

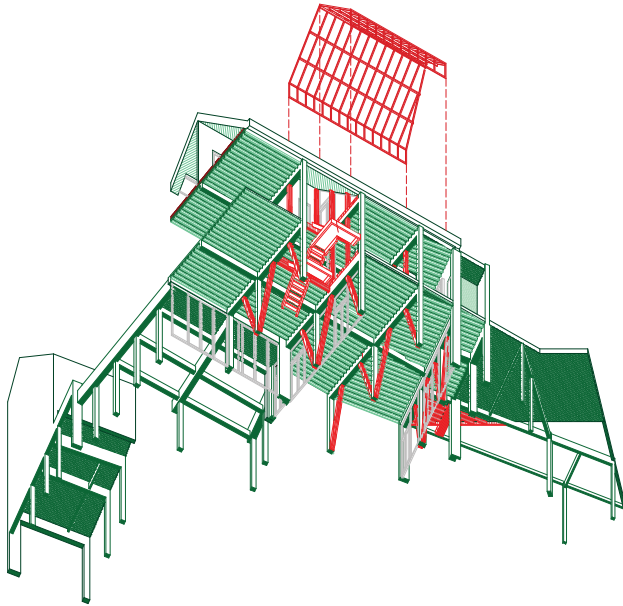
Pegleg

Élodie Degavre – Photos Séverin Malaud

An architect's personal home is an unhoped-for testing ground in which new architectural convictions can take shape: this is the road Agwa took when converting a warehouse into a dwelling in Verbieststraat.

'An intelligent demonstration of how to deal with an existing structure. Space and uses are defined through structural reinforcement.'





In the beginning, there was an isolated warehouse in the middle of a plain. A solid at the centre of a void. The status of this barn in Molenbeek changed when housing was built around it in the 1950s: it is now an empty skeleton at the centre of a solid.

Before we look more closely at this destiny reversal, let's go back in time. The year is 2018. Outside, people are chanting 'Claim the climate'. With an air of disbelief, the architects of Agwa see their children take to the streets. Eager to understand them while reflecting on his own discipline, Harold Fallon questions the environmental impact of the act of building. After comparing various types of construction – passive, new, renovation work, etc. – the conclusion was clear: what if, rather than wrapping our buildings in polyurethane, we renovated existing buildings as lightly as possible, while reducing the heated volume by 50 per cent? The calculations surprised him: this solution was the most energy-efficient construction method. The personal purchase of the warehouse in Molenbeek gave him the opportunity to challenge all his automatic reflexes.

To start with, the use of concrete, an energy-consuming material if ever there was one. In Molenbeek, the diagnosis was alarming: the structure was in danger of collapsing under its own weight, and so the beams would have to be encased in

A rational approach that retains the spirit of the initial building.' Louis Leger, jury member



new concrete. That was out of the question. A counter-intuitive solution then appeared: what if this old concrete skeleton was given wooden legs? These were designed to rest on the foundations of the existing columns, forming large unexpected obliques. All that remained to be solved was the insufficient bearing capacity of the voided slab: the juxtaposition of beams created large wooden slabs. They deck the existing floors and act as both structure and finish. And what about the other materials? Some will be collected from other Agwa sites. This exceptional approach should be implemented more broadly. It is an area in which the architects, who are well placed on this circuit, could one day play a key role.

The second automatic reflex concerns the relation between programme and surface. What are you to do when you have 1,000 m² available but only need 150 m²? Agwa reduced the heated space and used the potential of the void. The project was limited to three climate-controlled units: the family's living area, the children's area and a studio – overall, no more than 50 per cent of the usable area. In addition, most of the

space has been kept for the intermediate spaces, which have been only partly renovated or which were created on the basis of isolated demolitions: covered or open gardens, greenhouse, terrace, unheated areas, and nooks and crannies you can claim as your own. These voids offer many visual escapes within the framework itself, which is enclosed by the surrounding buildings and therefore deprived of direct views.

The strength of the proposal lies in the ability of the hollowed-out building to create its own landscape, punctuated by the wooden elements. These elements play the role of structure, spatial partition and, above all, architectural writing. There is no smooth aesthetics here; on the contrary, there is something offbeat, grating, innovative and quite refreshing: one thinks of the pegleg pirate, who might bear the dissonant trace of a profound metamorphosis but who for all that has gained in panache as he sets sail for more adventures. ▲ ■ ●

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Architect
Agwa
Website
agwa.be
Project name
Verbiest
Location
**Jean Verbieststraat 5,
1080 Sint-Jans-Molenbeek**

Programme
**Transformation of a old
warehouse of almost 1,000 m²
built between 1900 and 1970 in
Molenbeek into a single-family
house, a productive garden and
a shared artistic workshop**
Procedure
Direct commission

Client
Private
Structural engineering
JZH & Partners
Lead contractor
Revgroup
Completion
May 2020

Total floor area
**600 m² (interior) +
390 m² (exterior)**
Budget
**€ 400,000
(excl. VAT and fees)**
Products / Suppliers
**Isohemp (insulation system),
BC materials (earth products)**