

**European Mies van der Rohe Award 2011 – First-ever Belgian finalist :
The BrOnks Youth Theater by Martine De Maeseneer Architects (MDMA) : A Delicate Balance**

Text by Thomas Daniell

The prestigious European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture, otherwise known as the

Mies van der Rohe Award, is intended to celebrate innovative buildings that make a demonstrable contribution to the vitality and sustainability of the contemporary European city. On June 20, the 2011 prize will be awarded at the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona to the British architect David Chipperfield's Neues Museum Berlin, chosen from a shortlist of 343 nominated buildings across 33 countries. The six finalists also included the first-ever Belgian finalist: the BrOnks Youth Theater by MDMA (the partnership of Martine De Maeseneer and Dirk Van den Brande).

As the first public building realized by MDMA, the BrOnks Youth Theater represents the culmination of two decades of practical and theoretical investigations. Indeed, the project has been underway throughout most of MDMA's career – four distinct projects were designed for two different sites over a period of fourteen years. The final version was commissioned in 2002 by the Flemish Community Commission of the Brussels Capital Region and opened to the public in 2009. BrOnks (an acronym for Brussel Onderwijs Kunst, or Brussels Education Art) synthesizes many of the spatial and compositional ideas present in MDMA's earlier work, while taking a provocative stance on the question of how an architect might intervene in a historical city.

There are two main approaches to designing contemporary architecture for a traditional setting. The first is to mimic the existing, to blend in by making a more-or-less authentic pastiche of local vernacular building styles. The second is to contrast with the existing, to stand out by making an aggressive juxtaposition of incongruous forms and materials with the intention of enhancing and clarifying the qualities of both the historical context and the new building. Given the irreconcilable demands being placed on the architect, it is rare for either approach to be fully satisfactory. Mimicry tends to be seen as inimical to the designer's creativity and the city's vitality – and, ironically, as damaging to the integrity of the very context to which it is ostensibly respectful. Contrast, on the other hand, all too often results in little more than temporary shock value that soon looks dated and awkward within the timelessness of its historical setting.

Set on a picturesque street in the heart of Brussels, the BrOnks takes a third approach, integrating with its context by means of analogy, extension, and occasional friction. Fitting precisely into the space available between its immediate neighbors, reinforcing the continuity of the roof profiles and eave lines along the street, the façade is a fully glazed wall, its profile distorted like a stage curtain in the process of being raised. Visible beyond the street façade is a second, inner façade, a floating wall containing large glazed cutouts that MDMA describes as a *passé-partout* (the border mat that sits behind the glass in a picture frame). Transparent yet alive with shifting reflections, the radical openness of the glass wall makes a striking contrast with the sober stone façades and relatively small windows that dominate the surroundings – most vividly at dusk, as the BrOnks begins to glow like an enormous lantern, the silhouettes of people moving within only adding to the spectacle.

Yet this apparent permeability is not quite what it seems. The glazed façade does not open – the main entry and subentry are located either side – and while it may reveal the activities in the rehearsal hall within, immediately on the other side of the glass is a wide slot in the floor, a chasm open to the reception area on the basement level. The floor of the rehearsal hall itself is offset a meter above street level, another of the many disjunctions within the building that simultaneously

invite and rebuff visitors as they move through it. In a sense, the architecture of the BrOnks is mostly interstitial, a negotiation between imposed constraints. The building footprint is defined by the template of existing buildings and streets, and the building volume is forced partially underground by the legal height limit. Programmatic and acoustic requirements define the sizes and proportions of the two primary functional volumes, the rehearsal hall and theater. They seem to be loosely suspended within the building shell, unrelated to the ground level datum. Attention is focused on the spaces that mediate between the outer walls and the two inner boxes: a café above and reception area below, all linked by a web of stairs, ramps, and corridors comprising unexpected physical and visual connections. At each intermediate landing on the central double-helical stair is an element that MDMA calls the “septum”: a rotating mirror-clad panel that is used to separate or connect the independent public and private circulation systems.

The atmosphere throughout is robust and industrial, mostly bare concrete surfaces and volumes bathed in natural light. These raw, hardwearing spaces are counterbalanced by moments of extreme refinement, such as the smooth red counter in the reception area and the woven steel plates of the café ceiling structure. The BrOnks Youth Theater is an architecture of paradox and deliberate contradiction, at once assertive and reticent, open and generous to its historical surroundings while sequestering a new, alternative world within. Sitting amid buildings that date back several centuries, the BrOnks oscillates between deference and impudence toward its elders – a very appropriate sensibility for an institution dedicated to nurturing and channeling youthful talent.

Thomas Daniell is a New Zealand-born, Japan-based architect and writer. His books include *After the Crash: Architecture in Post-Bubble Japan* (2008) and *Houses and Gardens of Kyoto* (2010).