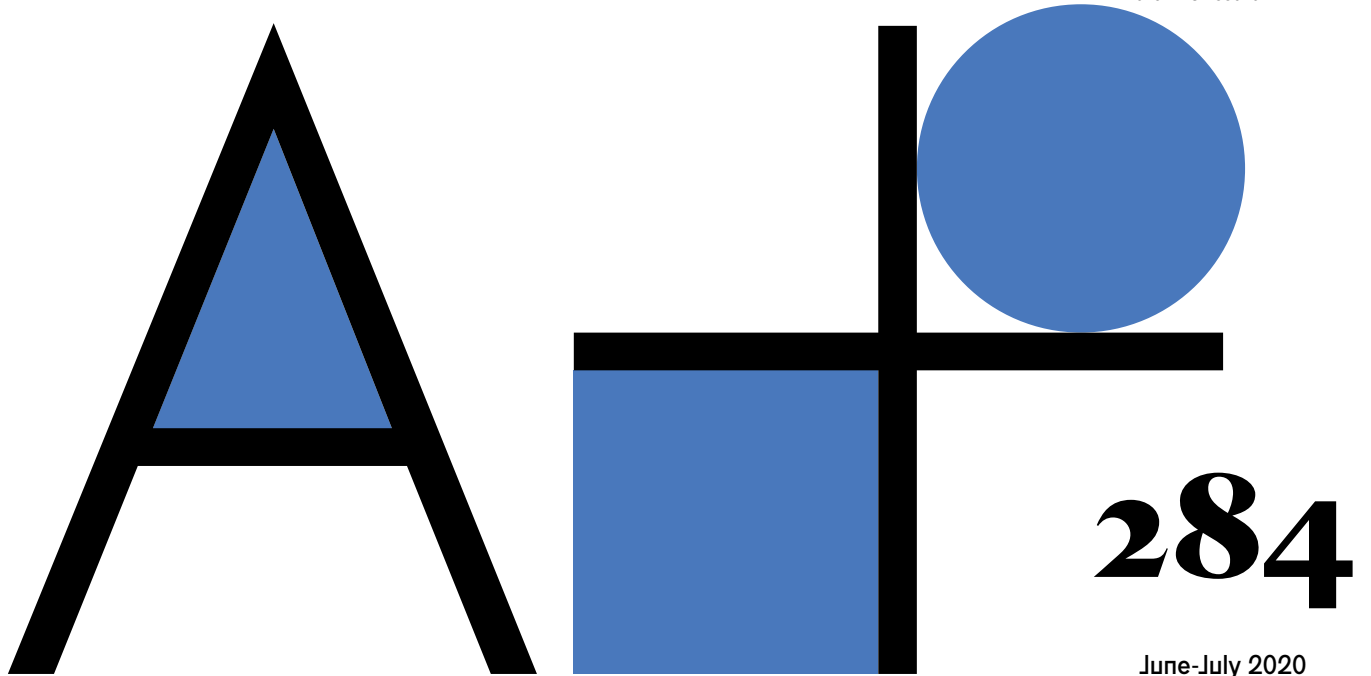




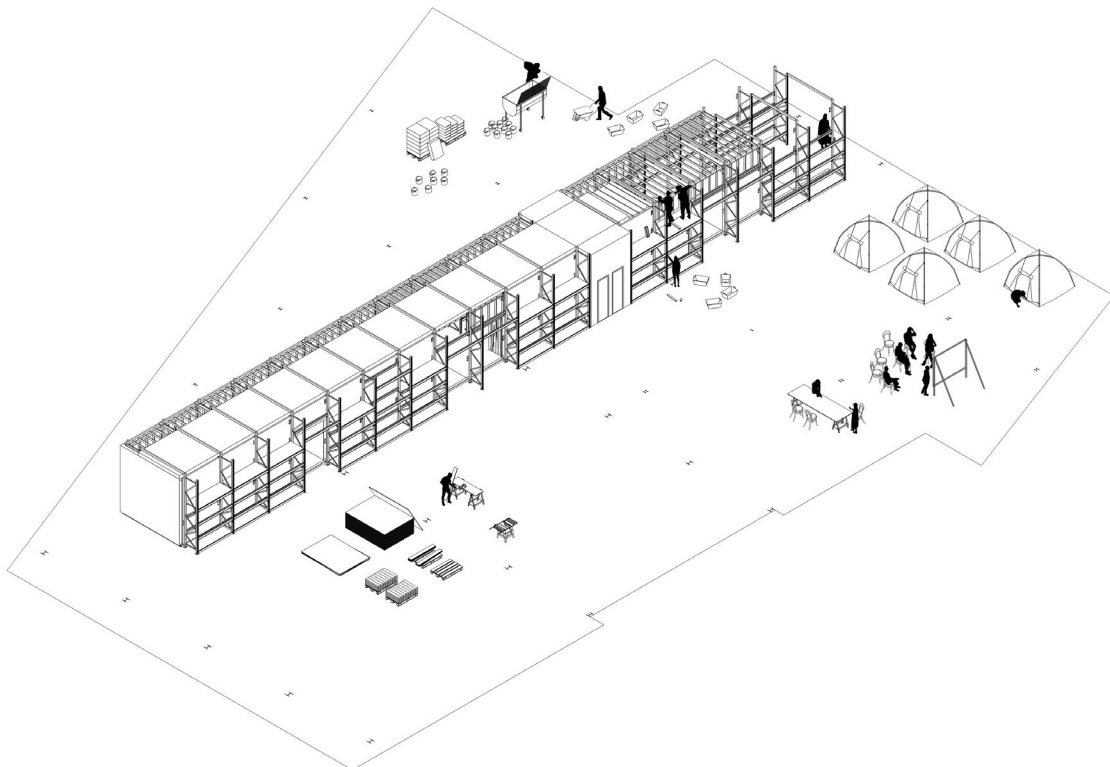
284

June-July 2020

Special Edition – Belgium: The Next Generation!



- 5 Editorial *Lisa De Visscher*
 7 Who's next? *Lisa De Visscher*
 14 **IDSRA – Laura Muyldermans**, Actiris, Brussels *Lisa De Visscher*
 20 **Traumnovelle**, A6K, Charleroi *Carla Frick-Cloupet*
 24 **Central**, iMAL, Brussels *Mathias Bouet*
 28 **TRANS**, Ryhove, Ghent *Jolien Naeyaert*
 35 Belgian architecture 2.0 *Lara Schrijver*
 40 **B-ILD**, Warot, Herent *Birgit Cleppe*
 46 **LRarchitectes**, Collège Notre-Dame de la Paix, Erpent *Apolline Vranken*
 50 **Goffart Polomé Architectes**, Crèche les Écureuils, Loverval *Pauline Malras*
 54 **FELT**, De Linde, Zarren *Bart Tritsmans*
 60 **Raamwerk**, Youth centre, Lichtervelde *Eline Dehullu*
 65 We need to take off – and land! *Pieter T'Jonck*
 72 **BC architects**, Studio of Pascale Marthine Tayou, Ghent *Gitte Van den Bergh*
 76 **Ouest**, Theatre Le Rideau, Brussels *Cécile Vandernoot*
 80 **Murmuur – Carton123 – ae-architecten**, Standaert site, Ghent *Jolien Naeyaert*
 84 **vvv – Bloc Paysage**, Pocket Parks, Laeken *Bart Tritsmans*
 89 When attitudes become form *Véronique Patteeuw*
 96 **Aslı Çiçek**, *Fernand Léger: Beauty is Everywhere*, Bozar *Eline Dehullu*
 100 **Gijs Van Vaerenbergh**, 'Labyrint', Genk *Bart Decroos*
 104 **Bernard Dubois**, PNY, Paris *Léone Drapeaud*
 109 Is representation the new building? *Victoire Chancel*
 114 **Nord**, La Carrosserie, Brussels *Maarten Delbeke*
 120 **VERS.A**, Mexico, Molenbeek *Élodie Degavre*
 126 **AHA Aurélie Hachez**, Jubel, Halle *Eloïse Perrillon*



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Pieter T'Jonck

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is an architect who graduated from La Cambre-Horta (ULB). In 2018 she managed the 'Home For Less' project (modular and temporary housing for the homeless). As the author of the book *Des béguinages à l'architecture féministe*, she advocates an equal city of men and women. She currently works at Urban Platform.

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My stereoscopic city

Élodie Degavre – Photos Stijn Bollaert

Thin steel letters arranged at the top of a wall announce a dream destination to those who enter here: Mexico. In the heart of an exceedingly congested Molenbeek, this allusion, which is not lacking in poetry, soothes the imagination. But does the social housing building designed by VER5.A really deliver on its promise to take visitors away? Yes and no.

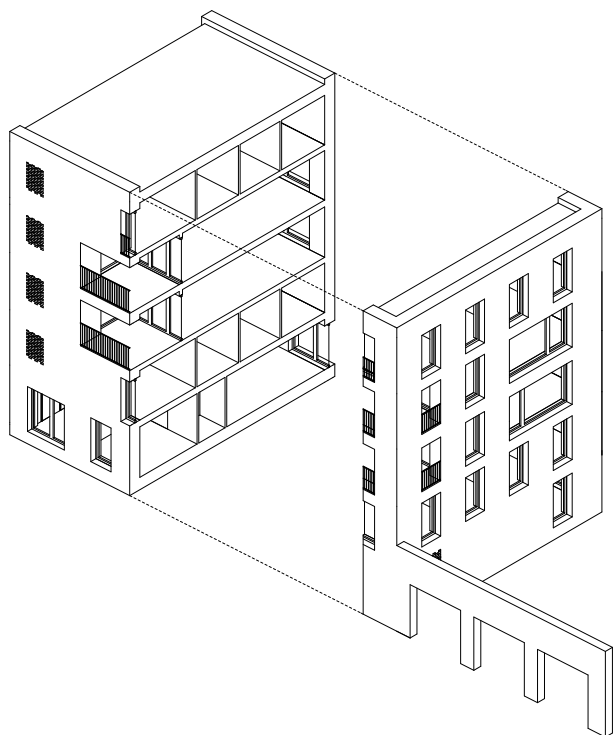


←
The desire to preserve a majestic tree prompted VER5.A to compact a small apartment block against one of two party walls, freeing up land for a park.

The building does provide a change of scenery, thanks to the created landscape, precisely. With great finesse, the architects, assisted by the landscape architects of Landin-zicht, have turned a former wasteland into a genuine tableau whose depth of field has been mastered to perfection. Like a stereoscope – that early device which made it possible to add depth to photographs – the new front is like a frame that draws in the visitor's gaze. What is habitually smooth – the street front – here becomes hollow, and the eye can take in the beautiful complexity of what makes Brussels what it is: the interiors of its city blocks, which make up a separate world. This effect of depth and relief rests on a bold choice in

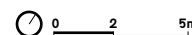
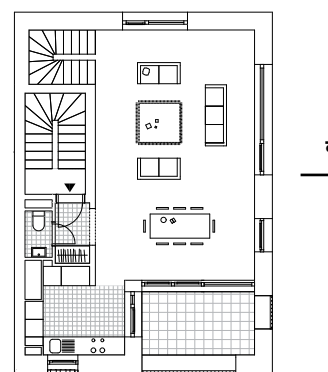
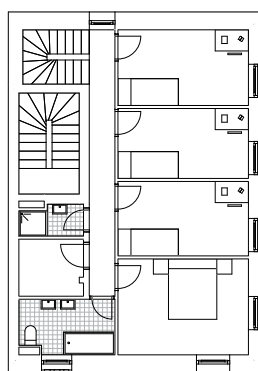
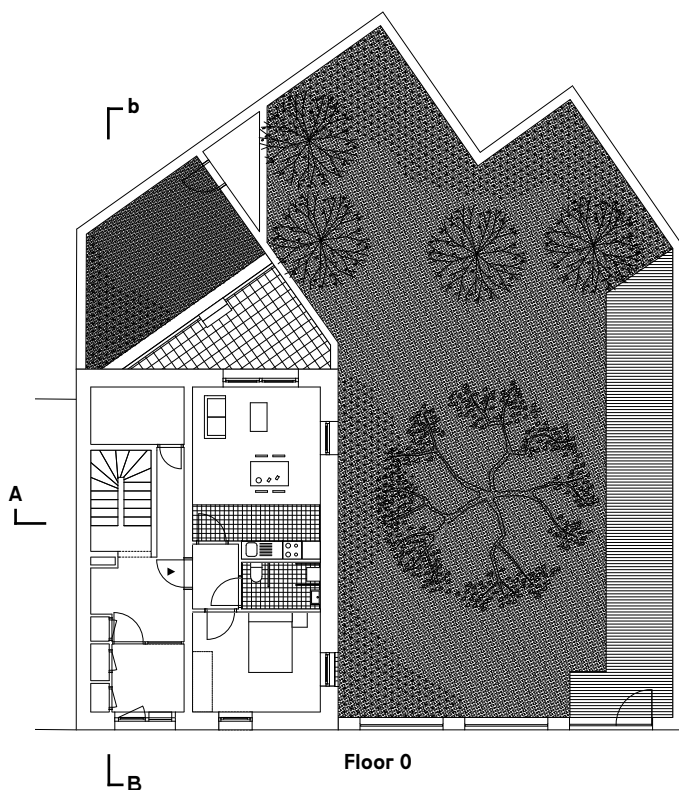
terms of urban planning: not to fill in entirely the built frontage that was left available, contrary to what was suggested in the contract pertaining to the Léopold II neighbourhood contract. The desire to preserve some majestic trees, which appeared there spontaneously, prompted VERS.A to compact a small apartment block against one of two party walls, freeing up land for a park. The boundary between the park and the street is clearly marked, but remains porous: the wall of the public park, shaped as a succession of large open frames, makes possible the 'stereoscopic' effect, heightened at night by a lighting system that accentuates this small interior world. As the hinge between the street and this microcosm,





the building, which consists of three apartments, rises up like a monolith: it is entirely made out of brick. The wall, the lintels, the sills and the embrasures are all covered in the same material: whether placed in a lace-like manner (for the openwork), as a massive wall (for the street front), or as coping stones (when emphasized by a zinc edge), these bricks all bear witness to the skill of the mason. Collecting the wet rooms along the party wall made it possible to create vast living rooms with three façades, brightened up by very large bay windows and generous loggias which let residents almost live among the trees. This is a rather unique layout, which offers rare oblique views onto the street and a welcome and luxurious feeling of space: you really can feel as if you have been transported somewhere else.

And yet the building fails to provide a change of scenery in other respects. One can only applaud the exceptional attention paid to the design and the construction, but this social housing has certainly not reinvented the genre – and the architects themselves are the first to regret it. Although VERS.A acknowledges that the previous generation successfully managed to improve the conditions of public procurement, they note that the nature of the commissions has changed little. Collective housing remains an unrewarding field in Belgium, one that is not very conducive to reinvention given the extent to which it is constrained by norms. The search for frugality which characterizes the architectural proposals of VERS.A, and which is shared by many



Architect
Vers.A
Website
versa-architecture.be
Official project name
Mexico
Location
Molenbeek (Brussels), Belgium

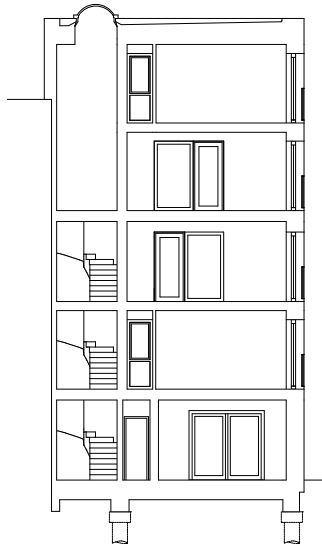
Programme
Construction of a social housing project and a pocket park
Procedure
Competition
Client
Municipality of Molenbeek

Lead contractor
Balcaen & Fils
Landscape architect
Landinzicht
Structural engineering
JZH & Partners
Services engineering
Enesta

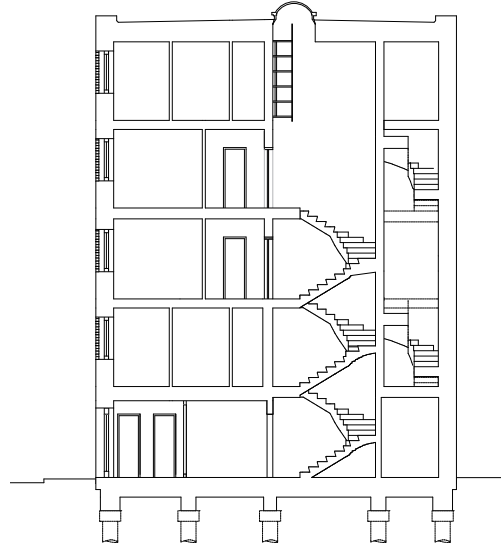
Building physics
Enesta
Completion
September 2019
Total floor area
500 m²
Budget
€ 1,000,000 (excl. VAT and fees)

architects today, could give rise to in-depth reflections on housing. And yet they seem to be included only rarely in the competitions. The exciting initiatives that have flourished in Switzerland – resident cooperatives and innovative typologies, for instance – are nowhere to be found in Brussels, as Guillaume Becker observes, who also notes that the duplex typology proposed for Rue de Mexico already represented,

in and of itself, a change of scenery for the client. This month VERS.A is taking part in a competition organized by the Brussels Community Land Trust. This confirms that they intend to take on the question of innovative housing in the coming years. Let's hope that they will set a new destination for us all: housing 2.0.▲●■



Section Aa



Section Bb

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2020

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A+285 Museums August–September issue, out 21/9	
A+286 Structure & Reuse October–November issue, out 16/11	

285

Museums

A+285 is an issue about new buildings for (contemporary) art which will focus not only on architecture, but also on the tension between building, artwork and visitor. Featuring Z33 in Hasselt (Francesca Torzo), the Folklore Museum in Mouscron (V+), an examination of the Open Call competition for the Design Museum in Ghent, and a state of affairs of Kanal-Centre Pompidou in Brussels (noA – Sergison Bates). And with an interview with the Swiss architecture office Gison Guyer.



© Olmo Peeters

↑
Francesca Torzo,
Z33, Hasselt, 2020

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This special issue of A+ shows up-and-coming talent, 22 offices at the cutting edge that are designing both our spatial and societal context today. Offices that are at a pivotal point in their development, a relaunch moment that demands professionalization, growth and capacity building, but without any loss of identity or quality. Featuring projects by: ae-architecten, Aslı Çiçek, AHA Aurélie Hachez, B-ILD, BC architects, Carton123, Central, Bernard Dubois, FELT, Gijs Van Vaerenbergh, Goffart-Polomé, LDSRA, LRA, Murmuur, Laura Muyldermans, Nord, Ouest, Raamwerk, TRANS, Traumnovelle, VERS.A and vvv.

