

Press release
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Museum M in Leuven **Labyrinth of art**



B1 | Window on the city – with its large panoramic window, the new building provides views both from inside the building and from the outside.

Old and new art, Medieval and modern: Belgian architect Stéphane Beel has developed an architectural concept which links the historical cabinets in Museum M in Leuven with the modern exhibition spaces of the new building. Differentiated lighting is used to bring out the qualities of the artworks in different ways.

Well-known for its university, Leuven, situated around 20 km east of Brussels, has recently also acquired a reputation as an outstanding location for art: after five years of planning and construction, Museum M in the city centre opened in September 2009. With a collection including, in total, 46,000 objects of Medieval and contemporary art, the museum has become the central institution preserving the cultural heritage of the former Duchy of Brabant and also serves as a bridge between historical times and the present. “Centuries old yet bursting with life”, the motto of the capital of the province of Flemish Brabant also applies to the new muse-

um: with several entrances, the extensive complex is integrated into the historical city centre and combines within itself different architectural styles and epochs, and provides a lively, multi-layered venue for art.

“Our aim was to make the museum a place in which art can flourish and where it can be enjoyed, instead of locking it away”, says Stéphane Beel, explaining his design. The architect and his Ghent firm are regarded as museum specialists who have already made a name for themselves with well-known projects such as the glass pavilion in front of the Rubens House in Antwerp or the extension of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht. In Leuven, Beel opted for the difficult strategy of bringing together old and new as independent spatial structures around a central inner courtyard. The earlier academy building and the Vander Kelen-Mertens palace – both buildings are integrated into the Museum M – were carefully restored in accordance



with conservation rules and connected via a bridge with a modern new building. In total, 6,500 square metres of exhibition space are distributed between the historical and the modern rooms within the labyrinthine museum complex. Whereas in the existing buildings the colourful splendour of past ages is displayed in small cabinets with wooden ceilings and wall panelling, the new building has a sober and low-key appearance. It was this clear contrast and opposition of old and new which Stéphane Beel wished to emphasise. In future, old masters will be exhibited in new gallery spaces and vice versa. A strict allocation of the exhibition spaces is not planned.

“The conservation and exhibition of art, as well as the art itself, do not demand a specific building type”, believes Stéphane Beel. Instead of monotonous, isolated rooms, he has created a varied and versatile museum complex with some spacious, high-ceilinged rooms, as well as smaller rooms with lower ceilings. The architects’ lighting concept reflects the character of the individual galleries and reacts sensitively to their specific spatial requirements. For example, the heritage-protected art cabinets of the existing buildings are illuminated using delicate Supersystem tracks suspended below the old wooden ceiling on barely-visible wires. Where needed, vertical wall washers provide flexible,

expressive accent lighting of the exhibits. “The use of wallwashers and wide-field reflectors allows us to avoid stark contrasts between the exhibited works and the surrounding walls” says Jan Van den Bergh of RCR studiebureau, responsible for the electrical design. Three-phase tracks with spotlights are used for the general, compact and flexible lighting. In the significantly more spacious white-cube rooms of the new buildings, the Tecton track lighting is supplemented with Tempura LED spotlights, the colour temperature of which can be adjusted within the range from 2700 to 6500 K, depending on the requirements of the artworks. The LED lighting also prevents the art objects being damaged by thermal or UV radiation.

The museum’s first special exhibition following the opening, which was attended by Princess Mathilde of Belgium and Princess Máxima of the Netherlands, is devoted to the living Belgian artist Jan Vercruyssen and the old master Rogier van der Weyden. Around 100 masterpieces associated with the famous Dutch master have been brought together from European and American collections; many of the sensitive painted panels are being exhibited for the first time in Leuven – displaying a wealth of light and colour which allows Museum M to shine in the Flemish manner.

Fact box

Client:	Autonomo Gemeentebedrijf Museum Leuven/B
Architecture:	Stéphane Beel Architecten, Gent/B
Electrical design:	RCR studiebureau, Herent/B
Electrical installation:	Spie NV, Zaventem/B
Lighting solution:	Special solution with TC-L 36 W wallwasher, SUPERSYSTEM 3-phase track, TECTON with track module, LED emergency lighting RESCLITE, LED spotlight TEMPURA, recessed luminaires SLOTLIGHT II in IP 54, surface-mounted luminaire PERLUCE



B2 | The glowing walls and wooden panelling of the magnificent historical cabinets stand in stark contrast to the new building. LED spotlights illuminate the exhibits in the showcases.



B3 | In the rooms of the old building, delicate Supersystem tracks are suspended from the ceiling on barely-visible wires.



B4 | The differentiated lighting concept creates different lighting moods in each room. As one walks around, rooms with emphasised zones of light and shadow alternate with spacious evenly-lit galleries.

B5 | The unfocused track lighting on the ceilings of the rooms in the new building supports the neutral white cube concept. Individual art objects are additionally lit using LED spotlights with adjustable light temperature.





B6 | The medieval sculptures are displayed to particularly striking effect in the modern exhibition spaces. Their glowing colours contrast vividly with the low-key architecture.

More information:



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