

PRESS RELEASE

Retrospective exhibition is unique voyage of discovery into the world of Marie-José Van Hee architecten

# A walk with Marie-José Van Hee

In 1993, as a young architect, Marie-José Van Hee exhibited her work at DE SINGEL. At that point, it was already clear that she would have a lasting influence on the architectural landscape in Belgium and far beyond. Almost thirty years later, the Flanders Architecture Institute is again inviting this *grande dame* of the Belgian architecture scene to stage an exhibition. In ***Marie-José Van Hee architecten. A walk*** not only are you introduced to her work, but you also walk through that of other architects, artists and thinkers. Marie-José Van Hee: “As an architect you cannot be an ego tripper. The whole point is that you are working with and for people.”

***Marie-José Van Hee architecten. A walk  
Exhibition | from 30.11.2022 to 21.05.2023  
Opening event | on 29.11.2022 at 8 pm***

*Flanders Architecture Institute at DE SINGEL, Antwerp*

## **Marie-José Van Hee architecten**

The national and international prizes, publications and exhibitions with which she is associated prove that Marie-José Van Hee has not stood still in all those years. In 1997, together with Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem, she won the Flemish Community’s Cultuurprijs voor Architectuur [Cultural Prize for Architecture] and in 2017 she was awarded the prestigious British International Fellowship by the Royal Institute of British Architects. The world-famous Japanese magazine *A+U* even dedicated an entire edition to the Ghent-based architect. In 2018, she again exhibited at the Venice Architecture Biennale. She had previously participated in 2012 at the invitation of Sir David Chipperfield, together with partners in crime Robbrecht en Daem.

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In Belgium, the seven-person office Marie-José Van Hee architecten is known for its striking housing projects and projects in the public realm, such as the City Pavilion in Ghent, the redevelopment of the banks of the River Lys, Deinze's market square, and the ModeNatie building in Antwerp. After more than forty years of practice, the bureau can now look back on 400 projects, 250 of which were realised. Marie-José Van Hee speaks with great passion about her metier – “her craftsmanship”: “The work still comes first for me. But I have a love-hate relationship with everything that has not been executed, particularly with the competition projects.”

### Walking as the ultimate form of freedom

As the title already suggests, the exhibition is conceived as a walking route, or rather two walking routes: the GR5A (the long route) and the PR5A (the short route). The names allude to the *Grandes Randonnées*, the famous walking routes in France and Italy that are so close to Marie-José's heart. Walking is an important part of Van Hee's life: “For me it is time and space, the ultimate kind of freedom.” In her designs you will never encounter a dead-end corridor; Van Hee always provides a circuit. And there's a reason for this. Says Marie-José Van Hee: “As a child I lived in a house where I had to walk through my parent's bedroom to enter mine. Since then, I always provide a way out in my designs, a path to freedom.” The PR5A route points to the exhibition hall, where the curators have constructed a version of Marie-José's own home. The house has many rooms, and every room alludes to an important part of the oeuvre of Marie-José Van Hee architecten.

### PR5A (the short walk)

Just as in real life, you enter the house from the street. The ‘Street Life’ room is illuminated by Van Hee's *garden-street-lamp* which she designed for House HdF and House V-C. You can relax there for a while on the benches that the architect designed for the Venice Architecture Biennale, or flick through the large books that rested upon her legendary lecterns from the 1993 exhibition. The ‘Drawing Room’ is perhaps the most important room, it is a copy of the space in which Marie-José Van Hee draws on the *house-work-table* that she designed herself. The viewer is invited to take a seat on the *bed-bench* and leaf through a series of books and drawings. Afterwards you enter the ‘Jardin des Ami.e.s’ which features a range of voices who play an important role in the oeuvre of Marie-José Van Hee architecten. “We invited the designers with whom we have collaborated to reflect on our work. Each of them does this in their own unique way”, explains Sam De Vocht, who has been working with Van Hee's for fifteen years. For Marie-José Van Hee it is clear that an architect never operates alone: “Today we live in an era of ego tripping. As an architect, you cannot be an ego tripper. You work with and for people. I continue to learn every day, above all from other people.”

Finally, the ‘Salon des Refusés’ confronts you with designs for unrealised projects, both large and small. For Van Hee these are as important as the projects that were built, not only out of respect for the work that has gone into them, but also with regard to those involved. Architects, artists or thinkers with whom the bureau collaborated, are given recognition for their contribution to these paper projects.

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### GR5A (the long walk)

The curators also break through the walls of DE SINGEL's exhibition hall. The long route contains artworks, a tree, furniture, books and doors. With this series of interventions, Marie-José Van Hee confronts the architecture of Leon Stynen, the original architect of the arts site. Van Hee says: "As an architect you always want to leave something behind. We're doing that too in this exhibition, with a number of permanent interventions and explorations." On the square in front of DE SINGEL the curators have placed a tree, a Swamp Cypress. "The tree is supposed to activate the square – which is in fact a non-place. It serves as a beacon to clearly signal that something is happening on the campus", says Van Hee. The long walk leads the visitor past parts of DE SINGEL where they would otherwise never go. Such as the mural by the Antwerp-based painter René Guiette (1893-1976) located in between the Stynen and Beel sections. Van Hee: "By replacing the fire doors with glass doors, we make this artwork more visible so that the visitor has almost no choice but to pause for a moment."

### Who looks after the architect?

The Flanders Architecture Institute asked Marie-José Van Hee architecten to come up with an exhibition within the framework of this year's theme 'Care in Architecture'. Van Hee turns this around. The final slogan at the exhibition exit reads 'Who looks after the architect?' Van Hee: "I am worried about the architectural profession. Today the architect has become an administrator who is only occupied with rules, there is scarcely room for creativity any more. The ideal home that fully complies with all the EPB norms in in fact a cube or a sphere. But be honest; you can't live in those, can you?"

Quotes:

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: I view this exhibition as a confirmation of the work that was done over all those years. But it's anything but a retrospective, as I'm not dead yet (laughs).

SAM DE VOCHT: As a bureau we approach an exhibition like a project, for us there is no distinction between constructing an exhibition and designing a building.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: The final slogan at the exit of the exhibition reads 'Who looks after the architect?' I am worried about the architectural profession. Today the architect has become an administrator. Today's rules mean that there is scarcely room for creativity any more.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: The ideal home that fully complies with all the EPB norms in actually a cube or a sphere. But be honest; you can't live in those, can you?

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: Walking is an important part of my life, both as an architect and in my private life. For me it's akin to freedom. As a child I lived in a house where I had to walk through my parent's bedroom to go to the toilet. Since then, I always provide a way out in my designs, a path to freedom.

SAM DE VOCHT: We've worked with two routes, two *Grandes Randonnées*. A turn takes you to a longer route that leads you past the interventions.

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MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: As an architect you always want to leave something behind. And that's what we're doing in this exhibition, with two fixed interventions and an exploration.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: There are some similarities between Stynen's architecture and our practice. Floorplan, inner courtyard, letting light in. The materiality, the combination of concrete and wood. Stynen created a very solid building. He included characterful elements that make the building unique. This entry stairway that is so difficult to walk up, for example. The trick is actually to tackle it diagonally.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: Today we live in an era of ego tripping. As an architect you cannot be an ego tripper. The whole point is that you are working with and for people. I do not like to be the centre of attention. Instead of going to previews, I prefer to sit at home drawing. I continue to learn every day, above all from other people.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: If Leon Stynen were still alive, then I would definitely have invited him to participate in 'Jardin des Ami.e.s'.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: Architecture is not art. Art has the freedom to be unusable, but architecture does not.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: My message to visitors to the exhibition is: carry on, keep on walking, discover!

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: Be free! And have respect for the architect's work.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: I do not pit myself against clients. The ideal project is created in collaboration with a good client.

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE: I have long dreamt of building bridges. They are a great metaphor for what architecture should be. Good architecture connects.

SOFIE DE CAIGNY: The work of Marie-José Van Hee architecten embodies care and consideration in a multilayered way. It is about caring for people with whom and for whom they are working, but also about caring for buildings and for the profession.

SOFIE DE CAIGNY: Marie-José Van Hee architecten gives us more than an exhibition, with their interventions they have provided a new way to experience DE SINGEL.

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## Marie-José Van Hee architecten **A walk**

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**production** Marie-José Van Hee architecten, Flanders Architecture Institute and DE SINGEL

**curator** Marie-José Van Hee architecten

**project management** Marie-José Van Hee and Sam De Vocht (Marie-José Van Hee architecten)

**scenography** Marie-José Van Hee, Sam De Vocht, Ben Rea, Margot De Caster (Marie-José Van Hee architecten)

**with the support of** the Flemish Community

**exhibition | Marie-José Van Hee architecten. A walk**

Wed 30 Nov 2022 → Sun 21 May 2023

Flanders Architecture Institute at DE SINGEL, Desguinlei 25, 2018 Antwerp

open Wed → Sun / 2 pm → 7 pm and during evening performances until 10 pm

€5

**opening event | Marie-José Van Hee architecten. A walk**

Tue 29 Nov 2022 – 8 pm DE SINGEL, Blue Hall

Desguinlei 25, 2018 Antwerp

info and tickets at [vai.be](http://vai.be) or [desingel.be](http://desingel.be)

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