important issues of local spatial developments.

³¹ [Open Heritage Days]

³² [Public Buildings and Spaces: A Cultural Challenge]

³³ *Publieke gebouwen en ruimten, een culturele uitdaging*, congress report of the study day hosted on 6th September 1995 at deSingel, Antwerp, on the initiative of the Stuurgroep Open Monumentendag Vlaanderen (Brussels: Koning Boudewijnstichting, 1995).

³⁴ [The Landscape: Four international Landscape architects]

(France), Hargreaves (United States), Torres Tur and Martínez Lapeña (Spain), and West 8 (Netherlands). Next to conventional architectural portfolios, the exhibition's catalogue was enriched by a collection of critical essays, further contextualizing these practices. The contribution "The landscape as alternative" authored by French theoretician Sébastien Marot examined the increasing blurring of urban and rural boundaries, linking this phenomenon to the concept of the palimpsest introduced by André Corboz, to express how landscapes intricately enshrine the memory of places.³⁵ The subsequent essay by Flemish art and architectural critic Steven Jacobs wielded Marot's analytical lens to scrutinize Flanders' characteristic urban sprawl and articulate a plea for a spatial practice better equipped to navigate contemporary urban conditions and overcome the separation of architecture and environment³⁶ (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Exhibition poster of *Het Landschap: Vier Internationale Landschapsonwerpers*, installed at deSingel, Antwerp, March–April 1995. Source: Courtesy of deSingel Arts Center.

The exhibition Op zoek naar openbare ruimte in een geprivatizeerde staat: Vier Londonse architecten,³⁷ curated by the British architecture critic William Mann, materialized in 1997 with the support of the British Council. It focused on the work of four distinguished architectural practices active within London—Tony Fretton, Eric Parry, Tim Ronalds, and Pierre d'Avoine—. Their contributions were portrayed in the exhibition through an eclectic array

³⁵ Sébastien Marot, "The Landscape as alternative," in *The Landscape: Four international Landscape architects*, ed. by Katrien Vandermarliere (Antwerp: deSingel, 1995): 9–38.

³⁶ Steven Jacobs, "Landscape without a home. A plea for landscape architecture in Belgium", in *The Landscape: Four international Landscape architects*, ed. by Katrien Vandermarliere (Antwerp: deSingel, 1995), 125–138.

³⁷ [In Search of Public Space in a Privatized State: Four London Architects]

of mediums including film documentaries, and a series of critical essays published in the accompanying catalogue. Authored by Mann and the individual architects, these essays shed light on their distinctive approaches to shaping spaces within an urban environment increasingly characterized by privatization and commercialization. In a succinct preamble, Vandermarliere linked these narratives with the Belgian context, emphasizing the architects' conviction that architecture serves as both a backdrop and foundation for social dialogue and interaction. The selected architects, as Vandermarliere contended, manifested “a sustained effort to make possible a public character, not only in their buildings, but also in their urban plans”³⁸ (fig. 4).

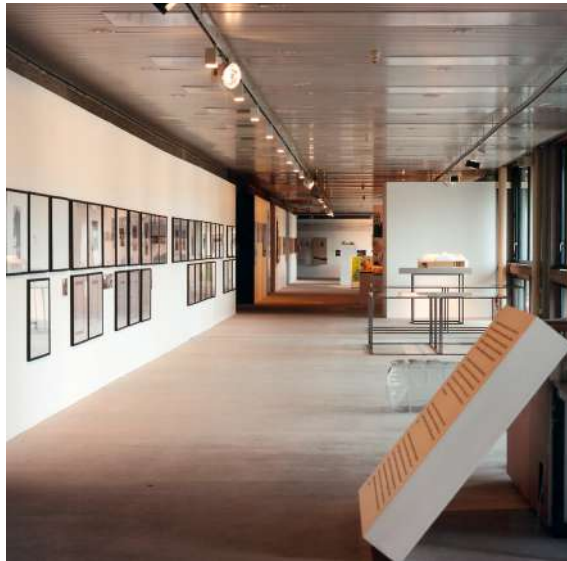


Figure 4. Exhibition view of *Op zoek naar openbare ruimte in een geprivatizeerde staat: Vier Londonse architecten*, installed at deSingel, Antwerp, April–June 1997, © CC BY-SA 4.0 deSingel. Source: Courtesy of deSingel Arts Center.

In 1998, deSingel hosted the exhibition *Architectuur in Catalonië: Overheidsopdrachten in de Jaren Negentig*,³⁹ a showcase of contemporary architectural and urban design projects fostered with the patronage of the Catalan authorities. Diplomatic exchanges between Catalonia and Flanders were established since 1992 with the aim to strengthen cultural and economic cooperation. Catalonia's autonomous government, established after the fall of Spain's dictatorship, assumed an innovative role in European urban planning policy. Its achievements proudly showcased at the Barcelona exposition in 1997 were praised within

³⁸ Katrien Vandermarliere, (Untitled Preamble), in *In search of public space. Four architects from London*, ed. by William Mann (Antwerp: deSingel, 1997), 7.

³⁹ [Architecture in Catalonia: Public Commissions in the 1990s]

Flanders as potential models for a policy orientation aimed at articulating regained democracy and an invigorated cultural identity transpiring the design of public spaces.⁴⁰

Consolidation (around 2000)

Towards the late 1990s, Flanders eventually witnessed major institutional advancements in its spatial planning policy. A landmark development was the *Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen*⁴¹ implemented by the Flemish Government in 1997. This strategic tool was conceived with the objective of harmonizing the region's fragmented territorial fabric, across all scales. It sought to safeguard the declining expanses of open land by accentuating the distinction between rural and urban areas, among other by densifying existing built environments and interlinking strategic projects with the region's infrastructural grid. It refrained from imposing rigid directives to the architectural practice and rather formulated recommendations and goals.⁴² Nearly concurrent was the appointment of the first Flemish Government Architect in 1999. The architect and urban designer bOb Van Reeth assumed this decisive role. Acting as public advisor, he was imbued with the explicit mandate of refining the administration and quality of Flanders' public estate.⁴³ A chief contribution of his tenure was the introduction of novel procedures to guide commissions for public buildings and infrastructure.⁴⁴

In 1998, deSingel showcased the exhibition *Jaarboek Architectuur Vlaanderen 1996/1998* curated by the young architects Lieven De Boeck and Peter Swinnen to commemorate the release of the publication's third edition. They commissioned the photographer Jan Kempenaers to portray the different architectural works featured in the publication. His photographs captured the works within their muddled everyday settings, and they appeared in the exhibition along with a resounding applause. With an ironic nod, the curators aimed to shed light on the public authorities' prevailing lack of ambition. They also underscored the assertion articulated by the Yearbook's international selection committee, contending that "... als de hedendaagse architectuur in Vlaanderen vanzelfsprekend wil worden, [zal] ze vooral ingezet moeten worden voor sociale woningbouw en gebouwen van openbaar nut."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Francis Strauven, "Overheidsopdrachten in België en Vlaanderen", in *Publieke gebouwen en ruimten, een culturele uitdaging...*, 17 (note 32).

⁴¹ [Flanders Environmental Structural Plan]

⁴² André Loeckx, "Flanders Environmental Structure Plan as Both the Framework for and Commitment to Architecture", in *Flanders Architectural Yearbook 94-95* (Brussels: Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1996), 242-248.

⁴³ Marc Santens and Jan De Zutter, *Een Rijksbouwmeester Bouwt Niet 1999-2005* (Antwerp: Houtekiet, 2005); Marc Santens and Jan De Zutter, *Het Vlaams Bouwmeesterschap 1999-2005: Een Zoektocht Naar Kwaliteit in De Publieke Ruimte* (Antwerp: Houtekiet, 2008).

⁴⁴ Maarten Liefoghe and Maarten Van Den Driessche (eds.), *More than a competition: the open call in a changing building culture* (Antwerp: Flanders Architecture Institute; Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, 2021).

⁴⁵ [... if contemporary architecture is to become self-evident in Flanders, it will have to primarily serve social housing and public utility buildings] "Hedendaagse architectuur, erfgoed voor morgen. Tentoonstelling Jaarboek Architectuur Vlaanderen 1996-1997," in *deSingel 98/99 (programme brochure)* (Antwerp: deSingel, 1998), 8.

This stance resonated in the talk series “Reality Check” (1998-99) organized by Swinnen and De Boeck at deSingel, which further attested to the burgeoning interest and engagement of local architectural practitioners with concerns spanning societal dynamics and environmental issues.

The itinerant exhibition *Homeward: Contemporary Architecture in Flanders* (Grenoble, Rome, Venice, Antwerp, Plymouth, from 1999 to 2001) continued the reflections on this front. It was produced by deSingel and commissioned by the Flemish Ministry of Culture to the curators Maarten Delbeke, Steven Jacobs, and Katrien Vandermarliere with the goal to promote local architecture in Flanders and abroad. Contrary to previous approaches that highlighted a curated selection of architectural works as ‘best-off’ of individual practices and autonomous designs,⁴⁶ the curators consciously charted a distinct course. Their intent shifted towards the formulation of a new discourse for contemporary architecture.⁴⁷ This novel framework was rooted in a comprehensive re-evaluation of Flanders’ urbanized environment, anchored in the principles advanced by the *Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen*. This approach resulted in an assemblage of insightful artifacts, ranging from architectural representations and documentary films to data visualizations and aerial perspectives, serving as means to direct the attention towards a reflection on the qualitative use of the Flemish territory⁴⁸ (fig. 5).

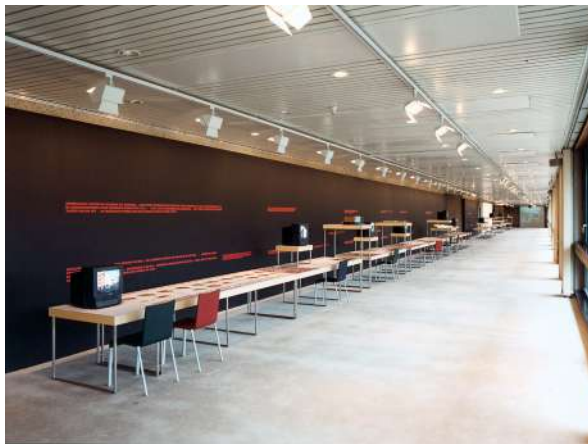


Figure 5. Exhibition view of *Homeward: Hedendaagse Architectuur in Vlaanderen*, installed at deSingel, Antwerp, November–December 2000, © Jan Kempnaers for deSingel International Arts Center vzw. Source: Courtesy of deSingel Arts Center.

⁴⁶ Explicit reference was made to the exhibitions *Architetti (della Fiandria)* (Belgian Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennale, 1991), *Nouvelles Architecture en Flandre* (Centre d’architecture Arc en Rêve, Bordeaux, 1996), and *Arquitectura de Flandes* (Collegi d’Arquitectes de Catalunya, Barcelona, 1997).

⁴⁷ Kristiaan Borret, Maarten Delbeke, Steven Jacobs, and Katrien Vandermarliere (eds.), *Homeward: Contemporary Architecture in Flanders* (Antwerp: deSingel, 1998).

⁴⁸ Article currently in preparation for publication in *Revue Clara Architecture/Recherche*. Alice Haddad, “Layered tables and compact TV monitors: exhibiting architecture and Flanders’s urban conditions at the turn of the millennium” (working title, 2023).

During the 1990s, discourse surrounding urban dynamics and environmental transformation gained traction across Europe. A remarkable exhibition was the show *Mutations*, curated by OMA, which premiered at Arc en rêve in Bordeaux in 2000. A collaborative effort forged between Arc en rêve and deSingel aimed at bringing this compelling initiative to Brussels during the city's tenure as the Cultural Capital of Europe held in the same year. Eventually, the exhibition found its venue at the Raffinerie in Brussels in 2001. Central to the exhibition's narrative were concerns related to the globalizing forces reshaping our world and the concurrent metamorphosis of urban landscapes into sprawling metropolitan conglomerates. The show's captivating multimedia displays and challenging discourse (transcribed in its extensive catalogue)⁴⁹ effectively captured the zeitgeist of the era.

Urban designer Xaveer de Geyter⁵⁰ embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the unbridled expansion of Flanders' urban sprawl. His inquiry, vested in urban and territorial planning, culminated in the exhibition and publication *After-Sprawl: Onderzoek naar de hedendaagse stad*⁵¹ presented at deSingel in 2002. The exhibition's framework was artfully conceived as a presentation of research, comprising two distinct facets: an atlas and a project component. The atlas segment intricately juxtaposed a spatial analysis of Flanders against that of five comparable European regions experiencing similar urbanization processes. Within this context, the concept of "negative space" was formulated into a strategic blueprint to reimagine unbuilt areas (e.g. natural zones, residual plots, agricultural land...). These latent spaces were envisaged as fertile ground for instigating radical spatial transformations, guiding novel modes of usage for the benefits of local communities.⁵² Whereas *Homeward*, on the one hand, through the display of concrete local works, was crafted to stimulate novel perspectives on the intricate interplay between architecture, urban design, socio-cultural trends, and environmental phenomena within the backdrop of the region's characteristic urban sprawl. *After-Sprawl*, on the other hand, embarked on a more expansive trajectory. Rooted in an in-depth analysis of the broader urbanization dynamics unfolding across Europe, it ventured to explore uncharted terrain by speculating on radical planning visions for the Flemish territory (fig. 6).

In 2001, another significant milestone was reached with the inauguration of the Vlaams Architectuurinstituut (VAi).⁵³ In the words of architectural historian Geert Bekaert, this institution at long last offered a designated venue "... zodat men zich vanuit binnen- en buitenland zou weten waar te wenden... Met het creëren en invullen van dat adres wordt de

⁴⁹ Armelle Lavalou, ed., *Mutations* (Barcelona: Actar, 2001).

⁵⁰ Xaveer De Geyter had collaborated with OMA and continued to channel a comparable approach within his own practice since 1988. His urban projects were regularly presented in various exhibitions. In 2001, he compiled these works in an extensive monographic exhibition presented at deSingel.

⁵¹ [After-Sprawl: Research for the Contemporary City]

⁵² Xaveer De Geyter et al. (eds.), *After-Sprawl: Research for the Contemporary City* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2002).

⁵³ [Flemish Architecture Institute]

architectuur in Vlaanderen op de wereldkaart gezet. Maar ook op de eigen kaart."⁵⁴ The institute's mission consisted in enhancing public awareness of architecture, among other, through informative website and newsletter, publications including the Flemish Architecture Yearbooks, exhibitions, and activities like the Dag van de Architectuur.⁵⁵ Its foundational statutes formally stipulated its mission to foster collaboration with "... relevante organisaties en personen, in het bijzonder met de Vlaamse Bouwmeester."⁵⁶ Van Reeth also figured on the institute's board of directors. These connections demonstrate the Government's aim to ensure a cohesive approach towards advancing architectural discourse within Flanders' public realm.

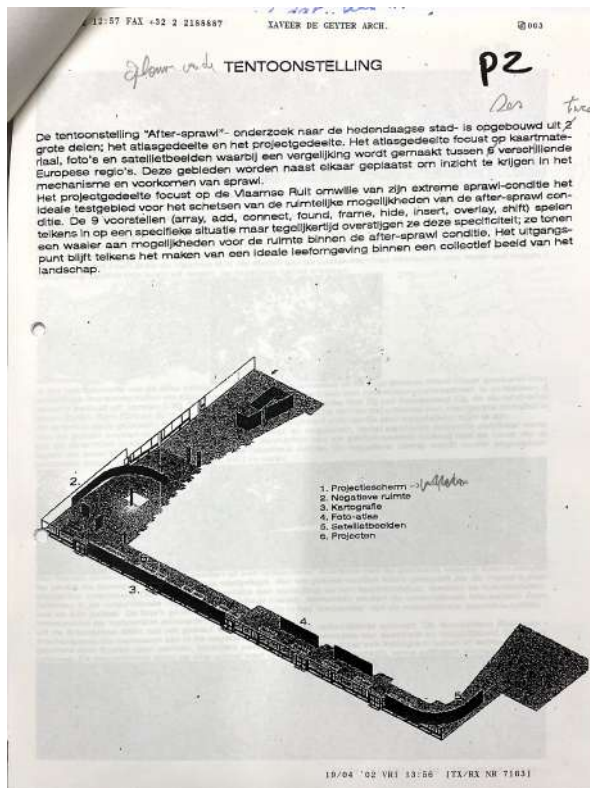


Figure 6. Work document with an illustration of the exhibition layout of *After-Sprawl: Onderzoek naar de hedendaagse stad*, installed at deSingel, Antwerp, May–June 2002, © Xaveer De Geyter Architects. Source: deSingel International Arts Centre archives.

⁵⁴ [... so that people from home and abroad would know where to turn... Creating and filling in that address puts architecture in Flanders on the world map. But also on its own map] Excerpt from Geert Bekaert's (chairman of VAI's board of directors) inaugural speech of the Institute, cited in Hans Ibelings, "Groeiend zelfbewustzijn in de Vlaamse architectuur," *Ons Erfdeel* 45 (2002): 768.

⁵⁵ [Open Architecture Days]

⁵⁶ [... relevant organisations and persons, in particular with the Flemish Government Architect] Excerpt cited in Ibelings, "Groeiend zelfbewustzijn in de Vlaamse architectuur...," 767 (note 51).

DeSingel's architecture programme sustained its course until 2010 next to the activities of the VAI. The two institutions were bound to collaborate, since the latter was housed within the same premises. However, the new configurations triggered a shift in roles. Katrien Vandermarliere was appointed as the first director of the Flemish Architecture Institute, within which she continued to consolidate the insights that had germinated in the preceding decade, and the arts curator Moritz Küng assumed the helm at deSingel. These institutional transitions granted him more freedom to cultivate an interdisciplinary programme less entangled in local spatial politics and chart a fresh trajectory guided by a broader spectrum of influences and inspirations.

A curious exhibition unfolded during this transition. *Portret van Vlaamse biotopen: De fotografie-opdracht van de Vlaamse Bouwmeester*⁵⁷ was instigated in 2002 and formally curated by Moritz Küng in collaboration with Katrien Vandermarliere. It is, however, Vandermarliere who initiated the project with bOb Van Reeth, while Küng's appointment occurred amid the exhibition-making process. As part of Van Reeth's new mandate as Flemish Government Architect, he sought to compile a photographic inventory of Flanders to better comprehend the extent of his field of intervention. The photographer Niels Donckers was enlisted, and he rapidly amassed hundreds of photographs, registering the most unassuming landscapes scattered across Flanders in which public commissions were to potentially take shape. In 2002, this photographic inventory was unveiled alongside a collection of landscape photographs acquired by the Flemish Government, a thoughtful lexicon,⁵⁸ and additional artifacts further explicating the Flemish Government Architect's aspirations.⁵⁹ The exhibition abstained from showcasing architectural or urban designs, opting instead to foreground an immersive narrative conscious of the power of images "[...] voor het vaststellen van de identiteit van een gebied, voor het registreren van veranderingen, het aanscherpen van de waarneming en het verbeelden van de subjectieve ervaring"⁶⁰ (fig. 7).

Discursive vehicles

Through this exploration, my aim has been to convey the entanglements of exhibition practices with concurring developments, spotlighting the role of deSingel's architecture programme as both a platform and catalyst that ignited public discourse. What stands out in

⁵⁷ [Portrait of Flemish Biotopes: The Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect]

⁵⁸ Lieven De Cauter and O.S.A. (eds.), *Het kleine Lexicon van het Vlaamse (Architectuur-) Landschap: van achterkeuken tot zonevreemd, agenda 2003* (Antwerp: deSingel, 2002).

⁵⁹ Alice Haddad, "Landscape Inventory vs. Collection: The Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect on Display", paper presented at the conference 'Formats of (Non)Seeing,' organised by the Institute of Art History Zagreb, in Split, Croatia, 27-29/10/2022.

⁶⁰ [... for establishing the identity of an area, for the registration of changes, the sharpening of perception, and the depiction of subjective experience] Excerpt from the exhibition leaflet. Source: deSingel archives. The line "The photography commission is of great importance for establishing the identity of an area and for the registration of changes, the sharpening of perception, and the depiction of subjective experience" was copied, without reference, from Friets Gierstberg's contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition *SubUrban Options. Photography Commissions and the Urbanization of the Landscape* produced by the Nederlands Foto Instituut and programmed at deSingel in 1998.

the examples I have chosen and aligned across three pivotal moments is their treatment of contemporary urban issues and their role as discursive vehicles. In the monographic exhibitions around 1990, discursive notions remained somewhat implicit, subtly permeating through a curated selection of works. Subsequent thematic group exhibitions introduced more cohesive curatorial narratives, complemented by critical essays included in the accompanying publications. Along with the consolidation of Flanders’ institutionalization of the architectural domain around 2000, exhibitions themselves transitioned into more assertive discursive entities, serving as platforms for the dissemination of novel research and fresh perspectives. This evolution also hints at the solidifying position of the curator(s) assuming an increasingly outspoken presence. A more detailed understanding of the ways these exhibitions shifted the gaze onto the evolving role of spatial practices and the built environment, incorporating a growing spectrum of voices, practices, and media, are avenues worth further delving into as they undoubtedly form significant precedents to approaches that continue to blossom today.



Figure 7. Exhibition poster of *Portret van Vlaamse biotopen: De fotografie-opdracht van de Vlaamse Bouwmeester*, installed at deSingel, Antwerp, November 2002–January 2003. Source: Courtesy of deSingel Arts Center.



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