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BOOK Living in Monnikenheide: Care, Inclusion and Architecture

Monnikenheide, pioneer of inclusive care architecture in Flanders

The Flanders Architecture Institute and architect-philosopher Gideon Boie have spared no effort in putting together a book about a unique architecture experiment: Monnikenheide. Founded in 1973 by Wivina and Paul Demeester, this care centre in Zoersel for people with a mental disability has become an international reference for inclusive care architecture. Over the past fifty years, architects such as bOb Van Reeth (AWG), Peter Swinnen (51N4E/CRIT.) and Dirk Somers (Bovenbouw) were given the opportunity to experiment as young designers with this exceptional design assignment. The result is a green estate full of high-quality architecture tailored to the residents and with a special connection to the neighbouring village.

Living in Monnikenheide: Care, Inclusion and Architecture

Available from 25.04.2023 on vai.be or in select bookshops

Book launch

25.04.2023 at 20:00, DE SINGEL, Antwerp

Fifty years of Monnikenheide

‘For the past fifty years, a special community has had its home among the majestic spruces and oaks of the forest of Zoersel. Some 200 people with mental and physical disabilities live there together in collective homes.’ Sofie De Caigny’s foreword reads like the opening of a novel. And indeed, the story of Monnikenheide features a range of colourful characters and emotions. In 1973, with the help of supporters, Wivina and Paul Demeester-De Meyer opened a first short-stay home on a plot of land donated by Paul’s father, Jozef Demeester. The creation of the centre

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was partly the result of a personal motivation: Steven, the first-born son of Wivina and Paul Demeester-De Meyer, was born with Down syndrome and, according to the guidelines of the time, could not be raised at home. The common practice was to place such individuals in psychiatric care. This had to change, according to the young couple, who came up with the idea of establishing their own inclusive care centre, featuring influential custom-made architecture. The name Monnikenheide refers to the Cistercian monks ('Monniken-') who in the eighteenth century farmed the heathland ('-heide'). Since its establishment, Monnikenheide has continued to evolve, both on its own site and in the adjacent subdivision and village of Zoersel.

'To my mind, Monnikenheide is a radical experiment: radical in its rejection of the old logic of separation and invisibility, experimental in the principle underlying its architecture, one that embraces the otherness of every fellow human being.'

- Sofie De Caigny, director Flanders Architecture Institute

A visionary view of care architecture

Living in Monnikenheide tells the history of Monnikenheide for the first time from an architectural perspective. Several projects that are part of the care centre quickly gained iconic status in Flemish architecture culture. These include the Seppenshuis by bOb Van Reeth, the first Flemish Government Architect, and Huis aan 't Laar by 51N4E. They have been published frequently, but this is the first time that have been documented and discussed together.

'Fifty years after its foundation, Monnikenheide is a life-size architectural statement about the place of people with disabilities in our society.'

- Gideon Boie, architect-philosopher (KU Leuven / Bavo)

It was architect-philosopher Gideon Boie who approached the Flanders Architecture Institute to make a book about Monnikenheide. From his own research practice, he often works around care and architecture. Boie is known, among other things, for the Kanunnik Petrus Jozef Triestplein project in Melle. There, together with architecten de vylder vinck taillieu, he transformed the former psychiatric centre Caritas into an activity zone for patients, visitors and staff. The intervention and the research drew acclaim in Belgium and abroad. A book on Monnikenheide fits in with Boie's view of the social impact of architecture: 'The combined architecture at Monnikenheide embodies a special design intelligence, created out of everyday conversation and

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experimentation in the care centre, not through set theories, typologies and forms.’ Boie emphasizes Wivina Demeester’s decisive impact as a politician on the development of Monnikenheide and, by extension, of architecture culture in Flanders: ‘As a member of the Flemish Christian Democrat Party CD&V, Wivina Demeester served as minister and state secretary in several federal and regional governments between 1985 and 1999, with various competences in, among others, finance, budget, healthcare, welfare and administration. In this capacity, she played a decisive role in the development of architecture culture in Flanders. For example, as the person politically responsible for the Government Buildings Agency, she created the position of Flemish Government Architect and was the chair of the board of directors of the Flanders Architecture Institute from 2004 to 2022.’ Monnikenheide can thus be seen as the culmination point of Demeester’s interests in healthcare, architecture and politics.

‘Monnikenheide actually tells me everything about who Wivina Demeester is. That it takes a village to raise a child is, for many parents, a hope, a complaint or a relief. Wivina Demeester not only dreamed of a village, she had one built. By the very best in the business.’

- Thomas Vanderveken, radio and television producer

Living in Monnikenheide provides a chronological overview of the architectural production at the Monnikenheide care centre since the early years, in both words and images. Several authors contributed to the book. As editor-in-chief, **Gideon Boie** outlines how architectural typology and spatial setting are used as a key in the quest for the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. **Fredie Floré** describes some central uses in recent residences at Monnikenheide, both collective and individual. **Heleen Verheyden** highlights the socio-spatial dimension of architectural production at Monnikenheide. For Verheyden, Monnikenheide is a unique example of how architecture enables people with disabilities to be part of society as a matter of course. The essay by **Vjera Sleutel** and Gideon Boie discusses Monnikenheide’s vision of enabling persons with disabilities to enjoy the right to their own territoriality through extensive management and spontaneous use of the forest. In her essay ‘Architecture That Makes People More Beautiful’, **Sofie De Caigny** situates the significance of Monnikenheide within Flemish architecture culture. She looks at how care architecture has been published in the Flemish architecture media and how the theme has been inscribed in government policy since the 2000s. The book concludes with ‘Vivre, C’est Faire Vivre’. In this text, **Thomas Vanderveken** outlines

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the biography of Wivina and Paul Demeester. The thread running through his homage is the conversation he had with Demeester on the television programme *Alleen Elvis blijft bestaan*. Besides these texts, photography plays a major role in the book. The series of images by art photographer **Kurt Deruyter** looks at the overwhelming landscape of Monnikenheide and reveals the importance of nature as a caring environment for residents. An eye-catcher is the cover image showing the artwork *Open kamer* (Open Room) by **Richard Venlet**. The concrete platform with a single door that is accessible from all sides embodies the notion of inclusion that makes Monnikenheide unique in the Flemish care landscape.

‘The buildings at Monnikenheide show how architectural quality can be developed: the commissioners determined the social added value by indicating the position and thereby the relation to the context, while the designer translated this ambition into special houses for special people.’

- Erik Wieërs, Flemish Government Architect

Projects at Monnikenheide

- Demeester residence, Luc Van den Broeck (1970)
- Short-stay home, Bruno Boulanger (1973)
- Staff building, Bruno Boulanger (1973)
- Monnikenbos, Luc Van den Broeck (1980)
- Monnikenhuis, Luc Van den Broeck (1985)
- Werkhuis, Mark Depreeuw (1985)
- Seppenshuis, bOb Van Reeth/ArchitectenWerkGroep (1997)
- Annexe to Demeester residence, Maarten Van Severen (2000)
- Huis aan de Voorne, Huiswerk architecten (2002)
- Main building, therapy pool and laundry, Architectuurgroep Jo Peeters (2003)
- Huis aan de Kerk, Vermeiren De Coster Architecten (2005)
- Open kamer, Richard Venlet (2006)
- Zonnebloem, Architectuurgroep Jo Peeters (2010)
- Huis aan 't Laar, 51N4E (2012)
- De Eiken, UR architects (2016)

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- Monnikenbos, UR architects (2020)
- Villa Kameleon, FELT architecture & design (2022)

Contributors to this book:

Gideon Boie is an architect-philosopher, co-founder of the BAVO collective and visiting professor of architectural criticism at the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture. His research focuses on the political dimension of art, architecture and urban planning. BAVO expands the function of criticism by actively engaging with practice. Its research into the architecture of psychiatry received international recognition with the PC Caritas project: see *Unless Ever People* (2018), with architecten de vylder vinck taillieu.

Sofie De Caigny is director of the Flanders Architecture Institute and visiting professor in Architecture Critique at the University of Antwerp Faculty of Design Sciences. Her doctoral thesis focused on housing culture in Flanders between the world wars. She has published widely on recent architecture in Flanders and the relationship between heritage and contemporary architecture. She was the commissioner of the Belgian entry for the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale.

Kurt Deruyter studied sociology and journalism, but soon found that the language of images offered him more opportunities than words to tell his stories. In a lyrical-philosophical style that is partly composed of writing but also questions our perceptions, he examines specific biotopes and how landscape and population dynamically influence each other. In the long-running project *Halfway Home*, he looks at the arrival neighbourhoods of Brussels, in *Cain & Abel*, the native nomads of Siberia; and in *Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, the mountain landscapes of the Pyrenees. His work can be found in museums and private collections.

Fredie Floré is professor in history of architecture and interiors at the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture. She wrote a PhD on discourses on 'better living' in Belgium in the period 1945–58. Today, her research focuses on the representational role of architecture and interiors in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Floré is a founding member of the Architecture Interiority Inhabitation research group. She is co-editor of *The Politics of Furniture: Identity, Diplomacy and Persuasion in Post-war Interiors* (2017) with Cammie McAtee and was guest editor of 'Architecture and Bureaucracy' in *Architectural History* (2022), with Ricardo Costa Agarez and Rika Devos.

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Ine Meganck is a graphic designer, lecturer and researcher. She has been teaching graphic design at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp since 2019 and at KASK School of Arts Ghent since 2022. She herself graduated from Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem in 2012.

Vjera Sleutel obtained a Master of Architecture from the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture in 2017. Since then, she has gained extensive research experience at BAVO, working on diverse projects relating to care architecture, especially within mental healthcare. She has worked in several architecture offices. She also developed her own art practice with Vroomm.collectif. Since 2021, she has been a Lab-O practice assistant at the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture.

Thomas Vanderveken studied music theory and piano at the Royal Conservatoire in Brussels before embarking on a career as a presenter, first with the youth channel JIMtv, and next with classical radio station Klara. Since 2004, Thomas Vanderveken has been a radio and television producer at VRT, where he has launched several programmes. He achieved recognition with the talk show *Alleen Elvis blijft bestaan* on the Belgian Dutch-language television channel Canvas, in which he conducts interviews with famous personalities.

Heleen Verheyden studied art history at KU Leuven and Paris Sorbonne IV and obtained a master's in architecture from the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture in 2017. Her work focuses on the social impact of architecture and urbanism and the search for spatial justice. Her work combines methods from spatial practice, such as mapping and design research, with ethnographic research. She is currently working on a PhD at KU Leuven on housing for refugees.

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Practical information

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With visual essays by Kurt Deruyter

Design by Ine Meganck

With projects by Luc Van den Broeck, Bruno Boulanger, Mark Depreeuw, b0b Van Reeth/ArchitectenWerkGroep, Maarten Van Severen, Architectuurgroep Jo Peeters, Huiswerk architecten, Vermeiren De Coster Architecten, Richard Venlet, 51N4E, UR architects, FELT architecture & design

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