

Perspective

Housing in Flanders

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The Flemish House

Literally translated, the saying goes that the Fleming is 'born with a brick in his stomach'. It's become a cliché, but it expresses well the tendency of the Flemish to earn a diploma, settle down and build a house big enough for family life. Renovating an existing house is an option, too, but erecting a new home is better. Preferably a detached house that's as close as possible to where your parents live.

That 'brick' did not appear spontaneously, however. Still speaking metaphorically, we're obliged to reveal that it was implanted surgically in 1948, thanks to the De Taeye Act, a law intended to stimulate the building of family homes. It included guaranteed low mortgage rates for buyers, who could borrow practically the entire amount of the purchase price, as well as incentive subsidies for building a house or buying an existing dwelling. In the decades that followed, many people took advantage of the benefits provided by the De Taeye Act.

The result is a dearth of public housing throughout Belgium. In numbers, it adds up to only 7 per cent of the total housing stock, one of the lowest percentages in Western Europe. Heading the list is the Netherlands, a country just over the border to the north, where public housing makes up 32 per cent of the housing stock.

How long can this obsession for detached houses with gardens go on? That's the burning question. Flanders is filled nearly to the brim with very low-density development, an increasing scarcity of land has driven the price of building sites to historic heights over the past ten years, and ever-stricter energy requirements make it increasingly difficult to build detached houses. Take heed – the detached houses featured in this issue of *Mark* may be the last of a generation.



De Smet Vermeulen
House in Burst
Photo Dennis De Smet



De Vylder Vinck Taillieu
House and atelier in Ghent
Photo Filip Dujardin



De Vylder Vinck Taillieu
House in Ghent
Photo Filip Dujardin



Blaf
House in Ghent
Photo Stijn Bollaert



Graux & Baeyens
House in Destelbergen
Photo Filip Dujardin



Atelier Vens Vanbelle
Four apartments in Ghent
Photo Tim Van de Velde



Blaf
House in Asse
Photo Stijn Bollaert



Puls
House in Ghent
Photo Puls Architecten



Puls
Two-family house in Antwerp
Photo Bart Gosselin



Puls
Two houses in Ghent
Photo Puls Architecten

Corner Boys

Puls Architecten builds houses on difficult and often unwanted urban plots.

Text
Dominique Pieters

From left to right: Philippe Van Deyck, Bart Vellefont and Bram Vangampelaere.
Photo Dirk Pauwels



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Faced with inner-city corner plots that fail to interest commercial property developers – because of an irregular shape or the lack of a garden, for example – Puls Architecten comes up with tailor-made solutions. The firm's clients are autonomous municipal urban-development organizations, such as AG Vespa in Antwerp and Sogent in Ghent, which offer buyers a 'shell with extras': a windproof, waterproof home that

comes with electrical and plumbing work, heating and ventilation systems, decking floor and plasterwork, and (where applicable) a finished roof terrace. The rest is up to the buyer, who's free to complete the interior in accordance with personal taste and budget. We get the details from Bart VIELLEFONT and Bram VANGAMPELAERE, who, together with Philippe Van Deyck, head up Puls Architecten.

The projects that have brought us here today were commissioned by AG Vespa and Sogent. How do you feel about working for this type of client, in a country that's better known for architects who are involved in private projects?

BART VIELLEFONT: When we talk about urban planning and architecture with municipal clients, most of whom know exactly what they're doing, the discussion occurs on a different level than it does with private clients. And I'm not just talking about scale, but about the typology, the social impact and the contextual perception of a building. Every decision contributes to a total vision.

BRAM VANGAMPELAERE: In Antwerp, designs must be submitted to a building regulations advisory committee, which is chaired by the municipal architect – a requirement that guarantees good quality. Conversations with private clients tend to be more emotionally charged. Details about fittings and finishes are mulled over on a more personal level. With public-sector clients, we're relieved of discussions about kitchen cabinets and curtain rails. [Laughs.]

Two-Family House

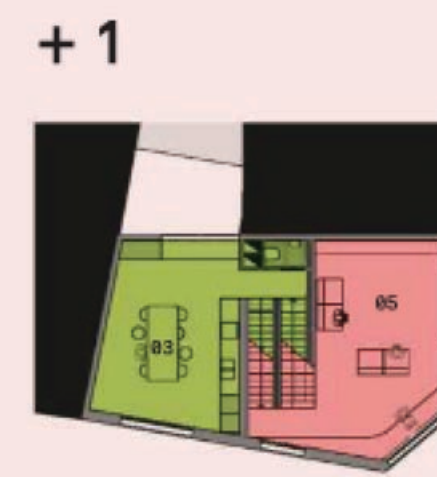
Spoorstraat and Rotterdamstraat
Antwerp | Belgium | 2013



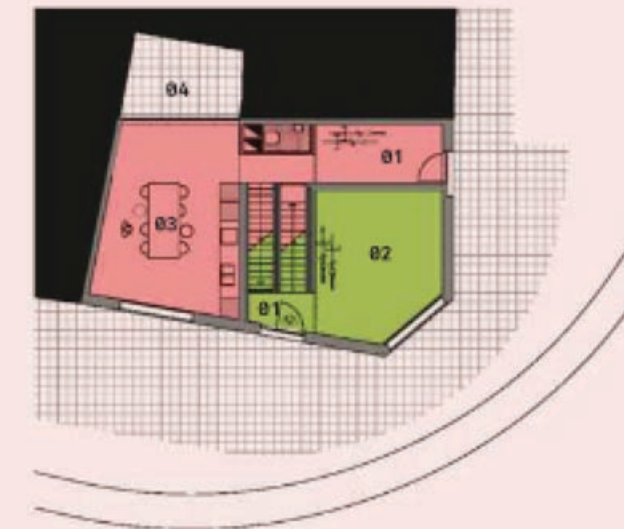
← Various masonry bonds enhance the brick walls of this residential building.
Photo Bart Gosselin

- 01 Entrance
- 02 Workspace
- 03 Kitchen-dining room
- 04 Patio
- 05 Living room
- 06 Bedroom
- 07 Bathroom
- 08 Roof terrace

Apartment A
Apartment B



+0



Interested parties sign up, and the homes – which have a fixed price – are allocated on the basis of a point system. A family is given more points than a single person, and so forth.

VANGAMPELAERE: The point system has been successful. All units were sold immediately, sometimes even before construction started. What we've noticed, however, is that most of these units are bought by artistically minded people, who apparently see the potential of the neighbourhood and are drawn to the notion of nontraditional living.

Do any of the buyers ask you to design the interiors?

VANGAMPELAERE: Not really – nor do we get the impression that other professionals have been asked to do the job. An exception to the rule is one of the two houses in Ghent. The owners of that house asked local outfit Doorzon Interieurarchitecten to design the interiors. We're actually quite proud that one of our projects is being completed by Doorzon.

Can you give some examples of your design choices?

VIELLEFONT: The residential building in Antwerp is on a site previously occupied by two houses that were demolished. The new building also contains two homes, but to keep circulation space to a minimum we opted for scissor stairs, which allowed us to interweave the two units, while providing each with a full package of benefits. Each has its own roof terrace and a living room with views overlooking two streets. For the façade, we used light-grey facing brick in various bonds interrupted by horizontal concrete bands.

VANGAMPELAERE: The projects in Ghent are both in Ledeborg, a densely developed neighbourhood with a lot of repetition. Sogent asked us for help in relieving the rather cramped atmosphere in the streets there. We began by separating houses – units of about 140 m² each – on the corner of Mondriaanstraat and Veldwijkstraat. We made a strategic incision that split the closed exterior walls. The result marks the street corner in a positive way. Trellises on the walls are for climbing plants. By situating two bedrooms at ground level – rooms that can easily be converted to studios or workplaces – we were able to open the first-floor living area by means of large windows that nearly span the entire façade. A double-height atrium connects the living area to a master bedroom with bath on the top floor. The two

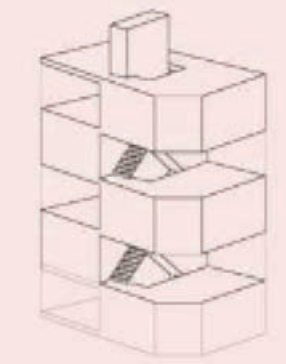
+3



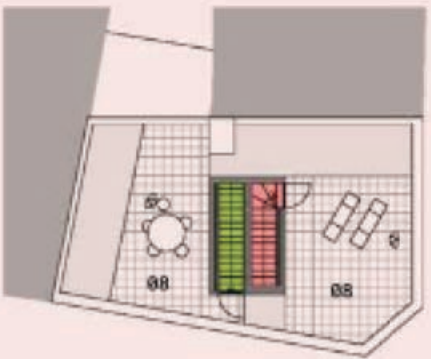
+2



Axonometric



+4



dwellings share a 50-m² garden, and each has its own walled roof terrace.

The house on the corner of Floristenstraat and Frans De Coninckstraat has a somewhat comparable internal organization; here, too, we left one side detached from the neighbouring house. Instead of a roof terrace, this house has a spacious balcony, which is supported by a steel framework with a 'half-timbered look'. Below this framework is the garden. We work with outdoor spaces wherever possible – in all our projects – but each time in a way that is tied to the possibilities and limitations of the site.

It seems you've become specialists in building on street corners.

VANGAMPELAERE: Developers and private parties are rarely interested in corner plots. Such remnants almost never have the advantage of a garden. Designing a corner building is anything but simple, though. You often have to work with a narrow plot that faces more than one street, and you have to deal with different styles as well. Corner projects often form a connection between a main artery and a secondary street.

VIELLEFONT: On the positive side, corner buildings give the architect an opportunity to exploit perspectives and to create signals in a neighbourhood. If you present your project correctly to a client that works within the public sector – like AG Vespa or Sogent, for instance – you have a good chance of getting the attention you want. Fortunately, authorities tend to give street-corner projects a bit more leeway as well.

What do these projects say about you as architects?

VIELLEFONT: Above all, they show that we'd rather work with public administrations than with private parties. We don't get any commissions from individual clients anymore. It seems we've acquired a certain status through competitions, which at one moment made up as much as 90 per cent of our work.

VANGAMPELAERE: And we're eager to build in the city because we love the collective idea. The city carries more restrictions than the countryside, but it's a context that also triggers many more ideas. ←

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One-Family House Floristenstraat and Frans De Coninckstraat Ghent | Belgium | 2013

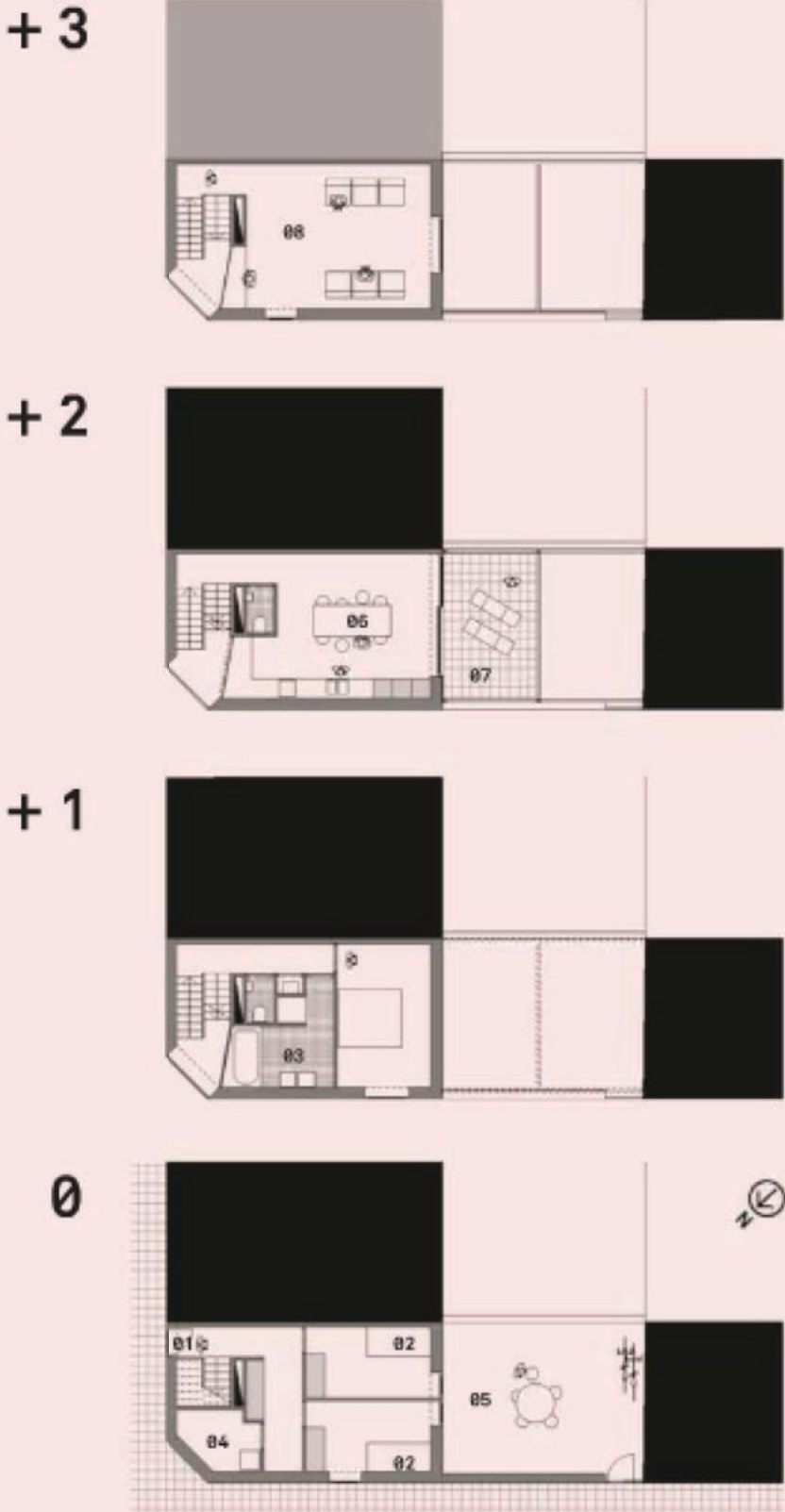


↑ Tall windows at the corner of the building offer views from the stairwell, a position that explains their nonstandard dimensions.

→ A spacious balcony outside the kitchen-dining room is supported by a steel framework with a 'half-timbered look'.

'We're eager to build in the city because we love the collective idea'

- 01 Entrance
- 02 Bedroom
- 03 Bathroom
- 04 Storage
- 05 Garden
- 06 Kitchen-dining room
- 07 Balcony
- 08 Living room



Two One-Family Houses Moriaanstraat and Veldwijkstraat Ghent | Belgium | 2013



↑ Trellises on the exterior walls are for climbing plants.
 Photo Puls Architecten

Axonometric

