

Memory and Confrontation

Museum M, Leuven, Stéphane Beel Architects

Author: Maarten Liefoghe

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The critical reception of museum architecture is a tricky business. The architectural criticism of museums often veers off into cultural criticism, as for example when museums are dismissed at a stroke as purely urban icons and architecture as the lackey of a late-capitalist logic of urban development. In the reverse direction too, museum criticism is often expressed in architectural metaphors, the most significant example being the criticism of what is called the 'white cube'. The habitual white walls that make museum rooms neutral and mutually interchangeable are in this instance interpreted as symptoms of a museum operation that presents works of art as formal-autonomous art objects. The white cube is said to cut art loose from place, history and society, loose from the world outside the museum. So is there really nothing we can say about museum architecture that is not an indirect reference to the programme that these buildings house? Or can the qualities of an architectural design indeed only truly be gauged as part of a discussion of the work of the museum as an institution?

In the case of the design Stéphane Beel Architects drew up for the Museum M in Leuven, a reading in terms of the programme is certainly legitimate. This is because of the ambiguity of the sort of museum that M is intended to be: both a museum of the local heritage and a museum of art. How is this institutional duality interpreted in the architecture? However relevant it may be, a reading by way of the programme soon comes up against its limits and we are forced to acknowledge a point of view that also looks at the pleasure inherent in this design. A pleasure that emerges most strongly in the way the design deals with the 'particularities' of the site and in a few laconic-looking formal 'excesses' that were able to be designed on the margins, not determined by the needs of the programme.

Stéphane Beel's team was selected for the expansion and renovation of the museum by means of what is called an 'announcement of the assignment followed by a process of negotiation'. More work was then done on developing and modifying the original draft design submitted in 2004 in dialogue with the client, though the main thrust of the design remained unaltered. The programme of the museum included the usual rooms for the storage, examination and display of art, and related activities such as a bookshop and a café, a children's workshop and a studio for an artist in residence. One exceptional element was the incorporation of an historical mansion complete with preserved interior decoration. Victor Vander Kelen donated the Hôtel Vander Kelen-Martens to the city in 1917 as a home for the municipal museum, on condition that it was named after his parents, the former mayor Léopold Vander Kelen and Maria Mertens. However, since its reopening in 2009, the Vander

Kelen-Mertens Museum has had a new name: Museum M. It can best be described as a municipal art museum, where there is a tension between the heritage function of its own art collection, which is closely linked to the history of Leuven, and the pronounced ambition to go beyond this by programming temporary art exhibitions. The main points of focus in M's own collections are late-mediaeval religious sculpture, nineteenth-century bourgeois portraits and genre works, and a set of paintings and sculptures by Constantin Meunier, who taught at the Academy in Leuven. This collection appears to need the context of the city, whereas the aim intended for the museum as an art centre mainly requires flexible exhibition spaces, as the opening exhibitions of Rogier van der Weyden and Jan Verrocchio have already made clear. The design of the museum mediates in this double challenge by taking up a midway position with flexible exhibition spaces that tie the exhibitions to the city and not the individual historical objects.

The programme is divided between the various buildings on the site in horizontal layers. The reserves, for example, occupy three underground floors that feed the museum from below. The reception area, shop, children's workshop and the entrances to the exhibitions and the café are collected together on a half-sunken floor. The permanent display of the collection occupies the first storey above ground, while the second and third are used for temporary exhibitions. This organisational form is related to the principle of presenting 'old' and contemporary art in both historical and new architectural settings – each floor contains rooms in the new and the renovated buildings. In the context of this logic, the housing of the permanent collection on one floor and temporary exhibitions on the two others did not become a determining factor in any differentiation in the design of the various floors. The permanent display is actually just an exhibition of a fraction of the reserves, which rotates much more slowly than the temporary exhibitions and could just as well be set up on the other floors.

The site, a stone's throw from the town hall, was just as challenging as the programme: the corner of a street block that contained the then Vander Kelen-Mertens Museum, the former public library and the complex of buildings belonging to the municipal academy. Apart from the historical mansion, the academy building and the neoclassical pillared portico in Vanderkelenstraat and the monumental garden wall with the baroque doorways along Savoyestraat also had to be preserved, being classified monuments. The design restructured the site by pruning away several uninteresting buildings and adding two new volumes. The first, an elongated volume, stretches over the full width of the site. Along Vanderkelenstraat it slides forward a half-sunken floor, the top of which becomes a raised forecourt. In Savoyestraat this volume grows into a slightly overhanging tower in which the museum seems to be showing itself to the city. The second new volume, smaller, fits into the internal angle of the Vander Kelen-Mertens house and the academy building. An inner garden gathers around it the new and the historical buildings in an intelligibly connected whole. What is more, the elevated forecourt is linked to the garden by means of an opening cut out of the long volume, and the garden is also immediately accessible from Savoyestraat, so that the

museum site is crossed by a public path and is thus woven into the city centre.

Apart from this, the architects refer to the inner garden in terms of a new 'urban room' that joins the numerous historical courtyards in the university's colleges in the city centre. The design appears to offer some other pronounced images too, images of an open-air stage on the elevated square, of a lookout tower above the town, of old and new architecture clustered together; images in which one can read an association between the museum and the city. So the depiction of the idea of a municipal museum is here not done by an architecture that externalises a set of functions, but in an interplay of formal gestures and the given elements of the site.

The horizontal connection of the various buildings on the site, sometimes by means of glazed bridges, gives rise to an extremely varied exhibition route that unfolds in a sequence of rooms each with a distinct character. There is the empty bareness of the museum rooms in the new volumes, the industrial nature of the rooms in the reserves building in the former academy and the full opulence of the restored historical interiors in the Vander Kelen-Mertens house. And although the different sorts of exhibition room come close to familiar types – the white cube, the converted warehouse and the historical interior used as a museum – it is mainly the way they differ that is interesting. For example, the inlaid floors and decorated walls and ceilings in the rooms on the ground floor of the Vander Kelen-Mertens house have been restored extremely meticulously, though they do not look like the drawing rooms that belonged to Mayor Vander Kelen and Mrs Mertens, but more like empty historical architecture in which the porcelain collection is not arranged on tables and cabinets, but is exhibited in display cases. And, with their newly-fitted ceilings and plastered walls, the rooms in the reserves building whose function has been changed are just as white as the rooms in the new building; it is only the incongruous windows that give a clue to their past. In its turn, the enfilade of museum rooms itself does not stick to the modernist ideal of white, top-lit exhibition rooms timelessly separated from their surroundings. On the contrary, the sporadic windows frame sideways views of an exterior – the forecourt in Vander Kelenstraat, the inner garden or the surrounding city – and these views situate the museum rooms. This gives rise to settings that are sufficiently secluded to be able to look at art with the necessary attention, but which also establish regular relationships with the city and ordinary goings-on outside the museum. This is most evident in the belvedere room in the tower extension in Savoyestraat, where a corner window outlines the pinnacles of the town hall, which is otherwise almost entirely hidden behind other buildings. And when the museum circuit suddenly leads you over the roof of the new volume, the city is unequivocally laid out before you.

So in this design windows definitely have a significance in the programme, but not always and never exclusively. This is because, apart from playing with the outward view by which one can situate oneself, and with the inward views of the curious, the design also plays with the peculiarity of the views through the building. One can look in through the low window on the pavement in Vander Kelenstraat, or through the sculptural light-

shafts on the elevated forecourt. From the street you look into the museum garden through a cut-out in the solid new volume and inside the big projecting hall the steps at the entrance below suddenly come into view through a bottomless 'patio'. The three closed internal sides of the patio one looks through are clad in mirrored stainless steel. Here, and also near the light-shafts above the lobby, which stand on the forecourt like concrete sculptures, the windows appear, because of their design, to assume a status as architectural events in their own right.

In another way, the integration of the neoclassical pillared portico into the design resists the construal of any unequivocal meaning. The pillars are the only remaining element of an eighteenth-century Artes Faculty building. Its fragmentary nature is borne out by the fact that the building behind it does not touch the portico. At the same time, this remnant is functionally integrated by placing the entrance to the museum immediately behind it. Now, thanks to its classical museum architecture, the portico acts as an iconic trade mark for the museum. However, this functional integration contrasts with the ambiguous formal relationship between the new building and the historical remnant. Above the steps that lead down to the entrance door, the new building juts out until it almost touches the portico. Seen from the front, the projecting volume ends respectfully behind the fronton, but from the side the mass of the projecting volume reduces the portico to the scale of an almost absurd remnant.

Lastly, another latent reminder of monumental nineteenth-century museums is to be seen in the stone cladding of the façades of the two new buildings, certainly when combined with the portico at the front. At the back, by contrast, this same uninterrupted stone enhances the impact with which the long new volume appears in the narrow museum garden. The change of scale this brings about with regard to the typically fragmented inner areas is probably suited to the public and prestigious status the site will have from now on, but the dauntlessness with which the long and sharply-delineated volume presents itself is nevertheless above all an irreducibly sublime aesthetic feature.

The design for Museum M effectively performs the actual tasks it was set. It makes it possible for the museum to do its job, provides a suitable place for this, plus an identity and a relationship with the city, and at the same time also gives Leuven a new prestigious site in the city centre. Any architectural design is always very dependent on all sorts of preconditions, of which the programme is only one, but it is never fully defined by them. The architectural response can never be reduced to the problem set. The problem always offers the possibility not only of the pleasure of designing, but also the pleasure of being confronted with form, mass and matter in the reality of the activities and narratives programmed. In the case of museums too, and certainly Museum M.