

"IS THERE A BELGIAN SPECIFICITY TO THE EXPORT OF ARCHITECTURE?"

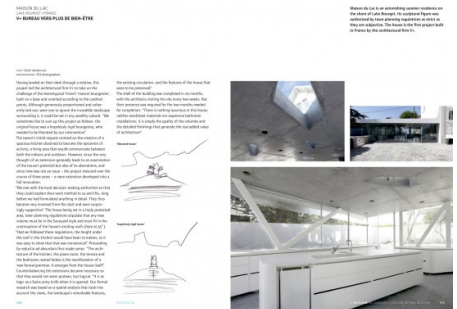
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"Another question worth asking is that of the Belgian specificity of exporting architecture, and thus the question as to whether it implies the export of a certain practice of architecture, or the figure of the architects themselves? In his introduction to this special issue, the Ghent-based academic Johan Lagae traces the development in this field from the 19th century onwards, and raises the question as to whether it is 'a story of big names'. Indeed, Belgian architecture on the international stage has so far never involved major names launched abroad with the support of government authorities. The same conclusion was drawn during the part of the round-table discussion entitled 'Around the table': 'Our export product is our know-how rather than a specific style'. The underlying explanation for this phenomenon is rather complex. It is true that Belgian architects rarely make any grand gestures in their work and that they prefer to remain focused on the essential. At the same time, however, there is no denying that Belgians rarely identify with their architecture, on the one hand, and that politicians, on the other, have failed to discern the real potential of this difficultly identifiable matter, certainly over the last 30 years. It nevertheless remains that Belgian architects who try to stretch their wings beyond their national borders rely on themselves and their networks, whether they be economic, cultural, academic, or personal. The decision to work abroad is due, for some, to a willingness to diversify the firm's portfolio so as to increase turnover, while for others, export can represent an opportunity to have access to challenging commissions or can be a way out of a saturated national market. For what lies at the root of the Belgian export of architecture is first and foremost an obvious fact, and that is, that as a small country, our attention has always been turned outwards. It is a no less obvious fact that also explains another specificity of Belgian architecture: the tendency to explore the potential that is found abroad and combine it with Belgian technical mastery rather than implement a 'Belgian' project on foreign soil. This consideration for the native culture can be integrated either through the client or through a local architectural firm, which it seems inevitable to associate with to successfully complete a project on the international stage. Some partners thus have a particular know-how, while others are intimately familiar with the local building culture and red tape."

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