

# The Landscape as Inventory Versus Impression: Exhibiting the Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect

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# The Landscape as Inventory Versus Impression: Exhibiting the Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect

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The function of Flemish Government Architect was implemented in 1998 by the Flemish Government's then competent minister Wivina Demeester and assigned to the architect and urban designer bOb Van Reeth the following year. His position comprised an advisory role, whose task was to improve the management and quality of the Flemish Government's built estate across Flanders, Belgium's Dutch-speaking region. The region counts as one of the most urbanized regions of Europe. Its spatial environment is characterised by low-density urban sprawl, which has come to blur the distinction between city and countryside across the entire territory. It formed along a network of industrial corridors and infrastructure, following the unhierarchical distribution of historical small-scale towns and the spread of free-standing family homes promoted after World War II.<sup>1</sup> It was less the result of an explicit spatial planning than an implicit planning vision by a national government that during the prosperous after-war period supported individual private entrepreneurship, rather than took responsibility for the development of adequate collective infrastructure, public services, and the distribution of economic wealth.<sup>2</sup> Convergent to the critical economic climate of the 1970s and profound unrest shaking the country's governance and public institutions, Belgium's frenetic building sector eventually came to a halt. The deplorable state of the built and public spaces spurred public outcry among architects, urban planners and citizens alike. Failed planning schemes and unregulated private developments were blamed for the congestion and disfiguration of city centres, as well as the fragmentation of the country's remaining open space. Following Belgium's successive state reforms and the establishment of the Flemish Government at the turn of the 1990s<sup>3</sup>, it is only after about

- 1 De Meulder, Schreurs, Cock, Notteboom, "Patching up the Belgian Landscape", 78-113.
- 2 Loeckx, Vervloesem, "Stadsvernieuwingsprojecten in Vlaanderen (2002-2012). In dialoog met een weerbarstige werkelijkheid", 10.
- 3 At the turn of the 1990s, Belgium, through a couple of successive

several decades, that Flanders eventually saw major advancement in terms of spatial governance and policy to more consistently organise the region's built estate and environment.<sup>4</sup>

It is within this context, that the Flemish Government Architect was given the challenging task of supervising, developing, and promoting procedures and policy instruments to accompany the commission and completion of qualitative public buildings, infrastructure, and spatial plans in Flanders.<sup>5</sup> To better grasp his field of intervention, Van Reeth kicked off his mandate with the commission of a photographic inventory of the Flemish territory, with particular attention to the areas destined for the construction of public works. The photographer Niels Donckers was hired for the task, and he quickly accumulated hundreds of photographs documenting Flanders's most ordinary landscapes.

At the end of 2002, about mid-term in Van Reeth's six-years mandate and on his initiative, this inventory was put on display for the first time in the exhibition *Portrait of Flemish Biotopes. The Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect* at the performing arts centre and campus deSingel in Antwerp. The exhibition was curated by the arts historian Moritz Küng in collaboration with architecture historian Katrien Vandermarliere as part of the arts centre's architecture programme, which they subsequently directed.<sup>6</sup> It was produced in close partnership with

state reforms, became a federal state and parts of its competences were distributed upon its three subnational regions: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital, as well as its three linguistic communities: Dutch, French and German-speaking.

4 After decades of preparations, the Flemish Government implemented the Flanders Environmental Structural Plan (*Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen*) in 1997. This key instrument for spatial policy sought to organize the region's fragmented territory across all scales. Other important initiatives were the appointment of the Flemish Government Architect (*Vlaams Bouwmesster*) in 1999, and the foundation of the Flemish Architecture Institute (*Vlaams Architectuurinstituut*) in 2001.

5 Santens and De Zutter, *Een Rijksbouwmeester Bouwt Niet 1999–2005*.

6 Founded in 1980 in Antwerp following the expansion of the Flemish music conservatorium, deSingel's cultural programme initially only focused on music, dance, and theatre. Its architecture programme (including exhibitions, talks and publications) was launched in 1985 by Carolina De Backer (1980–1990), followed by Katrien Vandermarliere (1990–2002) and Moritz Küng (2002–2010), who succeeded each other as programme directors. In 2002, Vandermarliere was appointed director of the newly founded Flemish Architecture Institute (VAi) also housed within deSingel. Both institutions collaborated on the production of several exhibitions until the architecture programme was eventually fully taken over by the VAI as it is the case today.

The making of the exhibition *Portrait of Flemish Biotopes* occurred at a moment of important shift in Flanders cultural landscape pertaining the domain of architecture, which also affected its curatorship. Vandermarliere started the exhibition project and Küng took over when he was appointed new programme director.

the Flemish Government Architect and with the support of the Ministry of the Flemish Community.

The exhibition project, which started with the desire to show images from the photographic inventory commissioned to Niels Donckers, evolved to include an overview of the Flemish Government Architect's activities, as well as other artefacts assembled or especially crafted for this occasion.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition thematised two of the Flemish Government Architect's instruments: the 'Open Call' and the 'Master's Thesis'—the first is a procedure addressed to architects and policy makers, the second to newly graduated architecture and arts students. They were confronted with a collection of photographs depicting Flanders's built environment by seven contemporary photographers: Peter Downsbrough, Lucas Jodogne, Jan Kempenaers, Aglaia Konrad, Reiner Lautwein, Marie-Françoise Plissart, and Niels Donckers appearing here too, whose works had recently been acquired by the Ministry of the Flemish Community. The inventory, tools and photographs were also presented in resonance with a lexicon commissioned to the academic research group OSA+<sup>8</sup> which had been invited to revise all sorts of words and expressions pertaining to the vocabulary typically used in local debates about Flanders's urbanization process. Eventually, 5 existing publications, almost 300 photographs from Donckers's survey, and 18 photographs from the Government collection were selected, and 388 lexicon entries were created.

In this paper, I focus on the curatorial narrative and display strategies, that determined how the presentation of the photographs from the inventory, displayed along with other material, were received. My aim is to better grasp how content and form converged to convey the exhibition's curatorial narrative, how this process stretched the exhibits' original purpose and mobilised the visitors in the formation of meaning.

The exhibition sought to introduce the important new role of the Flemish Government Architect to a local audience, but it refrained from imposing or promoting his instruments as solution to Flanders's past spatial mismanagement. By bringing the inventory of commissioned photographs to the public eye through an unconventional approach, the exhibition exceeded the photographs' original operational function to record the built estate of the Flemish Government and identify the ground onto which a

7 One can trace how the curatorial narrative and thematic selection developed from a first meeting in February to meetings in May 2002 through available meeting notes, reports, and correspondence kept in deSingel's archives.

8 The exhibition leaflet indicates that the lexicon was elaborated in collaboration with the Flemish Architecture Institute and commissioned to OSA+ (Onderzoeksgroep Stedenbouw en Architectuur, ASRO, K.U. Leuven) and edited by the philosopher Lieven De Cauter (De Cauter, 2002).

better building practice shall develop. Within the gallery space, the photographs' unresolved hybrid status was exposed as an instrument capturing shifting spatial, artistic, and political positions, which ultimately called for a collective engagement with the territory as matter of public concern.

Despite the merely 20 years that separate us from the exhibition, the event's full recollection remains a challenge. I could retrieve key documentation of the exhibition's production process from deSingel's administrative archives,<sup>9</sup> completed by information stemming from the archives of the Flemish Government Architect's office, conversations with stakeholders, and secondary literature.<sup>10</sup> However, notably, I could not find a single exhibition view. My observations hence very much rely on the material traces that such an ephemeral event may typically leave behind, which I here tentatively extend with my own critical interpretations.

#### THE PHOTOGRAPHY COMMISSION AND THE GOVERNMENT COLLECTION

Upon entering the exhibition, a small leaflet was handed out to the visitors. It contained explanatory texts printed along an annotated gallery map. The content of the exhibition's six sections was summarised in brief descriptions, including a list of exhibits. The introduction printed upfront stated what the photographic inventory commissioned by the Flemish Government Architect entailed:

[...] The photography commission is of great importance for establishing the identity of an area and for the registration of changes, the sharpening of perception, and the depiction of subjective experience. The commission is, on the one hand, part of an archive under construction that documents the patrimony of the Flemish Community, on the other hand, it is part of an investigation for qualitative architecture.<sup>11</sup>

9 The exhibition is listed in deSingel's administrative archives under the registration number TENT-113, which links it to documents scattered across several storage boxes. Among these I could find meeting notes and reports, various correspondence and administrative forms, reproductions linked to the exhibits, spatial layouts and technical drawings from different design stages of the scenography, communication and promotional material, photocopies of exhibition reviews...

10 In addition, I could conduct preliminary research on several architecture exhibition cases together with master students during an 'advanced topic' seminar in 2021, which I led with Prof. Maarten Liefoghe at the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of Ghent University. I would like to especially thank our students Laura De Jonge, Emma Heyneman, and Taebin Han who studied this exhibition among their cases.

11 Excerpt from the exhibition leaflet, translation by the author. Source: deSingel archives. The line "The photography commission is

Particularly striking were the many functions assigned to the photography commission. How exactly could "the depiction of subjective experience" converge with the perhaps at first more evident operational goals of the inventory in the context of the Flemish Government Architect's mission?

Photography commissions that cover the scope of a territory have traditionally been associated with documentary assignments issued either by government authorities or construction companies to record changing landscapes with the aim to preserve the memory of remarkable buildings or celebrate the excellence of engineering achievements such as bridges and railways. Such conception was however ultimately revised from around the 1970s onwards with practices in landscape photography by photographers developing an interest in the landscape as a mirror of culture. It became clear that a photograph of a landscape not only captured the manifestation of an environment as it existed at a certain point in time, but it also depicted a way of looking as much as a collectively constructed image.<sup>12</sup> In the exhibition, the different understandings of photography commissions were not comprehensively explained but taken as foundation for a curatorial approach engaging with playful associations and interpretations.

Crossing usually separated realms, Donckers's photographs were described as 'artistic', yet, also as 'tools' used in the work process of the new procedure launched by the Flemish Government Architect called the 'Open Call'.<sup>13</sup> This procedure formalised the framework supporting the organisation of architecture competitions for the construction of public buildings and infrastructure. All the elements characterising a site and its spatial context were seen as integral part of the project definition of these building assignments. The idea was to record each site before and after realization. But, at the time of the exhibition, no works had been constructed yet. Instead, the photographs translated the "conscious atten-

of great importance for establishing the identity of an area and for the registration of changes, the sharpening of perception, and the depiction of subjective experience" was copied from Friets Gierstberg's contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition *SubUrban Options. Photography Commissions and the Urbanization of the Landscape* produced by the Nederlands Foto Instituut and programmed at deSingel in 1998. See: Gierstberg, "SubUrban Options. Photography commissions and the Urbanization of the Landscape", 12.

12 Ibid., 7.

13 "Niels Donckers was commissioned to make a photographic inventory of the ['Open Call'] initiative, using the photographs as an artistic tool in the work process of building commissions. They should sharpen the perception, stimulate the mind, and contribute to shaping opinions and discussions. The various sites are captured before and after the realisation of a building or intervention. The site, the existing situation, the surroundings, the perspectives, the existing forms, all atmospheres or characters, all of the landscape's highlights are captured by the photographer and form part of the project definition of the building assignment." Excerpt from the exhibition leaflet, translation by the author. Source: deSingel archives.

tion to the immediate environment”<sup>14</sup> dear to the Flemish Government Architect (as one of the most important conditions for the conception of an architecture of quality) by revealing aspects of familiarity and triviality embedded in these ordinary landscapes. Capturing these traits was what made these images distinctive, and also what may have sparked a potential attraction in their viewers.

The untitled photograph of an abandoned shop of a gas station accommodated in a typical detached Belgian house taken in 2001 and used in all communication material (flyer, poster, website, etc.)<sup>15</sup> that promoted the exhibition crystallizes the photographer’s *modus operandi*: A centred and even framing of the building in its surroundings, which accentuates the image’s symmetry. A layered composition and frontal take at human height and at street-level without people nor bright sunlight, which tends to flatten the image and cancel strong chromatic contrasts. Neutralizing grey tones take over here, except for a washed-out ESSO-sign and painted construction barrier, both bright red, that stand out in opposition to the complementary green bushes.

Following in the steps of the New Topographics and the Becher Schule, Donckers’s images at first sight tend to endorse a similar objectifying gaze directed towards the built in the environment, in which emptiness serves as an iconic motif to reveal the site’s abstract structure. However, the seeming absurdity of highlighting trivial elements rather points to what escapes the ordering or mastering of the territory. They add a certain lightness to these otherwise mostly grim landscapes. They also propose a touch of humour (or irony) that loosens the ambient austerity and increases the image’s ‘likability’.

When art critic Jeroen Laureyns reflected about Donckers’s photographs as oeuvre (thus outside the context of the photography commission and this exhibition), he described how these images of typical Flemish suburbs immediately appealed to him for the sense of familiarity and belonging that they evoke. He wrote: “This has not only to do with a familiarity of the topic and the instantly identifiable perspective of a *flâneur*, but more importantly with a strong sense of empathy, which makes recognition so much easier to achieve.”<sup>16</sup>

The peculiar expressivity of Donckers’s photographs comes to the fore even more so when compared with the photographs acquired by the Flemish Community and displayed as autonomous artforms in the exhibition’s

14 Excerpt from the exhibition leaflet, translation by the author. Source: deSingel archives.

15 Source: deSingel archives and website.

16 Laureyns, *Weg van Vlaanderen. Hedendaagse Vlaamse landschappen in de beeldende kunst 1968-2003*, 128. (Translation by the author.)

dedicated section. The exhibition leaflet’s description of the ‘Collection’ concisely pointed at a particularly expressive feature found in each artistic approach: “[...] The residential block with sculptural qualities by Niels Donckers, the geometry within the city by Peter Downsborough, the fleeting gaze by Aglaia Konrad, the social context in the interior by Reiner Lautwein, the desolation of the periphery by Lucas Jodogne, the wide perspective by Jan Kempnaers, and the movement in the city by Marie-Françoise Plissart are just a few impressions of the Flemish patrimony. [...]”<sup>17</sup> The originality and difference in their approach towards a spatial reality in Flanders contributed to shape their artistic value. The landscapes appearing in the photographs of Jan Kempnaers, for instance, were very similar in tone and subject matter to those of Donckers, but the use of a wide angle and elevated viewpoint rather attempts to capture the green or undefined residual spaces as negative space emerging in-between vast urban infrastructures through an external gaze to these scenes.<sup>18</sup> By depicting their inaccessibility, it is also the image that is made inaccessible to its viewer. Such alienation was even more pronounced in Aglaia Konrad’s clichés.<sup>19</sup> Her hyper-contrasted images in black and white, included in the show, of a Brussels residential street block tend to reduce the urban motif to abstract formal compositions, stressing a feeling of tension and anxiety.

Donckers’s inclusion in both the ‘Collection’ and ‘Open Call’ section made the questionable status of his photographs visible. Despite the major difference of their origin and value, Donckers’s photographs made for the Flemish Government Architect’s inventory do not appear as neutral and objective as the nature of their commission foregrounded. In fact, they recorded the subjective impression of the photographer very similarly to the artistic photographs included in the ‘Collection’. Bridging the gap between an objective and subjective gaze, they were particularly suited to convey an impression of the Flemish landscape with success, not only thanks to their hybrid (artistic and operational) status but especially through their empathic expressivity. Because it is this quality that supports their potential to reach out to their viewers, to enhance identification with familiar situations, and to subtly arouse, more or less consciously, a shift in their perception of their surroundings.

Yet, the exhibition *Portrait of Flemish Biotopes* was not only about the subject matter and representation encountered in the single photographs and the experience each photograph may convey to its viewers. Their display in the exhibition raises the question whether the quality found in Donckers’s photographs was further exploited through the material and spatial

17 Excerpt from the exhibition leaflet. Source: deSingel archives. (Translation by the author.)

18 Jacobs, *Sites & Sights. A Critical History of Urban Photography 1968-2000*, 147.

19 Ibid., 195.

arrangement of the photographs in the exhibition. What relationship did these assemblages establish with the public and how is this significant?

## STAGING CONTRADICTIONS

The exhibition took place in deSingel's then dedicated exhibition space, which was in fact a large hallway giving access to its two main concert and theatre halls. The hallway's elongated shape led the audience attending a spectacle from entrance foyer to the halls and to a small bar open on spectacle nights, which was situated at its end. It also invited the visitors for a stroll along large bay windows opening onto an outdoor terrasse and framing a panoramic view on Antwerp's 19th century green belt meanwhile converted into the city's main ring road. *Portrait of Flemish Biotopes's* exhibition apparatus was deployed across the hallways' length, but no strict exhibition route was imposed on the visitors. The 'Collection' was housed in two rooms built as temporary 'white cubes' inside the hallway to accommodate the 18 photographs gathered in this section. Their status as autonomous artform was sustained by a conventional mounting of the individual images behind glass in large frames and by their placement at eye-height on the walls. Since access to deSingel's hallway could not be restraint, the entrances leading inside the cubes could be closed off to secure the artworks from the crowds attending the spectacles scheduled in the adjacent halls outside of the exhibition's opening hours. In the section dedicated to the 'Open Call', 261 photographs from the photography inventory were distributed across five socles inside which neon light tubes were lodged. Each of them was fitted with glass boxes in which small reproductions of the images, printed on translucent paper, were placed in a grid and retro-illuminated. This serial and horizontal display recalled the contact tables generally used by professionals to visualize film negatives before selection and print. Identifications of the photographs' time and location were left out, nonetheless at least in appearance, this display strategy underlined the images' use value as documents and tools. When such a vast quantity could be overwhelming to distracted visitors, it also invited them to look at the ensemble of images with attention, thereby stepping into the shoes of the investigator and reflect upon the built environment encapsulated in these landscapes. It thus encouraged them to think along with the Flemish Government Architect.

Moreover, the serialisation and great number of images matched with the 'fragmentation' and the sense of 'ungraspability' associated with the Flemish territory and current discussions on the diffuse or generic city. In such nebulous urban landscapes, individual components are places without identity, interchangeable and of equal importance. It is no longer a public realm, but urban infrastructure that is holding together private and residual spaces.<sup>20</sup> The arrangement of the photographs in these light boxes thus also hinted at a challenge falling upon the Flemish Government

20 Ibid., 180-196.

Architect, though surpassing his mission and responsibility alone. Could his survey, thus his attempt at comprehending the various components of the Flemish territory, contribute to establish a public realm capable of knitting Flanders's pieces together?

If an objective look and an objectifying gaze were stressed through the display of Donckers's photographs in the section dedicated to the 'Open Call', their arrangement in different sizes and formats and association with various artefacts in other sections conveyed a plurality of meanings. At the end of the hallway, a 15 metres-long 'fresco' confronted the visitors. It was composed of enlarged reproductions of a selection of photographs by Donckers displayed in relation to 26 keywords from the lexicon. Among these appeared for instance the words 'rear kitchen', 'do-it-yourself', 'exodus', 'fermette aesthetic', 'intelligent ruin', 'residual space', 'allotment thinking', and 'xenophobia'. Next to this juxtaposition, the visitors could consult a selection of publications edited by the Flemish Government Architect office, which presented the projects resulting from the 'Master's Thesis', an initiative which offered the opportunity to young graduates to develop a design assignment from conception to realisation, with the supervision of a professional mentor. The initiative's ambition was also summarized in the form of a poster manifesto. The visitors could also listen to a soundscape as well as browse a digital monitor listing all the 388 lexicon entries. Finally, they could stop at the section 'Antwerpse Leien', where they could manipulate a photocopy machine to print out and take home for free 12 pictures by Donckers of Antwerp's main south-north transit streets taken as part of the inventory. And lastly, they could purchase the *Small Lexicon of the Flemish (Architecture) Landscape*, which compiled all lexicon entries along with Donckers's photographs and was published in a twin format as a notebook and an agenda for the year 2003.

Could all these declinations suggest that in a generic urban landscape framing may become an act of defining and creating a place's identity after all? This was also implied by the word 'Portrait' employed in the exhibition title. However, the title was somewhat misleading. It resulted after various declinations had been in use in the exhibition making process and seems to derive from socio-political concerns to avoid connotated words like 'Flanders'—too nationalist—and 'Landscape'—too lyrical. The use of 'Flemish Biotopes' in association with the 'Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect' suggests an objective and pragmatic approach towards the environment endorsed by this figure of authority. But such a sense of realism was undermined by the photographs.<sup>21</sup> The

21 The critical approach to realism also matched with a singular attitude not elaborated upon in this article, which one could associate with the particular figure of the Flemish Government Architect b0b Van Reeth and his adjunct Marc Santens. Such a reading could for instance follow up on Sebastiaan Loosen's investigation developed in his Doctoral thesis and referenced article. See: Loosen, "The Challenge of the Poetic: Criticism in Search of the Real. With a

use of the term 'biotope' is suggestive of a scientific realm, however, the extraction of the human species in Donckers's landscapes makes them untruthful depiction of their habitat. Yet, it also differs from the classic depiction of picturesque sceneries seizing people in their daily activities common in Flemish landscape paintings. The built environment in his images is nevertheless filled with human creation. In these portraits of cultural landscapes, trivial objects substitute the protagonists, yet they still suggest the scenes of an active life.

In the end, the exhibition was conceived for a wide audience and the latter's attention needed to be directed towards the built environment, which was after all the object the Flemish Government Architect had been assigned to supervise, not the population which lived in it. Avoiding such a misunderstanding seemed essential, especially if the visitors themselves were invited to "sharpen their perception"<sup>22</sup> and endorse his advisory role, albeit temporarily and performatively. With this in mind, the absence of human bodies in the photographs does not appear insignificant, on the contrary, it enhanced the *act* performed by the visitors that ensured the exhibition's cognitive operation throughout the spatial assemblage of words, objects, and images. By exposing the Flemish Government Architect's tools and field of intervention, as well as staging contradictions through various levels of subjectivity, the exhibition less intended to make a claim about the region's identity, than to encourage its visitors' awareness and agency in the matter of spatial governance. In other words, what the exhibition wished for, I would suggest, is the constitution of an emancipated public.<sup>23</sup>

## LOOSE ENDS

Through the confrontation of documentary, literary and artistic means, a polyphonic and humorous language for the representation of urban matters was introduced that split open the narrative. This could be sensed in the divergent reception that the exhibition received in the local press.<sup>24</sup>

Debt to b0b Van Reeth, 1975-1985", 106-121.

22 Excerpt from the exhibition leaflet. Source: deSingel archives. (Translation by the author.)

23 This mechanism may be understood in terms theorised by Jacques Rancière in his account about *The Emancipated Spectator* (2007), in which he offers an interesting reading of self-suppressing mediations in theatre settings aiming to counter the passive effect of a play on its spectators: "according to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes the audience aware of the social situation on which theatre itself rests, prompting the audience to act in consequence. Or, according to the Artaudian scheme, it makes them abandon the position of spectator: No longer seated in front of the spectacle, they are instead surrounded by the performance, dragged into the circle of the action, which gives them back their collective energy." See: Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator", 274.

24 A set of exhibition reviews has been collected in deSingel's ar-

Spanning from enthusiastic responses describing the exhibition content as "an exciting diversity" and "an adventurous tale" to more sceptical accounts seeing in the images "a mere compilation of impressions" or an "awfully recognisable" appeal, several critical reviews translated the exhibition's thematic ambiguity. Most opinions pointed at the quality of the spatial environment and the role of the Flemish Government Architect, they acknowledged the tensions that appeared between the exhibition's subject matter and displayed material, especially between the inventory of photographs as a systematic or objective survey of the Flemish landscape versus the collection of photographs as artistic and unique impressions, yet they generally failed to mention the curated nature of the exhibition content and arrangement.<sup>25</sup>

What the exhibition *Portrait of Flemish Biotopes. The Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect* intended to register and to effect was a shift in the conceptions by then taken for granted about the urbanization processes of the Flemish landscape. Through its layered interplay, the exhibition wished to lift the inertia associated with a political body, which until then had let the fragmentation and deterioration of the territory happen and which had accepted its 'disfunction' and 'ugliness' as a matter of fact. Instead, the exhibition drew attention to Flanders's most ordinary landscapes and stressed that its transformation and improvement is a matter of a public and shared concern.<sup>26</sup>

The material traces of the exhibition are insufficient to understand how exactly this specific display of the photography inventory served the Flemish Government Architect or the Flemish Community. In fact, barely any documentation of the exhibition's production process has been kept in the Flemish Government Architect's archives. Its mention has been omitted in publications listing retroactively the cultural activities conducted during the Flemish Government's first mandate.<sup>27</sup> This is however not the case of two exhibitions realized about a year later. A selection of photographs from the survey and the collection were exhibited in Brussels as part of an outdoor route on the theme of Bruegel.<sup>28</sup> Around the same time, images

archives, which also shows how the arts centre cared for the reception of its productions.

25 Only the account of photography and visual arts critic Ludo Bekkers, a voice more acquainted with arts exhibitions, addressed the exhibition as an experience and the role of the curators, coming to the following conclusion: "An exhibition that was doomed to be dull from the outset has, under the hands of the curator, developed into a fascinating multimedia event in which photography is shown in a surprising context and has therefore gained added value." (Translation by the author.) See: Bekkers, "Landschappen, gebouwen, huizen en koterijen", 24. Source: deSingel Archives.

26 Cf. Latour, 19.

27 Santens, De Zutter. See both references.

28 The images were displayed on minimal construction fences under the

from the photography inventory and other instruments more strictly related to the Flemish Government Architect were also displayed in a traveling exhibition conceived in the framework of a diplomatic and cultural exchange with Poland.<sup>29</sup>

More than 20 years after its introduction, the inventory photographs can be visualized online on the Flemish Government Architect's website. They are contextualized according to their original use value. The inventory has grown along the (by now) about 700 projects launched through the Open Call competition procedure for public buildings and master plans.<sup>30</sup> The initial goal to photograph the project sites before and after construction has endured, throughout the mandates of the Flemish Government Architects appointed after bOb Van Reeth. Other photographers succeeded Niels Donckers to complete the task. They are most often also involved in promotional and commercial commissions related to contemporary architecture and altogether tend to shape a distinctive style worth further examination.

Ultimately, perhaps the most important lesson to take away from the exhibition *Portrait of Flemish Biotopes* is one that transcended political, professional, or disciplinary concerns at a pivotal moment for spatial governance: Enhancing the quality of a shared environment starts with the recognition and capturing of ordinary experiences, albeit trivial and erratic in appearance, as legitimate approaches to learn from, talk about, and *know* the environment, therefore, also start acting upon it—with a touch of Belgian humour and empathy.

monumental arcades of Brussels's Palace of Justice in 2004 as part of an outdoor exhibition route titled *Weg van Breugel '04, Vlaamse Biotopen*, organised by the visual artist Bert De Keyzer in collaboration with the Flemish Government Architect.

29 The team of the Flemish Government Architect produced the travelling exhibition *Vlaanderen anders & herkenbaar*, which was first shown in Warsaw in 2004, then in a former administrative office building of the Flemish Government, known as 'Baudewijngebouw', in Brussels in 2005.

30 Liefvooghe, Van Den Driessche, 2022.

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## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

The archives of deSingel International Arts Centre

The archives of the Team Vlaams Bouwmeester






[1]



[2a]



## Portret van Vlaamse biotopen





### De fotografie-opdracht van de Vlaamse Bouwmeester {Tentoonstelling 21.11.02 -12.01.03}

Bewuste aandacht voor de directe omgeving is misschien een van de belangrijkste voorwaarden voor het creëren van goede architectuur. Tegen deze achtergrond heeft de Vlaamse Bouwmeester in 1999 een fotografieproject in het leven geroepen. Inmiddels is dit initiatief uitgegroeid tot een indrukwekkende inventaris van het Vlaamse patrimonium, een portret van het Vlaamse landschap. De tentoonstelling presenteert voor het eerst een bestandsopname van dit belangwekkend initiatief dat uit verschillende onderdelen bestaat:

- 'De Collectie', een verzameling foto's als eerste aanzet tot het fotografieproject, met werken van Niels Donckers, Peter Downsbrough, Lucas Jodogne, Jan Kempenaers, Aglaia Konrad, Reiner Lautwein en Marie-Françoise Plissart;
- 'De Open Oproep', een procedure om de bouwopdrachten van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap kwalitatief te stimuleren;
- 'De Meesterproef', een stimulans voor aankomende architecten die onder internationale professionele begeleiding hun eerste projecten kunnen realiseren;
- 'Het Kleine Lexicon van het Vlaamse (Architectuur-) Landschap' met 388 trefwoorden, een gezamenlijke publicatie van deSingel, de Vlaamse Bouwmeester en het Vlaams Architectuurinstituut. 'Het Lexicon' krijgt de vorm van een agenda/werkboek 2003 en wordt samengesteld door OSA+ K.U. Leuven (Onderzoeksgroep Stedelijkheid en Architectuur + Stedenbouw) met tekstbijdragen van de professoren Lieve De Cauter, Bruno De Meulder, Hilde Heynen, André Loeckx, Jan Schreurs en Marcel Smets, en van Tom Avermaete, Dieter De Clercq, Michiel Dehaene, Maureen Heyns, Nancy Meijsmans, Michael Ryckewaert en Karina Van Herck. De illustraties zijn van Niels Donckers.

**opening** woensdag 20.11.2002 vanaf 19 uur  
**introduce** Moritz Küng, Lieve De Cauter & OSA+ K.U. Leuven . Blauwe Zaal . 20 uur

**open** van dinsdag tot zondag van 14 tot 18 uur . gesloten 24, 25, 31.12.02 en 01.01.03 . toegang gratis  
**publicatie** Het kleine Lexicon van het Vlaamse (Architectuur-) Landschap, agenda/werkboek 2003 . € 10  
**rondleidingen** op zaterdag 30 november 2002 en op zaterdag 4 januari 2003 . telkens om 15 uur . € 4  
 rondleiding voor groepen maximum 20 personen op een datum naar keuze . € 60



 Desguinlei 25 . 2018 Antwerpen . 03 248 28 28  
[www.desingel.be](http://www.desingel.be)  



in samenwerking met de Vlaamse Bouwmeester, Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap. De architectuurwerking van deSingel geniet de bijzondere aandacht van de provincie Antwerpen en van Bouwonderneming Vooruitzicht. deSingel wordt betaald door de Vlaamse Gemeenschap en de stad Antwerpen. Het seizoen 2002-2003 wordt mogelijk gemaakt door Agfa-Gevaert, Knack, Radio 1, De Standaard en de Nationale Loterij.

[2b]



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**de Singel**

Internationaal  
Kunstcentrum

## Portret van Vlaamse biotopen

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informatie en tickets  
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v.l. Jerry Aerts, Jan Van Rijswijcklaan 155, 2018 Antwerpen - 784 239

[3]

## ARCHITECTUUR & STEDENBOUW

Niels DONCKERS



126 x 97

Zonder titel 1994



111 x 140

Zonder titel 1998



103 x 81

Zonder titel 2000



99 x 81

Zonder titel 2000

Peter DOWNSBROUGH



alleen 46

40 x 60

60 Gent 8.82



Gent 3.83



Aalst 4.96



Brussel 3.99

Lucas JODOGNE



85

Diegem, de ring rond Brussel 1991



Verbrande brug-Vivoorde 1991



Antwerpen Ring tussen Borgehout en Dieume 1993

Jan KEMPEAERS



100 x 137

Antwerpen 1998



100 x 137

Staten 1998



115 x 144

Leuven 1997



Antwerpen Kiel 1996

Aglaia KONRAD



80

Brussel 2000



120

Ranst 1998



120

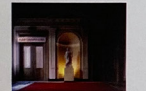
Brussel 1998



120

Coostende 1991

Reiner LAUTWEIN



alleen 100

100 x 140

Vlaamse Opera-Gent, ingang foyer 07/1988



Stadsschouwburg Brugge, theater foyer 04/1992



Vooruit-Gent, Trappenhuis, kelder-verdieping met toiletten 07/1988



Vooruit-Gent, keuken van het toenmalige Volkrestaurant 06/1988

Marie-Françoise PLISSART

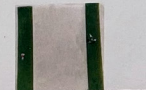


114

Brussel 1999



Brussel 1999

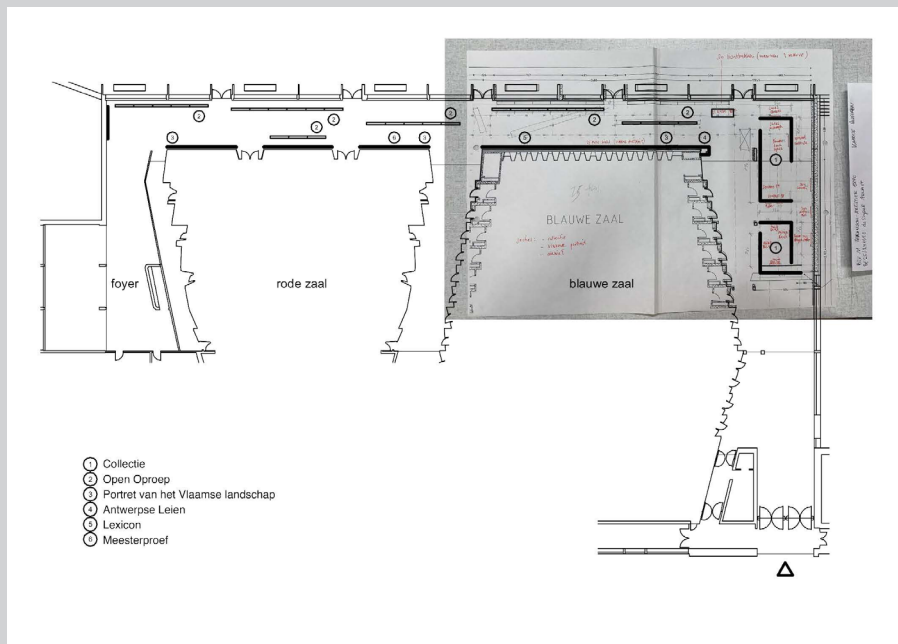


114 Brussel 1998



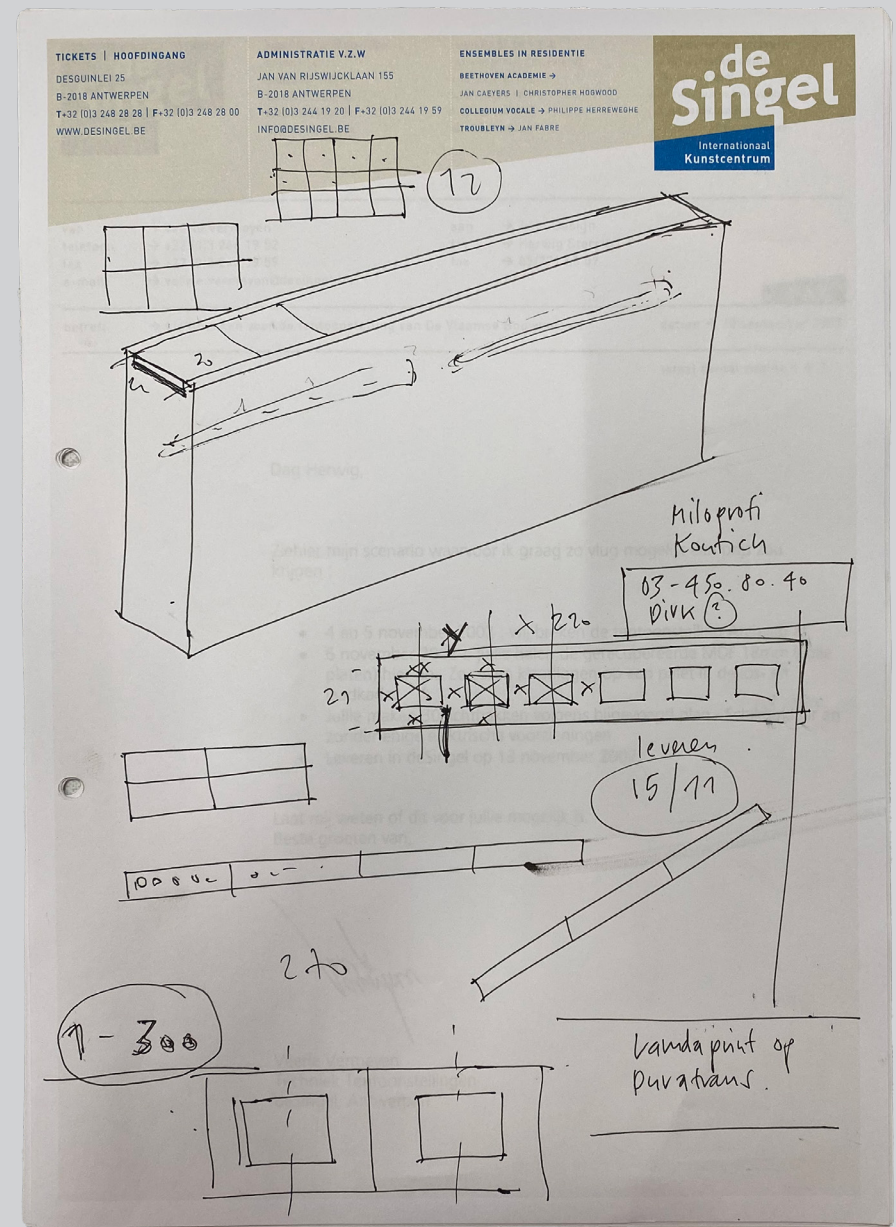
176 Brussel 1999

[4]



[ 5 ]

1. Sample images by Niels Donckers from the photographic inventory commissioned by the Flemish Government Architect. Courtesy of deSingel International Arts Centre.
- 2a + 2b. Flyer of the exhibition *Portret van Vlaamse biotopen. De fotografie-opdracht van de Vlaamse Bouwmeester* [Portrait of Flemish Biotopes. The Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect] organised at the international arts centre deSingel, Antwerp, 21/11/2002 – 12/01/2003 with a photograph by Niels Donckers. Courtesy of deSingel International Arts Centre.
3. Poster of the exhibition *Portret van Vlaamse biotopen. De fotografie-opdracht van de Vlaamse Bouwmeester* [Portrait of Flemish Biotopes. The Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect] including a photograph of an abandoned gas station taken by Niels Donckers. Courtesy of deSingel International Arts Centre.
4. Annotated document showing the curatorial selection made together with the Flemish Government Architect bOb Van Reeth of the photographs from the Flemish Government's art collection related to architecture and urban planning. Courtesy of deSingel International Arts Centre.
5. Juxtaposition of the final exhibition floorplan from the visitor brochure and a preliminary plan from the curatorial process with the annotation of image placements in section '1. Collectie [Collection]'. The other sections were titled: 2. Open Oproep [Open Call], 3. Portret van het Vlaamse landschap [Portrait of the Flemish Landscape], 4. Antwerpse Leien [Antwerp Boulevards], 5. Lexicon, and 6. Masterproef [Master Project]. Montage by the author. Courtesy of deSingel International Arts Centre.
6. Sketch of a retro-lit display box with indications for the layout of translucent prints of the inventory photographs. Courtesy of deSingel International Arts Centre.
7. Interior pages, including an inserted photograph by Niels Donckers, from the notebook *Het kleine Lexicon van het Vlaamse (Architectuur-) Landschap* [Small Lexicon of the Flemish (Architecture) Landscape] edited by Lieven De Cauter (Antwerp: deSingel, 2002).



[ 6 ]

# B

~ **Baksteen:** Uit klei of leem gevormde en gebakken stof die - volgens het gekende spreekwoord - elke modale Belg of Vlaming van bij de geboorte in zijn maag heeft zitten. Wie aan deze 'goedaardige' aandoening lijdt, vindt het de normaalste zaak van de wereld om een degelijke eigen en uiteraard liefst bakstenen woning te bouwen of te verwerven. Vanuit die instelling valt ook zijn natuurlijke belangstelling te verklaren voor een van de stabielste en zekerste beleggingen: een belegging in → *vastgoed*. De spreekwoordelijke baksteen lijkt echter niet zozeer aangeboren, dan wel aangekweekt. Al van vóór 1900 berust het huisvestingsbeleid in België immers op de aanmoediging van woningeigendom - ook voor de minder gegoeden - door een financiële ondersteuning ervan door de staat. Een paternalistisch en christen-democratisch geïnspireerd beleid dat tot op de dag van vandaag door SPA minister Steve Stevaert wordt verdedigd in de discussie over sociale huurwoningen. "Als 99 procent van de mensen een eigen woning heeft, is het socialisme dichterbij."<sup>1</sup> Dat de liefde voor de baksteen moeilijk te verzoenen is met het streven naar een duurzaam leefmilieu en op de koop toe een van de voornaamste oorzaken is van de versnippering van de ruimte en de steeds toenemende mobiliteitsproblemen, schijnt onze Vlaamse minister van - nota bene - Mobiliteit echter niet zwaar - als een baksteen - óp de maag te liggen. (→ *bouwoede*, → *armoede*) / DDC

~ **Banaliteit:** → *gemeenplaats*

~ **Bebouwd perifeer landschap:** term uit het → *Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen* waarmee die nederzettingscategorie wordt aangeduid "waar de onbebouwde ruimte nog in belangrijke mate aanwezig is, maar die een versnipperd voorkomen heeft als gevolg van een uitwaaiering van allerhande functies en activiteiten (wonen, verzorging, commerciële activiteiten, industrie, ...)."<sup>2</sup> Met het invoeren van deze categorie, die wellicht grote delen van Vlaanderen omvat, erkent het Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen een nieuwe dynamiek en nieuwe vormen van → *stedelijkheid* die voorkomen in de Vlaamse → *nevelstad*. Echter, in één en dezelfde beweging worden deze gebieden geschaard onder het buitengebiedbeleid. Daarvoor gelden de volgende prioriteiten: het bundelen van beperkte, nieuwe bebouwing in de bestaande kernen; het vrijwaren van de open ruimte en het tegengaan van verdere versnippering. Daarmee wordt onmiddellijk een duidelijke keuze aangegeven ten aanzien van de gewenste toekomstige ruimtelijke ontwikkelingen van deze gebieden. "De periferie wordt blijkbaar gezien als te recupereren open ruimte, niet als proefterrein van nieuwe stedelijkheid."<sup>3</sup> (→ *gedeconcentreerde bundeling*, → *open en stedelijk*) / NM

~ **Bebouwde kom:** volgens het Koninklijk Besluit van 1 december 1975 (Houdende het algemeen reglement op de politie van het wegverkeer) gedefinieerd als een gebied met bebouwing waarvan de invalswegen aangeduid zijn met de gekende witte plaatsnaamborden

en de uitvalswegen met dezelfde borden met een schuine rode streep erdoor. De gangbare → *lintbebouwing* in Vlaanderen en onze gedesorganiseerde ruimtelijke ordening zijn niet vreemd aan het feit dat inderdaad meestal slechts deze borden doen vermoeden dat er daadwerkelijk iets aan de bebouwing verandert. Dat onze provinciale wegen vaak dwars door bebouwde kommen lopen is niet alleen hinderlijk en gevaarlijk. Het leidt ook tot een slechte doorstroming van het verkeer. De Bebouwde kom is gekoppeld aan een snelheidsbeperking voor automobilisten en als zodanig vaak ter discussie gesteld. (→ *doortocht*) / DDC

~ **Bedrijventerrein:** eufemisme voor industriezone (of -park, of -terrein). De benaming industriezone die samen met het fenomeen vanaf het begin van de jaren 1970 snel om zich heen greep, begon een zodanige kwalijke geur te verspreiden dat projectontwikkelaars en andere betrokkenen het ongetwijfeld nuttig hebben geacht deze realiteiten te 'upgraden' door een chiquere, 'cleanere' term. 'Industriezone' doet denken aan uitbuiting en vervuiling, 'bedrijventerrein' aan een vallei van melk en honing (riante glazen gevels met draaideuren en atria, met aktassen en gebruide gezichten in maatpakken). In het postindustriële tijdperk, met zijn nadruk op communicatie, promotie, marketing en 'restyling', zijn benamingen deel van het productieproces en dus in dit geval van het urbanisme zelf. / LDC

~ **Beekvalleien:** → *herbebossing*

~ **Belbus:** Bus die voorziet in lokale verplaatsingsbehoeften in landelijke gebieden, bedoeld om heel Vlaanderen - ook de meest verspreide woonkernen, → *gehuchten* en de meest afgelegen verkavelingen - een basismobiliteit te garanderen. Dit systeem op maat is bijzonder klantvriendelijk: op eenvoudig telefonisch verzoek kan elke inwoner afgehaald worden op maximaal 500 meter loopafstand van zijn woning. Vraag is of dit 'busje komt zo'-beleid te rijmen valt met andere beleidsopties van de Vlaamse Regering inzake ruimtelijke ordening: versterking van de → *kern*, → *duurzame ontwikkeling*, → *verdichting*, enzovoort. (→ *verkaveling*) / DDC

~ **België:** "Ik bemin België omdat je er ruimer, comfortabeler, goedkoper, makkelijker kunt wonen dan in enig ander land dat ik ken. Ik haat België omdat de huizen er zo bloeddelijk en pretentius zijn en hun alomtegenwoordigheid het zachte landschap besmeuren."<sup>4</sup> (→ *levensruimte*, → *architectuurlandschap*, → *fermette*, → *fermette-esthetiek*)

~ **Belgische logica:** {1.} wirwar van redelijke en minder redelijke compromissen en regelingen waar 'een kat haar jongen niet in thuis vindt' omdat België over negen overheden beschikt: de federale overheid, het Vlaamse Gewest, het Waalse Gewest, het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest, de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, de Franse Gemeenschap en de Duitstalige Gemeenschap. Dit alles is ook bekend als 'het Belgisch labyrint', naar het gelijknamige boek van Geert Van Istendael. {2.} Onder deze noemer worden ook de absurditeiten als gevolg van {1.} verstaan. Hét voorbeeld daarvan is wellicht dat Brussel tegelijk hoofdstad van Vlaanderen



Aarschot