

**XX**

**MODELS**

**YOUNG**

**BELGIAN**

**ARCHITECTURE**

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Today, creating identity is an established part of city marketing, in which the packaging of history and thus of identity is in turn expected to bestow identity. Instant and artificial identity is of all times. Our model follows these principles: we want to commercialise De Dri Heeren.

— Bart Viellefont, Puls architecten

XVI

materials: cardboard, chocolate, paper  
size (cm): 33/24/7  
scale: 1:200  
date: 2011  
model maker: Puls architecten



address: Schijfstraat – Tirstraat, Antwerp

programme: Housing

architects: Puls architecten

area: 543 m<sup>2</sup>

delivery: 2009

title text: Three gentlemen

author: Bjorn Houttekier

photographer: Puls architecten

In 2009, Puls architecten erected a striking trio at the heart of the urban planning microcosm of the Kiel neighbourhood in Antwerp. Their project thereby joined the existing housing experiments that have appeared here over the last century, swept together alongside the asphalt ribbons and interchanges of the Antwerp ring road.

Between Renaat Braem's 'Legged Towers' and the six-storey rental tenements from the 1920s, three small orange-coloured towers present themselves as willing gatekeepers next to a newly laid pathway. They gaze at each other with blushing faces, a stone's throw from the old Olympic stadium. Remarkably enough, the decisive initiative for this ensemble came from Antwerp city council. This is worth a mention in itself, since the often troubled relationship between urban planning and architecture was here transformed into a commendable dialogue: a Local Development Plan that was still under consideration pulled apart the existing ribbon of buildings in the Schijfstraat and made way for a pedestrian pathway that was intended to provide the neighbourhood with access to the former military firing range ('Den Tir'). In a single brief gesture, this clear intervention animated the spatial composition of the two zones, which had previously been separated by a row of houses, and made for a steady flow of passers-by that gave rhythm to the day. In this way the pathway illustrates the simple credo of the Canadian urban planner Jane Jacobs: 'In a city you have to be able to turn a corner as often as possible'. Puls architecten was left with a task that was simple to formulate yet delicate to execute: erect three single-family homes that would give a face to the corners of the intersection. The new pathway thereby tempted the designers to make a series of changes which by degrees turned these buildings, in themselves quite

average, into attractive 'low-budget palazzi'. The client, AG Vespa – an Antwerp city-council independent municipal company – engaged Puls architecten in 2005. The office, which had then only just started out, was immediately given a chance in what are now the well-respected 'design pools'. The urge to build led to a bifurcated approach. This involved in-depth research into the history of the site combined with a fondness for handicraft that looked like it emerged straight from the model workshop at architecture school. This desire to explore stemming from the early days now forms the balanced undercurrent of Puls architecten's daily practice.

The epithet 'The Three Gentlemen' also resulted from this search, representing characters whose task was to forge the separate dwellings into a unified whole – in itself a bit of fooling around, but nevertheless ensuring that basic design was backed up by a more imaginative approach. This is how they came across Floris Prims, the former municipal archivist, who complained about the neighbourhood's loss of identity in the early twentieth century and whom Puls architecten promptly thrust into the role of pseudo-guardian for the project. His likeness and sayings were to decorate the alleyway and plinths of the houses in variously tinted brick. Unfortunately this idea quietly faded in the course of the complicated layout of the surroundings.

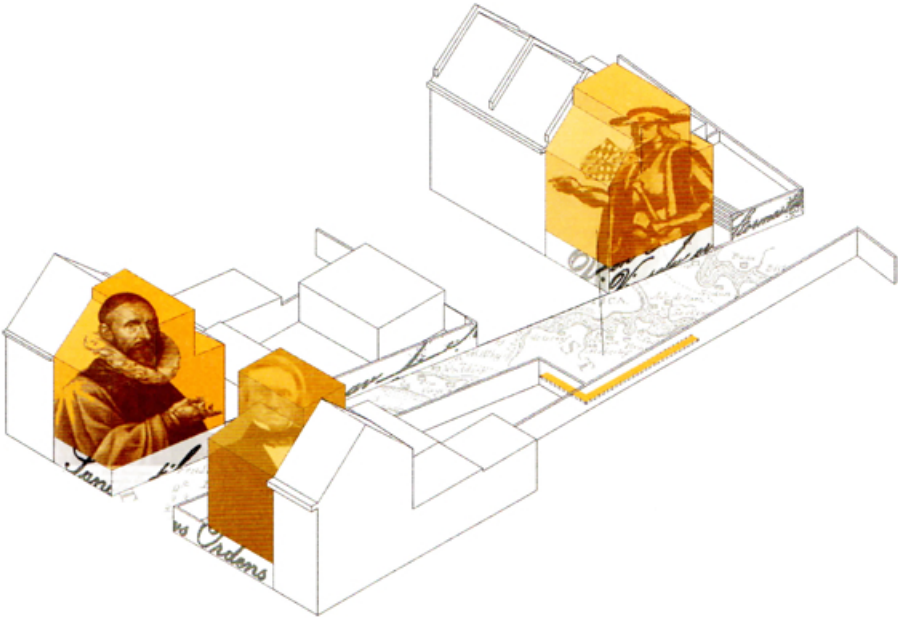
What remained were the three torsos with their intriguing outlines: neither cubes with mansard roofs, nor truncated towers. These small buildings appear rather to embody an eccentric intermediate form of the surrounding façades, a hybrid of the traditional and functionalist, enveloped in a cloak of plain tiles in terracotta that forms a link between the tops and flanks of the towers. Beneath this is a continuous stone plinth that marks the place where the ground and the building, interior and exterior, meet. It is precisely on this borderline that the real interventions show themselves.

For instance, the architects decided almost immediately to move the entrances to the alleyway side and there to install an extra, privatised courtyard behind a man-sized wall. So, a sequence that starts on the street ends 'within the walls', in the enclosure of a town garden and a generously lit living space. Two of the three dwellings were given such an additional threshold. The smallest (with two rooms instead of four) obtains its privacy from the stacking of the living and dining areas: cooking is still done

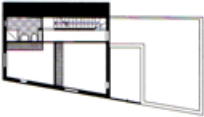
between the city and the garden, but life goes on one floor up, with a view out over the neighbourhood.

Once inside, the next pleasant surprise reveals itself: the gracious ceiling heights that these small towers have inherited from their neighbouring buildings. The obligatory scale meant the living spaces had to be three metres high, a luxury which, although it does not allow for any extra furnishings, does make for a setting that goes beyond the sum of the square metres. It is as if, in these dwellings, the small-scale texture of the surroundings suddenly leaps up to the grandeur of a mansion. Add to this the large areas of glass and the occasional corner windows that open up enclosed but often surprising perspectives, and you have three homes that are effortlessly able to rise above the 'ordinary'.

While Renaat Braem proclaimed that architecture would mould man into a liberated persona, 'The Three Gentlemen' radiate the modest desire to house people with care. Instead of embodying an impetuous rush forwards, the houses stand for the inventive handling of a context on a human scale. And so, in the calmness of these once heroic surroundings, the project presents itself as a touchstone of meticulous design in an existing urban fabric.



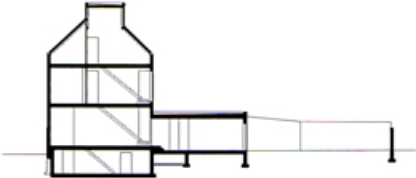
Lot 1 - Plan +2



Lot 1 - Plan +1



Lot 1 - Plan 0



Lot 1 - Section AA'









