

## PRESS RELEASE

The Ensembles exhibition examines unique link between craftsmanship and architecture

# The craftsman and the architect: as thick as thieves

After the widely appreciated Flemish presentation on ‘craftsmanship’ in the Belgian pavilion at the Architecture Biennale in Venice, the craftsman is now also making his appearance at deSingel. In *Ensembles. Architecture and Craft*, the Flanders Architecture Institute (VAi) and the Antwerp Provincial Architectural Archives (APA) offer a view of what craft and craftsmanship have meant to architects both past and present.

‘Craftsmanship’, ‘craft’ and ‘manual production’ have become buzzwords in the creative sector and far beyond. Handwork, repair shops, all manner of DIY books: they are all the rage again. At the same time, learning a craft is more than ever seen as a credible response to the problem of unskilled youngsters in towns and cities. *Ensembles* looks at how architects find these craftsmen to be partners in creating good architecture.



Library in Burundi, built with local materials © BCarchitects&studies

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## Prefab concrete is also the result of craftsmanship

The intense collaboration between architect and craftsman, but also the use of traditional techniques with local material and passing on knowledge, leads to new insights and innovative building methods. It is not only the obvious building materials such as wood and brick that turn up in projects where the interaction between designer and maker is crucial, but also metal and concrete. How do architecture students cooperate with prospective joiners to make a window frame? What does prefab concrete have to do with craftsmanship and skill?

*“The production of prefab concrete is a perfect example of how craftsmanship is not always visible in contemporary architecture, but is still a fundamental aspect of the building process.”*

Bart Tritsmans, curator **Ensembles**

Big objects in the exhibition space, such as a brick chimney or a steel node function as ‘an ode to craftsmanship’. They show how architecture students work together with carpenters, what prefab concrete has to do with craftsmanship or why the quest for the perfect weld for the steel structure of a public building is so important. Bart Tritsmans, one of the two curators of Ensembles, explains: “The production of prefab concrete is a perfect example of how craftsmanship is not always visible in contemporary architecture, but is still a fundamental aspect of the building process. There’s actually a lot of craftsmanship involved in making a prefab product. First one has to make 3D-drawings that lead to beautiful, complex drawings on wood. After that a template is made, in order to make the concrete element, what is then a perfectly modeled wooden sculpture.”



Transformation of an abandoned building in Prishtina (Kosovo) to a space for the community, a joint venture of Toestand, InfoQuartier Mâche & Prishtina Architecture Week 1

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## **Craftsmanship as the key to social cohesion**

Next to the material aspect of craftsmanship, *Ensembles* also focuses on the social impact of the collaboration between craftsmanship and architect. “By reintroducing craftsmanship in an urban environment the local knowledge about architecture and the building process is reinforced” explains curator Christoph Grafe. A great opportunity for the urban economy lies ahead. “The increasing number of unemployed youngsters in our cities can find a new goal in life by picking up a craft and learning to appreciate true craftsmanship. Nowadays there’s a lack of craftsmen in the city. They could fill in that gap.”

*“By reintroducing craftsmanship in an urban environment the local knowledge about architecture and the building process is reinforced”* Christoph Grafe, curator **Ensembles**

Projects of different Flemish and international architecture offices show the importance of craftsmanship for the future being of architecture. Offices such as BC Architects and Studies, Gafpa, MUF, 6A and Patrick Bouchain explain what ‘building together’ can accomplish in a community.

## **Craftsmanship of all times**

The passing of the Ancien Régime signaled the end of the age-old system of guilds and trades. However, the Industrial Revolution sparked off movements that looked back to pre-industrial heydays. Both in Belgium and internationally, handwork, craftsmanship and the ‘honest’ use of materials was celebrated for various reasons and in various ways: in Neo-Gothic, the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau, the brick architecture seen between the wars, the first experiments with such ‘modern’ materials as steel and concrete, and in the residents’ protests and participation movements of the 1970s.

In this exhibition, contemporary partnerships – we might call them encounters or collaborations – involving architects and craftsmen are matched with historical examples. For this purpose, the curators draw on the Antwerp Province Architectural Archives.

Breathtaking photos of the steel construction for the ‘Boerentoren’ skyscraper in Antwerp can be seen alongside academic drawings by architecture students showing wooden constructions, roof structures, carpentry and joinery, brick bonds and wrought iron, a drawing of the façade of the ‘Liberaal Volkshuis’ in Antwerp on which a group of architects and applied artists worked together intensively, a skillfully designed wrought iron capital from Horta’s lamented ‘Volkshuis’ in Brussels, pictures of neighbourhood cooperation on ‘the square’ in the beguinage at Mechelen in 1975, etc. “*Ensembles* proves that craftsmanship and traditional expertise in a new co-working context can lead to innovation in architecture today” says Tritsmans. As an example the curator points out two life-sized objects in the exhibition: “An iron capital from the ‘Brussels Volkshuis’ from 1896-1899 and an impressive steel node from the ‘Waalse Krook’ in Ghent, a project by architects Coussée and Goris. Together these two objects show how craftsmanship will always be connected to architecture.”





Craftsmen working on the Boerentoren, 1930 Antwerp © Architectuurarchief van de provincie Antwerpen 2

- ➔ [Installation / designer Nathalie Van der Massen and the Bataille & ibens archive](#)  
Also visit the VAI display case to view the result of a design exercise by textile designer Nathalie Van der Massen. She has devised a new fabric design inspired by the archives of the interior architects Bataille & ibens.

[DOWNLOAD THE PRESS IMAGES](#)

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## Colophon

**production** Flanders Architecture Institute (VAi), deSingel International Arts Campus and the Antwerp Province Architectural Archives (APA).

**curators** Christoph Grafe and Bart Tritsmans

**exhibition design** Asli Cicek

## exhibition

Fri 30 September 2016 > Sun 15 Jan 2017

open Wed > Sun / 2 > 6 pm and during evening performances

closed Mon, Tue and holidays

admission: €5

tickets on sale at the entrance to the exhibition

## opening

Thur 29 September – preview and opening talk in the Blue Hall at 8 pm

free

book for the opening and series of talks at

[www.vai.be/inschrijvingen](http://www.vai.be/inschrijvingen)

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The Flanders Architecture Institute's 2016-17 programme has been made possible by the support from:



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