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The stepped story of a community school

Arnaud De Sutter – Photos Franziska Kriek

Faced with a municipal school housed in unsuitable infrastructure, the authorities of Melle decided to relocate it. To that end they bought newly vacant land, a former school site in the heart of a allotment a bit further on. The ambitious council aimed to build a compact but future-oriented school in a park there. The result, the Park School by Petillon Ceuppens Architecten and Schenk Hattori Architecture Atelier, embraces the interior area and steers its use in the right direction. It is in line with the inconstant rhythm of allotment Flanders but also goes against it.



In the context of its commitment, the municipality contacted the Team Flemish Government Architect. When it appeared that Melle's administration didn't have sufficient expertise in terms of project management and the drafting of a project definition (both management and definition being required within the Open Call), the regional intermunicipal organization Veneco entered the process. This organization assists twenty-one municipalities around Ghent in various spatial areas. Rien Gellynck, coordinator within its Spatial Planning department, praises the initiative of the municipal council: 'Subdividing the plots the traditional way was not an option. We wanted to house a park and a community school on it, with space for a music school and a local gym club.'

Gellynck supervised the process up to the building permit application. There was about a year between Veneco's appointment and the publication of the competition in 2017. This period of time was used to conduct extensive preliminary research. With input from the municipal and school administration and the stakeholders, Veneco prepared a thorough project definition. It focused on the envisioned functioning of the community school and how that could translate into spatial schemes. Optimal organization of the park was sought in consultation with local residents. For

Gellynck, this was a successful work method. 'The preliminary study and the project definition established a framework the architects could operate in. Discussions with the neighbourhood and the board had already taken place when the competition started, so that thorny issues had been resolved and the architects could focus fully on the design.'

The winning design, by the young team around Petillon Ceuppens and Schenk Hattori, was selected unanimously. It consists of a compact school that efficiently separates the public park from the playground. The concept of the school building proved highly innovative. By placing the escape routes from the classrooms along the façade, above via a circular walkway, the halls inside can be used as a central area for meeting and collaboration, but can also be opened up to outsiders without disturbing the classrooms. The design thus goes against rigid thinking in education.

After the selection, it turned out that the initially requested renovation of the former sports hall on the site was unfeasible. On top of the competition question, the architects were asked to design a new hall. This did not happen within the framework of the Open Call but was overseen by Veneco. The role of the intermunicipal association changed throughout the process. After the selection it acted mainly →

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The use of the rooms is not permanent but can evolve over time. The design is about the presence of the hard programme.





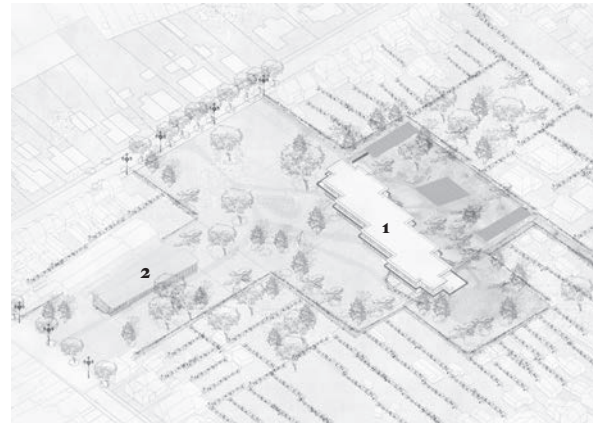
as an adviser on budgetary issues and served to monitor timing, programme and quality. Once the project was granted a permit, Dieter Van Acker, project coordinator in the Project Development and Management Department, took over from his colleague. For him, the role of project manager is essentially that of a mediator. 'Sitting down with the architect, client and contractor, my goal was to obtain the best possible compromise between the different visions', he says. 'Besides representing the client's interests, Rien and I acted as neutral referees in the interest of the project.' As both coordinators have a background in architecture, they were able to fulfil both duties expertly.

Due to several lockdowns, the school was finished around the turn of 2022, not on time but within budget. The Park School consists of two large and several smaller volumes in Elsdries Park. Within the amalgam of the allotment, the gymnasium is no exception, standing next to a barn and alluding to its scale and formal idiom. The multifaceted building of the school stands out immediately and shows itself in different ways. From one street it appears as a slender profile, as if it were a detached house; from the gymnasium it appears as a wide strip that borders the park, a backdrop against which to play.

In plan, the school is a stepped figure, between park and playground. It consists of a square grid of columns, concrete bricks stacked in a cruciform shape, with a wide-slab floor. Free walls create classrooms between them. The arrange- →

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The Park School consists of 2 compact volumes in Elsdries Park: the school building and – a bit further on, across from it – the new sports

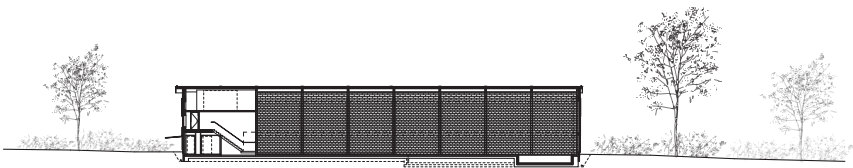
hall. In plan, the school is a stepped figure, between park and playground. In architectural terms, the sports hall looks like a neighbouring barn.



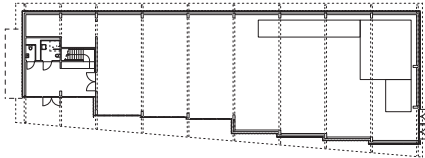
1 school building
2 sports hall



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Sports hall



Section

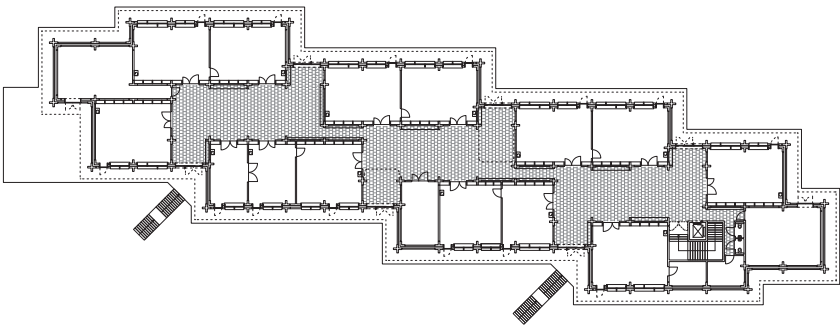


Floor 0

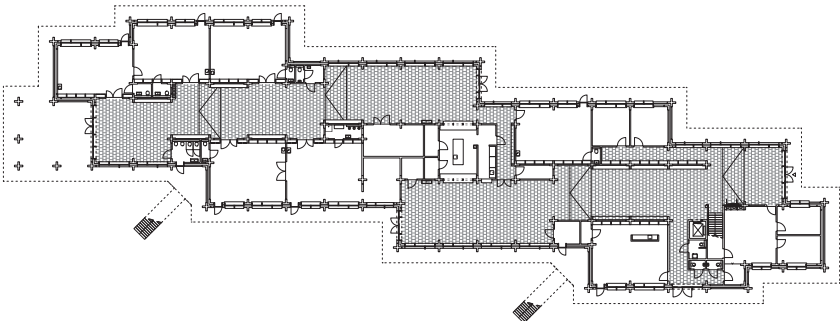
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School building



Section



Floor 1



Floor 0



Architect
Petillon Ceuppens –
Schenk Hattori
Website
petillonceuppens.be
schenkhattori.com
Project name
Park School
Location
Melle, Belgium

Programme
A new kindergarten and pri-
mary school with sports hall
and public park
Procedure
Open Call
(Team Flemish Government
Architect)
Client
Municipality of Melle

Landscape architect
Veneco
Structural engineering
Tandem ingenieurs
Services engineering
NVTs engineering
Lead contractor
Strabag Belgium
Completion
August 2021

Total floor area
4,500 m²
Budget
€ 6,900,000
(excl. VAT and fees)
Product/Supplier
Firestone/Elevate
(EPDM roof),
Soprema (membranes),
Geberit (sanitary facilities),
Bega (outdoor lighting)

ment is not fixed and the spaces can be put to different uses over time. The design is about the spaces in-between, the absence of any well-defined programme. This in-between space flows diagonally through the building as a public space in two places, guided by the columns. A refectory during school hours but above all a multipurpose hall, it can be used outside school hours for external initiatives. The two in-between spaces are connected by the kitchen, which acts as a hinge between kindergarten and primary school.

Because the ground floor slopes with the terrain, while the first floor remains flat, the spaces become lower the further away one moves from the main entrance. This lends the entrance and offices greater openness while giving the kindergarten more security, tailored to the pupils. On the first floor, the classrooms are arranged by grade around a hall. This hall runs from façade to façade and is connected to the adjacent hall by a short corridor. A walkway extends on the outside of the building. Each classroom opens onto it, as do the common halls, as well as two staircases leading to the playground. The walkway acts as an escape route, so the halls do not have to. That is why they can be fitted with furniture and the corridor can be used for teaching or playing.

As a translation of the programme, the gymnasium is a juxtaposition of three spaces under one roof. A small volume for the entrance hall and sanitary facilities stands next to a slightly larger sports hall for the school, followed by an even larger hall for the club. The spaces form a whole but are also recognizably present through the articulation of the building.

Within the allotment, the park is a welcome change, as it creates contact between people and provides a clear resting point. Valuable trees were preserved, parking spaces kept out. The Elsdries Park accommodates areas for sports and play, sunbathing areas with space for the neighbourhood fair and cycle paths. It connects with the surrounding area and local residents. Thanks to its neutral presence in a lively context, the Park School exerts a strong attraction on the community. It combines its welcoming spaciousness with a uniform and warm materiality. The designers thus managed to create an environment in which education can take place uncompromisingly, a building ready for juvenile action, to the benefit of the pupils. ▲ ■ ●

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Within the amalgam of the allotment, the building of the sports hall is no exception. It stands next to a barn and alludes to its scale and formal idiom.

