

## Prologue

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*Praxis is the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted, practised, embodied or realised. It may also refer to the act of engaging, applying, exercising, realising or practising ideas.<sup>1</sup>*

The oeuvre of Marie-José Van Hee has developed since the mid 1980s in Brussels and Flanders. During that era, building culture in Flanders became emancipated as a result of private engagement and support from cultural organisations. SAM (*Stichting Architectuurmuseum / Architecture Museum Foundation*) and the deSingel arts centre showed her emergent work at an early stage. After gaining practical experience through collaborations with Groep Planning, landscape architect Paul Deroose and architect Johan Van Dessel, amongst others, Van Hee established her own architectural practice. Over a period of almost 30 years, designing together with Paul Robbrecht and sharing a common office with Robbrecht en Daem architecten has become a constant activity that continues to this day.

Van Hee's architecture originates in architectural history, not so much in its theoretical or autonomous discourse, as in the way historical buildings are classified according to typologies and ensembles: urban dwellings and city walls, village squares and staircases, country lanes with barns and the iconic silhouette of a single tree. By referring to the culture of building, numerous classical architectural elements shape and define space: the galleries, the colonnades, the staircases with landings and the sequential positioning of windows and doors. The awareness of the built world and its relationship with the garden – and its extension, the landscape – cannot be left out. This preference for the intuitive and experiential is moulded in an understated and modest architecture, rooted in an immense respect for the logic of construction and the awareness of historically transferred knowledge, still present in the act of building today.<sup>2</sup>

Marie-José Van Hee is an architect with a vision who 'sees' places, spaces and proportions. She recognises, rearranges, redraws and creates something new from common knowledge. The initial design is formed by a basic concept that is quickly established, followed by a long process of thinking and drawing, negotiations between the client and her own experience, intuition and knowledge. Each time it yields a very precise project in which everything is extremely well thought out, consistent and correct. The result is a quiet architecture that does not strike a pose, yet evokes calmness and asceticism. The taut plan, the spatial arrangement, the purity of construction, all are intended to offer the freedom that architecture must give. Her buildings arrange space for living, in which personal, multiple use and versatility are key notions. Dwellings, communal housing, public buildings, bridge designs, the creation of public space ... a diverse range of commissions in which the context – garden, landscape or city and urbanity – is always embraced by the designer.

This book is not a typical monograph with a chronological overview of projects; it is idiosyncratic in this respect. Instead, multiple points of view on the work of Marie-José Van Hee offer a compendium of

meanings, insights and perceptions of her architecture. To approach this diversity in a fitting way, we chose an unusual but strict framework for this publication: three essays and an interview form the basic central content. A second structure organises the selection of eight buildings, each split into two groups of four projects. The private house of Van Hee is accentuated in the middle of the book. A third layer features contributions from inhabitants, photographers and artists. Out of the 350 projects that Van Hee has drawn throughout her career, a selection of 130 projects was made for the extensive project list at the end of this book. Because it is not complete, we chose to indicate the year of design and the numbering of the projects in Roman numerals.

The book starts with a huge amount of sketches, at the explicit request of Marie-José Van Hee. For her, a sketch is the starting point of architecture, the beginning of a story. In the condensed form of the drawing, history, reality, thoughts and dreams flow together. Every solution grows from her sketches as a result of a trance-like concentration, without artistic pretensions or ambitions. Van Hee looks at her drawings as a tool for mastering an abstract idea, to achieve plans and cross-sections. As she puts it in her own words, 'to channel the chaos into clear lines.'

The three architectural critiques in this publication each approach a different facet of Van Hee's architecture. Helen Thomas starts from the praxis of the architect and focuses on the narrative as the basis for the creative process of the building: the formulation and the assignments of the client as a beginning for the architect's solitary process of thinking, sketching, and starting over again. In her text we get an insight into the intimate struggle of the designer's quest, a process that is never finished. The final decisions on the design of the building, the process of obtaining permissions from the planning authorities, the construction itself on the specific site with skilled workers, they all are part of the actual praxis. In all these subsequent operations, different strategies and negotiations come into play.

The essay by Christian Kieckens is based on the theory of architectural theses exploring interiors and objects – furniture that embodies the fundamental act of living. Van Hee's sketches illustrate the way she designs interior and exterior all at once, while the section is developed in tandem with the spatial sequences and interior paths through the building. Walls and partitions are not just structural supports and boundaries. Rather, they act as substantial parts of the interior, often combined with a utilitarian function: cupboard, stair, library, alcove. And in this way, the inhabitation is already incorporated into the first lines of the design.

Javier Fernández Contreras analyses the characteristics of a number of realisations by Van Hee, their appearance, the materiality and the tactile quality. He unravels various design choices and explains how they are deliberate and effective, how the combining and distinguishing of material textures is a design attitude revealing the knowledge, experience and sensitivity of the designer.

Marie-José Van Hee usually builds directly for the inhabitant or the owner. This involves a different approach to working for a real estate developer who has a mere professional, mainly financial interest in a project. Hence the importance we gave to three portraits of inhabitants by photographer Michiel Hendryckx, accompanied by personal texts written by the residents themselves.

Private houses are usually not open to the public. A wide selection of photos invites you to explore.

The material characteristics such as the geometry, the light, the spatial structuring, the tactile richness, the materiality, can be transmitted through the lens of photography, although capturing the soul of a place requires a photographer's more engaged eye. Marie-José Van Hee counts some very fine professional photographers among her friends and we invited two of these, David Grandorge and Michiel Hendryckx, to present 'that one specific image' containing the essence of her work, and to motivate their choices.

In this light, we also include the exhibition concept and the collaboration with artists Kris Martin and Dirk Braeckman, conceived for the *Biennale Architettura Venezia 2018*. The internationally-operating Kris Martin is a former student of Van Hee. They previously worked together on the art integration for various architectural competitions. Based on his experience and affinity with architecture, and their shared thematic affinities, Van Hee invited him to join in brainstorming for the presentation in the Arsenale. The short note in the book is a reflection of this process. Van Hee also invited another acquaintance with an international reputation. Dirk Braeckman spent a few days in Van Hee's house in Ghent. He was given *carte blanche*, and after a few weeks delivered a diptych of monumental night photos. Her own home, which could be described as her 'Freospace'<sup>3</sup>, is the subject of her contribution in Venice. The garden, present in the two photographs; two benches, furniture for the house; two lecterns that each hold a book; natural light and an electric light-bulb. The material supports that embody the metaphysical aspects of her house became the protagonists of the scenography.

The lecterns with books were presented in a similar way during an earlier exhibition in the 1990s at the deSingel Art Centre in Antwerp. The large format books refer to rich medieval manuscripts and document a selection of projects with a multitude of drawings and photographs. The publication 'More Home, More Garden 1977-2018', produced for the occasion of the Biennale, shows visual similarities with this new monograph. After all, the preparations for this book and the participation in the Biennale went hand in hand.

That is why 'the garden' is also prominent in this book. 'The garden' – a collective term for a tree, a pond, a vegetable garden, an orchard – stands for 'nature', or more specifically for the relationship between architecture and nature. It is a theme already present in the early work of Marie-José Van Hee, being the subject of her graduation thesis back in 1974, and is carefully applied in every subsequent design to this day. The variations on the boundary between nature and architecture – from the Roman patio with gallery, the medieval *hortus conclusus*, the religious pilgrimage with benchmarks in the landscape, the pleasure garden, to the presence of shadow and scent on porous walls, so beautifully described by Japanese writer Junichirō Tanizaki – Van Hee incorporates and translates this wide register into ever-changing applications. The series of photos 'more garden' shows the generosity of nature inherent in her designs.

In every architecture book some issues remain absent: it is better not to dwell too much on declined projects or lost competitions. For architects, this remains a painful and upsetting subject: so much design energy and determination only ever existing in the archive. In Van Hee's career as well, too many projects were never built. Having entered and lost the competition to extend it, her sole museum building MoMu is currently being redesigned by other architects. The phantom pain caused by a similar experience was described by William Mann in an earlier publication in relation to an unrealised housing project in the Schaafstraat in Antwerp.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, the interview with Colm mac Aoidh offers, among other things, a fascinating insight into a series of projects for bridges, designed by Van Hee together with engineer Dirk Jaspaert.

These projects highlight the seemingly effortless mastery from the small-scale arrangement of the patio and the garden, to the larger dimension of public space and landscape, ideas that became evident in Van Hee's later work.

A bridge is a landmark and requires the same holistic approach to design as the organisation of public space in the city. On a conceptual level, it is primarily about connecting, but in practice, it means plotting the most logical passages for the users. A good bridge design must support different layers: the subsurface, the ground level and the experience within the field of vision – from near to far. This constant switching between levels of scale makes Van Hee's bridge designs a fascinating topic. After all, a bridge is not only a dot in the landscape, but also an object that relates 1:1 to the walker crossing it. Capturing this staggering position between architecture and infrastructure, form and materiality, landscape and detail in such complex designs is a task Van Hee masters with brilliancy. These projects represent more than just a reply to a question: it is about providing orientation and determining an identity. This giving 'more' than the sum of things, so typical for Marie-José Van Hee, is representative in all her projects covered in this book: more life, more variation, more difference, more wealth. In sum, 'More architecture'.

#### Notes

- 1 Bijoy Jain, *Studio Mumbai: Praxis* (Tokyo: Toto Publishing, 2012) p. 7.
- 2 For a more comprehensive analysis of Van Hee's work see Caroline Voet in 'Architecture between Dwellings and Spatial Systematics. The Early Works of the Generation of '74', in *Autonomous Architecture in Flanders* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016) pp. 103-119.
- 3 'Freespace' was the title of the 16<sup>th</sup> *Biennale Architettura di Venezia 2018* curated by the Irish architects Yvonne Farrell and Shelly McNamara.
- 4 William Mann, 'Fantoompijn', *Marie-José Van Hee. Architect* (Gent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2002) pp. 85-95.