

Project description – Flanders Architectural Yearbook 2002-2003

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Nothing in the fine 19th-century mansion on Coupure leads us to suspect that an exceptional sculptor's studio has been added on in the lower-lying garden at the back. The client, Philippe Van Isacker, previously had a studio elsewhere in the neighbourhood, but had for a long time cherished the desire for a workspace in his own quiet garden. The artist called in Kristoffel Boghaert, giving as his only requirements height and top lighting. Whereas at first sight the architect's response to the brief appears simple, one gradually becomes aware of its complexity and the intriguing play of light and space.

The classic first floor of the house, in three bays, retained its original function and division after the building work. The one-storey difference in height between the street and the garden was left as it was. However, a clever change to the circulation means it is used in a completely new way. At the garden level are the secondary living and working functions, and at street level are two workrooms running into one another. The first and second floors are for living and sleeping. Two new openings and one blocked-off window give the house a completely new relationship with the garden behind.

The new studio appears like a stacking of two concrete volumes cast on the spot. Since the lower building was constructed against the outside wall of the house and the upper building is separated from it, a sort of skylight is created between old and new. The position of the windows has been very precisely defined from inside the studio and in addition to the working light requested they make for a contemplative atmosphere. This also emphasises the studio as a freestanding volume. The window in the topmost volume is exactly opposite the window of the workroom. The short distance between the two does not allow one to see the woodwork of the new building. Through the workroom window one sees the window of the studio and the glass surface reflects a brick wall. The view through and the reflection create an interesting visual effect.

In the studio, the rough finish of the concrete walls, with traces of the formwork and untidy joins, are left visible, as a reference to the sculptor's struggle with his material. The floor also has a neutral anthracite-grey polished concrete surface, which is resistant to dust and dirt. The light transforms this hard concrete shell, marked by random graphic patterns, into a serene place.

It is only from the garden that one has a view of the overall transformation. The offset between the two new volumes leaves space for an L-shaped terrace that serves as an intermediary between house and garden. From here, open steps descend into the garden. The terrace and the house are connected by a small concrete staircase.

Its cladding in Afrormosia slats gives a precious impression to the outside of the studio. Six-centimetre slats alternate with a two-centimetre join. The measurements of the facades, windows, stair-treads, landings, balustrades, parapet and terrace are all multiples of these dimensions. The corner of the wooden volume was taken as the reference point when marking out the lines. Both vertically and horizontally the slats run on from each other and fit together perfectly. The railings of the terrace and the steel supporting sections of the treads are inserted into the joints between the wooden slats. They are welded on to a section that is concealed in the batten structure of the facade. The balustrades and the structure of the stairs are in galvanised steel. All details: wooden slats, supporting sections, railings and woodwork, are characterised by correct proportions, perfect joints and Swiss precision.

The tactility of the materials, the play of light and volumes, the proportions, the interaction between solid and void and between inside and outside are features we consider typical of the realm of sculpture. This means the studio is much more reminiscent of a sculpture than of an extension. The people here are advocates of architecture with poetry.

This simple and sober addition gives the house a new richness and freedom. The existing view is

enhanced; new and surprising relationships are created. The concrete shell concealed in its linear wooden grid forms a hidden gem in the garden.