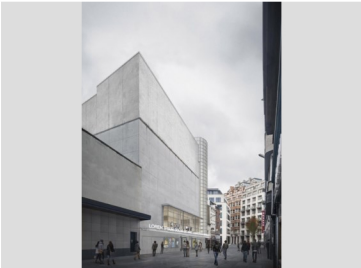




ARCHITECTURE

# Brussels ruin becomes cultural meeting place

Yesterday at 05:00 by **Geert Sels**



A simulation of the new Théâtre des Variétés. Photo: Flores & Gals / Ouest

**After thirty years of vacancy and arson by squatters, the modernist Théâtre des Variétés is being revived. Bxl Laique will house culture and debate there. Budget: 19 million euros.**

The Mechelsestraat is a transit zone. It connects two Brussels boulevards: Adolphe Maxlaan and Jacqmainlaan. It is a narrow street, where the worst filth has been cleaned away by lifeless facades. Here and there lies a forgotten eatery and a café. Two shops for erotica are located opposite the side wall of the Plaza Hotel.

What a difference with the Mechelsestraat of the 1930s. Back then she drew the public in dense droves. Five *lieux de plaisirs* were next to each other, with variety theaters and cinemas. Some of those halls had a capacity of two thousand seats. Anyone who wanted a night out knew that he could count on entertainment here. Thousands of visitors must have walked here at its peak times.

One of those halls was the Théâtre des Variétés from 1937, for which the modernist architect Victor Bourgeois entered into a collaboration with his French colleague Maurice Gridaine. In order to stand out among all those entertainment houses, they had a tower peak above the building on the side in the modernist tradition. It was completely glazed, so that the lighting behind it shone like a beacon. The building rested on a concrete skeleton, which was filled in with brick, which was then behind a layer of cement. The facade gave the impression that it was made of concrete, but it was not.

In its heyday, this theater was a performing instrument. The hall had 2,400 seats and had a revolving stage and an orchestra pit with a lift. When the variety show had seen its best days, the hall was converted in 1961 into a cinema for widescreen films. In 1983 the hall was closed for security reasons. She then remained moribund for about thirty years. Squatters moved in and set fire to it. In 2003, the Brussels Region protected the main facade, the roof and the hall to protect the building from total destruction.

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It is also the Brussels Region that is now approving the renovation of the building. The assignment goes to the Barcelona architectural firm Flores & Prats, which completed a very similar project in its home city. It converted a cooperative building into the Sala Beckett, a dynamic cultural center. Flores & Prats also signed a cultural center in Palma de Mallorca and an office of 150,000 square meters for Microsoft near Milan.

For this renovation, the office is working with the Belgian architects van Oost, who are currently working on Théâtre Jean Vilar in Louvain-la-Neuve and who are creating additional studios for the Parts dance course. 'Bxl Laique will not use the building as a traditional cultural center', says Jan Haerens van Oost. 'So far, the organization set up an annual festival and is now going to expand that operation permanently.' Culture is a lever to attract the public and set up debates on social themes.

The design includes a large hall for a thousand people, for concerts and performing arts. A smaller room, with about four hundred people, is suitable for film screenings, exhibitions and debates. 'The spaces around those rooms are equally important,' says Stephane Damsin, also from Oost. 'Bxl Laique works on social themes such as migration, literacy, human rights or the prison system. That is why we have created an inner street between the halls. It will be a continuous space with separate corners and zones, a kind of friendly square where different audiences feel at ease.'

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