

DEAR PHILIPPE

DEAR PIET

TEMPELIERSHOEVE

JOS

ARCHIVE

PROMISE

TENSION

PAPER

IDEOLOGY

CRAFT

ALLES IST UMBAU

REGION

STIJN

ENGLAND

RUIN

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SLOWNESS

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STONE

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BEACON

CHARACTER

EMBELLISSEMENT

COMPRESSION

DEAR PIET



The destroyed Cloth Hall, Ypres, 25 April 1919.
Photo by Antony d'Ypres.





Joseph Viérin, about 1938.

JOS

I went to work at my father's office. Even though such a step is no longer, as in the past, a matter of course, it still sounds very ordinary. My father did the same, and so did his father. Four architects from father to son. And yet I have no knowledge of another family with four generations of architects. It appears that we four are rather unique. The first was Joseph, or Jos, as he called himself. The word 'great-grandfather' is a bit of a mouthful. I never knew him, so I too will call him by the abbreviated first name he chose for himself.

His grandfather came from Valgrisenche, a place high up in the mountains near Aosta, in Italy. He moved to Flanders, twice, and the second time he stayed and married a girl from Kortrijk. He entered her parents' cloth shop and carried on the business. In Valgrisenche, everything is still recorded neatly in large registers. Every newborn child, every marriage, with its branches and ramifications, can be found among family members we can still visit there. It was an environment with a heightened awareness of place and climate, and so with a strong connection between people and roots.

I wonder whether this led the grandson to be aware of the environment to which he belonged. Jos studied in Sint-Lucas in Ghent. This was in the 1890s. Sint-Lucas was founded in 1862 by Jean-Baptiste Bethune, a man who was heavily influenced by the ideas of the English neo-Gothic architect Augustus Pugin. Bethune had a particular purpose in setting up this school. He wanted to train the right people in order to build a Christian community. The aim was a return to the values and customs that had been lost as a result of the growing industrialization and the far-reaching consequences it entailed. The emphasis lay in the beginning on religious buildings in a neo-Gothic style.

At the time of Jos's studies at Sint-Lucas, the emphasis had shifted to more bourgeois assignments. But even though neo-Gothicism was no longer the doctrine and attention was growing for the Arts and Crafts Movement, the continuation of building traditions was still very much alive. At the time you could still make a distinction between academy-trained architects and Sint-Lucas architects: the former being the classical or beaux-arts architects, the latter having leaped over that period to look further back in time. Your training marked you for life. The Ghent-native Joris Helleputte – engineer, architect and later minister for the Catholic Party, which would play such a decisive role in the reconstruction – was one of the patrons of Sint-Lucas and a staunch proponent of neo-Gothicism. It is difficult to tell how well thought-out his decision was, but what we know for certain is that Jos's decision to go to Sint-Lucas would determine his future career.



Extension of the Museum Plantin-Moretus in Antwerp by noAarchitecten, 2016. New façade in collaboration with artist Benoît van Innis.

S L O W N E S S

It is often said that building is a slow process, while in actual fact things often have to go very fast. When it comes to building, different speeds appear to be in conflict with one another. That was certainly the case when an entire region was destroyed a hundred years ago.

The story of the German architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel is well known. When he visited England in the first half of the nineteenth century, he was appalled to see that, at places where cows had still been grazing a couple of years earlier, the brick walls had now been blackened by the soot from the factory chimneys. He may have been exaggerating slightly, but what he wanted to say was that the quality of the architecture had suffered under the speed at which the change had happened. Today, in China, residential towers are going up faster than their plans can be drawn up. We stare in surprise at the images of the new cities housing millions of inhabitants.

For the American philosopher Lewis Mumford, building could be nothing but a slow process, if it were to be done properly: 'The architect must build from structure to structure on his own experience and absorb that of other architects, past and present.' The time assigned to conceive an architectural project is too short to come up with new solutions each time. A process of transmission and evolving insight is beneficial to building. This is how he formulated it in the early 1960s, in reaction to a fast-changing environment around him. He was neither a traditionalist nor against progress, but the technological developments had gained the upper hand and had become dehumanized. Novelty had become the norm. This brought about a shrinking of time. Everything had to go faster and faster in order to be able to keep up.

Mumford expresses it differently than we explain it in our architectural practice, but it comes down to the same. A person needs anchors in their environment, points of reference. The accumulation of one layer on top of another, through time, can generate such an anchor. When everything is new, there is a problem. Not everything has to be old, for that matter. In fact, something can be new and still have a strong connection with the past. A sufficient degree of organic growth or evolution is necessary for an environment to feel natural. In our work we build forth on what exists already and innovate within an idea of continuity.

When working on the extension of the Museum Plantin-Moretus in Antwerp, we learned that things also contain a form of slowness. We were building a new archive beside houses that dated from the sixteenth century, an age when wooden timber framing was supplanted by the use of stone. The change in material was not accompanied by a change of form, however. The timber framing remained visible in the façades.