

UNFOLDING THE ARCHIVES #7

KMSKA, Built for Beauty



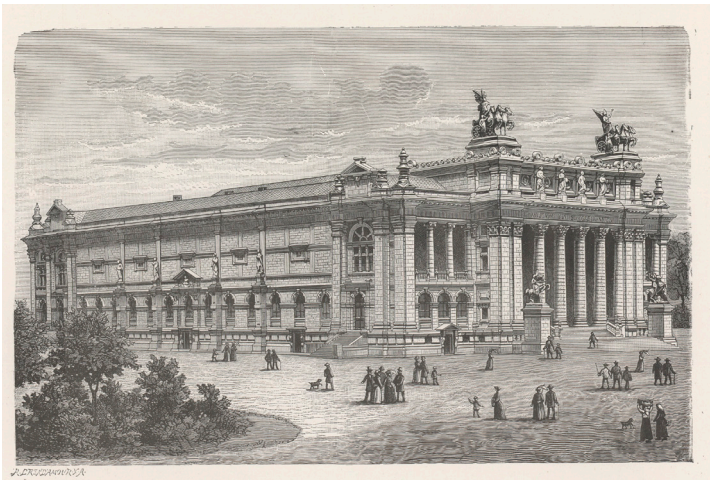
23.10.2024 – 19.01.2025
Flanders Architecture Institute

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Introduction

In this exhibition, the Flanders Architecture Institute sheds light on the design, context and construction of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA). How did the preparations and the design competitions unfold? Who were the architects? What was the international dimension of the design, and what role did the museum play in both the new South district and the nineteenth-century cityscape? Find out how the museum grew into so much more than just the home of an art collection.



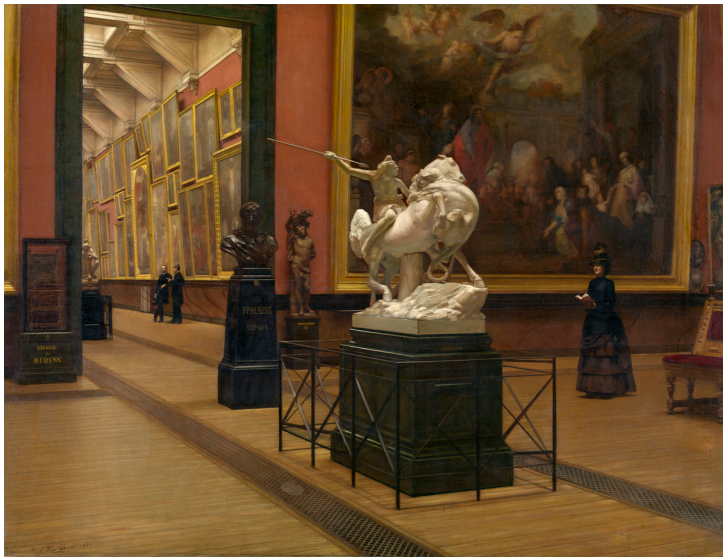
View of the museum, lithograph by Richard Brend'amour in René Corneli and Pierre Mussely, *Anvers et l'Exposition Universelle 1885*, 2nd ed., Brussels, 1886, p. 124.

From Old to New

On Monday 11 August 1890, the new Museum of Fine Arts festively opened its doors. The ceremony was preceded by a long journey. Seventeen years earlier, the Stadswaag (Weighing House) had burned down, a building close to the museum housed at the time in the former Friars Minor Convent. The invaluable art collection narrowly escaped being destroyed.

The museum complex on the historical convent site used to accommodate four museums, each with its own history and collection. The museum infrastructure left much to be desired, however, as did the level of visitor comfort. There was also a lack of space, as the collection kept growing. Renovations addressed these problems to some extent, but for years it had been clear to the authorities that only a new museum building would bring a lasting solution. The catastrophe of 1873 also made it clear that the museum had to be a detached building.

The city therefore decided to erect a new museum. The Belgian state would pay half of the construction costs, with a maximum of one million Belgian francs. That promise gave the project the necessary impetus. In exchange for the money, a public design competition was required. And the state would own half the building.



Henri Van Dyck, *Interior of the Academy Museum, 1886* (inv. no. 1141), photo: Hugo Maertens, Collection KMSKA – Flemish Community (public domain)

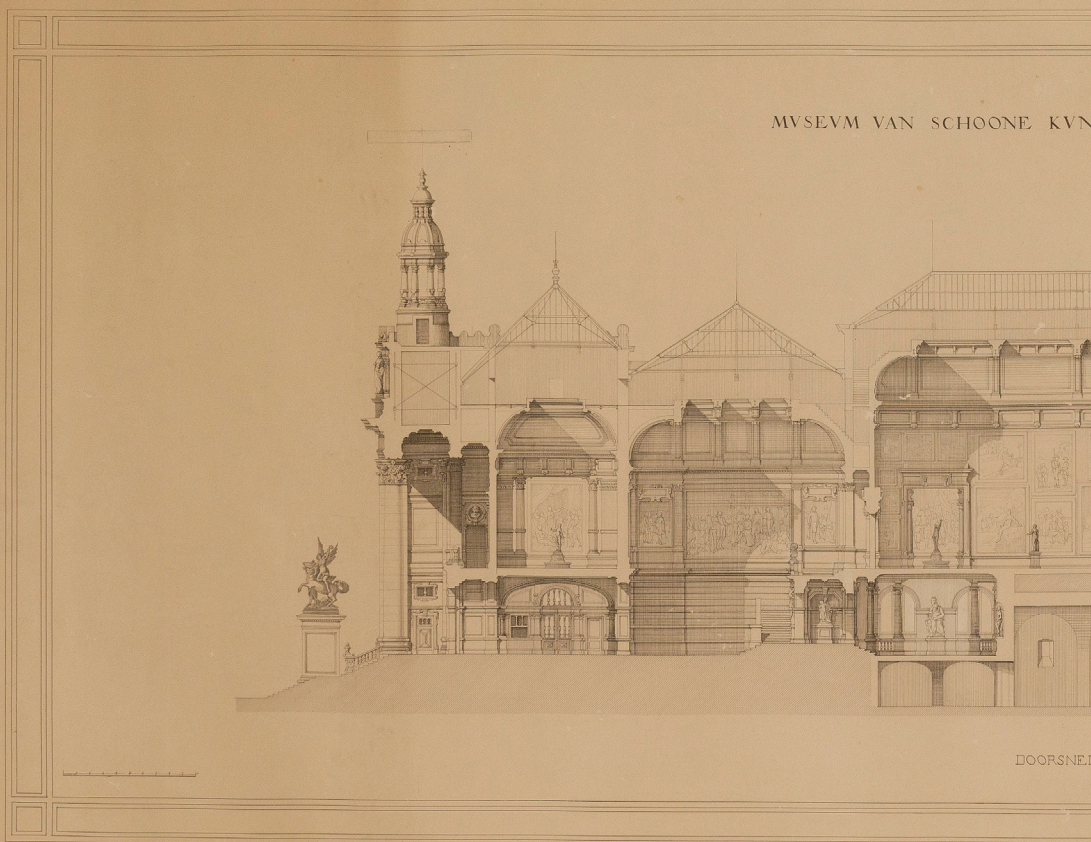
From Competition to Competition, from Design to Design

In 1877 the city launched a competition reserved exclusively for Belgian architects. The monumental series of paintings by painter and Antwerp Academy director Nicaise De Keyser (1813–1887) played a central role in the design assignment. No fewer than thirty-six canvases, made between 1862 and 1872, glorified the values of the Antwerp Academy and its history, singularity and reputation. The series hung in the entrance hall of the old museum. It served as an introduction to the collection and as a tribute to the artists whose work was kept there. De Keyser's paintings were to serve the same role in the new museum.

The fifteen participants in the first competition of 1877 included experienced and renowned architects such as Ernest Dieltjens, brothers Leonard and Henri Blomme, Joseph Martin Ryssens de Lauw and Adolphe Vanderheggen. The competition did not produce a clear winner but a selection of six candidates. Among them, Jean-Jacques Winders and Frans Van Dijk, two remarkably young architects with significantly less experience.

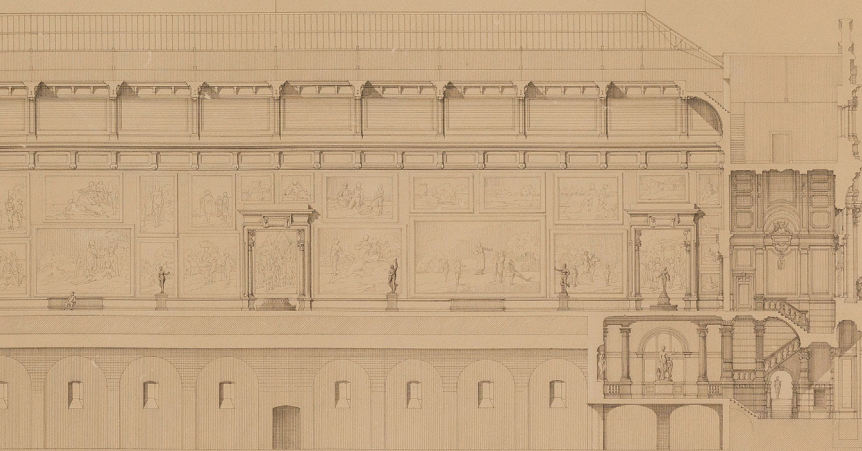
A new competition was held to find a winner. In 1879 five of the six selected candidates competed against each other. Again, there was no clear winner, but the judges recognized the qualities of the new proposals by both Winders and Van Dijk. A combination of both designs would produce the best results. In 1882 they were asked to submit a joint design. Two years later, the final design was ready. Construction could begin.





Cross-section of the museum, preliminary design by Jean-Jacques Winders and Frans Van Dijk, 1883, pen, pencil, watercolour, 645 x 965 mm.
Flemish Government – Collection Flemish Community. Depository Flanders Architecture Institute

KUNSTEN TE ANTWERPEN



*Gezigt naar de voormiddag
van het Koninkrijk en het
26 februari 1788
Op verzoek van de
de heer van de
Antwerpen*

RSNEDE

Opgevoelt door de ondergetekende bouwmeester

Antwerpen den 1 Januari 1788

Ant. W. de G. de G. de G.

From Building Site to Inauguration

The museum was built between 1884 and 1890. During earthworks, the contractor came across remnants of a bastion of Antwerp Citadel, built in 1567–72 under the reign of the Duke of Alba, Governor of the Netherlands. The citadel was razed in 1881, part of a large-scale campaign to remove the sixteenth-century fortifications around the city. That operation began in 1864, with a view to ensuring the city's necessary expansion and economic growth.

The construction site was impressive. It covered an area of more than three football pitches, with a continuous 176 m by 135 m wooden fence to keep out trespassers. The size of the project required more than a regular site hut. A temporary building at the entrance to the site included a home for the caretaker, an office for the architects and a meeting room. Working conditions were tough. The stonecutters, for instance, had to work twelve hours a day and no higher pay was provided for night work.

A papier-mâché model, painted in 1884 by Antwerp painter-decorator Henri Verbuecken, was intended to give the city authorities a realistic impression of the museum under construction. The monumental model was on display in the Leys Hall of Antwerp City Hall, where the public could also come and have a look every Sunday. In 1885 a second model was made for the office of the architects.

By 1890, the museum was ready to open. King Leopold II paid an early visit on 26 July. The grand inauguration followed on 11 August. Invited guests from all civil and military authorities, the Antwerp art circles and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts gathered in the premises of the Kunstverbond (Art Circle) in Arenbergstraat. The group went in procession to the City Hall, where the mayor, aldermen and city council received them. The group then made its way to the museum, accompanied by no fewer than 154 associations. There followed speeches by Louis De Winter, alderman for Fine Arts, and Baron Eduard Osy de Zegwaart, the provincial governor who was also representing the state. A bronze commemorative medal was given to all the artists and societies that took part in the procession. A banquet was held in the hall of the Kunstverbond to conclude the celebration.



oster for the reception marking the inauguration of the museum, designed by Frans Van Kuyck.
 500 x 330 mm. Supplement to *De Vlaamsche School*, 1890.
 Collection Flanders Architecture Institute - Collection Flemish Community



The museum under construction, photo commissioned by the contractor Goossens, 26 September 1887.
Unknown collection.



A Fitting Crown

In the nineteenth century, sculpture was intimately linked to architecture. It was found on such official buildings as town halls, banks and churches, as well as on the homes of the upper classes.

The museum featured a rich range of decorations with reliefs, medallions and busts as well as façade sculptures and free-standing sculptures. The architects Winders and Van Dijk determined not only the subjects of the decorations, but also the dimensions and materials, the execution and style. The sculptors merely acted as craft executors of those choices.

The selection of sculptures is typical of the Eurocentric and nationalistic view of art and culture that prevailed at the time, including the hierarchical division between fine and applied arts and the focus on 'the artist as genius'.

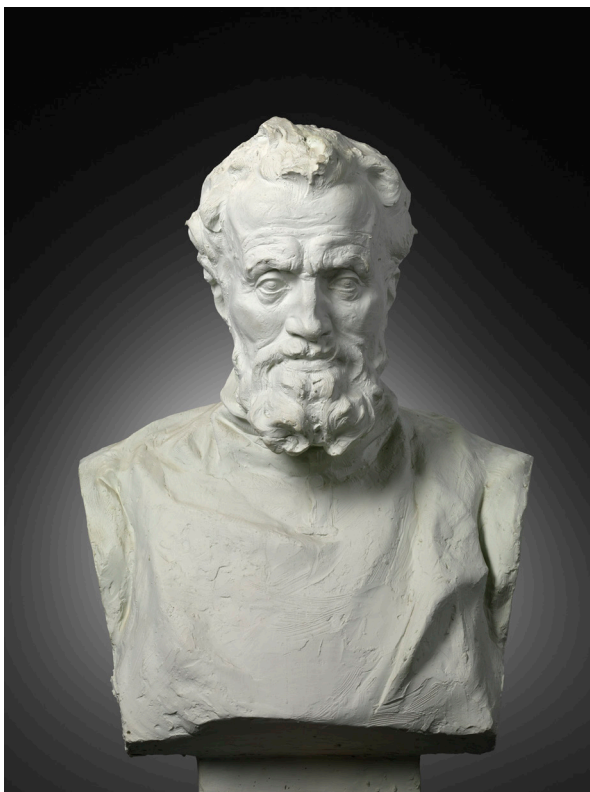
- Front façade: four female figures representing the various branches of art; medallions and portrait busts depicting historical artists from Belgium and abroad, with a clear emphasis on the Antwerp school of art.
- Lateral façades: statues of women as depictions of the art periods, including Egyptian and Arabic art; a figurative frieze with motifs referring to classical antiquity.
- Rear façade: the city of Antwerp as protectress of the arts.
- On the eaves of the front façade: two triumphal groups in bronze of a pair of horses driven by a female figure representing Fame.
- Two groups in bronze on the plinths to the left and right of the steps; only Fame by sculptor Léon Mignon was executed.

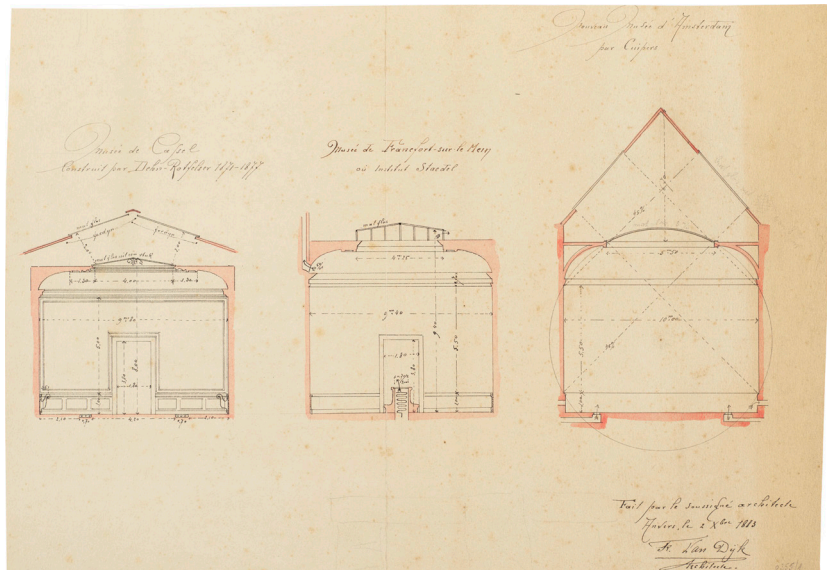
The first commissions date from 1889, when completion of the building was in sight. Twenty-two sculptors were involved in the execution of the works, including Joseph Ducaju, Robert Fabri and Josuë Dupon. Thomas Vinçotte's two triumphal groups on the eaves of the front façade marked the end of this journey in 1903.

Josué Dupon, *The Painter Peter Paul Rubens*, design for a medallion, plaster, ø 600 mm, 1899. Collection KMSKA – Flemish Community

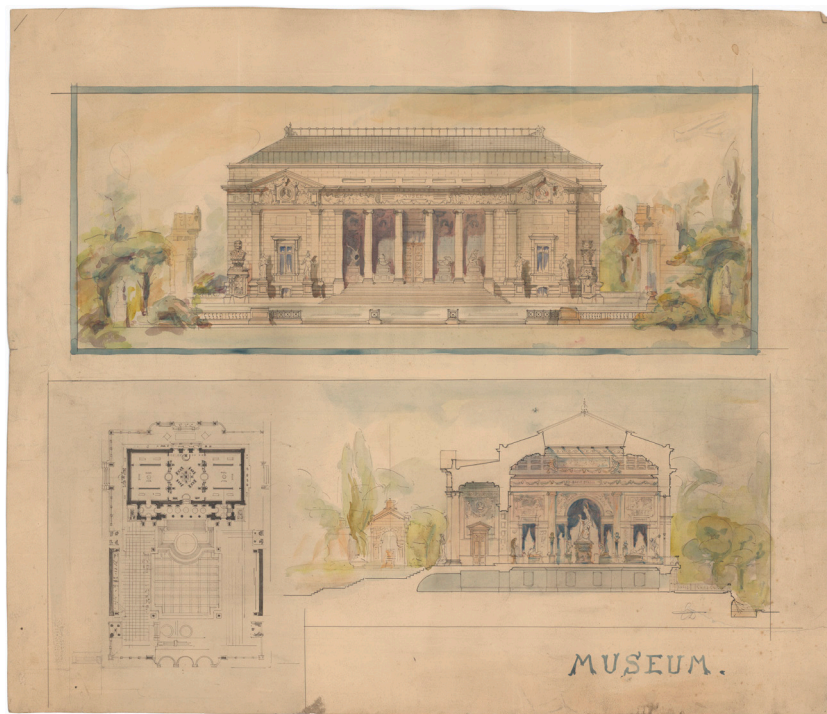


Josué Dupon, *The Artist Michelangelo*, design for a bust, plaster, 850 x 570 x 360 mm, 1891. Collection KMSKA – Flemish Community





Frans Van Dijk, comparative study of the light incidence in the rooms of the Vienna and Dresden museums, 1883, pen and watercolour, 290 x 432. Collection KMSKA – Flemish Community



Eduard Van Steenberghe, Design for a museum, entry for the 1913 triennial competition of the Royal Society of Architects of Antwerp. Pencil, pen and watercolour, 535 x 624 mm. Collection Flanders Architecture Institute – Collection Flemish Community

The Museum Design in a European Perspective

The museum took shape as an architectural type in the course of the nineteenth century. Museum buildings sprang up across Europe as free-standing temples of art. These museums built on such eighteenth-century precursors as the *Fridericianum* (1779) in Kassel. The core elements of the design were a harmonious and often symmetrical plan with main and secondary halls as well as a central foyer, with or without monumental stairs and a dome. Stately interpretations of classicism, the Italian Renaissance and the baroque were common. In developing this model, much attention was paid to the lighting of the halls and the presentation of the art.

The Antwerp authorities focused on this international standard. In 1875, long before the first competition for a new museum building, the city administration was already collecting documentation on museum buildings they considered successful: the Royal Museum of Dresden (now *Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister*), designed by Gottfried Semper and inaugurated in 1855; the *Glyptothek* (1816–30) and the *Alte Pinakothek* (1826–36) in Munich, both designed by Leo von Klenze; and the *Museum der bildenden Künste* in Leipzig, designed in 1856 by Ludwig Lange. The system of natural hall lighting by means of skylights in the Dresden museum left a particular impression. The city authorities went on to publish the plans of that museum in the brochures for both the first (1877) and second (1879) design competitions.

In the company of Alderman for Education Evarist Allewaert and Alderman for Fine Arts Louis De Winter, the architects Winders and Van Dijk travelled to Frankfurt, Vienna, Dresden, Berlin, Munich, Kassel and Amsterdam in 1883 to study the leading museums. The trip yielded useful findings relating to the design of the Antwerp museum.

The museum as a building type was alive and well in the architecture world of the time. It featured prominently as a theme in important design competitions in Belgium, such as the Prix de Rome in 1902 and the triennial competition of the Royal Society of Architects of Antwerp in 1913.



Panoramic view of the Old Antwerp district at the 1894 International Exposition, arranged next to the museum. Reproduction from a photo album. Collection Flanders Architecture Institute – Collection Flemish Community



The museum with, in the foreground, the Congolesse village at the 1894 International Exposition. Reproduction from a photo album. Collection Flanders Architecture Institute - Collection Flemish Community

The Museum, Heart of the South

The South was not the only option as a site for the new museum. Several alternatives were discussed by the Antwerp city council in 1874. Each proposal had fervent advocates. Koning Albertpark in a residential area near Berchem was also debated, as were Franklin Rooseveltplaats near the station, and a plot near Frankrijklei and the City Park, enclosed by Rubenslei and Louiza-Marialei.

None of these alternatives held up against the proposal for the South and certainly not against the interests at stake here. The development of the South was tied to the demolition of Antwerp Citadel (1881), purchased by the *Société Générale* and the *Compagnie Immobilière de Belgique*. To bring urban expansion in that area to a successful and, above all, profitable conclusion, the *Compagnie Immobilière de Belgique* and the Antwerp city council set up the *Société Anonyme du Sud d'Anvers* in 1874. The new company aimed to create poles of attraction to incite the wealthy bourgeoisie to buy up the many building plots. This vision included the Scheldt Free monument (1883) on Marnixplein, the Church of Sts Michael and Peter (1892) on Amerikalei, the synagogue in Bouwmeesterstraat (1893), the train station (1894) on Simon Bolivarplaats (demolished in 1965), and an unbuilt bridge over the Scheldt. For the same reason, the company attracted the 1885 International Exposition. The museum itself was conceived from the outset as a pole of attraction.

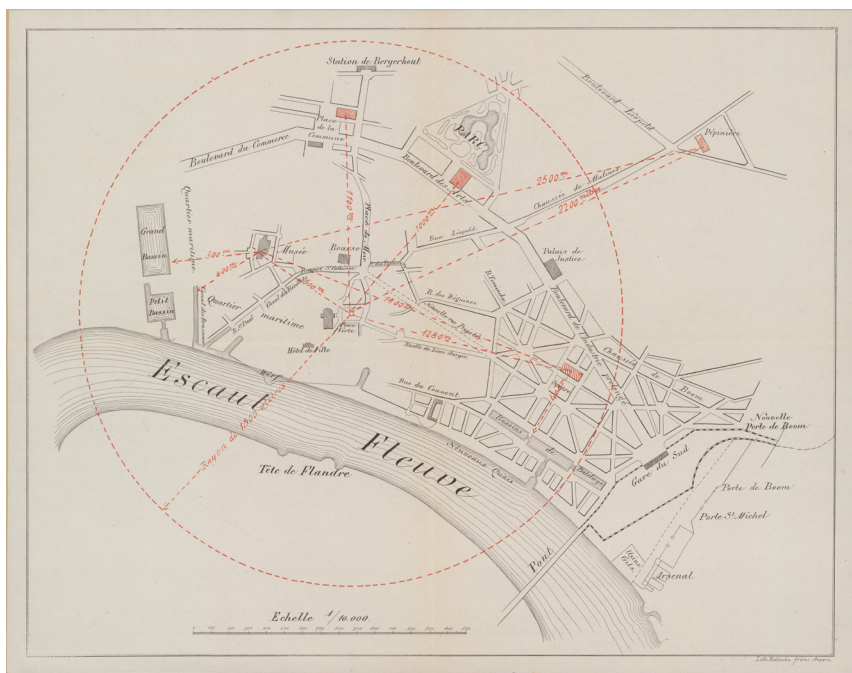
The development did not go as planned. When the *Société Anonyme du Sud d'Anvers* was dissolved in 1890, only part of the intended strategic infrastructure had been realized. Barely 25 per cent of the plots had been sold. The city council had no choice but to take control of the initiative. The arrival of the International Exposition in 1894 provided an opportunity to use the vacant land temporarily and thereby focus attention on the South. The International Exposition took place in a large area around the museum and stretched from Vlaamsekaai to Amerikalei and Brederodestraat, and from Brusselstraat to Scheldestraat and De Vriërestraat.

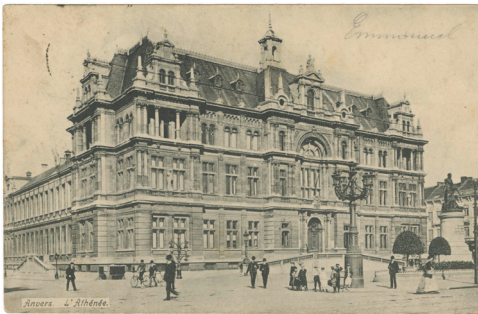
The South was ultimately built up. But the original idea of a middle-class residential area was soon abandoned for a financially more viable plan that included a fish market and investment properties. Aesthetic standards were also adjusted in the process. The museum and other poles of attraction became a permanent reminder of an overall project that was only implemented in part.

Inauguration of the Scheldt Free monument in 1883.
 Photograph, 447 x 627 mm. © CIVA Collections, Brussels



Sites proposed for the museum, 1875. Lithograph, 360 x 460 mm.
 Antwerp City Archives





From top to bottom: Grote Markt; The Athenaeum; Teniersplaats and Leysstraat with monumental corner buildings by Ernest Dieltjens (left) and Frans Van Dijk (right); Leysstraat, with Grand Hôtel Métropole under construction. Postcard
Collection Flanders Architecture Institute – Collection Flemish Community

KMSKA and the Grandeur of Nineteenth-Century Antwerp

The alternative sites for a new museum in 1875 were near the station, on the avenues opposite the Athenaeum and further down near the City Park, and in a residential area near Harmoniepark. This was no coincidence. These sites were central to the social life of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

The demolition of the historic Spanish ramparts from 1864 onwards resulted in the ring of avenues around Antwerp in 1866–68. The route consisted of wide tree-lined boulevards with statues and monuments as well as richly decorated lanterns providing artificial light. There arose on both sides of the street an infrastructure that met the needs of the wealthy bourgeoisie in both functional and aesthetic terms, with a City Park (1869), the Flemish Theatre (1869), the Palace of Justice (1874), the National Bank (1879), the Athenaeum (1884), the Church of Sts Michael and Peter (1897) and the Opera (1907). Grand town houses filled the available space.

The prominent Royal Music Society De Harmonie had its summer venue in Harmoniepark. For decades it had been a meeting place where the Antwerp bourgeoisie attended music performances and parties. The park connected to the residential Leopold district around Leopoldlei, now Belgiëlei. That axis connected Harmoniepark with other poles of importance for the social and cultural life of the Antwerp bourgeoisie, such as the City Park and, further along, the Royal Zoological Society, or Zoo for short.

The layout of the South was promoted as a variant of these bourgeois sites. Here too, a pattern appeared of straight wide avenues, squares and parks, monumental public buildings with distinguished functions, town houses and monuments, presented with an adapted aesthetic marked by neo-styles. The museum was one of the anchor points. In that context, it joined the chain of buildings, monuments and statues that defined Antwerp's nineteenth-century streetscape.

To this day, the grandeur of the nineteenth century plays an important role in the image and perception of the city.

Architect Jean-Jacques Winders (1849-1936)

Winders trained from 1862 to 1867 at the Antwerp Academy. Among his teachers were such prominent figures as provincial architect Jozef Schadde and city architect Pieter Dens as well as Lodewijk Baeckelmans. In 1868 he joined the firm of his father Jean-Baptiste Winders, who, like his father, was a contractor-architect. The company had been involved in the construction of the Brialmont ramparts around Antwerp, a ring of forts. From around 1870, Jean-Jacques Winders worked as a self-employed architect. In the early years, he designed town houses and commercial buildings in an eclectic, richly decorated style, dotted with neo-Greek, neo-Gothic and neo-baroque elements.

Winders came to prominence through two architectural competitions. In 1873 he won the competition for a monument commemorating the liberation of the Scheldt in 1863. The monument on Marnixplein was not inaugurated until 1883; it was widely acclaimed in domestic and foreign journals. The design also marked his reorientation towards the neo-Flemish Renaissance. Winders deployed an eclectic variant that characterizes his work, with great attention to visual effects, ornaments and an abundant use of sculpture.

In 1877 Winders and Frans Van Dijk were among the six laureates of the first competition for a new fine arts museum in Antwerp. A second competition followed in 1879, Van Dijk and Winders emerging as the winners. Their joint design was approved in 1884.

Winders was gradually regarded as one of the stars of the fashionable neo-Flemish Renaissance. He acquired that status with such projects in Antwerp as two linked shop houses on De Keyserlei (1878) and several designs for the Steenackers-Van der Ray family, including a warehouse in Solvijnstraet (1879). Both complexes have since been demolished. The highlight of his oeuvre is *Dit huis is De Passer* genaamd (This house is called The Compass, 1882–83), his home and studio in Tolstraat that he turned into his architectural manifesto. At Bully-les-Mines, near Béthune in northern France, he built a workers' quarter and administrative buildings for the *Mines de Béthune*. Winders boosted his status as a leading architect through persistent self-promotion. He published his designs in domestic and foreign journals.

Due to health issues, Winders concentrated from the 1890s on restorations like the Maagdenhuis in Antwerp as well as on teaching assignments. From 1895, he taught at the Antwerp Academy. In 1896 he joined the Royal Academy of Belgium, of which he became director of the

Class of Fine Arts in 1907. At the same time, he was a member of several professional associations at home and abroad. He also collaborated on several surveys of architectural history. Winders was a committee and jury member of the Antwerp International Exposition (1894), a committee member of the Liège International Exposition (1905) and the Brussels World's Fair (1910). He received numerous domestic and foreign awards.



Historical photograph of Jean-Jacques Winders' first design for the Scheidt Free monument on Sint-Walburgisplein, 420 x 280 mm © CIVA Collections, Brussels

Architect Frans Van Dijk (1853-1939)

Frans Van Dijk trained at the Antwerp Academy from 1864 to 1874. He was taught by such prominent Antwerp figures as provincial architects Jozef Schadde and Leonard Blomme and city architect Pieter Dens. From 1870, he joined Schadde, first as a trainee and later as an associate. It is in that capacity that Van Dijk worked on the reconstruction of the Handelsbeurs (Bourse) in Antwerp (1869-72). The collaboration with Schadde resulted in a long-term and privileged connection with an influential and versatile figure in the Antwerp architectural scene. Among others, Schadde was a lecturer at the Antwerp Academy (1854-94), provincial architect (1852-69), a practitioner with a flourishing private office, a member of scientific societies, and an advocate of historicizing style applications, especially the neo-Flemish Renaissance.

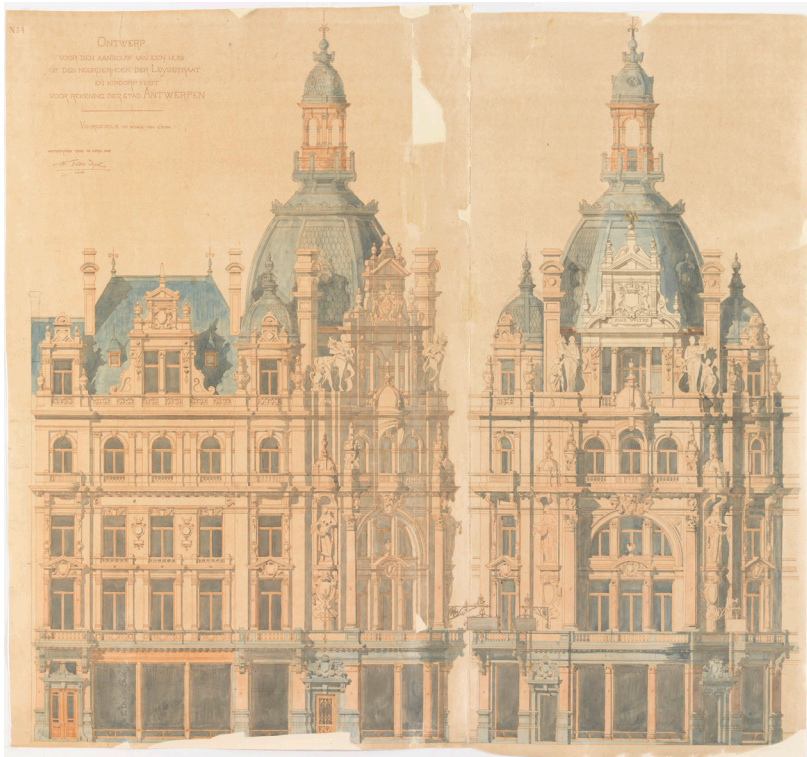
Even during his time as Schadde's associate, Van Dijk entered competitions. In 1876 he won the triennial architecture competition of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Fine Arts. In 1877 he was one of six laureates of the first competition for the design of a new fine arts museum in Antwerp. A new competition followed in 1879, with Van Dijk and Jean-Jacques Winders emerging as the leading winners. They were invited to produce a joint design, which was approved in 1884.

From 1879, Van Dijk worked as a self-employed architect. His oeuvre comprises a remarkable number of commissions for figures from the Antwerp nobility and bourgeoisie, for whom he designed town and country houses, warehouses and trading houses. He had a preference for a monumental, richly decorated version of neo-baroque and neo-Flemish Renaissance design languages. For the Kreglinger family, he prepared, over several stages, the historicizing restoration and conversion of three former guild houses and adjoining buildings on Antwerp's Grote Markt. The first to be restored was the Spaengien house in 1893. This project spurred the long-lasting undertaking to restore and rebuild the façades on the market square in a historicizing style.

The Museum of Fine Arts was not the only project in the South in which Van Dijk was involved. He also designed the Church of Sts Michael and Peter in 1892. Van Dijk had other important Catholic clients. The *Société Anonyme pour la Construction de Maisons Bourgeoises* developed the new Zurenborg district. He designed no fewer than six groups of houses there between 1897 and 1907, five of them on the central Cogels-Osylei. He built a complex for the newspaper *La Métropole*; spanning Leysstraat, Kipdorpvest and Jezusstraat, it included an office building, printing office, director's house, garage and caretaker's house (1901-03).

Van Dijk also designed the grand corner building *Grand Hôtel Métropole*, commissioned by the city authorities in 1899; together with its counterpart on the opposite side of Leysstraat, it served as a stately beacon on the newly developed Leysstraat and as a visually prominent monument on the busy route from the Central Station to the Meir.

Van Dijk taught at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp from 1901 to 1923 and was a member of several professional associations.



Frans Van Dijk, presentation drawing of the *Grand Hôtel Métropole* in Antwerp, pen and watercolour, 1899. Collection Flanders Architecture Institute – Collection Flemish Community

Erfgoedapp

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Get surprised and inspired during this wonderful walk through the Zuidwijk! We take you along the architecture and rich history of the KMSKA and The South. Admire, among other things, the home of Jean-Jaques Winders, one of the architects of the KMSKA.

The walk takes about 1.5 hours with a distance of 2.5 kilometers. The walk is fun for all ages 10 and up.

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MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS À ANVERS.
 FRAGMENT DE LA FAÇADE PRINCIPALE.
 DU PROJET COURONNÉ AU CONCOURS OUVERT PAR LA VILLE
 D'ANVERS EN 1877.

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 Echelle

