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Breaking convention: Chapex in Charleroi, Belgium, by AgwA and Architecten Jan de Vylder Inge Vinck

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1/16 The city of Charleroi is encircled by the disused infrastructure of coal-powered industry

Credit: Filip Dujardin

The reimagined Palais des Expositions in Charleroi, Belgium, by AgwA and AJDVIV, is a lesson in navigating architectural production in late capitalism

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Convention centres were once vessels of capitalist might. Their proliferation across Europe tracks the rise and subsequent fall of industrial colonial capitalism, their vast halls displaying the bounty of imperial domination and

technological prowess. While many recent convention centres might conjure images of corporate plazas and poorly detailed cladding systems, examples from the mid 19th to the first half of the 20th centuries were architecturally pioneering – from the glass and cast-iron behemoths of the Crystal Palace in London (1851) and the Grand Palais in Paris (1900), to the concrete innovation of the Palais du Centenaire, built for the Brussels Expo in 1935 (and the largest reinforced-concrete frame in the world at the time).

Accordingly, the story of the convention centre in the Belgian city of Charleroi is a mirror to the city's economic trajectory. The idea for the Palais des Expositions was hatched in 1948, riding the swell of a remarkable postwar recovery and building on its industrial prominence in the previous century. The French-speaking Wallonian city is in the so-called Pays Noir – 'black country', named after the coal it sits on. Evidence of this industrial activity remains in the slag heaps looming across the landscape and the metropolises of decaying factories and mining infrastructure.

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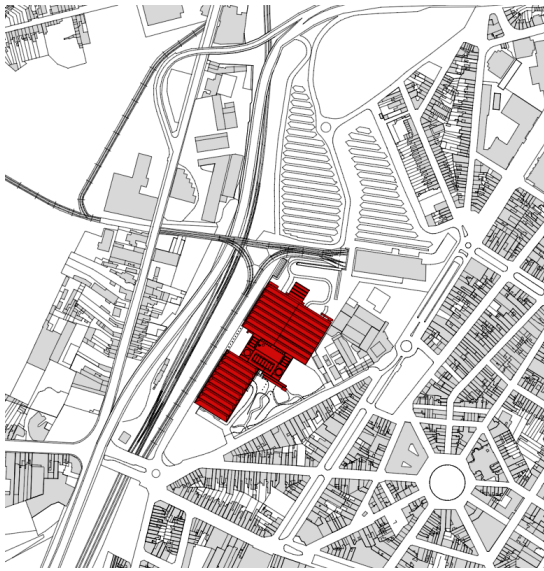
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The site chosen for the Palais des Expositions was on the sunken western flank of the city, on land occupied by a disused glassworks. A colossal 60,000m² edifice was designed by Joseph André, the architect behind several fine buildings in the city between the 1920s and '60s. It was organised into two large volumes containing vast exhibition halls - including one with an uninterrupted span of 60m - with a central stately foyer hall between them, topped with glass-block domes and dominated by broad staircases.

The first exhibitions opened in 1954 - including the Salon International des Arts Ménagers (International Household Arts Exhibition), which ran annually until 2017 - and were followed by six decades of trade fairs, camping and caravanning displays, car exhibitions, dog shows and much more. The lowest level housed a sports complex, including a 16-lane bowling alley and tennis courts, as well as a fire brigade barracks. A swathe of land to the north soon became a vast car park,

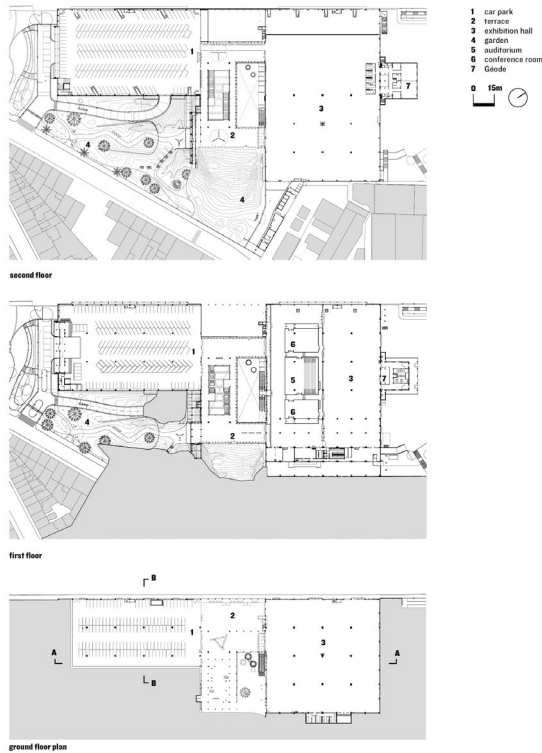
and most visitors entered the building from what had been its rear.



When the Palais des Expositions was being built in the 1950s, this industry was still active, and the slag heaps still growing
Credit: Collection Archives Ville de Charleroi

However, Charleroi's heyday was already behind it, and the 1960s onwards were characterised by rapid decline as coal was replaced by oil and the attendant industries waned. By the time a competition for the convention centre's transformation was held in 2015, the ground floor included a track for remote-controlled cars and a skate park. 'It was impossible to understand where you were in the building. It was infinite, the things you could find there,' explains Harold Fallon, co-founder of AgwA and part of the team who won the competition, alongside Architecten Jan de Vylder Inge Vinck (AJDVIV, at that time operating as Architecten de Vylder Vinck Taillieu). A po-mo pavilion, named Géode, had been built in 2005 to welcome visitors entering from the car parks, and it had become a site of drug abuse where unhoused people sought shelter. Though the exhibition halls were still in use, the corridors between stands at the annual Salon International des Arts Ménagers were getting wider and wider as the number of exhibitors dwindled.

From the first proposal, the architects challenged what the project could be: rather than replacing the central foyer hall with a new construction, as suggested in the brief, they stripped the exterior walls of the existing structure away to create covered urban terraces. By becoming an outdoor space, the 'low energy' building prescribed by the brief became 'zero energy'. The result is surreal. Generous boulevards and squares unfold across three floors, complete with streetlights and garden benches. The building's skeleton - bearing the colour-code of its previous uses (green for tennis courts, for example) - frames views of smokestacks and rewilded slag heaps to the west and the streetscape of the city centre to the east. The middle of the first-floor slab has been removed to create an atrium down to the lowest floor, where the soil of the unmade sloped ground tumbles unheeded around the building's columns. The chimneys of the disused heating plant - previously concealed within an internal courtyard - soar upwards.



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The original brief specified three new underground floors for car parking and the renovation of four expo halls. This was contradicted in the design process when several companies explained to the architects that the building needed to be only a third of the existing surface area. The ambition was further undermined by a minuscule budget (currently standing around €43 million) from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) – ‘a third of the budget that was needed’ to fulfil the brief, Fallon comments.

When it transpired that the whole ground-floor slab would have to be insulated to comply with regulations if the car parking were built underground, blowing the tiny budget, it was entirely – if counterintuitively – logical to propose that the whole southern building, with floors strong enough to carry vehicles for the purposes of car shows, could become a multi-storey car park. The ambition to build more floor area evaporated. The extent of the thermal envelope, already challenged by the transformation of the foyer hall into external terraces, was reduced even further, contracting to 25,000m²; only the lower two floors of the northern volume – including the fully modernised black-box exhibition hall on the lowest floor – are comfort-controlled.

The trend towards degrowth was repeated elsewhere, when a new congress centre (more specifically for large meetings rather than exhibitions), which had been commissioned in 2016 and designed by JDS Architects, was shelved in 2019, presumably when the municipality realised the absurdity of building more floor area when there was already too much next door. A fraction of the funding for the cancelled project was redirected to the Palais des Expositions while construction was well under way, on the condition that congress facilities were integrated in the project. As a result, a small auditorium and two large conference rooms have been inserted into the middle floor of the northern volume, a generous loggia was carved out to face the courtyard, and the sawtooth roof of the top exhibition hall was replaced;

more money could also be spent on the garden that connects the building with the city to the east.

‘The palatial car park serves as a reminder of western capitalism’s inability to respond quickly to the demands of decarbonisation’

The architecture is unembarrassed by technicalities and uncompromising regulations, which are instead made clearly legible in the buildings – the massive smoke extraction shafts in the top floors, stipulated by fire regulations, are expressed as monumental blocky sculptures, and new regulation-height stair balustrades have simply been installed behind the existing lower balustrades. While much capital-A Architecture is preoccupied with concealing onerous rules, ugly services and ruthless value engineering, this building brazenly expresses this process. Each design decision is logical but also somehow whimsical, gently poking fun at and drawing attention to the regulations, gymnastic budget decisions and negotiations that dictate much built production: a world of spreadsheets and discussions with

regulatory bodies and city representatives, rather than shadow gaps and painstaking sill details.

The building is an essay in what Jan de Vylder describes as ‘twisting’: creatively shifting the scope and ambition of a project and subverting limitations to become opportunities for play and joy. As we progress further into the climate emergency and the role of the architect necessarily shifts from building more to building less, the skill of ‘twisting’ will become a crucial tool; the task of design will become one of challenging received briefs and tactically dispensing resources as materials become more scarce. Twisting more, building less.

Chapex - as it is now known - plugs into an ambitious series of projects planned by the city of Charleroi and its *Bouwmeester* (chief city architect), including a plan to regenerate the street on the western edge of the building, to possibly add a train station, and to develop the former car parks to the north into housing. The skatepark that was removed from the ground floor will be reinstated in a garden to the south of Chapex. This strategy is reminiscent of New Labour’s ‘urban renaissance’ in the UK from the 2000s, in which struggling urban areas were treated with an acupuncture of regeneration and well-meaning cultural projects in the hope that socio-economic problems would, by proximity, also be alleviated. While many of these cultural projects are admirable, they were never going to bring the prosperity promised.



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Nearly 25 per cent of people in Charleroi were reported as unemployed last year, four times the Belgian average. A radical, reparative project like Chapex should be celebrated, but only a similarly radical restructuring of economic forces will solve these socio-economic problems (or house the unhoused people it displaced, as de Vylder recognises: ‘Architecture is responsible, but not only architecture’). This utopian project remains at the bidding of the market: at the time of writing, the client, the city-owned company IGRETEC, is still seeking a private partner to inhabit and manage the building. The plan remains for the building to be drafted into commercial use in a public-private partnership – if, that is, the private sector deems it profitable.

If the Palais des Expositions was a mirror to the 20th-century spoils of industrial capitalism, Chapex encapsulates its death throes as it faces the realities of the climate emergency. The palatial multi-storey car park serves as a grim reminder of western capitalism’s inability to respond sufficiently quickly to the demands of decarbonisation. The paradox that this building had to both be low energy and accommodate 700 cars is made bizarrely visible. De

Vylder articulates the risks of capitalism co-opting retrofit, warning that architects must 'prepare for the next reuse' rather than fulfil capitalism's short-term aims. Hopefully, soon the car parking halls will be surplus to requirements and their floors change use once again – as the architects have planned – to host the festivals of the future.

Chapex is one of the eight projects highlighted in the exhibition *As Found*, on show at De Singel in Antwerp until 17 March and at 12 Star Gallery at Europe House in London until 19 April

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