

Breathe

Élodie Degavre – Photos Séverin Malaud

For anyone familiar with the pleasure of diving into the interior of Berlin or Barcelona blocks, Agwa's plan to transform ECAM will be a relief: urban courtyards have a future in Brussels! For others, it will be a delightful surprise, since this new public space, enclosed between the city's houses and generous brand-new public facilities, breathes novelty.



It is rare for blocks to open themselves up to the public in our capital. Saint-Gilles does have a few hidden courtyards and parks, but until now nothing possessed the urbanity and generosity of what is being planned here. The ECAM project – named after the engineering school that used to be located on site – offers a welcome breakthrough in a context of extreme density. In 2012 this block running along Théodore Verhaegenstraat, whose interior was entirely built up, became the subject of a Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract. The municipality prepared an ambitious programme for this run-down area, including facilities for the young – a crèche, associations, outdoor and indoor sports halls – and devoted almost the entire budget of the neighbourhood contract to it.

The site entrusted to Agwa, the winner of the competition, is very complex. The state of the buildings within the block varied and there were no connections between them. In addition, there were significant differences in level – think of the slope on Verhaegenstraat – but these were invisible under the buildings. To open up the block, the architects had to remove rather than add. The project focused on retaining the main buildings, eliminating much of the rest, and creating connections with the surrounding streets by means of three openings in the perimeter of the block.

This clarification of the block has revealed some gems. ECAM's former laboratories and classrooms proved to be flexible structures that lent themselves well to the integration

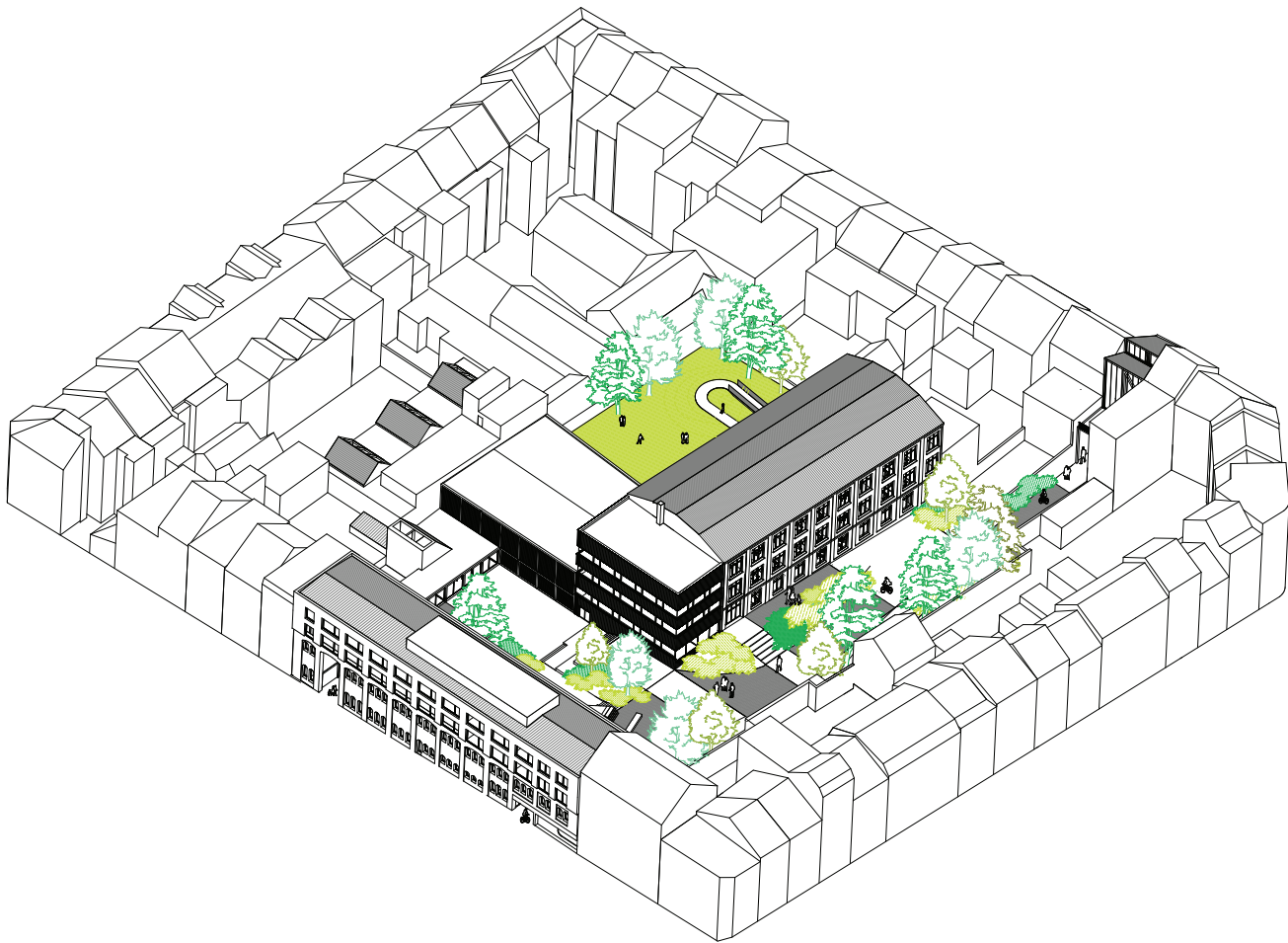
'A sophisticated intervention mixing new public spaces and buildings with existing structures to create a piece of new urban fabric.' Deyan Sudjic, jury member



of future programmes. A sports hall thus fits naturally in the former concrete testing room, while a crèche occupies the former classrooms. The lucidity of the project lies in its ability to 'listen' to the spatial heritage, but also in the clever use of the adjoining buildings to create visual openings between functions. The architectural touch is discreet and reveals itself mainly in the passages between the street and the block, where the concrete structural elements stand out as legible entities that are autonomous with regard to the existing structure – an Agwa hallmark, as it were.

With its welcome simplicity, this architecture soothes the chaotic block and gives shape to its new observatory. Each renovated building presents settings that sublimate this

existing decor that is so particular: the reverse side of the block's interior and the patchwork of Brussels roofs. Let's conclude with the element of surprise: a generous floor that collects the thresholds leading to the different functions and creates areas for pausing and playing. Its mineral dominance is somewhat regrettable, but fire standards mean that motor vehicles must be able to reach the façades. In any case, this is soon forgotten, as it is great to see that the hundreds of future users will find there what the city should offer us more often: facilities for everyone, high-quality reversible spaces, fresh urban perspectives and ... a moment to breathe, behind the scenes of city life. ▲ ■●



Architect
Agwa
Website
agwa.be
Project name
ECAM
Location
Rue du Tir, 1060 Saint-Gilles
Programme
Redevelopment of the former ECAM site: school, sports complex, office space, kindergarten, park

Procedure
Competition
Client
Municipality of Saint-Gilles
Landscape architect
Denis Dujardin
Structural engineering
JZH & Partner
Services engineering
JZH & Partners

Consultancy
Enesta (PEB)
Lead contractor
In Advance – BPC
Completion
June 2021
Total floor area
7,627 m² (renovation: 5,725 m² – new construction: 1,362 m²) + landscape: 2,740 m²

Budget
€ 11,365,151 (excl. VAT and fees)
Products / Suppliers
Sto (plaster on insulation), Eternit (slates and corrugated façade), Wienerberger (bricks on façade), Knauf (light walls/light floor panels), Gyproc (light walls/suspended ceilings), Reynaers (curtain walls/aluminium windows)