

Keywords architecture exhibition, exhibition design, media, spatial representation, Flanders, urban condition

Abstract The travelling exhibition *Homeward, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders* (1999–2001) was commissioned by the Flemish Ministry of Culture and curated by Maarten Delbeke, Steven Jacobs, and Katrien Vandermarliere. The curators selected nine buildings and an urban design project, not merely as “best of” contemporary practices, but rather to articulate a new discourse for evaluating contemporary architecture based on the Flanders Environmental Structure Plan. The exhibition and accompanying publication aimed to foster new perspectives on the interaction between architecture, urban design, and the social, cultural, and environmental factors of the region’s urban sprawl. Using diverse media and a modular furniture system, the exhibition created a framework to explore how the selected designs and Flanders’s spatial environment affected each other. The layered narrative offered a kaleidoscopic portrayal of the Flemish landscape. This paper explores the symbolic and operational functions of *Homeward*’s exhibition apparatus, showing how discourse and media combined into a transfiguration of the spatial environment, promoting a new architectural agenda for Flanders

Résumé L’exposition itinérante *Homeward, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders* (1999–2001) fut commandée par le Ministère de la Culture flamand et organisée par Maarten Delbeke, Steven Jacobs et Katrien Vandermarliere. Ils sélectionnèrent neuf bâtiments et un projet de design urbain, non pas comme une vitrine des meilleures pratiques contemporaines, mais plutôt afin d’articuler un nouveau discours pour l’évaluation de l’architecture contemporaine basé sur le Plan Structurel Environnemental de la Flandre. L’exposition et la publication qui l’accompagnait visaient à encourager de nouvelles perspectives sur l’interaction entre l’architecture, le design urbain et les facteurs sociaux, culturels et environnementaux de l’étalement urbain régional. Utilisant divers médias et un système de mobilier modulaire, l’exposition créa un cadre pour explorer comment les projets sélectionnés et leur environnement spatial s’affectent mutuellement, faisant apparaître un portrait kaléidoscopique du paysage flamand. Cette contribution explore les fonctions symboliques et opérationnelles de l’appareil d’exposition de *Homeward*, détaillant comment le discours et les médias se combinèrent pour transfigurer l’environnement spatial, promouvant ainsi un nouvel agenda architectural pour la Flandre.

Layered Tables and Compact TV Monitors: Exhibiting Architecture and Flanders's Urban Conditions at the Turn of the Millennium

Produced in the late 1990s as part of the architecture programme of Antwerp's deSingel performing arts centre, the exhibition *Homeward, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders* and its accompanying publication of the same title were commissioned by the Flemish Ministry of Culture to present the most exemplary practices of contemporary architecture from Flanders to a local and international audience. Between 1999 and 2001, the exhibition travelled successively to Grenoble, Rome, Venice, Antwerp, and Plymouth.¹ It presented a concise selection of nine realized buildings and an unexecuted urban design project conceived by local architects in the 15 years leading up to the show (Figs. 1-3).

Maarten Delbeke² and Steven Jacobs,³ young academics associated with Ghent University's Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, and Katrien Vandermarliere,⁴ deSingel's architecture programme director, were entrusted with the exhibition's curation. They did not intend to expose an exhaustive survey nor the most spectacular achievements of contemporary "Flemish architecture". Instead, they wished to erect a new framework to comprehend the role of architecture within Flanders's contemporary urban conditions. Their approach was inspired by discourse from the field of urban studies on the rapid transformation of urbanized environments. It was also motivated by new enquiries into Belgium's fragmented urban landscape and shifts in

1 *L'architecture contemporaine en Flandre, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders 1984-98*, in Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble (FR), March-May 1999; *Architettura Contemporanea nelle Fiandre*, in Academia Belgica, Rome (IT), March 2000; *Homeward, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders*, Belgian Pavilion, Venice Biennial, Seventh International Architecture Exhibition, Venice (IT), June-October 2000; *Homeward, Hedendaagse Architectuur in Vlaanderen*, in Kunstencentrum deSingel, Antwerp (BE), November-December 2000; *Homeward, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders*, Plymouth School of Architecture (UK), February-March 2001.

2 Maarten Delbeke (dipl. engineer-architect) was then a junior staff member preparing a PhD on the theory of the visual arts in Rome (1640-70). He regularly published on the relationship between visual culture and architecture and was editor of *AS-Andere Sinema*.

3 Steven Jacobs (dipl. art history) was working at the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning as an academic researcher, regularly publishing on art and architecture. He was a founding member of the Ghent Urban Studies Team (GUST) established in 1995 at Ghent University, which focused on the study of urban conditions.

4 Katrien Vandermarliere (dipl. art history) has been director, curator and editor of deSingel's architecture programme since 1991, in the framework of which she has produced various exhibitions, publications, and public talks dealing with contemporary architecture and urbanism.

Fig. 1.

Homeward, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders, Venice, 2000. Exhibition view of installation at the Belgian Pavilion, Seventh International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennial. © Photo: Paul Casaer, 2000.



Fig. 2

Homeward, Hedendaagse Architectuur in Vlaanderen, Antwerpen, November–December 2000. Exhibition view of installation at the Kunstencentrum deSingel. Courtesy of deSingel Arts Centre. © Photo: Jan Kempenaers, 2000.

Fig. 3

Homeward, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders, Plymouth (UK), February–March 2001. Exhibition view of installation at the Plymouth School of Architecture. Courtesy of deSingel Arts Centre © Photo: Veerle Vermeyen, 2001.



local spatial governance. Accordingly, projects were selected by starting with a simple question: “How do present-day Flemish architects deal with this situation?” (Borret *et al.*, 1998: 9).

The result was the production of a layered exhibition and publication, in which Delbeke, Jacobs, and Vandermarliere, with the contribution of various collaborators, gathered a vast range of visual material and contextual insights. Coming together to form a kaleidoscopic portrayal of the Flemish landscape, different artefacts were collected, on the one hand, to represent and situate the works in their environment and, on the other hand, to document the multidimensional relationships linking architecture and the territory’s characteristic urban sprawl.

This article inquires into the exhibition as medium, which itself, as is often the case of exhibitions, assembled a range of heterogeneous media (Davallon, 1999; West, 2019). It aims to examine to what extent the symbolic and operational functions of these media informed the curatorial approach and narrative of *Homeward*. More specifically, it will focus on how media and discourse coalesced in the exhibition to construct a schematic transfiguration of the Flemish environment. However, to disentangle the intermedial relationships at play and their significance necessarily involves an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts from which the different media emerged (Elleström, 2010). Moreover, this curatorial project cannot be understood in isolation from contemporary developments in urbanism and territorial governance that unfolded towards the end of the 1990s in Flanders. Recalling key events, discourses, and practices linked to the production of *Homeward* therefore takes up a large part of this account without the aspiration of being exhaustive. Now, over 20 years after the exhibition, only traces of it remain. Pieced together with the help of the

publication and various (archival) sources,⁵ I hope to offer sufficient insights in order to reconstruct the exhibition as a complex media apparatus and ultimately gain a better understanding of exhibitions as intermedial and multimodal sites of knowledge production.

Curating (a New Discourse for) Contemporary Architecture and Urban Conditions

Throughout the 1990s, the Flemish government was slowly gaining interest in⁶ and increasing its support for the cultural development and promotion of local architecture (De Caigny and Vandermarliere, 2016). These efforts showed most concretely with the launch in 1994 of the triannual Flanders Architecture Yearbooks,⁷ which surveyed local developments in architecture and urban planning. The efforts culminated with the foundation of the Flemish Architecture Institute in 2001, whose long-awaited approval by the Flemish government

- 5 This investigation relied to a great extent on documentation preserved within deSingel International Arts Centre’s physical and digital administrative archives, which contain, among other materials, 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. They were brought to my attention and further understood through conversations with, and prior research conducted by, my PhD supervisor Prof. Maarten Liefoghe (Ghent University). He examined *Homeward* in comparison to the exhibition *Arquitectura de Flandes* (Barcelona, 1997) focusing on their institutional frameworks in relation to regional politics in an unpublished paper presented at the SAH conference session “Knowledge and Power: The Politics of the Architecture Museum” chaired by Sergio Figueiredo (Providence, Rhode Island, 26 April 2019).
- 6 A first mention for the necessity to pay attention to the quality of architecture in Flanders was made in the coalition agreement of the Flemish government of 29 January 1992. The Arts Administration of the Flemish Community followed up on this agreement through the commission of an investigation of architecture-related cultural initiatives conducted by Pieter Uyttenhove between 1994 and 1995 (Uyttenhove, 1995).
- 7 The Flanders Architecture Yearbooks were co-edited by Katrien Vandermarliere first in the framework of deSingel’s architecture programme and later in that of the Flemish Architecture Institute of which Vandermarliere was appointed the first director.

was confirmed by Minister of Culture Bert Anciaux in his speech at the opening event of *Homeward* at deSingel on 9 November 2000 (audio file 001109).

Severely debated at the time were the various ventures to identify the production of Flemish architects under the problematic banner of “Flemish architecture”, which became associated with a fear of adopting the region’s strengthening Flemish-nationalist identity-building project (Bekeart, 1999). Taking a position on this tricky matter was intrinsic to the curatorial narrative developed in *Homeward* and addressed in the publication. The introduction written by Steven Jacobs critically reviewed recent presentations of local practices and their related attempts to define “Flemish architecture”, not through a common style or genre but an attitude (e.g. individualism, simplicity, essentialism) towards undifferentiated local realities. It stressed the urgency of challenging established conventions and argued that the representation of architecture as autonomous objects in previous exhibitions⁸ had further contributed to diluting important environmental aspects of contemporary practices established in Flanders for the sake of finding some sort of unity.

How could the connection between cultural identity and current political aspirations be questioned while avoiding definite conclusions? The philosopher Dieter Lesage was invited to reflect on these tensions in a guest essay in which he called for a more nuanced awareness of the problems posed by identity politics, multiculturalism, and regional specificity. *Homeward*’s curatorial approach turned the attention towards the contextual aspects of contemporary architecture left as blind spots in local discussions. By raising the issue of urban sprawl, it also sought to confront local architectural productions with a spatial phenomenon that was not limited to Flanders’s regional

borders but more broadly affected various regions around the globe. As Lesage pointed out, this aim was not per definition a solution to political recuperation but, at least, it tried to counter simplistic interpretations by shifting the gaze towards urgent challenges facing contemporary architects.

Homeward was an opportunity to address recent research developed in the fields of environmental studies and urban planning.⁹ “*Città diffusa*”, “middle landscape”, “edge city”, “exopolis”, “generic city”, and “*Zwischenstadt*”¹⁰ were just a few of the terms that nourished the many debates that addressed the transformation of urban environments since the Third Industrial Revolution and the advent of global capitalism. They translated various attempts to comprehend new urban conditions that had emerged in different parts of the world, where centrality or locality was no longer to be found, replaced by urbanization processes that irrevocably blurred the morphological and hierarchical distinction between city and countryside (Ghent Urban Studies Team, 1999). The continuous corridor of urbanized land—coined the “blue banana” (Brunet, 1989)—stretching from West England across the Benelux regions to Northern Italy, was increasingly scrutinized in this context, further unravelling the local specificities of urban fragmentation as a widespread complex phenomenon.

The curatorial approach of *Homeward* was elaborated upon observations of Belgium’s fragmented urbanization processes. Recalled in the publication were the

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

9 Around the same time as curating *Homeward*, both Steven Jacobs and Maarten Delbeke contributed to the Ghent Urban Studies Team (GUST)’s first edited volume focusing on contemporary urban conditions (Ghent Urban Studies Team, 1999). The publication comprehensively showed how the notion of urban condition traversed various subdisciplines of urban studies through an analysis of its different conceptions and international case studies as diverse as Jacob’s examination of the dramatized alienation captured in the townscapes filmed by Michelangelo Antonioni or Delbeke’s study of the inhabited matrix of cyberspace envisioned in William Gibson’s benchmark science fiction novels.

10 Cf. Indovina, 1990; Rowe, 1991; Garreau, 1992; Soja, 1992; Koolhaas, 1995; Sieverts, 1997.

poignant words of architect and urban planner Marcel Smets, who a couple of years earlier expressed his fear that the Belgian territory “was on its way to degenerating into a large periphery, in which the historic centres function as tourist attractions and the residents are endlessly moving along crowded motorways from nowhere to nowhere” (Smets, 1993, quoted by Borret *et al.*, 1998: 19). Recent research had shown that the region’s profuse urban sprawl grew thanks to the historical distribution of small-scale towns and the construction of low-density single-family houses outside of city centres, which was facilitated after the Second World War through haphazard political campaigns. The following decades were marked by demographic growth and increased mobility, as well as administrative negligence in the domain of spatial planning. Residential settlements thus continued to propagate along existing industrial and new commercial ribbon-shaped arteries enmeshed in an exceptionally dense network of road infrastructure (Heynen *et al.*, 1991; De Meulder *et al.*, 1999).

After major state reforms (that led to the constitution of Belgium as a federal state) and the subsequent intricate redistribution of political competencies (across three geographic regions and three linguistic communities), important changes unfolded in terms of spatial planning policy and public governance in Flanders. In 1997, the Flemish government implemented the *Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen* (“Flanders Environmental Structure Plan”) to organize the region’s fragmented territory more consistently across all scales. Inspired by Dutch planning models, “decongested clustering” was one of its key principles. It aimed at preserving the remaining unbuilt spaces by strengthening the distinction between rural and urban areas, for instance, by linking strategic functions to infrastructural networks, so that further growth would come to densify the already urbanized land (Loeckx, 1996; Van Wesenbeek, 2002). The Structure Plan, however, did not include prescriptive rules and guidelines for the practice of architecture. The almost concurrent appointment of a first Flemish Government Architect in 1999 more specifically aimed at tackling

the management of Flanders’s architectural estate in the public realm (Liefvooghe and Van Den Driessche, 2021). And despite the revisions needed shortly after its implementation, the Structure Plan was nonetheless welcomed at the time as an important initial framework for rethinking the relationship between architecture and urban planning in regard to an environmental paradigm that could no longer be ignored (Borret, 1999).

These concerns stimulated the new discourse developed in *Homeward* expressed in the publication, which sought to clarify how the Structure Plan foregrounded a new agenda for contemporary architecture:

...today’s Flemish architects are no longer operating in an obscure, undefined zone, but in a meticulously charted area to which apply binding regulations with a force unprecedented in local environmental policy...The development of a new discourse is undoubtedly linked to its sensitivity to the observation of the environmental structure of the Flemish landscape, with its morphological and socio-cultural cohesion. The occupation of space from now on must be legitimized. Architecture becomes a resistance against, but at the same time an expression of a feeling of unease. One almost has to formulate apologies for building a house. (Borret *et al.*, 1998: 10)

Overcoming these hurdles called for more elaborate criteria for the assessment of architecture, most importantly also taking into account the spatial contexts and environmental factors in which buildings and urban plans were embedded (Delbeke, 1998; Jacobs, 2000). To demonstrate this prerequisite the curators, together with the architect and critic Paul Vermeulen,¹¹ made a concise

11 Paul Vermeulen was initially part of the curatorial team, but he withdrew from the project during the curatorial process due to concerns about the project selection. In a letter faxed to Vandermarliere on 5 December 1997, he expressed his fears that the exhibition would be “too heavy” to process and could benefit from a more consistent bundling of the material (Vermeulen, 1997).

selection of ten designs scattered across the Flemish territory:

- a discreet funeral parlour designed by Erik Van Belleghem inserted along rural brick houses and neatly decorated front gardens in the traditional village of Sinaai;
- a modestly sized nursing school enriched with literary meaning by Wim Cuyvers, located on a former football field behind residential buildings in Zwijndrecht;
- the constricted reconversion by Stéphane Beel of a former milk factory into a public-oriented health insurance office in Eeklo's semi-archaic semi-ribbon town plan;
- an introverted terraced house incorporating a pharmacy by Robbrecht & Daem and Marie-José Van Hee, situated next to the central marketplace of the provincial town of Lokeren;
- a nonchalant contemporary art gallery with an autonomous glass-boxed penthouse overlooking Brussels's intricate historic centre, by Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem;
- a stratified urban design project, which aims to intensify Brussels's metropolitan character, submitted by Xaveer De Geyter Architects for the Europa Junction design competition;
- an entrenched scenic villa in Antwerp's rich suburbia of Brasschaat, by Xaveer De Geyter;
- a compact residential corner block facing Antwerp's busy ring road in the district of Berchem, realized by Willem-Jan Neutelings in collaboration with Marc de Kooning;
- a frugal detached family house set back along an old country road in the municipality of Waarschoot, by Guy Châtel in collaboration with Marc de Kooning; and
- an austere industrial bakery by Ronny De Meyer and Lut Prims, reinterpreting the aesthetics of the adjacent E17 motorway and blending into Beveren's patched carpet landscape.

The projects were investigated in greater detail by Maarten Delbeke and Steven Jacobs in collaboration with their colleague

Kristiaan Borret.¹² They researched the most relevant aspects of the projects' design process, conceptual references, programmatic functions, everyday use, and critical reception. And they focused more specifically on every design's relationship to its surroundings in order to point out, for instance, how a building's volumetric implementation probed the limits of local regulations or how the spatial organization of functions, in one way or another, disturbed everyday customs and habits. These observations were compiled in a series of close readings included in the publication, in which Borret, Delbeke, and Jacobs further elaborated on the spatial condition of each site as samples of a broader reality to be found on the Flemish territory.

A Nonlinear and a Modular Structure

The Michelin roadmap printed on the book cover invited the reader on a journey, not to an exotic location, but homewards to Flanders. No major landmarks, no linear trajectory could be expected on this journey; only a (re)discovery of familiar sights was on offer (Fig. 4). The publication was put together by graphic designer Gert Audenaert as an autonomous and well-researched book, translated into English and Italian, which could outlive the exhibition after its temporary installations. Qua form and content, it contrasted greatly with the aestheticized architecture portfolios typically included in exhibition and promotional catalogues, as well as the Flanders Architecture Yearbooks.¹³ In their consecutive close readings of the different works, the authors

12 At the time, Kristiaan Borret (dipl. urbanism) was a junior faculty member in the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at Ghent University and also a member of the Ghent Urban Studies Team (GUST). He was preparing a dissertation and publishing on topics related to urban planning and the politics of public space, including a contribution on "urban void" as a productive concept for architecture (Ghent Urban Studies Team, 1999: 236–251).

13 The Flanders Architecture Yearbooks were regularly criticized 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.

“deliberately opted not to present glossy individual visual documentation, but rather to integrate the illustrations into the text” (Borret *et al.*, 1998: 9). The extensive and detailed descriptions of the links between architecture, site, and urban condition at times also comprised comparisons between the works, inviting readers to flip between case studies. These texts were complemented by an additional set of maps and data tables on Belgium’s demographics and land use patterns compiled in the annex. By enhancing crossings between image and text, case studies and general information, the publication offered a captivating overview of the complex dynamics at play in Flanders’s urban nebula. In accordance with their call for a new discourse expressed in the introduction, it was especially the authors’ intricate narrative that served to link the works together with the aim of revealing a shared agenda in the architects’ search for finding an original response to what were, after all, banal situations.

To help translate this approach in the exhibition, architect and scenographer Eric Van Daele was commissioned to conceive *Homeward’s* exhibition design. Since the exhibition would be travelling to different locations, some unknown in advance, the design of the display apparatus was based on individual modules that were easy to transport, instal, and dismantle from one place to another, and that could adapt to the morphology of many exhibition spaces. The modules therefore combined custom-made tables of different dimensions that could be stacked and placed to form various configurations according to each venue’s spatial constraints. A floor surface of approximately 120 m² was nonetheless required, but the exhibition did not need wall space or a particular hanging system.¹⁴ When installed at

the Seventh Venice Architecture Biennale, for example, the modules were placed adjacent to one another, forming a series of separate single rows in the Belgian pavilion’s atrium. In Plymouth’s architecture school gallery, separate rows were doubled, and at Magasin in Grenoble, the modules were doubled and aligned to form a single display island standing in the middle of the venue’s large exhibition hall.

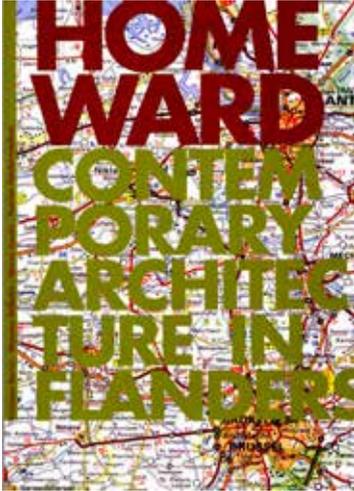
Van Daele visualized a set of configurations as part of the exhibition’s design process (Fig. 5). In axonometric drawings, he omitted the exhibits that were to occupy the structure. Instead, the renderings of the desks’ contiguous surfaces were filled with the outline of a roadmap similar to that eventually chosen to illustrate the book cover and exhibition poster. These drawings showed how the designer imagined the display apparatus as a scale model of a landscape, in which the horizontal and multileveled layering of surfaces resembled a fragmented topography. This schematic transfiguration of a territory, at least conceptually, seemed particularly suited to supporting the curators’ analysis of Flanders’s urban sprawl. Yet how did it deal with the media chosen for the representation of architectural works to compose a cohesive curatorial narrative and orchestrate the visitors’ experience and access to the information?

On the Move: From Nowhere to Somewhere?¹⁵

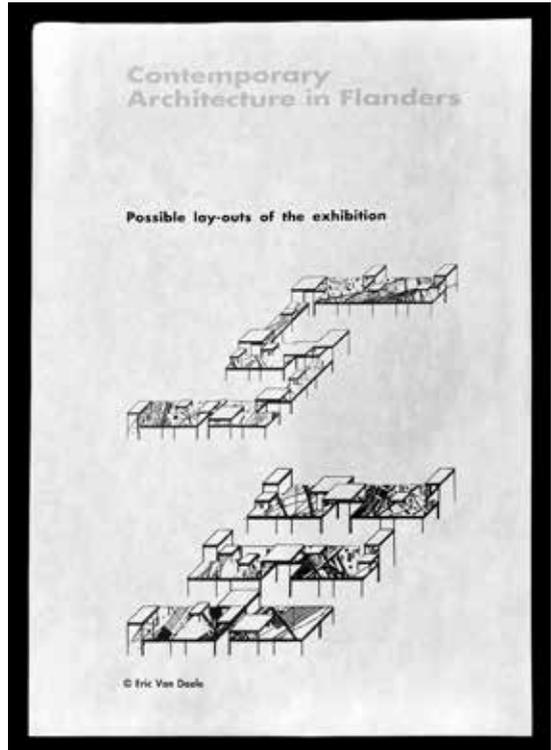
One or two modules were used for the presentation of all the material related to an individual work. As in the book, a wide range of artefacts were chosen that could specifically direct the gaze towards contextual processes and ideas pertaining to a more situated conception of architecture. The architectural offices were asked to provide drawings, sketches, plans, visual montages, and models pertaining to the projects’ design process, as well as photographs documenting the

14 The scenography’s production process can be reconstructed through various documentation found in the archives, including sketches, technical drawings, exhibition floorplans, photographed scale models, lists of furniture components, display objects and devices, print tests, reports, contracts, correspondence, etc. See deSingel International Arts Centre archives, section 10 architecture programme, boxes 56, 152 and 187.

15 In the publication, the bundle of project descriptions was briefly introduced with the ambiguous subtitle “On the move, from nowhere to nowhere”, quoting the phrase by Marcel Smets referred to earlier (Borret *et al.*, 1998: 18–19).



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Fig. 4

Book cover of Borret *et al.*, 1998. English version of the publication designed by Gert Audenaert and published by deSingel International Arts Centre.

Fig. 5

Document with concept drawings by architect and scenographer Eric Van Daele showing possible layouts for the exhibition design. Courtesy of deSingel International Arts Centre.

Fig. 6

Exhibition view taken at deSingel framing a TV monitor and visual montage presenting a terraced house designed by Paul Robbrecht & Hilde Daem and Marie-José Van Hee, and a scale model of a residential building realized by Willem-Jan Neutelings in collaboration with Marc de Kooning. Courtesy of deSingel International Arts Centre © Photo: Jan Kempenaers, 2000.

realized buildings and the project sites (Fig. 6). Outdoor shots that portrayed the building embedded in its surroundings were prioritized, as were indoor views framing an opening towards its outdoor context.

None of these images was framed or mounted on walls, as was often done in exhibitions to mimic the display of artworks. Instead, all the two-dimensional representations were specifically prepared (reformatted, polished, etc.) and graphically juxtaposed together with a selection of quotations encapsulating a key attitude of the architects. They formed what the curators called a “lively collage”,¹⁶ which was printed on large boards covering the desks’ surface. This horizontal arrangement required a certain amount of effort from the visitors, who had to lean over the tables to look at the profusion of text and images. At deSingel, chairs were provided for more comfortable study. The scale models, on the other hand, were placed on top of adjacent stacked tables or pedestals. Some included more of a design’s context than others. The scale model of Willem-Jan Neutelings’s terraced corner building, for example, showed the architecture’s façade components with delicate details but stopped at the plot’s boundaries. The model of Beel’s reconverted factory, in contrast, highlighted the project as a solid volume inserted into the site’s surrounding urban fabric. The models’ separate and individual placement enhanced their sculptural features, but the proximity to the extensive project documentation hindered their contemplation as autonomous objects and at the same time dimmed the possible association of such an interpretation extrapolated with architecture itself.

Whereas these assemblages predominantly showed the project’s architectonic and conceptual qualities in relation to their immediate surroundings, aerial views of the ten project sites were collected to broaden the field of vision. In the book, they

systematically appeared at the beginning of each case study. In the exhibition, they were incorporated into the graphic boards. Their large size and recurrent format made them stand out from the otherwise heterogenous material. Framing a larger portion of the environment through a zenith perspective, they depicted the patched morphologies in which the designs were inserted. In each aerial view a coloured circle indicated the design’s location and helped to identify the rendering’s scale. At this distance, the architecture’s edges and the plot’s boundaries tended to disintegrate into their fragmented surroundings. On the other hand, some striking contrasts started to appear, such as the comparable size of the industrialized zone and remaining agricultural fields surrounding De Meyer & Prims’s industrial bakery in Beveren, and how it differs from other patterns of urban density.

Aerial photography and satellite imagery, originally developed for military use, had become useful tools to supplement maps and datasets in the work of geographers and urban planners. Through their evolving techniques, they could reduce vast territorial surveys into increasingly precise synthetic pictures. Whereas such visualization techniques gained in popularity as a means to encapsulate environmental concerns, they were also condemned for their superficial abstraction and false objectivity. By the end of the 1990s, alternative and/or complementary methods for the representation of urban phenomena as a multifaceted and dynamic system were increasingly explored in urban studies, landscape urbanism, and artistic practices. Among these were the “eclectic atlases” developed by urban designer, critic

16 Mention from a document with an overview and English description of the exhibition and publication’s aims and requirements. See deSingel International Arts Centre archives, section 10 architecture programme, box 56.

and editor Stefano Boeri¹⁷ to capture the social and morphological dynamics of Italy's characteristic *citta diffusa*. These eclectic atlases consisted of heterogeneous and multidimensional assemblages, which gathered photographs, territorial surveys, maps, study reports, design projects, literary essays, etc. Presented in various exhibitions in the 1990s and early 2000s, Boeri's eclectic atlases were conceived as "polyphonic" environments in which contemporary urban conditions could be experienced by the viewer through what Boeri called an "oblique" understanding of the different documents spatially deployed in the exhibition (Boeri, 1997; Basilico and Boeri, 1998; Boeri, 1999; Boeri, 2002; Boeri, 2003).

Whereas photographic surveys, notably those realized by Gabriele Basilico and Francesco Jodice, had been central in Boeri's inspirational explorations of urban environments (Borret, 1999; Jacobs, 2004; Jacobs, 2012; Ballesta, 2019), in *Homeward*, a different approach was pursued. Photography was restricted to the depiction of the individual projects. In fact, many of the photographs included in the project boards were existing photographs that had been commissioned to professional photographers by the architectural offices for promotional purposes. In addition, for the exhibition's third instalment in Venice, the visitors could contemplate an additional set of photographs not included in the publication. The photographer and artist Paul Casaer was invited to take expressive photographs framing more intimate impressions of the daily use of buildings. And a linear series of relatively small prints

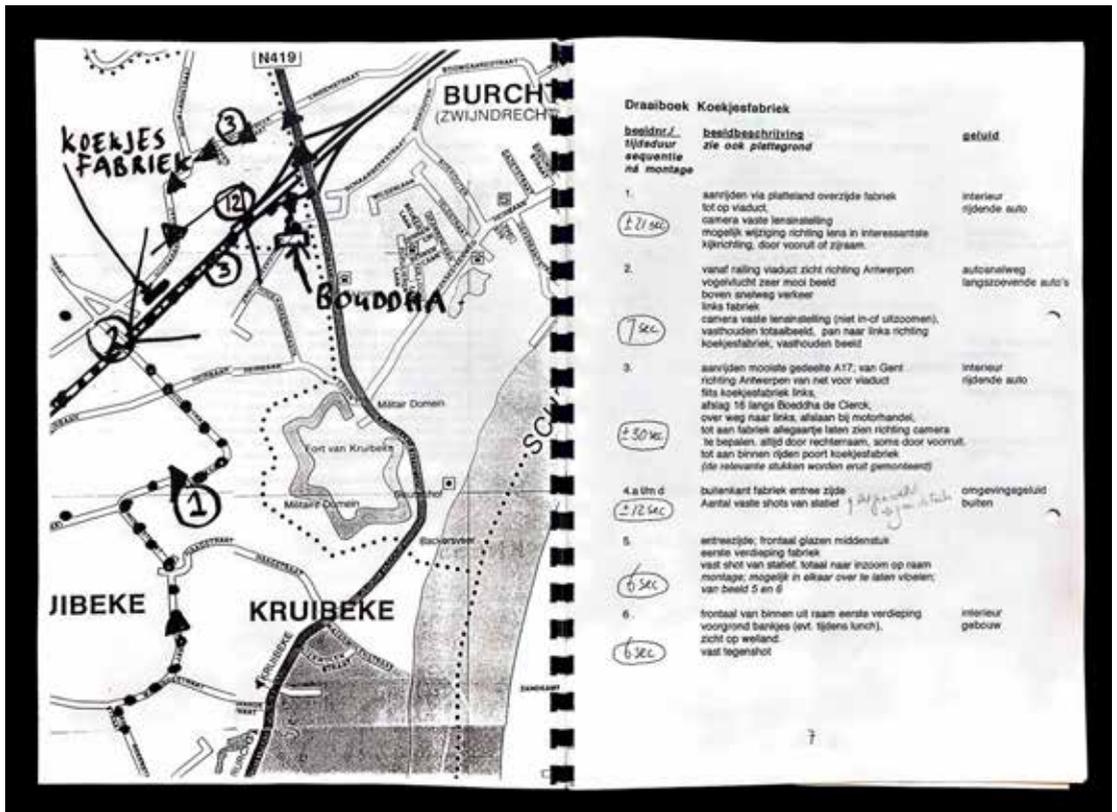
was mounted on the walls of the pavilion's peripheral rooms on this occasion.

The curators' intention to capture the experience, not only of buildings but also of their spatial environment, drove them to rather emphasize short documentary films made of the ten designs, commissioned to the filmmaker Terenja Van Dijk. These became the highlight of the show. "An important role in the exhibition was given to video", Jacobs announced in the book's introduction. "Not of course to make fine pictures of each individual building, its interior and any dazzling details, but mainly to show the design in its surroundings and the way it functions in everyday life" (Borret *et al.*, 1998: 9).

Van Dijk thought of her assignment as the making of a (flower) "bouquet of Flanders",¹⁸ in which the contemplation of anecdotal elements helped to capture the beauty of daily activities, urban atmospheres, and the programmatic and architectonic structure of each project. As part of the production process, individual scenarios were prepared in close collaboration with the curators (Fig. 7). Every film roughly followed the same stylistic approach and narrative structure devoid of text or voiceover, except for the appearance of a minimalist title, such as "Funeral Parlour", "Urban Plan", or "Home", cryptically announcing the film's focus in the opening frame. Ten times, the camera's gaze took the viewer on a journey through the Flemish landscape. Usually, the trip started in a car that eventually arrived at the project site. On the way to Waarschoot, for instance, a small locality close to Ghent, the itinerary passed by a string of dispersed commercial sheds, parking lots, and wasteland to reach a residential neighbourhood

17 S. Boeri published and exhibited abundantly, including the pioneering publication on Italy's urban development *Il territorio che cambia. Ambiente, paesaggi e immagini della regione Milanese* (with A. Lanzani and E. Marini, Milano, Abitare Segesta, 1993) and the exhibition *Sezioni del paesaggio italiano* (with G. Basilico, Sixth Venice Architecture Biennale, 1996), conceived as an eclectic atlas. In 1993, he founded the research agency Multiplicity, involving artists, photographers, and analysts investigating the relationships between geopolitics and urbanism; their project USE-Uncertain States of Europe further explored eclectic atlases presented, for example, in the exhibition *Mutations* (2000–02, Bordeaux, Brussels, Tokyo).

18 Van Dijk shared her intentions in an extended project proposal, including ideas for the films' narrative structures, detailed scenarios (each illustrated with a mapped route and indications of the angle from which to shoot each site), and display options. See deSingel International Arts Centre archives, section 10 architecture programme, box 187. Digital copies of the 11 films could also be consulted. See deSingel International Arts Centre digital archives, folder 001107 *Homeward – Hedendaagse architectuur in Vlaanderen – VHS*.



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Fig. 7

Production document made by film director Terenja Van Dijk outlining the scenario for the shooting of the industrial bakery by Ronny De Meyer and Lut Prims located in the outskirts of Antwerp. Courtesy of deSingel Arts Centre.

adorned with typical Flemish “fermettes”, before arriving at a fence enclosing the neat garden of the family house designed by Guy Châtel. Upon arrival at a project’s location, a full image of the building framed from the ground or from a higher point of view (thanks to extra shootings from a plane) was always sought after. The wandering then continued through the gaze of a slightly shaky camera usually held at shoulder height to explore the building’s outskirts and indoor spaces up close. Sometimes the gaze followed anonymous individuals seemingly absorbed by their daily routine, such as a young boy and his father on their way to Cuyers’s nursery school. The building’s sense of melancholy identified by the curators in the project description particularly came to the fore at the sight of the boy waving goodbye to his father from behind the school’s gate. Subsequently, the gaze entered the building to reveal the architecture’s interior. Unsurprisingly, the school’s atmosphere contrasted greatly from that of the gallery and penthouse designed by Robbrecht & Daem in Brussels. Here, the filmmaker attempted to grasp the architecture’s “dialectic tension between introvert and extrovert elements” (Borret *et al.*, 1998: 89). Van Dijk framed the interior design first without people, then during an exhibition opening, before following several guests to a dinner party in the penthouse upstairs from where the panoramic view over Brussels’s inner city centre could be appreciated. Xaveer de Geyter’s urban design project for the Europa Junction in Brussels, being the sole unexecuted design among the selection, was treated as an exception. This time around, the location was reached by train, a means deemed more in line with the

designer’s approach to urban development¹⁹ and the project’s location next to Brussels Central Railway Station. The film also incorporated a few captions and design renderings to make up for the design’s absence.

In the exhibition, the three-minute videos were played in loops on small TV monitors placed on top of stacked tables and pedestals in alternation with the scale models. In contrast to the other project documentation, they confronted the visitors frontally, more or less at eye level. The whispering sound of the filmed environments’ background noise could also be heard. The bulky monitors’ scattered distribution across space and the moving images’ constant flickering made them particularly stand out. Together, they opened small windows in the exhibition apparatus that framed the projects within a fragmented yet connected horizon.

Van Dijk in total produced 11 videos, ten individual project documentaries and an additional seven-minute film introducing the general content of the show. The latter was an important didactic tool that informed visitors of the exhibition’s general objectives. Unlike the other videos, the introductory film was projected onto a gallery wall from floor to ceiling and included subtitles, which explained key aspects of local spatial conditions as the different urban landscapes appeared. It also briefly summed up the ten works through a series of aerial and street-level snapshots (Figs. 8–9).

The documentary films conveyed a realist style similar to TV reportages popular at the time. For local audiences, they may have resonated with Jef Cornelis’s film essays, which are known for their crisp criticism of Belgium’s contemporary culture (De Caigny and Van Impe, 2013). The films in *Homeward*

19 Set up in continuation with the themes explored with OMA in the 1980s, Xaveer De Geyter’s practice stood out for developing urban design projects and master plans submitted to various international competitions. Around 2000, he was investigating the uncontrolled growth of Flanders’s urban sprawl with a focus on urban and territorial planning. His findings, complete with speculative proposals, were presented in the exhibition *After-sprawl: onderzoek naar de hedendaagse stad at deSingel* from 1 May to 9 June 2002 and compiled in an eponymous publication (De Geyter *et al.*, 2002).



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Fig. 8

Exhibition view taken at the Venice Biennial showing the exhibition apparatus in the Belgian Pavilion's central atrium and the introduction film projected in the background © Photo: Paul Caesar, 2000.

Fig. 9

Image stills from the introduction film directed by Teresa Van Dijk, which synthesized the curators' analysis of Flanders's fragmented urban environment and offered an overview of the selected designs. Courtesy of deSingel Arts Centre.



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were less outspoken and otherwise left uncommented, but they nonetheless captured striking tensions of urban sprawl. The traveling gaze shot from a car, more generally popularized in 1970s cinema with films such as Fellini's *Roma* (1972) or Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), stressed the prevalence of mobility and individual modes of transportation in the post-industrial era. One could see how urban infrastructure across the territory had developed, at times incoherently (Delbeke, 2002), to accommodate the new modalities of an independent commuter-consumer's lifestyle, and accordingly, that the function of a site no longer depended on the proximity between locations but rather their accessibility. Whereas in *Homeward's* companion book, the characteristics, causes, and consequences of Flanders's urban sprawl were described and documented at length to render its complexities, in the films, the sprawl's all-too-recognizable contradictions could instantly be invoked. Yet the films, more than mirroring current conditions, also carried a hopeful message. Despite the environment's dispersed and seemingly incoherent morphologies, valuable destinations were still to be found in the overarching chaos.

The exhibition nonetheless also displayed a selection of maps and datasets included in the book's annex.²⁰ They complemented the visual material and synthetic narrative with the latest information on Belgium's socio-economic statistics, land use patterns, and environmental and mobility indicators. They were the result of surveys and research conducted by local universities, expert groups, and public administrations.

Serving as major, supposedly more objective, instruments for the development of governmental policy and action, they also played an increasingly important role in design practices in order to understand the context and constraints of projects, evaluate design options, and communicate and legitimize solutions to clients and stakeholders. However, these abstract figures, seen on their own, could also appear to be problematic, as they fully erase local specificities and lived experiences.

When *Homeward* travelled "home" to its production house in Antwerp, the curatorial approach in regard to these abstract datasets took a surprising turn. The exhibition was mounted in deSingel's dedicated gallery space, which doubled as the arts centre's main hallway and gave access to its two largest concert halls and a small bar that operated during events. Adapting to the gallery's longitudinal configuration, the exhibition's modular furniture was aligned sideways along a thick wall to form an almost uninterrupted straight line. The display faced large windows and an outdoor balcony with views on Antwerp's 19th-century green belt, which had been converted into the city's principal road and railway artery surrounding the historical centre. Not too far away was Neutelings's corner building, which coincidentally thematized the urban condition of Antwerp's ring road infrastructure in the exhibition. The ambiguous relationship between the building's apartments and the motorway observed in this project by the curators could also apply to deSingel. It too functioned "as a sort of peep-box" (Borret *et al.*, 1998: 125), peeking over the busy traffic. This property particularly came to the fore from behind deSingel's panoramic windows in which *Homeward* was accommodated. For this fourth instalment, excerpts of the country's facts and figures were summarized in short sentences plastered onto the gallery's wall (Fig. 2). In addition, some of the collected data was visualized into colourful charts and pasted on the glass of the opposite large windows. The exhibition route introduced some sort of parallel slow track to that of the passing train and speeding cars. The visitors could wander

20 Bundled under the curious title "MAPS, FACTS AND FEELINGS ON HOUSES, HOUSEHOLDS AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN FLANDERS AND BELGIUM"; the different maps and datasets were sorted according to their source reference: The Journal of the Municipal Credit Bank (1997), a publication of the Ministry of Economic Affairs National Institute of Statistics, Federal Services for Scientific, Technical and Cultural Affairs (1997), a report from the Planning and Statistics Administration, Department of General Affairs and Finance, Ministry of the Flemish Community (1997), and finally the report by the Ministry of the Flemish Community (1998) delineating the recently implemented Flanders Environmental Structure Plan (Borret *et al.*, 1998: 177–210).



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Fig. 10
Exhibition views taken at deSingel showing the juxtaposing of graphic charts pasted on the exhibition hallway's panoramic windows and Antwerp's ring road landscape in the background. Author unknown. Courtesy of deSingel Arts Centre.

through the hallway, contemplate the displayed material, and gaze at deSingel's environment in between the graphic elements (Fig. 10). Suddenly, through this uncanny juxtaposition, lived space and represented space could fully coincide. This experience revealed to visitors how in the contemporary (sub)urban condition every site can be seen as a "hyperlandscape" (Marot, 2014), and therefore as an invitation to decipher its complex stratification of time, programme, and meaning and acquire a deeper understanding of the territory.

Polyphonic Resonances

In *Homeward*, passages and analogies between spatial environments and the spaces of their representation were maximized through an abundance of representational media and an emphasis on intermedial relationships. The broader circumstances and local specificities of contemporary architecture and urban conditions were extensively documented. Whether textual, visual, audio-visual, or graphic, the registration of contextual elements in each medium implied a gaze and language specific to its documentary regime (Besse, 2018). Every artefact hence also mediated aspects of different domains: the design of a house from an architect's point of view, the portrait of a courtyard through a photographer's lens, the lively atmosphere of a gallery opening through a videographer's eyes, top-down snapshots of suburban settlements by an urban planner, territorial maps fabricated by geographers, charts and graphs by statisticians...and lastly, the cultural assessment of architecture and urban conditions conveyed by the curators through the exhibition and the publication. Altogether, they offered a broad overview of the tools at hand to reflect on contemporary urban conditions, as well as the possibilities to develop a transversal practice of architecture and urban planning at the scale of the territory as was foregrounded in the Flanders Environmental Plan.

In the exhibition, the apparatus itself sought to convey an idea and image of Flanders's urbanized territory. This transfiguration eventually came to the fore through

the spatial arrangements in which the artefacts were reproduced, assembled, juxtaposed, and, most important, experienced. It is through these motions that new relationships between the artefacts could arise and contribute to their resemantization. In fact, within the limits of the exhibition space new conditions of possibilities were determined, in which the artefacts' documentary regimes were supplanted by establishing regimes of narrativity and visibility shaping the exhibition as a space of language and imagination (Davallon, 1999). Similar to Stefano Boeri's eclectic atlases, the display in *Homeward* sought to produce a "polyphony... by combining more than one point of view in the same discourse – in other words, a sort of buzz, an undertone, a basso continuo – [which] is what comes the closest to the sense of contemporary urban space" (Boeri, 2002: 97). Yet only the exhibition visitors – and I was not one of them – could ultimately judge whether this effect was successfully achieved.

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