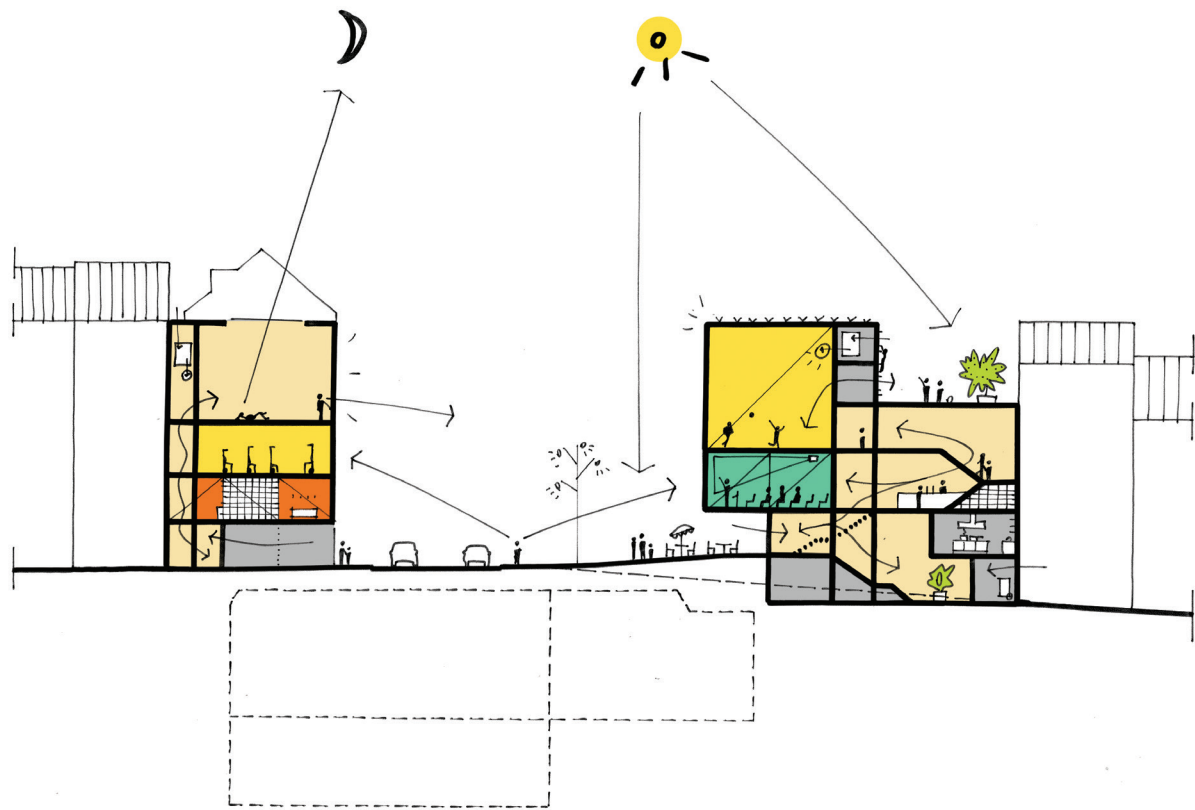




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Special Edition: Brussels Architecture Prize 2021





‘These two facing buildings form a new gateway for the area and frame a generous public space that extends inside the

volumes and culminates at the roof terrace.’ Konstantinos Pantazis, jury member



Balancing act

Bart Tritsmans – Photos Lucid

In the lively neighbourhood on the border between Saint-Gilles and Forest, B-architecten realized the new community centre Centr'al. The undeveloped areas at the corners of the Albert Pole junction, which emerged decades ago when the metro was built, were given a new purpose. The site presented the design team with major challenges, but together with Util, B-architecten succeeded in realizing an iconic building and a high-quality urban integration. The project fills a gap in the urban fabric, creates a new landmark, and provides new meeting places for the neighbourhood.



In 2015 B-architecten and Omgeving won the competition for the redevelopment of Square Albert and the construction of a new community centre. The public square is still under construction, but it is already being announced by the smaller staying spaces under and around the community centre. As we approach Centr'al, the project evokes associations with the post-war urban architecture of Léon Stynen and Paul De Meyer. B-architecten built two elegant yet monolithic volumes on the narrow corner plots. The community centre marks a spot in the city, but it still fits modestly into the urban fabric. The cornice height of the town houses on either side is adhered to, and although the designers did not aim for a spectacular effect, they describe the building as a 'soft icon'.

The corners have an open, inviting character. The seemingly simple volumes that act as a gateway to the future public square were realized in close cooperation with the engineers of Util. Because the footprint of both buildings was limited by the underlying metro, the design team developed a structure to make optimal use of the space. Concrete cores make up the counterweight for the cantilevered floors. The ingenious steel structure with diagonal beams (visible behind the windows and opaque surfaces in the façade) supports the cantilevered part of the building. 'The construction phase of the building was very impressive', says project architect Julie Van Huynegem during a visit to Centr'al. 'The entire steel structure was assembled on site like a Meccano kit, producing spectacular images.' The choice of materials was tailored to the load-bearing capacity of the structure: floors and façade

cladding had to be as light as possible. 'And yet the choice of materials, the grid in the façade and the colour scheme have a very Brussels feel', says Van Huynegem. 'The building is striking, but at the same time it fits perfectly into its context.'

The Albert Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract expressed the ambition to give the Albert Pole, with its tangle of roadways and bike lanes as well as tram, bus and metro lines, more staying quality. The community centre houses a programme entirely made up of neighbourhood facilities: a restaurant offering opportunities to young chefs, different sports halls, an auditorium and a roof terrace. During our visit, a dance workshop for adolescents was taking place in one of the smaller halls and a taekwondo class in the large sports hall upstairs. The caretaker, who proudly walked us through the building, was very enthusiastic about the new community centre. 'People are using the different rooms and the target groups are very diverse: activities range from ping-pong for older people to sports for children.'

The sports halls offer views of the surrounding city, and higher up in the building the panorama from the hill in Forest is absolutely spectacular. Plenty of light fills the halls, but in order to limit the view, opaque synthetic façade surfaces were also used. During our visit, the building showed off its different faces: the low sun lit up the natural stone and revealed the steel skeleton through the opaque surfaces; and as we left, the windows lit up at dusk, and the activities in the building became a part of urban life. ▲ ■ ●



Architect
B-architecten
Website
b-architecten.be
Project name
Centr'al
Project location (city, country)
**Avenue Besme 129-131 –
Avenue Albert 1, 1190 Vorst**

Programme
**Cultural and sporting
complex consisting of a
neighbourhood restaurant,
a foyer, an auditorium and
3 spaces for practising soft
sports**
Procedure
Competition
Client
Municipality of Forest

Landscape architect
Omgeving
Structural and services engineering
Util structuurstudies
Sustainability
Boydens Engineering
Acoustics
Bureau De Fonseca
Lead contractor
In Advance

Completion
November 2020
Total floor area
1,471 m²
Budget
**€ 3,643,125
(excl. VAT and fees)**
Product / Supplier
**Geberit (roof drain),
Kingspan (insulated panels),
Renson (shades),
Schüco (exterior carpentry)**