Architecture

The skylights? They're from fighter jets! The anarchic architect who transformed Belgium

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Cockpit chic ... the roof with salvage from Lockheed fighter jets. Photograph: Anja Hellebaut & Anthony De Meyere

Derided by the architectural establishment, Marcel Raymaekers used salvaged materials from ships, planes and slaughterhouses – to create riotous buildings that made people rethink their lives

Shimmering skylights bulge from the pitched roof of a house in rural Belgium, like an army of slugs slithering up the terracotta tiles. It turns out that these bulbous glass cupolas once served as the cockpits of Lockheed fighter jets, but they're now bringing light into this astonishing, pyramid-shaped home, illuminating an interior made of tarred timber reclaimed from old boats and a sculptural hearth made from salvaged bricks.

In a suburb nearby, a huge ornate stone bay window, this time salvaged from a Brussels townhouse, dangles from the facade of an angular modern house like an oversized trophy. Porthole windows flank an arched stone entrance,

leading to an interior where aged pine beams fan out across the ceiling, above a black fireplace made of steel from a ship. Pointed arch doorways, salvaged from a church, lead to further sumptuous chambers, all stuffed with *objets trouvés*.

> *He built a love hotel with an escape route hidden within a church confessional booth*

These are just two of many such magpie creations by Marcel Raymaekers, the maverick Belgian architect who built more than 100 homes out of almost entirely reclaimed materials during his nearly 50-year career. These are not heritage projects incorporating choice pieces of architectural salvage, but wild fantasies of the most unlikely combinations, riotous assemblages drawn from different periods, with scales and styles collaged with anarchic abandon.

Slaughterhouse meets military HQ ... House Boncher. Photograph: Anja Hellebaut & Anthony De Meyere

Gigantic stone porches, plucked from condemned manor houses, crash into low-slung cottage-like eaves. Walls of reclaimed bricks billow out to meet undulating roofs of mismatched tiles. Staircases from redundant pulpits spiral up to boudoirs of untold magnificence, where kaleidoscopic mirrored ceilings float above fantastical bathtubs, enthroned in symphonies of marble. It's like an architectural version of the exquisite corpse game, mismatched building parts bolted together with Frankenstein glee.

These heady visions of upcycled opulence have been brought together in a new book, fittingly titled Ad Hoc Baroque, accompanying an exhibition at De Singel arts centre in Antwerp, which charts this outsider architect's little-known creations. It is the culmination of research conducted by design cooperative Rotor, whose work focuses on reusing materials, and who first came across Raymaekers by chance, while mapping architectural salvage businesses in Europe in 2011.

Driving along the N75 motorway, about halfway between Hasselt and Genk in the province of Limburg, their attention was caught by a gigantic illuminated crown perched on top of a pair of eight metre high neogothic steel columns, advertising *bouwantiek* (building antiques) and *estetische raadgeving* (aesthetic consulting), under the intriguing banner of *woonkultus* (the cult of living).

At the back of a yard piled high with blue limestone cornices, ornate steel trusses and grand oak doors, they found a sprawling manor that looked like a cartoonish cross between a country estate and a haunted castle. This was Queen of the South - named after a retired paddle steamer whose starboard fascia adorned the facade - the lavishly stocked depot and courtly seat of

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Raymaekers' reclamation kingdom. He declared bankruptcy in 2014, after being convicted for tax evasion, but he still lives there, aged 91, a tenant of his former empire.

Hot stuff ... pine beams above a fireplace made of steel from a ship. Photograph: Anja Hellebaut & Anthony De Meyere

As the authors explain, the architect conceived this dreamy complex in 1972 as an immersive experience, designed to both entice and subjugate its visitors. Potential customers would be "lulled into the right state of mind (wonder, ecstasy, submission, status anxiety) not only for a purchase, but to rethink what they wanted out of life, and how their home and its objects might deliver it". It was a lifesize catalogue where the middle classes could come and dream of nobility, shopping for accessories with which to concoct their own gaudy suburban chateau.

Raymaekers' business model was unusual: buy a large enough quantity of reclaimed windows, marble floors and carved stone columns, and his design services would be thrown in for free. The deal was often sealed over a meal in his restaurant, seated on richly upholstered benches beneath crystal chandeliers, salvaged from a Brussels hotel. The exclusive dining room was accessed from behind a double oak door clad with mirrors, which only the bartender could open, using a hidden switch. It was architectural theatre, designed to seduce. One visitor in 1968 said they were overcome by a sense of "being chosen". They added: "Whenever we visited, we always felt very special. We had to park our Lada there among the Jaguars and other fancy cars. The place, and Raymaekers himself, created a mystique and made you feel like somebody. It was very psychological."

Raymaekers, largely self-taught, distanced himself from the architectural establishment - which regarded him with equal suspicion, as an uneducated, cunning antiques dealer, building tasteless houses just to sell his wares. Born in Heverlee, Leuven, in 1933, Raymaekers enrolled for a degree in architecture at the Sint-Lukas School in Schaarbeek, Brussels, but dropped out after a year, impatient with the Roman Catholic friar-led education. He worked as a draughtsman for electricity substations, and spent his evenings designing houses. But he soon became disillusioned, seeing the countryside of Limburg overrun with ribbon developments and drab villas in car-oriented suburbs.

Visionary ... Raymaekers in 2023. Photograph: Anja Hellebaut & Anthony De Meyere

An encounter with a demolition contractor in the 1950s, when he procured a staircase for an attic, triggered an interest in using salvage as a foil to the generic mass-produced elements of modern construction, which he saw as responsible for the "impoverishment of architecture". He went on to study visual arts, and became a secondary school art teacher, but he spent all of his spare time sketching elaborate house designs, scouring the region for demolition sites and cultivating a network of contacts in the salvage trade.

The 1958 Brussels World's Fair had sparked a wave of demolition and modernisation across Belgium, so sources of materials grew ever more abundant. Meanwhile, a government incentive for people to build their own homes spawned a surfeit of clients looking for something a bit different.

Raymaekers' early projects bear the hallmarks of 1960s suburban villas, but with unlikely additions. Boulders hauled from the Meuse River were used to form rugged walls and chimneys. Sheets of metal from ship-breaking yards, hammered with decorative patterns by his blacksmith friend Raf Verjans, were transformed into monumental garage doors. Over time, his work became more exuberant, fuelled by richer spoils and wealthier clients.

The paddle-steamer look ... Queen of the South. Photograph: Anja Hellebaut & Anthony De Meyere

House Kelchtermans, designed with Jos Witters in 1970, is a wild tour de force, utilising reclaimed oak beams - some up to 10 metres long - to form a cluster of pyramids, sheltering a house, doctor's surgery and garage. And who else but Raymaekers would see 23 fighter-jet cockpits languishing in a salvage yard on the other side of Flanders and think of turning them into the coolest skylights around?

House Boncher, built between 1978 and 1984, combined materials from a slaughterhouse in Tienen and a military HQ in Verviers, the triumphal portal of which found itself framing the doorway of the suburban villa in a striking surrealist montage. Awkward junctions where the reclaimed elements didn't quite meet were not hidden, but celebrated. A staircase connecting the bedroom and study was too short, so Raymaekers made a feature out of it, designing a big bump of bricks as the missing step, surrounded by a starburst of coloured marble.

For the Rubensexclusief, a love hotel built in the Brabant countryside in 1979, he went all out with the bordello chic, concocting a ripe confection of stucco mouldings, stained glass, padded seating and mirrors. A church confessional booth housed a nifty secret escape route, should unwanted visitors show up unannounced.

With its witty reinventions and radical juxtapositions, the work avoided sentimentality, nostalgia or pastiche. "I feel like a modernist," Raymaekers said in 1991, "giving old materials a new application."

Regal salvage ... Raymaekers' apartment. Photograph: Anja Hellebaut & Anthony De Meyere

In their epilogue, the authors examine what lessons his curious approach might have on today's efforts to move towards circular construction (reusing, refurbishing and upcycling) and reducing embodied carbon. The days of such abundant, regal salvage are long gone, the historic buildings so readily bulldozed in the 1960s now thankfully protected. Cost is also a barrier, given the extra labour involved in dismantling buildings carefully, compared with crushing them into aggregate. But, as Rotor argues, if the price of new materials had to reflect their impact - on the environment, the labour market and society at large - then used materials would instantly become more competitive.

They make a plea for architects and builders to learn from Raymaekers' attitude (if not his tax affairs), in terms of embracing a looser, more collaborative approach to improvisation on-site and appreciating pre-used components and their patina. If we want the circular building economy to flourish, they argue, we must move beyond technocratic solutions and adopt practices that are culturally and aesthetically meaningful - and learn Raymaekers' skill of rearranging used elements into new compositions with raucous flair and unbridled delight. If sustainable design can be this much fun, how can anything stand in its way?

Ad Hoc Baroque is out now. Unfolding the Archives: #6 Marcel Raymaekers is at De Singel arts centre, Antwerp, until 17 March.

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