

51N4E DOUBLE OR NOTHING





It seems like blasphemy to break open the sacral and retiring character of a museum like the Groeninge in Bruges and to extract the works of art from the reverent radiance of their security. Yet this sort of sacrilegious gesture can be salutary from time to time. The brief for the transformation of the Groeninge Museum dates from 2002. The radical approach taken by the architects was the only way to work efficiently. A conversion in stages was proposed. Only the first stage was carried out, but it clearly set the tone for later development. First and foremost, the museum was drawn out of its seclusion and given back to the city. The designers refer to a 'public route' and an 'exhibition route', which differ from each other in the intensity of the art experience. After all, there are many ways of dealing with art, as the designers demonstrate in their approach to the various rooms.

The original 1930 museum, designed by the municipal architect Jozef Viérin, was stripped of all later additions. A clear chronological course was drawn up. In this framework, each room is treated in its own way by means of appropriate lighting. What is more, by using various materials and methods of display, each room is adapted to the works of art on show. In some rooms the light is reflected by the bright white mosaic floor, while in others the mood is set by an opulent red carpet.

However, nothing is done to remind us of the expectations of a traditional museum. Everything revolves around the direct relationship with the work of art. As a result of the everyday setting in which they find themselves, visitors are either confronted with the bare essentials of the work of art, or else find themselves naked and unprotected in the face of the work of art – which amounts to the same thing.

Geert Bekaert



As important as the collection is the public – whether tourist, flâneur or expert. A new museum arrangement should also elicit new ways of viewing the art, as well as new ways of interaction: attentive, inclusive, bulimic, superficial, punctual... (photo: The Modern Room)



GROENINGEMUSEUM

Materials and colours are specifically chosen to maximise the collection. A new white mosaic tile floor reflects the light from above, sometimes sensuous, sometimes subtle and sometimes hard. Some rooms are also lined with luscious red carpets. The resulting floor rhythm (hard mosaic floor and soft carpet surface) underscores the rhythm of the art hanging on the walls. To finalise the spatial matrix, additional furniture (individual seats / massive stands) acts as an oxygenous surplus. (photo: The Baroque Room)



In the middle of the route, an archive accessible to the public emphasises the new identity of the museum. The system consists of mobile transparent metal screens providing a crash course in six centuries of art. The strategic central position of the archive induces the visitor to view the art at a different pace. (photo: The Open Archive)



From the Groeninge Museum to the Arteconomy Villa, the buildings and projects of 51N4E appear here as the result of a continuous quest to produce work that is autonomous (even personal) and yet radically open to the world in which we live. The necessary paradoxes that these twin ambitions generate also define a certain tension that characterises the work itself. For both the architects themselves and an onlooking audience this tension seems productive, even necessary, in the sense that it creates architectural environments that are clearly defined but still open, ready to be engaged with and used. This book illustrates a series of distinct projects produced over the first decade of 51N4E, and presents them in a deliberately deadpan sequential arrangement, neither chronological nor thematic but simply positioned with texts on the left-hand side and images on the right. As much as allowing the words and pictures to speak for themselves, this structure enables a double reading (consistent with the title of the exhibition that this book accompanies): to focus on and understand individual projects, or to leaf through the book as if one big portfolio, forgetting the projects and simply looking at everything in a kind of free association – double or nothing.

Brett Steele

