

Belgitopia

EMMANUELLE BORNE

Should we rely on international expositions, the Venice Architecture Biennale in particular, to learn about the fundamental movements and challenges that shake the world of architecture? With Rem Koolhaas's historic "Fundamentals" and, at the other end, Alejandro Aravena's oh-so-contemporary "Reporting from the Front", we were tempted to answer yes. But Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara's "Freespaces" is so full of disparate intentions, and projects, that it will leave fans of the big idea and committed vision wanting more, even if there are some pearls in the cacophony. Many will remember Peter Zumthor's wax, sand and concrete models. Others praised the democratic vision of the Belgian pavilion's amphitheatre, a reconstruction of an ideal European parliament "ridiculing the nation-state in decline" and bearing the dulcet name of Eurotopie. Having decided on a political bent, the pavilion renounced showing any architecture. And yet if there is one scene that has been more and more visible the last few years, it is certainly the one composed, just to name a few, of V+, Hebbelinck, Baunkunst, OFFICE, 51N4E... not to forget ADVVT – architecten de vyllder vinck taillieu. The latter were awarded, at the Biennale, a Silver Lion for their exhibition inviting visitors to stroll around one of their projects, the delicate renovation of a villa on a psychiatric campus in Melle (pp.76-87). Despite the importance of not confusing one with the other, Flemish and Walloon, young radicals and old guard –who sometimes support irreconcilable architectures– they all share the common point of having given credibility, as well as international acclaim, to a profession for a time scorned in Belgium –especially over the period when Brussels was disfigured by property speculation. Architectural quality was back in the forefront in the 1990s, with the first public competitions, the committees or specialised institutes, without forgetting the bouwmeester, the master architect guarantor of quality. Charleroi's one, Georgios Maïllis, sees a "liberated pragmatism" in Belgian architecture, partly defined by an uninhibited relationship with the history of architecture. One thing is certain: Belgian architects master the art of palimpsest as well as budgetary restrictions. Between history and storytelling, audacity and mastery, the Belgian scene has become a guarantee of quality, humanism and poetry.