

Soft Power : The Brussels Way of Making the City



Negotiation



The exhibition *Soft Power* highlights the involvement of the *bouwmeester maître architecte* in shaping the city of Brussels. As the title suggests, the institution's action lies in words and communication, rather than in policies. The BMA's role ranges from self-initiated seeds of projects through research by design, to organizing competitions and providing design reviews. Independent in the role, the BMA is an agent for the built environment that everyone can enjoy. The institution is neither interested in the architectural fetishism of an object, nor concerned with the prospective returns of a real estate investment. To fulfil its mission, the BMA travels between stakeholders and negotiates on behalf of the public for high quality in the city.

The BMA's magic circle is the city of Brussels. Renowned for its architecture, its guilds and merchants, and the seat of many international institutions. As residents and visitors to Brussels, we get a sense of the *Brussel Gevoel* without being able to point a finger at it. The feeling of being welcome no matter where you come from, of people taking the time to chat and help, of a joy in diversity and in making things happen. We see this joy and diversity in the way people live in the city and give form to its spaces. A polyphonic population that shapes its environment through different perceptions and languages. This collective activism manifests itself in the city through art projects, street take-overs and community forums where residents discuss and instigate change from the bottom up.

Negotiation is at the heart of the city, its inhabitants and of the BMA. Making these negotiations visible is therefore at the heart of our scenographic proposal for the exhibition *Soft Power: The Brussels Way of Making the City*.

We want the immersive exhibition at the S AM to reflect the ongoing negotiations within the fabric of Brussels. Upon entering the exhibition, the visitor steps into a snapshot of a continuous process; notebooks, drawings and models on a table, a market stall full of objects, projects in a design reviews and calls with stakeholders. To achieve this, we have developed five scenographic principles and outlined four typologies of objects.

From left to right : Jeu de balle square, EU council

BMA in S AM



INDEPENDENT

The BMA's agency lies in negotiating with stakeholders. These conversations take place in a variety of spaces; online via videocall, at public institutions' offices, on site, in temporary occupations or in their transparent headquarters in the city - the context changes, but BMA's aim to advocate for a high quality built environment remains a constant.

We propose to leave the walls of the exhibition space untouched and to work with objects in space. This approach reflects the fact that the content of the exhibition is independent of the space in which it takes place and can move to another city.



EMBEDDED

Building on the first principle, the content of the exhibition is embedded in its objects. The scenes of Brussels are display furniture and content at the same time. Inspired by Brussels and the BMA, we have developed four typologies to display and interact with the curated content.

OPEN WORK

A city is always in the making and therefore a constant work in progress. Brussels energy comes from a heterogeneous cityscape with a variety of eaves, extensions, open spaces, gardens, towers and many other typologies that are open to new perspectives. In the coming years, the city of Brussels will accommodate more inhabitants and jobs. In order to balance this growth with the existing quality of life, the voice of the BMA is crucial. Through research by design and the organization of competitions, the future of the city is initiated and negotiated by several stakeholders.

The exhibition should feel as if the negotiations are ongoing and the stakeholders have just gone for a coffee break. This should emphasize that the city is in the making and that the visitor is immersed in this process.



POLYPHONY

Language shapes the way people perceive and talk about space. With Flemish and French as its mother tongues, Brussels has always welcomed people from all over the world. Today it is a multicultural hotspot and the most cosmopolitan city in Europe, with more than 100 languages spoken in the region. While most of the writing is in Dutch and French, the diversity is reflected in the soundscape of the city.

We want to give the exhibition this underlying hum. The rooms will be filled with sounds recorded in Brussels. Standing in the center of a room, the different sounds coalesce into a hum, representing the polyphonic energy of the city. By moving closer to an exhibit, some of the conversations will become intelligible.



PERSUASION

Every business meeting is a negotiation of sorts. Different stakeholders use language to persuade and convince each other of their ideas. Some of the stakeholders have hard power, backed up by policies or money. The BMA's team uses its soft power to argue and persuade the others on behalf of a quality city. At the end of a successful meeting, all parts win and leave with a clear idea of how to progress.

This turning point in a negotiation is reflected in the sequence of the exhibition. The last 'room' holds the key to unlocking the full potential of the previous display. Using a cul-de-sac scenography, the visitor can first experience the feeling of Brussels in the making and on the return journey, delve deeper into specific themes after having acquired the knowledge of the last room.



From top to bottom : Teresa De Keersmaeker dance performance Violin Phase, Zinneke parade in 2018, Schaerbeek neighborhood with ongoing construction site, Street plate in Jeu de Balle square, Angela Merkel at EU council.

Typologies



Purpose: display the 500 competitions through objects and notes from their stakeholders

Media: various gifted or loaned objects, sound recordings

Construction: reclaimed fabric with embroidery

the market

From the medieval market on the Grote Markt to the flea market on the Jeu de Balle, markets are ubiquitous in Brussels.

At the S AM, a large carpet-like blanket lies on the floor. On it are 500 objects representing the 500 competitions. The objects are loans or gifts from the projects' clients, architects, developers, residents, contractors, shop owners or other stakeholders.

Each object is accompanied by a text.



Purpose: display specific projects, publications, and reports by the BMA

Media: books, models, notebooks, printouts, sound recordings

Construction: reclaimed timber sheets from Brussels, steel legs from S AM inventory

Seating: informal stools, made of tree stumps from the Sonian forest

the meeting

The spectrum of meeting places in Brussels is larger than in any other capital. Formal negotiation tables in the form of the round table at the EU Council are just a stones throw away from the tree trunk seatings around Kiosk Radio. The project process in Belgium allows for live discussion during competitions with BMA and stakeholders, it is an illustration of the importance of meeting in making the city. A large table with stools invites visitors to sit and take a closer look at the exhibits on display. The table is designed to accommodate different media: books and drawings closer to the visitor and models of different scales in the center.

From left to right : Jeu de Balle market, BMA's meeting, Kiosk radio seatings in Parc, Demonstration in Brussels, Review in BMA's office, Presentation of BMA for Urban Maestro, Lecture of BMA at Brussels environment, Dance performance by Ultima Vez in Anderlecht.





Purpose: display specific projects and/ or specific topics
 Media: printed photographs, drawings, texts, sound recordings
 Construction: steel frame on wheels with fabric cover
 Seating: chairs available at S AM

the review

Halfway between a flip chart that escaped from a board room and an activist's banner, these review panels are placed around the other objects. The hybrid display pieces bring together the administrative process of making a city, whilst also hinting at the bottom-up activism of the inhabitants of Brussels. With projects pinned up, and chairs grouped around, they evoke the sense of an ongoing negotiation during a design review.



Purpose: display administrative process
 Media: videos
 Construction: projectors with headphones
 Seating: bean bags available at S AM

the video call

Making a city is a collaborative process and the BMA is in constant exchange and negotiation with stakeholders. The format of online meetings is used to provide an insight into the administrative processes of the BMA. This 'space' is the scenographic cul-de-sac and is the key to unlocking the administrative side of the previously experienced scenes. Some interviews and short films show the 'making of' behind the projects through conversation with the BMA's team but also various partners involved in the process. These interviews and short films are either drawn from an archive or produced specifically for the exhibition. The videos are projected onto the walls and ceiling of the space, with subtitles in four languages and original tone through headphones.

We can imagine that this space also hosts an evening program to screen longer films that are concerned with the city of Brussels.

