

**PHILIPPE VANDER
MAREN AND
MIREILLE WEERTS
ARCHITECTS**

CONVERSION OF A FORMER PARSONAGE, LEUVEN

DESIGN ASSOCIATION:
ARCHITECTS:
PHILIPPE VANDER MAREN
MIREILLE WEERTS
ARTISTS:
DANIEL BUREN
JOS DELBROEK
DAN VAN SEVEREN
RICHARD VENLET
ENGINEER:
DIRK JASPAERT

DESIGN:
2002

DELIVERY:
2007

CLIENT:
VALORENS PLC

LOCATION:
HALFMAARTSTRAAT 7
3000 LEUVEN

CONTRACTORS:
BESSEGA PLC, FLERON
FINE CARPENTRY:
ADELAIRE MARCEL, NEUPRÉ
ROOF:
ERIC DORTANT, BRUSSELS
WOODWORK:
THIERRY VERSTRAELEN, BIERGES
GENISOL DOMUS ARTE, GHENT

AREA:
524 m²

VOLUME:
1.824 m³

BUILDING COSTS:
NOT KNOWN

PHOTOGRAPHY:
STIJN BOLLAERT

BUILDING COSTS/m²:
NOT KNOWN

There is often a degree of tension between contemporary architecture and heritage conservation. This is not necessarily the case, however: this conversion of a former parsonage into a family home shows that a decisive contemporary modification of an historical building can be just as good a form of heritage conservation as the careful conservation of the relics of earlier periods. The building in question is the organically evolved result of a series of quite radical changes in the past. The broad central passage onto which the rooms on each side open characterises the 18th-century expansion that transformed the original core into a parsonage. The series of drawing rooms on the street side is in its turn a typically 19th-century addition that gave the house a more middle-class allure. Even later, the house was divided into student bedsits, whereby several elements were somewhat injudiciously restored or replaced. Such successive transformations mean that the value of such a building as a monument lies less in its consistent, material evidence of a particular period or typology than in its complex historical stratification.

In this conversion, the first step was to conserve a number of historically and aesthetically valuable elements. The ceilings in the various rooms (vaults in the oldest parts of the building, plaster ceilings with decorative mouldings in some rooms) were restored to their original state because they clearly indicate the various building periods. The cornice on the street facade was restored with great care in order to restore its harmonious composition. In the absence of historical documents on the old window divisions, they were deduced from the geometric lines of the facade and the proportions of the openings. This characterises the architects' approach: rather than attempting an historically sound reconstruction, they tried to uncover the constructional and aesthetic logic of the building and translate it to the present. In order to achieve the desired visual subtlety and to comply with present-day comfort requirements, such things as special, fine window frames in wood and steel were designed. Their refinement sets the tone for the rest of the interior finish, which is outstanding in its detail and precision. In addition, the furniture, handcrafted in solid wood, expresses an unconditional love of authentic and durable materials. This is most evident in the new staircase. It is composed of a sequence of slender freestanding inverted U forms in solid wood that get higher and higher. The achievement of this seemingly simple construction actually

involved a technical *tour de force*. The staircase had previously been in the middle of the house at the end of the central passage. It starts from the middle rooms, which means that what were in the past the darkest spaces in the house became the central circulation hub. The stately hallway now acts as a transitional area between the presentable parts of the house (reception area, drawing room, study) and the more private rooms such as the kitchen/dining room on the ground floor and the bedroom on the first floor. The static, symmetrical access to the separate rooms has made way for a more open relationship between the rooms and a lively route through the house. On the attic floor the entire space has been left open to keep the impressive roof structure in view; its various sections show up the history of the building's growth.

The almost fanatical attention to detail and finish means that all the materials used remain visible; the range of colours is determined by lime mortar, untreated wood, bare concrete and steel. This consistency of material also continues in the outdoor areas. For example, on the patio the paving and facade are in untreated wood, while the whitewashed walls accentuate the original building volume. The enclosed and intimate nature of this outdoor room contrasts with the garden behind the house, which has a more open and monumental appearance. Its austere design does full justice to the subtle proportions of the rear facade. Just like the street frontage, the rear facade is given a cheerful touch using Daniel Buren's well-known striped motif on the shutters. Inside, Richard Venlet accentuates the middle-class character of the interior by means of ostentatious mirror frames screen-printed on the sliding doors. Lastly, Dan Van Severen translated the spatial articulation of the building into an abstract drawing by means of lines in the cast concrete. The accent given by these artists to the various periods in the development of the building can be seen as a metaphor for the architects' approach; they have made the hybrid, layered nature of this building into the theme of their changes. On the basis of a highly individual but sound vision they have conceived the re-use of this parsonage as a logical next step in an age-old process of transformation, addition and adaptation.

SVEN STERKEN



Daniel Buren, photo-souvenir:
"Ouverts ou Fermés: travail in situ",
Leuven 2002-2007





Dan Van Severen, Untitled, 2004-2007

