



A+ 299

December 2022 – January 2023

Special Edition: Quality Matters



Opinion

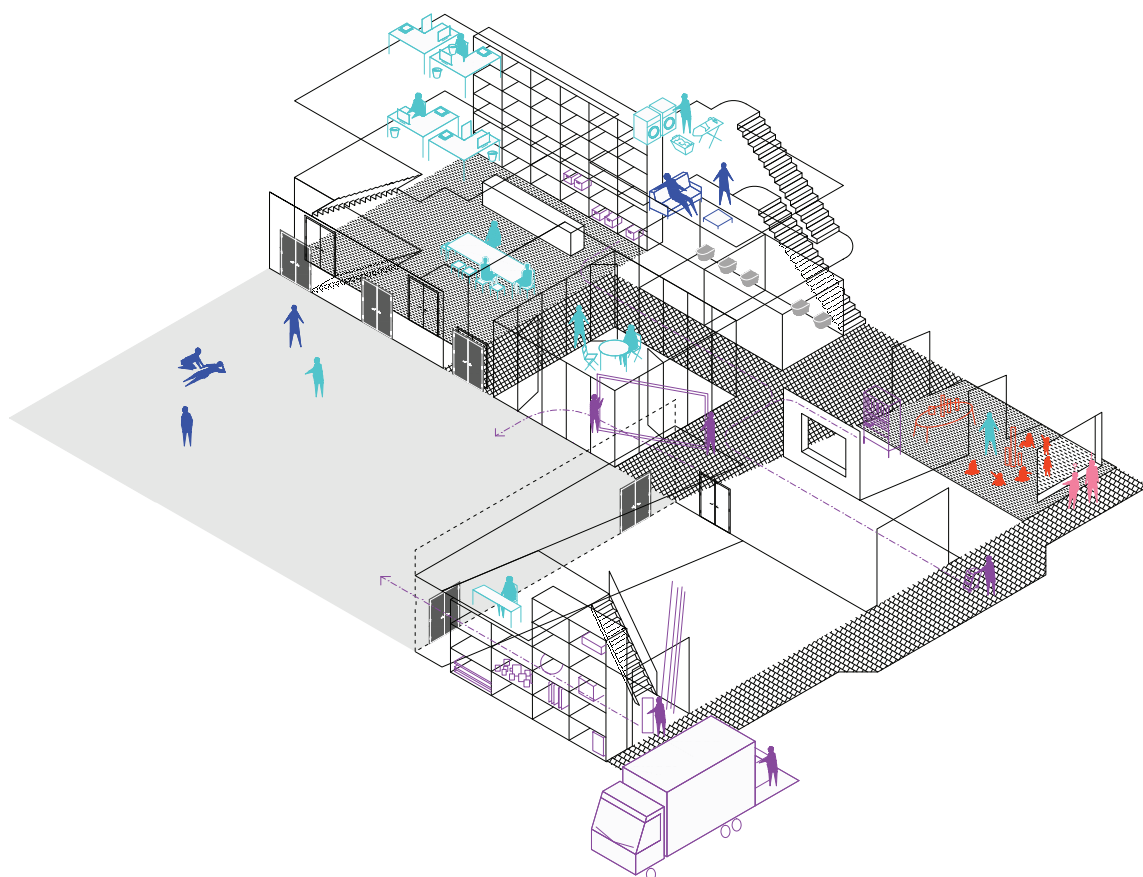
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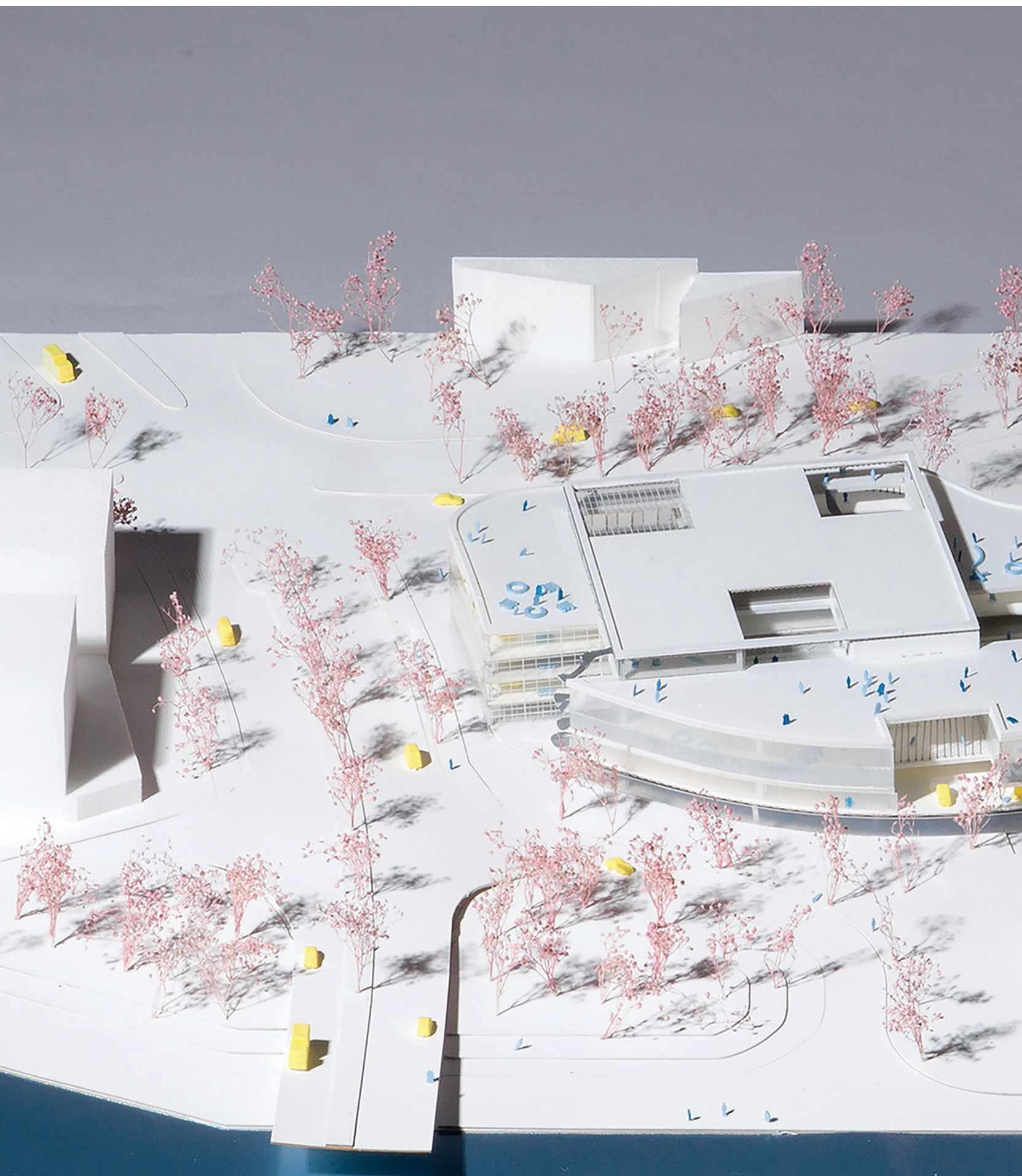
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UPP
UNE PIRE DE STICHEREN OM DE PERSOONLIJKE PIRE EEN

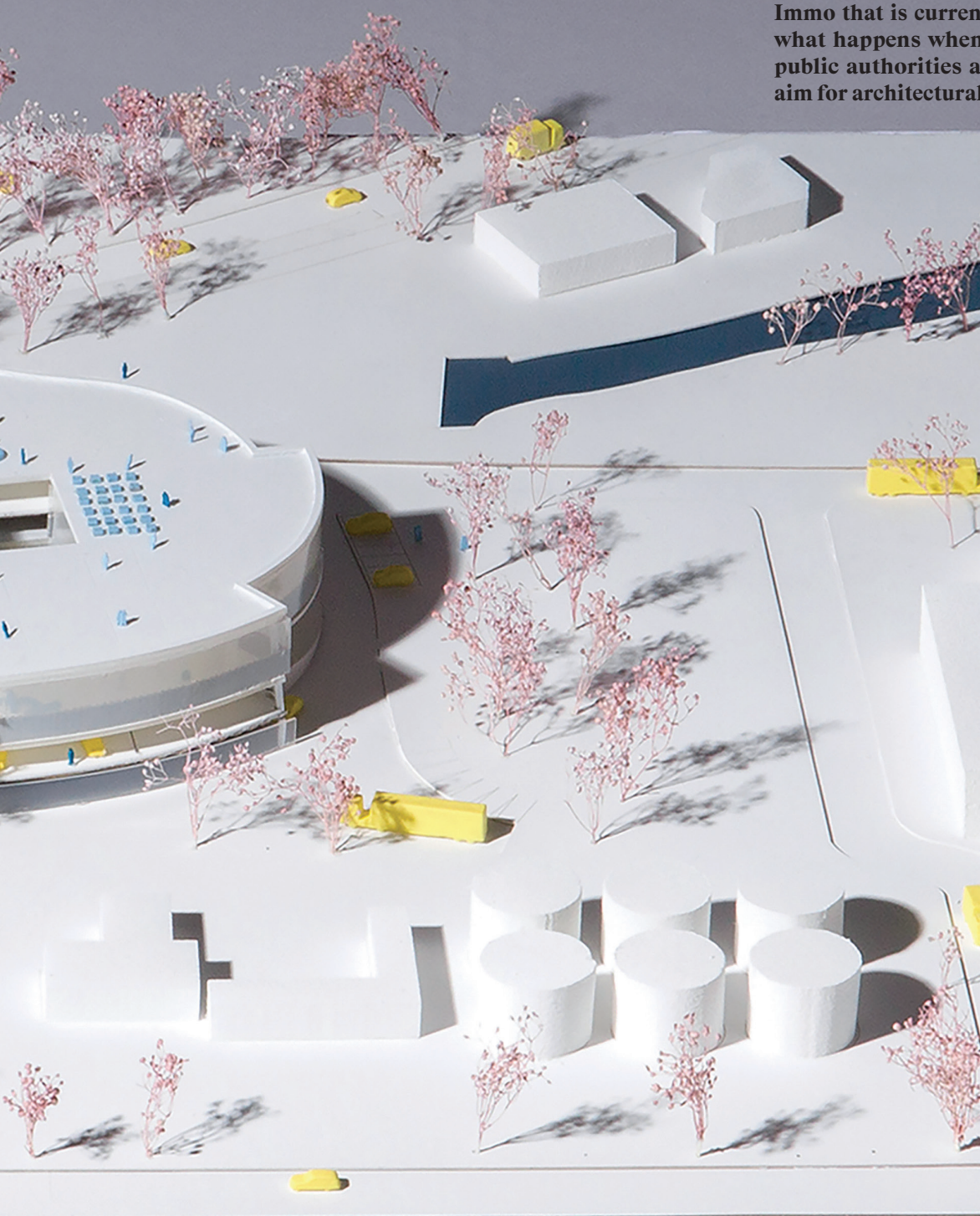
 **Vlaamse overheid**



The good ancestor in Anderlecht

Véronique Patteeuw

Good architecture begins with good commissioning. If we look at the work of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Gerrit Rietveld, for example, their clients – Baron Charles de Beistegui, Pierre Couturier, Grete Tugendhat, Phyllis Lambert and Truus Schröder-Schröder – are emphatically present in the background. Today is no different. The story behind the Mobilis project, a design by Xaveer De Geyter Architects for D'Ieteren Immo that is currently under construction, illustrates what happens when a visionary architect, ambitious public authorities and an enlightened commissioner aim for architectural quality in the twenty-first century.



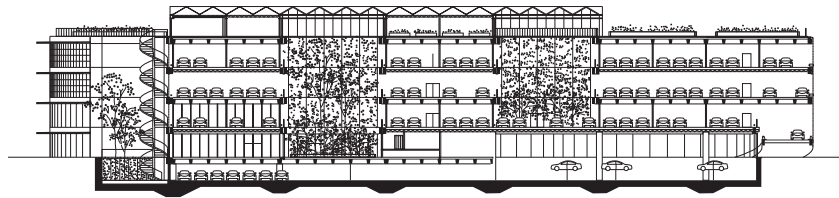
About forty years ago, Roland D'Ieteren, a direct descendant of Jean-Joseph D'Ieteren, founder of the eponymous company, wrote a letter to the then mayor of the Brussels municipality of Anderlecht, Christian D'Hoogh. D'Ieteren had his eye on the land at the corner of Boulevard Industriel, Boulevard Paepsem and the Canal and, with the necessary entrepreneurial spirit, managed to convince the mayor to sell the land for the construction of an automobile garage. When, decades later, that garage needed renovation, a plan was conceived within D'Ieteren to build a new showroom on the property. The envisioned 'shoebox on a parking lot' fitted perfectly among the industrial sheds in the unregulated amalgam of this industrial part of the Brussels Canal Zone. However, the project was lacking in vision. 'We left the meeting with the authorities with the realization that we could shelve our project, but then also saw that there was a unique opportunity before us', recalls Greet Mertens, head of architecture at D'Ieteren Immo. The group had a plot of land on which it could adjust the initial 3,000 m² of garage and showroom to almost 35,000 m² of productive functions fitting within the Canal Plan, Alexandre Chemetoff's plan for the development of the Brussels Canal Zone.

That opportunity crystallized at an important moment for the group. In 2016 D'Ieteren Immo, the group's real-estate division, had just been created with the mandate to invest the group's historic sites in Belgium. Indeed, the current transformation of the automotive sector threatened some thirty-five industrial buildings owned by the group with imminent vacancy. D'Ieteren's real-estate company not only authorized a certain diversification of business models, but also opened a path within the group to implement sustainability and long-term thinking within the management of its own patrimony. Its 'Invest and Hold' strategy perpetuates real-estate assets in the very long term, in an intergenerational perspective. The creation of value is done in a very slow but progressive way. If D'Ieteren Immo initiated a new direction for the group, Mobilis was a test case, a site where the economic feasibility of long-term thinking and adaptable architecture could be tested.

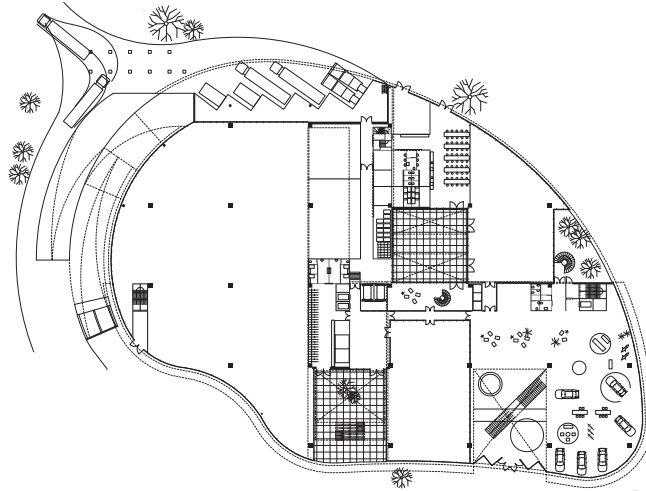
The many conversations between D'Ieteren Immo and the Brussels public authorities were crucial on the journey from idea to implementation. In a very early stage, work sessions were organized with the Canal Team, composed of public stakeholders, responsible for advising and guiding project →

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The building renders the productivity of its programme visible from every perspective: the stacking of cars in the showroom, the half-sunk atelier spaces that, with a ceiling height of 7 m, catch daylight and lend visibility to the work, or the movement of driving into and out of the garage.

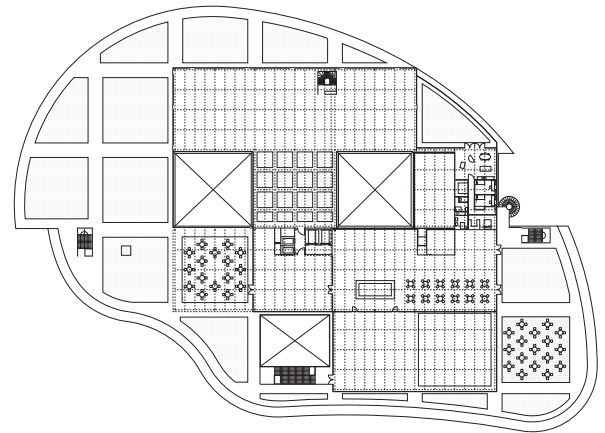




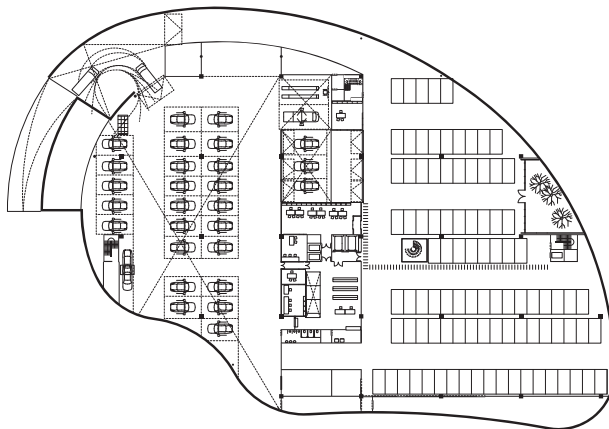
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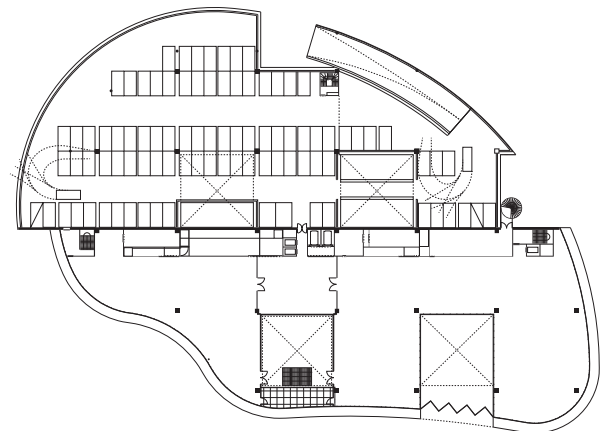
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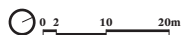
Floor 4



Floor -1



Floor 3



Architect
XDGA Xaveer De Geyter
Architects
Website
xdga.be
Project name
Mobilis
Location
Brussels

Programme
Showroom, workplaces,
offices, commercial
spaces, production
spaces, roof garden,
hotel and catering
industry
Procedure
Competition (Call BMA)

Client
D'Ieteren Immo
Structural engineering
Util structuurstudies
Building physics
Studiebureau Boydens
Acoustics
Daidalos Peutz

Completion
December 2023
Total floor area
27,821 m²
Budget
€ 32,000,000
(excl. VAT and fees)



developers and architects, in the framework of the redevelopment of the Brussels Canal Zone. It is in collaboration with that team that the contours of the project were sketched. The 'shoebox' was replaced by a new building typology that proposed an urban guise for its productive functions through the stacking of its programme on multiple floors. It also sought an alignment of the building with the urban front on the boulevard and proposed transparency and visibility of the activities, creating an urban presence at this particular intersection in Anderlecht. In a second phase, the team of the Brussels Government Architect (BMA) opened the path to a design competition where preliminary design research would make it possible to test further some of the initial scenarios, and a public and transparent procedure proposed architects and designers new to D'Ieteren Immo.

The architectural ambitions were not minor. With a nod to Jules Verne's 'Mobilis in mobile' (the motto of the *Nautilus* submarine in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*), the project's name echoed a leap forward: a renewed understanding of the building's programme and a challenging take on its architecture, both flexible and for the long-term. 'Today, as a company, we face a double temporality. On the one hand, today's sustainability requirements call for sturdier buildings; on the other hand, companies must be able to respond ever more quickly to the market's changing trends. Mobilis is an exercise in bringing the two together. The ambition from the start has been to realize a building that can stand for a hundred years, but can be adapted over time', recalls Greet Mertens.

Within the framework of the competition, five selected design teams were asked for a double design task: on the one hand, to take into account a known programme of requirements (15,000 m² of workspace, a showroom and offices); on the other hand, to make relevant programmatic proposals that can activate the car garage. With these additional functions (which were to cover an area of about 9,000 m²), D'Ieteren sought to capitalize on job creation while diversifying its own business model. The design by Xaveer De Geyter Architects (XDGA), which was named the winner, is certainly intelligent in that regard. The office designed a structure that offers 24,000 m² of tangible and intangible production and that can be adapted to other programmes over the coming decades.

Bordering the Canal and two major roads, the 10,000 m² site presented a unique opportunity to create a building with neither a front nor back, a building that makes the productivity of its programme visible from every perspective: the stacking of cars in the showrooms, the half-buried studio spaces which, with their 7 m floor height, catch daylight and lend visibility to the work, and even the dynamics of driving in and out of the car park. The curved façades suggest that the plan continues its whimsical design inside. But nothing could be further from the truth. XDGA designed a regular rational grid that spreads over the entire surface of the garage, interrupted only by five large patios and several vertical cores. The grid organizes logistics at all levels and translates the structure's design according to four scale levels with specific lifespans: S, M, L and XL. →



← The amorphous design of the building playfully follows the plot boundary. Bordering the Canal and located near two major access roads, the 10,000 m² site offers a unique opportunity to realize a building without a front or back.

The XL level, which includes the primary concrete structure and patios, has a life expectancy of one hundred years. Set at 16.2 m by 16.2 m, it allows for large spans in the atelier, showroom and parking garage. Its oversize is located both in its dimensions (7 m between slabs) and in its load-bearing capacity (16kN/m²). In the long term, horizontal and vertical divisions by means of a secondary suspended steel structure with a life expectancy of fifty years can be added and removed depending on the further completion and development of the project. A special feature is that the steel ramps are also adaptable without affecting the primary structure. The somewhat robust concrete columns have a certain prominence; the slender steel pulls, in turn, a certain elegance. The M level (which includes the techniques of the building) and the S level (comprising the interior and furnishings) are both flexible and planned to last between five and twenty years. Although flexibility and adaptability were paramount, Mobilis was designed on the basis of very concrete programme components. The design's oversize lies as much in its dimension as in the design of circulation and techniques. For instance, five large patios not only lend the building identity but also organize the vertical circulation, provide adequate daylight and bring techniques into the building without impeding future flexibility.

Circularity is a keyword in today's architectural discourse on sustainable architecture. Most often, however, it is invariably downsized to circular thinking with regard to materials and building components. But isn't the supreme form of circularity the permanence of the building itself? Wouldn't it become crucial to aim for adaptive reuse and structural resilience without having to dismantle the building completely? Forty years ago, Roland D'Ieteren managed to cash in on his vision of entrepreneurship by the Canal. Today, D'Ieteren Immo seems to tackle the permanence of its own patrimony with the same commitment. Their thirty-five sites will accommodate multiple assignments in the near future. The Heyvaert site was transformed into Circularium in 2020 with 51N4E. The headquarters in Elsene/Ixelles, some parts of which are 106 years old, are currently being tackled in partnership with British architect Amanda Levete. With Mobilis, the group is showing its willingness to invest with seriousness in sophisticated projects that combine sustainability and long-term economic viability. In an era in which both clients and architects are compelled to reflect on their roles and responsibilities, the crucial conversations between designers, enlightened commissioners and public authorities may open up a pathway to projects that combine design quality with ancestral thinking. ▲■●

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The basic idea is not to make a building that can be adapted endlessly to new activities, but to conceive a structure in which anything can happen.

XDGA designed a building that offers 24,000 m² as material and immaterial production without knowing or defining the specific use.

