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Towards a built manifesto

Eline Dehullu, Bart Tritsmans

The Belgian architectural world has a thriving competition culture. Since the creation of the position of Flemish Government Architect in 1999, a range of procedures has developed to promote the quality of the built environment. It is almost a matter of course in Belgium that competition procedures stimulate strong commissioning and, among other things, offer opportunities for young offices to stand out in new design assignments. But how do foreign architectural firms view the selection procedures of the Flemish Government Architect, the Brussels Government Architect (BMA) and the Cellule architecture of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation? In this article, we give the floor to Mechthild Stuhlmacher of Korteknie Stuhlmacher (Rotterdam), Stephen Bates of Sergison Bates (London), Mathieu Berteloot of HBAAT (Lille), Hideyuki Nakayama (Tokyo), Ido Avisar of List (Paris) and Kjetil Thorsen of Snøhetta (Oslo).



In *More Than a Competition*, published on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Open Call, Maarten Liefoghe wrote that the Belgian competition context is viewed with admiration from abroad. Liefoghe quoted the magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, which considers the interaction between the various actors (clients, Government or City Architects, designers) as an art that guarantees the quality of projects, from competition to site.¹ Existing competition formulas are nevertheless regularly criticized from different quarters. Current Flemish Government Architect Erik Wieërs also recently indicated that future-proofing instruments like the Open Call poses a challenge, both in legal terms (in weighing up the assessment criteria) and in creating public support.²

From the perspective of architects, participation in competitions has gone through an evolution. Competition designs are increasingly drawn up by multidisciplinary design teams, and the competitions of the Brussels and Flemish Government Architects and the Cellule architecture show numerous collaborations between Belgian and foreign designers. Liefoghe wrote in this context of 'the rise of Belgian-foreign collaborations' and points to the growing share of foreign participants in the Open Call.³

For this contribution, we asked the team of Erik Wieërs (Flemish Government Architect), Kristiaan Borret (BMA) and Thomas Moor (Cellule architecture) for an overview of foreign firms that won competitions. From these, we selected six diverse foreign architecture firms and asked them to reflect on their experience with architectural policy

in Belgium. Korteknie Stuhlmacher (NL) is behind, among other things, the Predikheren library in Mechelen (Open Call 2213) and it is now working on the Klein Eiland City-gate II housing project in Anderlecht (Call BMA); Sergison Bates (UK) has already built up a rich experience in the Belgian context with, among other things, the Performing Arts Site in Leuven (Open Call 3501) and Kanal Pompidou in Brussels (Call BMA); HBAAT (FR), which collaborates regularly with the Belgian offices Owest and V+ on both sides of the border, was responsible for the construction of the crèche of Habay-la-Neuve in Martelange and is now working with Ledroit Pierret Polet and Pigeon Ochej on the Centre sportif La Sapinette in Mons (both through the public works contracts of the Cellule architecture); List (FR) and Hideyuki Nakayama Architecture (JP) jointly realized the Frans Masereel Centrum in Kasterlee (Open Call 2606) and the residential care centre De Wimilingen in Wommelgem (Open Call 3504); and Snøhetta (NO), as an internationally renowned firm, gained its first experience in the Belgian context with the renovation of the Muntcentrum/Centre Monnaie in Brussels, in collaboration with Binst Architects.

We sounded out their motivation for entering a competition in Belgium and asked them about the specific qualities of Belgian competition procedures. We were curious about the impact of winning the competition on their architecture practice and what they think makes the Belgian architecture world special. We also asked them to formulate suggestions that could strengthen the existing instruments. →

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List (FR) - Hideyuki Nakayama (JP), Frans Masereel Centrum, Kasterlee, 2019: newly built pavilion for a centre for contemporary art

Participations in competitions / selection procedures in Belgium

Hideyuki Nakayama Architecture (JP)
 hideyukina-kayama.com

- Frans Masereel Centrum, Kasterlee, 2019 - in collaboration with List (Open Call 2606)
- Local services and residential care centre De Wimilingen (Emmaüs), Wommelgem, in progress - in collaboration with List (Open Call 3504)



A+ Why is it important for your office to enter foreign design competitions, specifically those in Belgium?

Stephen Bates Although based in London, we feel like a European practice, and this is reflected not only in our outlook but also in staff composition, with twelve nationalities and thirteen languages! Belgium feels close physically (only two hours away on the Eurostar) and culturally, and we enjoy working there. We have always gone out to seek interesting work wherever it may be, enjoying our role as cultural observers, slightly on the margins of the situation.

Mathieu Berteloot The same goes for us. Located in Lille, on the border between France and Belgium, our office HBAAT feels like a neighbour. The building culture in the North of France is actually very comparable to the one in Belgium; we share knowledge of local materials as brick, building techniques and vernacular architecture. What is different, however, is the quality of the architectural competitions organized in Belgium. The programmes are more interesting, the conditions for reflection very high, and clients are particularly open to experimentation.

Hideyuki Nakayama – Ido Avissar* For both our offices, taking part in Belgian competitions represents an opportunity to work on public facilities in a stimulating foreign context. Work outside our ‘natural biotope’ is crucial for us. The reason for that is intellectual stimulation and the discovery of new architectural and urban contexts rather than the search for ‘new market opportunities’. Unlike France, the Flemish Open Call system is very much open to

experimentation, and unlike Japan, it is more open to young foreign practices.

Mechthild Stuhlmacher Our reasons for entering competitions in Belgium are simple: we are selected with some regularity, so we feel that we are understood there, that our work is appreciated in some way and that we therefore have a chance – a chance to win the competition, a chance to then make a good project out of it, and a chance to meet people and circumstances along the way that we want to collaborate with.

A+ Can you explain what is special about the Belgian competition procedure you have taken part in?

Hideyuki Nakayama – Ido Avissar Together we have won two Open Call competitions: the Frans Masereel Centrum in Kasterlee and the home for the elderly De Wimilingen in Wommelgem. Both competitions took place in a more or less open landscape context. We felt that almost everything was possible in formal terms. In these two competitions we were able to explore various organizations in relation to architectural form. In France, for example, 99 per cent of the architectural competitions take place in an urban context, leaving limited room for formal experimentation. Unlike in Flanders, the countryside is often left to private developers. In both competitions, the clients and juries were very open to our reinterpretation of the given programme. Architectural ideas and concepts were shared and debated, making it a very unusual and quality framework.

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List (FR) – Hideyuki Nakayama (JP), Frans Masereel Centrum, Kasterlee, 2019





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Participations in
competitions / selection
procedures in Belgium (selection)

List (FR)

- Frans Masereel
Centrum,
Kasterlee, 2019
- in collaboration with
Hideyuki
Nakayama
Architecture
(Open Call
2606)
- Master plan,
Moerbeke, in
progress - in
collaboration with Lola
landscape (Open
Call 3407)
- LDC and WZC
De Wimilingen
(Emmaüs),
Wommelgem, in
progress - in
collaboration
with Hideyuki
Nakayama
Architecture
(Open Call
3504)
- Kotmet,
Brussels
(Pilot project
Students Make
City 01 - not
retained)

Mechthild Stuhmacher For us, the competition for the restoration and repurposing of the Predikherenklooster in Mechelen (see *A+281*) was probably the most extraordinary experience. It was then a very unique design task, a project definition drafted in almost poetic terms, two impressive briefings on site, and a jury whose fascination and dedication were palpable during the jury session. Moreover, it was extraordinary that, while the selected architects had all worked on monumental buildings before, they had no experience designing a public library. There appeared to be a great willingness among the full jury to choose an ‘unusual suspect’ with new and unexpected ideas. I understood afterwards that some of the jury members had been won over on the jury day itself by the complete opposite of what they had previously assumed.

Stephen Bates Our first encounters with the competition procedure in Belgium was via the Open Call. We have since won eight projects via this procedure and have competed for many more! Our first competition win was for the City Library in Blankenberge in 2004, when bOb van Reeth, the first Flemish Government Architect, presided (1998–2005). The latest was the Performing Arts Site in Leuven, which we won in 2019 during the tenure of Leo Van Broeck. More recently we have been involved in competitions organized by the Brussels Government Architect through which we recently won the Kanal Pompidou arts complex together with noAarchitecten and EM2N (see *A+278* and *A+285*).

Mathieu Berteloot In 2015 we won the competition of the Cellule architecture to build a crèche with thirty cots in Habay-la-Neuve (see *A+282*). The organization of the competition went very well; besides the client (the municipality and Public Centre for Social Welfare of Habay, and the director of the Crèche La Ruche), there were also enthusiastic, critical architects on the jury, which was moreover chaired by Chantal Dassonville, at the time head of the Cellule architecture. Thierry Decuyperre of V+ was then an external expert: his sharp analysis of the various projects certainly added value to the competition procedure. This was actually our first encounter with V+, a Belgian office with whom we collaborated later on many projects in France and Belgium.

A+ What has your participation in the design competition or building process brought about within your architecture practice?

Stephen Bates Working now for eighteen years in Belgium, we have developed much knowledge and experience to design, build and manage the construction process. As we are interested in building well and building carefully, we have had to invest a lot of time and energy to ensure that we can achieve the standards we set ourselves on sites away from home. It has led us to engage in many collaborations either with like-minded designers or technical support offices and this has fundamentally changed the way we work in detail. But our methodology remains constant. →





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**Korteknie
 Stuhlmacher (NL),
 Prediherenklooster,
 Mechelen, 2019:**
 restoration and
 repurposing of a
 monastery from the
 seventeenth century
 into a contemporary
 library

Participations in
 competitions / selection
 procedures in Belgium (selection)

Korteknie
 Stuhlmacher (NL)
 ksa.nl

- OCMW residential care centre, Machelen, 2017 – in collaboration with Hild und K (Open Call 2104)
- Prediherenklooster Library, Mechelen, 2019 – in collaboration with Hild und K, Callebaut Architects (Open Call 2213)
- Mixed-use building Lebeau Sablon (Immobel), Brussels, in progress – in collaboration with Maccreanor Lavington (Call BMA)
- Klein Eiland Citygate II (Citydev), Anderlecht (Brussels), in progress – in collaboration with noA-architecten, Sergison Bates, Aurélie Hachez, Boom (Call BMA)



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Mathieu Berteloot Those kinds of collaborations are key. What our participation in design competitions in Belgium has brought to our practice is learning to work together with local architecture offices, sometimes with very different opinions or ways of working. We regularly respond to calls for projects in Brussels in association with offices such as Owest and V+, but also 51N4E, Aslı Çiçek and Jan De Vylder Inge Vinck. Conversely, we respond with these same partners to competitions in France. With V+ we recently realized a small but very successful multi-cultural municipal facility in Marcq-en-Barœul in the Lille metropolitan area (see *A+291*). In the design process, we aptly combined the programmatic intelligence of V+ and the constructive precision of our own office to meet the shared aim of intensifying uses and saving resources. Collaborations like these mean that we can exchange particular skills, which is why they are so enriching to us.

Kjetil Thorsen Engaging in international projects, we too work closely with local partners and rely heavily on their insights in relevant instruments and institutions to ensure that we fully comply with and utilize the right 'toolbox' in each country. In the project of the Muntcentrum/Centre Monnaie, we enjoyed working with Binst Architects and closely collaborated along the process. But the most unique aspect of our experience with the Muntcentrum/Centre Monnaie is that the project as such has been grounded in sustainability since its inception. The city of Brussels, by requiring the reuse of building in its redevelopment, took the first sustainable decision of the project that later efforts such as controlling carbon footprint or using circular material can amplify. The Muntcentrum/Centre Monnaie in Brussels is to date one of the largest stand-alone buildings in a city centre we've helped to rehabilitate, with ambitious goals from the start, courtesy of the developer and other partners in Belgium. It has truly been a particular challenge. →



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Participations in competitions / selection procedures in Belgium (selection)

Sergison Bates (UK)
sergisonbates.com

- Care campus Amphora, Wingene, 2016 (Open Call 2103)
- Performing Arts Site, Leuven, in progress - in collaboration with Charcoalblue, Eld (Open Call 3501)
- Kanal Pompidou, (Fondation Stichting Kanal), Brussels, in progress - in collaboration with noA-architecten, EM2N (Call BMA)
- Klein Eiland Citygate II (Citydev), Anderlecht, in progress - in collaboration with noA-architecten, Korteknie Stuhlmacher, Aurélie Hachez, Boom (Call BMA)

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Sergison Bates (UK), in collaboration with noAarchitecten and EM2N (Atelier Kanal), Kanal, Brussels: transformation of the former Yser Citroën car factory into an arts and cultural centre.

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Sergison Bates (UK), in collaboration with Eld and Charcoalblue, Performing Arts Site, Leuven: transformation of a 7 ha former hospital site into an 'open house' for performing arts and public spaces.

Mechthild Stuhlmacher The Predikheren project in Mechelen has been going on now more than ten years (a final phase is ongoing). It has gone through profound moments of crisis, but it has also ultimately delivered a project that has brought about a fundamental change in our office. So there is a time before the completion of the Predikheren, a time when we were regarded as experimental timber builders, and the time after, when we are regarded as a serious, mature agency capable of bringing complex transformation projects to a successful conclusion.

Hideyuki Nakayama – Ido Avissar The Open Calls formed a great opportunity to draw and build some experimental design principles that are very important for both our practices. Both designs are a little bit of a built manifesto for us. Only the first competition of the Frans Masereel Centrum has been built today, but we hope the home for the elderly in Wommelgem will be realized as well.

A+ In your opinion, are there similar instruments or procedures in other (European) countries that aim to boost the quality of the built environment, and what are the differences with the region you mainly work in?

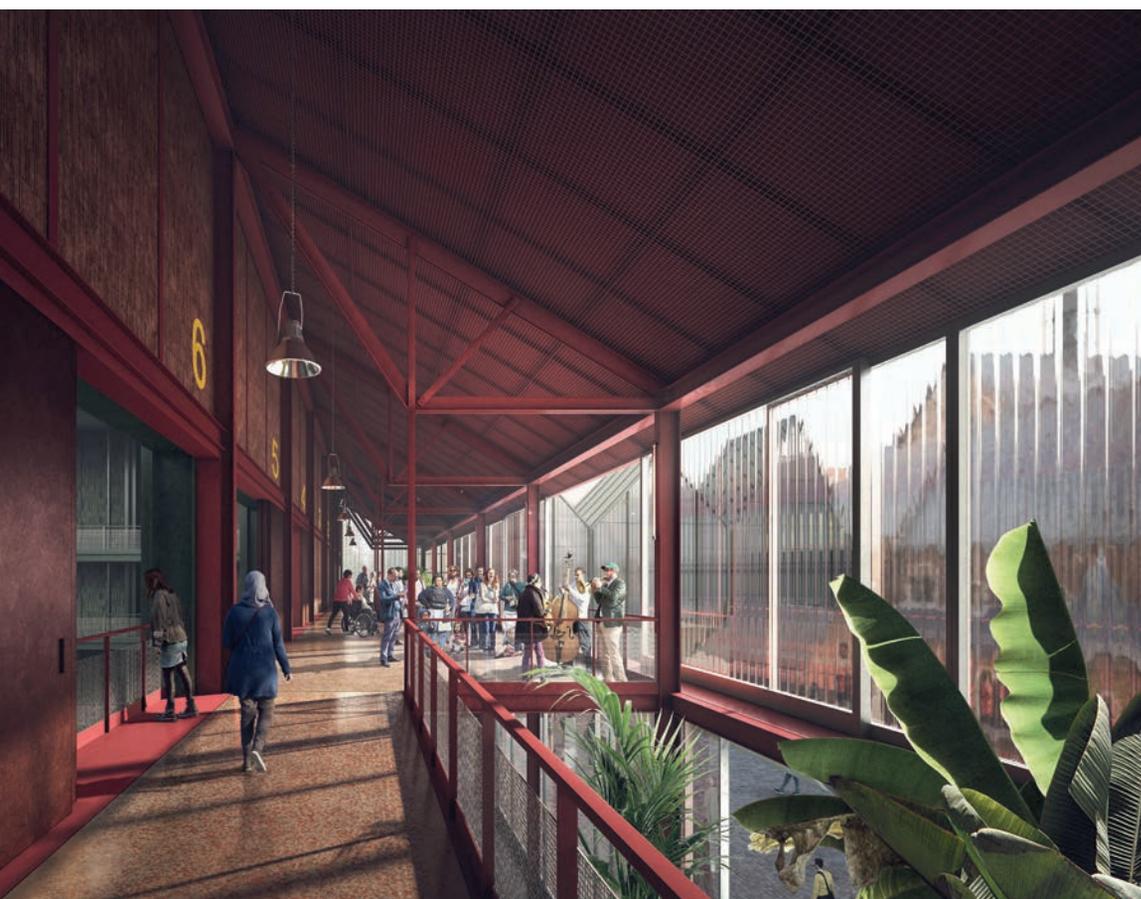
Mathieu Berteloot We particularly appreciate the competition procedures of the BMA and the Cellule architecture. They are well-organized procedures with juries made up of experts and not only (or mainly) of elected representatives, as is the case in France. In my opinion, no such well-organized procedures exist in France. We are very happy to participate in competitions that are transparent both in the application stage and after the selection of a project. In France,

by contrast, clients very rarely, if ever, communicate about unsuccessful projects. There is very little transparency on consultations in France.

Ido Avissar Indeed, in France there is unfortunately no parallel institution on a territorial level. The big cities have tools to stimulate architecture through local advisory institutions (e.g. Pavillon de l'Arsenal in Paris), but this is not the case elsewhere. In any case, we can only envy the relative independence and perpetual explorative DNA of the Flemish Government Architect.

Hideyuki Nakayama In Japan, the personal activity cycle of certain politicians is responsible for important social decisions and their cycles are very short. Cities and architecture, however, require long-term perspectives. If the cycle of personal activity is superimposed on the period of architecture and urban design, only superficial architecture that lacks deliberation is produced. The current situation in Japan is that such superficial architecture is commissioned intensively from a very limited number of architects against the backdrop of a performance-based system. I have great respect for a system where flexible thinking, not bound by performance-based principles, is put into practice over time.

Stephen Bates To be honest, the Flemish Open Call procedure is quite unique! Now we see local authorities copying the procedure and in many ways the Brussels Government Architect also follows a similar procedure. In the UK the so-called competitive interview still prevails in public sector projects where the team and its experience are assessed without a clear design proposal. In Germany and Switzerland, where →



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Sergison Bates (UK),
 in collaboration with
 Eld and Charcoalblue,
 Performing Arts Site,
 Leuven

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HBAAT (FR),
 in collaboration with
V+ (BE), Ponts des
 Arts, Marcq-en-

Barœul (FR):
 a newly built cinema
 and theatre



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Participations in
 competitions / selection proce-
 dures in Belgium (selection)

HBAAT (FR)
hbaat.fr

- Crèche d'Habay-la-Neuve, Martelange, 2018 (Cellule architecture, public architecture contracts)
- Centre sportif La Sapinette, Mons, ongoing project – in collaboration with Ledroit Pierret Polet, Pigeon Ochej Paysage (Cellule architecture, public architecture contracts)
- 22 participative housing units (CLTB), Brussels, ongoing project – in collaboration with V+ (Call BMA)
- Metropolitan park and urban farm (Brussels Environment), Brussels, ongoing project – in collaboration with Owest, OLM (Call BMA)

we are working on a number of projects, the competition structure is very clear and well organized, but the number of shortlisted competitors is greater (and so the odds longer) and there are also many open anonymous design competitions. In Spain there are two-stage competitions carried out very fast with a limited amount of information required (restricted by allowing only two or three A3 pages, for example!).

Mechthild Stuhlmacher We are aware that several initiatives are under way in the Netherlands to organize more competitions that are more substantive in nature than the tenders commonly used in the Netherlands and which can also have surprising outcomes. For example, the current Dutch Chief Government Architect plans to award major architect selections for public commissions such as museums on the basis of competition formulas with a pre-selection. This approach is partly similar to the Open Call, with the difference that the preselection in the Netherlands is much tougher, with, for example, very strict reference requirements, and that much less architectural expertise is represented in the jury than in Belgium.

Kjetil Thorsen There is a large number of instruments in our home country, Norway, which aim to boost the quality of the built environment. The Norwegian Building Authority governs the technical requirements and local legislation, and there is FutureBuilt and the Green Building Council which aims to increase innovation and exploration for city development and architecture. In addition, there is a wide range of organizations and strategic partnership constella-

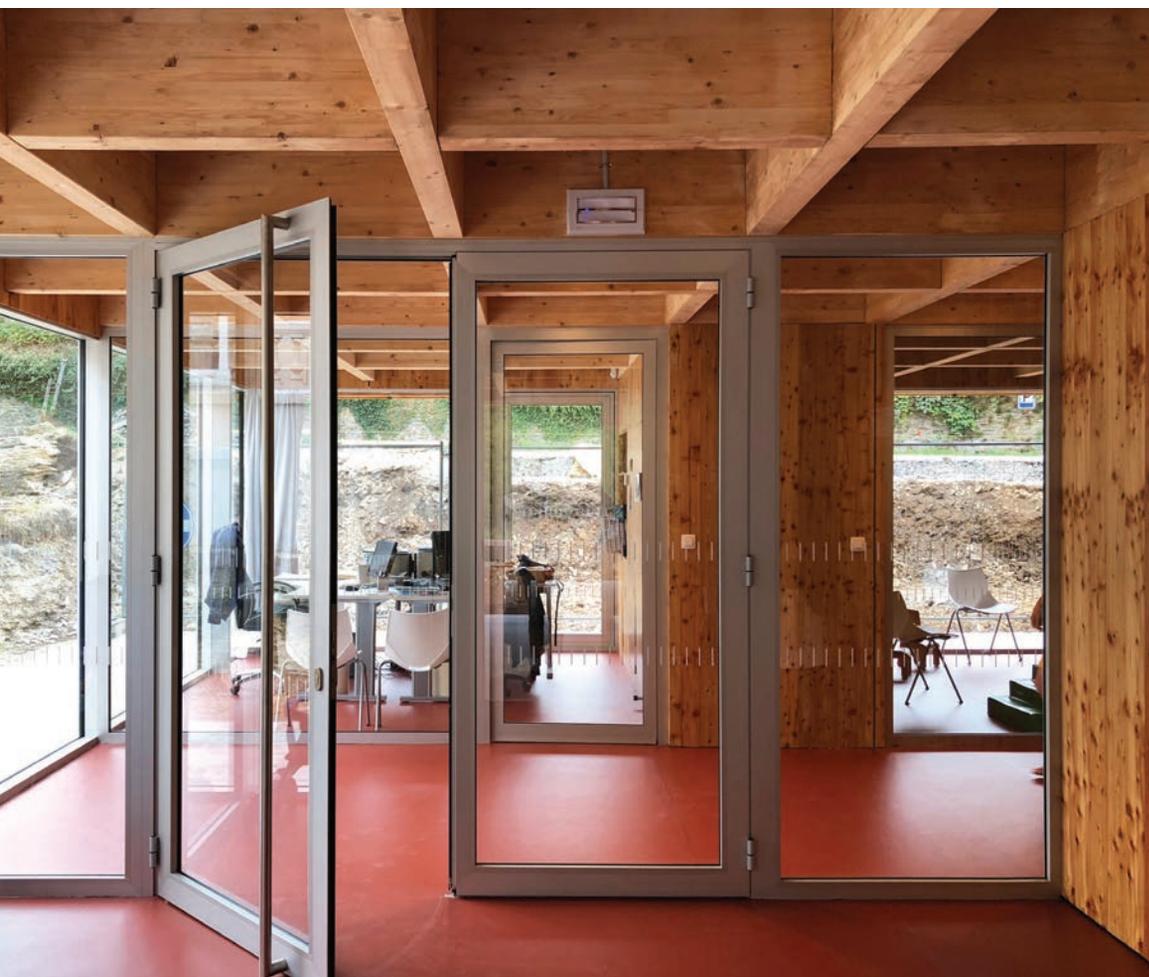
tions which aim to foster a climate-friendly development and ensure proper quality control. What we experience in both Norway and other countries is that development, innovation and what is actually doable sometimes develops much faster than the legislation itself, or what is even possible to expect from government or official bodies. Hence, we believe that our and other private practices can (and should) help to fill the void between current regulations and future demands for sustainable solutions.

A+ Have you noticed an evolution in the course of the Open Call procedure or other selection procedures over time? Have they evolved for the better (or for worse)?

Mathieu Berteloot The Cellule architecture has certainly improved and strengthened the expertise of architects in their juries over time, which is a very good thing.

Stephen Bates Of course, the Open Call procedure has evolved too, partly by the character and motivations of the individual Government Architect who presides over the process and sets a 'vision'. We tend not to judge the one Government Architect from the other, but we realize they often have their own agenda, which is usually interesting in its own way.

Mechthild Stuhlmacher The Open Call system is cherished among architects at home and abroad, but I sometimes have the feeling that it is in danger of collapsing under its own success. I see the Open Call as a way of giving young and proven talent from inside and outside Belgium the chance



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**HBAAT (FR), Crèche
 du Châtelet, Habay-la-
 Neuve: nursery with
 30 cots and associated
 rooms**

to realize exceptional projects. The formula has played an important role for the current flourishing Flemish architectural climate and for the development of its own specific cultural identity. From my own perspective, it is obviously good that clients are increasingly open to international teams, but it is important that the local connection remains and that international teams continue to sense what is desirable and customary in Belgium. The formula used in the past – according to which, each time in the final round of an Open Call, in addition to well-motivated and experienced indigenous architects, (at least) one young and (at least) one foreign firm may also participate – still seems relevant here, but I would, however, also put a ceiling on these groups of participants. After all, in my view, the formula should not lead to international (star) architects in particular dominating the procedures or to its experimental nature deterring builders. To convince more (local) clients of the usefulness and necessity of an Open Call, the procedure should (again) become accessible and affordable.

A+ Based on your personal experience with selection procedures in Belgium, can you formulate some suggestions to improve them?

Mathieu Berteloot In my opinion, nothing should be changed. On the contrary, the procedures in Belgium are exemplary and should serve as a model for countries like France both in the access to a commission they allow for young offices and in the models they use, often leading to outstanding architectural quality.

Stephen Bates This is indeed a difficult question as we are very impressed by the current procedures. They seem to suit us. The shortlist is small, we can meet the client and talk to them. These things are important and often rare elsewhere.

Kjetil Thorsen Defining specific improvements to today's procedures feels a bit presumptuous, as we do not have in-depth knowledge of these. Our experience with the building procedures in Brussels is quite limited. However, using the excellent Government Architect function as a starting point, we could propose a slight add-on that we would find really helpful, and that is having more predictability with regard to the timing of the decision-making process.

Mechthild Stuhlmacher Every project has its own stories, problems and idiosyncrasies. In general, I am also very pleased with the way competitions are prepared and organized in Belgium. Where there is definitely room for improvement is the follow-up after the design process has started. So I would like to advocate that the design and realization process should continue to be supervised by the relevant Government Architects even after the Open Call. This wish is motivated by my own experiences. After all, in almost all the projects our office has obtained through the Open Call procedure, there have been times during the design and realization phase when I would have wished for the support, intervention or advice of the person who voted in favour of the chosen plan during the jury and who therefore has an interest in ensuring that the intended quality is actually achieved. And I know that we are not alone →



with our concerns and problems. Realizing architecture is a sometimes long and very often difficult process in which the Government Architect and their team could also play an important role in the interim. So far, in my view, this happens (too) little. This applies to the assistance of the clients as well as the architect.

Hideyuki Nakayama – Ido Avissar In recent years, the administrative selection procedure has become more complex than before and we believe this is a bit of a shame. Some years ago, application was easier and lighter, and we felt that there was no place for specialization (need to present previous relevant references to get selected to a competition). The Flemish Government Architect was simply looking for good and inventive practitioners. We understand that there is some necessity to ‘objectify’ the selection, but this also slightly immobilizes the architectural scene and risks enclosing architects within certain programmes.

A+ To summarize, can you reflect on what makes the competition and construction process in Belgium so specific?

Kjetil Thorsen Based on our work with the Muntcentrum/Centre Monnaie, our impression is that there is a solid framework in place to support the city in achieving its ambitious goals. The city-specific Government Architect function

for Brussels is one great example of how the process is organized really well, fostering high standards in the architectural and landscape quality of public projects. In addition, our impression is that there is a quite unique focus on ensuring high standards and quality for all the city’s public spaces and neighbourhoods rather than limiting it to a few prominent areas. From our perspective, we have been impressed by the effect and strength that the Government Architect function has in Belgium and Brussels, and in our experience, this level of streamlining the application process is quite distinctive.

Hideyuki Nakayama – Ido Avissar In our view, the position of Flemish Government Architect is the most important institution. But it is accompanied by the Brussels and Walloon institutes, by an important lecture and debate scene (in architecture schools, Bozar, Flanders Architecture Institute, ICA/WB, Architecture Workroom Brussels, etc.). This constellation is very important to stimulate an architectural debate which is still quite specific today.

Stephen Bates It is always beneficial in the competition procedure, whether it is via the Open Call process, the Brussels Government Architect or even through private developers, when the relevant stakeholders are present at the competition stage. So, members of various environmental departments at the planning office, urban planning, heritage



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Snøhetta (NO), in collaboration with Binst (BE), Muntcentrum/Centre Monnaie, Brussels: redesign of the iconic cross-shaped office building from the 1970s into an energy-efficient, mixed-use complex

Participations in competitions / selection procedures in Belgium

Snøhetta (NO)
snohetta.com

– Muntcentrum/Centre Monnaie (Immobel – Whitewood), Brussels, in progress – in collaboration with Binst Architects (Call BMA)

and sustainability advisers are always useful to have their view at an early stage. In some cases, we are introduced to sociologists, anthropologists or artists, which is always extremely interesting.

Mechthild Stuhlmacher We are by now well acquainted with the different competition formulas and Government Architects. Less well known and less widely discussed is the importance of the many people we meet after a competition has been awarded. We are particularly impressed by some clients who are highly competent in architectural terms and their representatives. We encounter such competent builders with great regularity at AG Vespa, but we have also had the opportunity to work for such knowledgeable and committed builders at AG Real Estate through Schools of Tomorrow. This is far from common abroad.

In my view, it is crucial and enormously valuable for Belgian architectural culture that there are not only well-trained architects with a heart for the matter and a lot of ambition on the architects' side, but also in all other places that are important within a design process: with the client, with the users (including school boards such as the autonomous municipal company for urban education AG SO), with the Flanders Heritage Agency, with various municipal services, with the fire brigade, with advisory bodies on accessibility, etc. To my knowledge, architectural expertise, ambition and

vision in other countries are mostly represented among the architects themselves and much less among the other parties who play an equally important role in the creation of good projects. And that is what makes the competition culture, and consequently architectural quality in Belgium, so special. ▲■●

* Since Hideyuki Nakayama and Ido Avissar (List) are collaborating on the two projects they discuss here, they chose to answer the questions together.

- 1 Maarten Liefvooghe, 'Model at a Crossroads: The Open Call in the Broadened Field of Government Architects and Architectural Practices', in *More Than a Competition: The Open Call in a Changing Building Culture*, eds. Maarten Liefvooghe and Maarten Van Den Driessche (Antwerp and Brussels: Flanders Architecture Institute and Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, 2021), 106–27 (113).
- 2 Erik Wieërs, 'Foreword: Challenges for the Open Call', in *More Than a Competition*, 6–10.
- 3 Liefvooghe, 'Model at a Crossroads', 120.

