

Architecture

The Rediscovery of the Public Library Birmingham Library by Mecanoo Architects

In this digital era, many people will find it incomprehensible that a library costing almost two hundred million pounds could be an asset to a city. But anyone who visits the new library in Birmingham designed by the Mecanoo architectural firm will soon change their mind.

Birmingham, the United Kingdom's second city in terms of population size, is best known for its industrial past. It has remained at the forefront of science, technology and economic development since the start of the Industrial Revolution. Numerous innovations have been developed there. Some even claim that the foundations of modern industrial society were laid in the city's plentiful craft workshops with all their creativity and innovation. The image of Birmingham is still that of a production city, although most of the workshops have vanished and the heart of the city is filled with modern office buildings. To rid itself of this persistent industrial image, Birmingham City Council has taken action in several ways, the most ambitious undoubtedly being the new library designed by Francine Houben of the Mecanoo architectural firm. The aim of the city council is to become one of the 'world's top 20 most livable cities' in the not too distant future.

In 2008 the Dutch firm Mecanoo won the international competition for which more than a hundred firms had submitted designs. Under the guidance of the Royal Institute of British Architects, a shortlist of seven architectural firms was drawn up: Foreign Office Architects, Foster and Partners, Hopkins Architects, OMA (Rem Koolhaas' firm), Schmidt Hammer Lassen, Wilkinson Eyre and Mecanoo. It was the last of these that received final approval. Mecanoo had previously designed the Technical Library at Delft University and in Birmingham, in close collaboration with the British engineering firm Buro Happold, they once again created a library that far transcends the notion simply of a collection of books under a roof.

Houben claims that 'libraries are the new cathedrals'. In addition to being a place for study, a library



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is above all a place for encounters. With an average of about 10,000 visitors a day, the building offers numerous opportunities to meet other people, but also to be alone. An agreeable spot can be found for every target group, calm or dynamic, study area or coffee bar, lounge or roof terrace. According to the designer, the library of the future will be active (and interactive). Encounter and interaction are focal points. For this reason, the new style of library is designed entirely as a social meeting place. It is an extension of the street, a true public space. Its lay-out is flexible, so that in the course of time its use can easily be adapted to changing needs and desires.

The library has been built on a former car park between the 1962 Repertory Theatre (REP) and the 1936 sandstone Baskerville House. The guidelines laid down that the REP could be demolished to make way for the new building. However, the design team opted to integrate the old REP into the new plan. In this way, the composition of the various existing volumes and the new building leaves open an old route leading from the neighbourhood behind it to the city centre. Mecanoo also provided the interior design for the renovation of the REP and the lay-out of the renewed outdoor Centenary Square. This enabled the complex to create strong links between past, present and future.

Although Birmingham is a reasonably green city, asphalt and concrete dominate the city centre as designed by the city planner Sir Herbert Manzoni after the Second World War. In this context, the roof terraces at three levels are agreeable oases where readers can relax or become absorbed in their studies.

The composition of the volumes is the result of the organisation of the programme of requirements. The rectangular volumes contain eight circular atria,

arranged for the best possible distribution of natural light and the enhancement of natural ventilation. These circular spaces, surrounded by curved walls of books, were undoubtedly inspired by Mecanoo's earlier project in Delft. The atria also make it easy to view the building as a whole.

The library, 35,000 square metres in size, houses a study centre, a music library, a community health centre, rooms for multimedia, meetings and offices, exhibition areas, cafés, lounges and an auditorium. To limit the volume, a large part of the programme of requirements has been housed below ground around a circular sunken open-air amphitheatre.

The building is equipped with the latest technology so as to reduce energy consumption, and has thereby acquired the much-coveted BREEAM 'excellent' label. The circular metal ornamentation of the façade refers indirectly to the industrial crafts of the past, specifically gold- and silversmithing. It filters out harsh direct sunlight but retains transparency. The materials chosen for the floors - stone, ceramics and oak - mean that the building does not have the feel of a terminal or shopping mall. It assumes a domestic air, partly due to the unusual light entering through the facades.

This library houses several major collections. The undisputed highlight is the Shakespeare collection in the Shakespeare Memorial Room, originally built in 1882. When the original building was demolished in 1974, this interior by John Henry Chamberlain was moved to the old Central Library. Now it has once again been transferred to the new library. It is housed in a 'golden' volume in the upper half of the building.

This building has in the meantime won several prizes and is currently the largest public library in the United Kingdom. Some sources even claim that it is the largest public cultural space in Europe. Whether this is true or not, the building is indisputably a marvellous acquisition for Birmingham, and for lovers of architecture and culture it puts the city firmly on the map.

HARRY DEN HARTOG

Translated by Gregory Ball

Flanders' Films Go Hollywood

Let's begin by qualifying the title because it is slightly misleading, albeit intentionally so. 2014 saw the release in Belgian cinemas of new films by two talented and successful Flemish directors: *The Drop* by Michaël R. Roskam (° 1972) and *The Loft* by Erik Van Looy (° 1962).

These are English-language films and they were both filmed in America. Even before the films went into production, the Flemish newspapers were already giving wide coverage to both projects. Their respective cinema releases also attracted great media interest. It was in that context that the word 'Hollywood' regularly cropped up, often in titles and captions, for the combination of 'Flemish', 'film' and 'Hollywood' has a seductive ring, or at the very least it arouses the reader's curiosity.

For both directors this was their first American adventure. In the case of Erik Van Looy, also known for the thriller *The Memory of a Killer*, it was a remake of his 2008 box-office hit *Loft*, which attracted 1.2 million cinema-goers, a record for a Belgian film and one it will not be easy to break. Michaël R. Roskam, on the other hand, is a rather late-bloomer. He made his cinema debut in 2011 with *Bullhead*, which was an overnight success. Accolades were heaped on the film at home and abroad and, as the icing on the cake, it won an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film.

Flemish film directors who make a film for the big screen on the other side of the Atlantic are few and far between, even a touch exotic. And adventurous. Tintin in America as it were. But these two films have relatively little to do with Hollywood, if only because *The Drop* was filmed in New York and *The Loft* largely in New Orleans.

And why would a director want to produce a remake of a film he has already made? For Van Looy the answer is clear: 'I have always believed that Bart De Pauw's fantastic script deserves a global audience and the best way to achieve that is still an American remake. *The Loft* is a mainstream film, not a festival or art-house film'.