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# Gare Maritime, Brussels:

**Contemporary space for city life**

**The conversion of the warehouses of the Gare Maritime freight depot in Brussels has just been presented with the Dutch ARC20 Architectuur Award. Neutelings Riedijk Architects installed a total of twelve pavilions in the vast building complex, which now houses offices, shops, restaurants and plenty of public space – thus helping to revitalise the district. This has created an entirely indoor, modern urban precinct – while retaining the characteristic atmosphere of the historic halls. The pavilions’ new glass façades have been manufactured in line with current requirements using the thermally separated VISS façade.**

The Gare Maritime, which was built between 1902 and 1908, consists of three high and four lower halls that are spatially interconnected. The whole thing measures 280 metres long, 140 metres wide and 24 m tall at its highest point, with a roof covering more than 40,000 square metres of floor space. Just to be clear, the Gare Maritime is no protected landmark. But with its imposing pillars, which are adorned with floral ornaments in the early Art Nouveau style, it is a valuable example of industrial architecture in Brussels. It is located in a former customs enclave, which was used to store and handle goods. However, when customs were abolished within the European Union, the site lost its function and was slowly but surely abandoned.

**Historical architecture**

The current initiative to transform the site into a contemporary city zone is to spare the characteristic atmosphere, original monumentality and spaciousness of the historic halls wherever possible. The project was divided into two areas, which partly overlapped in both planning and execution – a ‘work in progress’ that required close collaboration between all those involved. The renovation of the structural fabric – the steel structure, all outer and inner façades, and the rainwater drainage system – was left to the Brussels-based JDMA Jan de Moffarts Architecten, in cooperation with the Bureau Bouwtechniek in Antwerp. Neutelings Riedijk Architects, Rotterdam, again with the help of the Bureau Bouwtechniek, oversaw development of the halls, with planned usable floor space of approx. 45,000 square metres.

**Contemporary concept**

As a nod to the history of the structure, the halls were left in their original configuration, with work spaces, shops and eateries being incorporated in the form of pavilions – as if the term ‘pavilion’ is even appropriate when it is four storeys high with a floor space of roughly 900 square metres. Five of these pavilions line the east and west façades of the large outer halls and are interlinked by mighty wooden staircases. Two smaller pavilions can be found in the southern gable. The large central hall and the two smaller halls adjoining it have been left empty. This is where an extensive boulevard is to be created, akin to Las Ramblas in Barcelona, with ample space for all manner of activities, such as exhibitions, markets and cultural events. As such, the enormity of the original space can still be felt.

The pavilions were built using CLT (Cross Laminated Timber). On the ground floor and first floor, the outer doors and window frames were also manufactured from wood. However, from the second floor upwards, the façades are largely made of glass. Whereas the second storey is a proper floor, the third storey is set back a bit, giving the arches of the historic steel pillars the space they need – a ‘creative mezzanine’, as the architects call it. These glass façades offer visitors an uninterrupted view of a particularly impressive part of the supporting structure – the mighty pillars with their floral adornments. Fortunately, these could be preserved and only needed a clean and fresh coat of paint.

**Self-supporting steel façades in XXL designs**

A total of 20 large-scale glass façades have been erected as self-supporting lightweight steel structures on the gable ends of the pavilions, with each façade having a surface area of 215 square metres. The architects decided on the highly heat-insulating Jansen VISS steel profile system, which was used partly in combination with VISS Basic for support-free façade designs. As the historical structure is not permitted under any circumstances whatsoever to bear any weight, the curtain wall rests on the ceiling beams of the second floor. On the third floor, it is connected to the ceiling and additionally fastened to just two points on the pavilions by means of struts. Additional stability is provided by offsets in the corner areas and entrances that are set back slightly into the building. The special feature of the post and mullion construction is that the posts are interconnected by means of hinged mullions: they are partly welded, partly fitted, and partly fitted and screwed, such that they can accommodate expansion in the mullion connections. They are used in the large, openable skylights in the hall roof, which is joined to the post and mullion façade by an EPDM seal.

**Steel – the perennial first choice**

The result is a state-of-the-art self-supporting façade that is only possible with steel profiles – and also fully meets the architects’ visions of a lightweight and sophisticated structure: “We opted for steel profiles, as they are more streamlined than aluminium,” said Jan de Moffarts as justification for choosing the VISS façade. In this instance, the heat-insulating steel profile system with a face width of just 50 millimetres has been used. Another argument in steel’s favour is that the profiles of the original façade were also made of steel. Unfortunately, however, vast swathes of the industrial glazing were replaced with sheet metal over time – an architectural crime that de Moffarts has set out to rectify: the east and west façades of the high-ceilinged halls have also been modernised with the Jansen VISS steel profile system in areas where they are linked to the pavilions. The offices on the west façade are protected from excessive sun exposure by triple-glazed insulation glass with a low-e coating and sensor-controlled dimming function. In addition, openable wings from the Janisol door profile system allow you to walk out onto the roofs of the lower halls.

The first pavilion was occupied in September 2019, and all pavilions are expected to be completed by the end of 2020. This project is now proof that historical building fabrics can be paired with an innovative architectural concept to create spaces that are well received. As a “city where it never rains”, the new Gare Maritime will also prove a significant draw for the countless tourists that flock to the European capital every year.

**Project details:**

**Client:** Extensa Group, Brussels

**Architects:**

Renovation of structural fabric, outer and inner façades: JDMA Jan de Moffarts Architecten, Brussels, with Bureau Bouwtechniek, Antwerp

Development of halls: Neutelings Riedijk Architects, Rotterdam with Bureau Bouwtechniek, Antwerp

**Metalworkers:**

Pavilion façades: Lootens Deinze NV, Deinze

East and west façades: CS Raamconstructies, Weelde (Ravels) and

Zuid Nederlandse Ramenfabriek (ZNR), Rucphen

**Steel profile systems used:** VISS Fassade, VISS Basic and Janisol

**System supplier:** Jansen AG, Oberriet/CH

**Text:** Anne Marie Ring, Munich

**Photos:** Tim Fisher / © Jansen AG

**Diagram: © Extensa**

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**All drawings © Neutelings Riedijk Architects**

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The editorial use of the illustrations is bound to the present project report.

pic\_01\_Gare Maritime 07\_2020 © Tim Fisher 2020 12.jpg:

The Brussels Gare Maritime has just been presented with the Dutch ARC20 Architectuur Award. The jury was impressed with the way in which Neutelings Riedijk Architects are contributing to the revitalisation of the district by converting the warehouses of the Gare Maritime freight depot into a modern urban precinct featuring offices, shops, restaurants and a great deal of public space. They feel that this is a good example of sustainable development in architecture: “We didn’t bestow the project with this award due to the superficial aesthetics, but rather for the application of a great many innovative features,” as was stated in the jury’s report. The self-supporting VISS façades, which are attached to the pavilions’ wooden structure at just two points by means of struts, are undoubtedly just some of the innovative features.

Rendering 3411-2228-H-MO-REN-IN-10 © Extensa.jpg:

The Gare Maritime consists of three high and four lower halls that are spatially interconnected. The whole thing measures 280 m long, 140 m wide and 24 metres tall at its highest point, with a roof covering more than 40,000 m2 of floor space.

pic\_02: Neutelings Riedijk Architects lined the east and west façades of the large outer halls with ten pavilions – five on each side.

pic\_03: The large-scale glass façades on the gable ends of the pavilions were erected as self-supporting lightweight steel structures from the second floor upwards.

pic\_04: The slightly smaller third floor gives the arches of the historic steel pillars the space they need – the ‘creative mezzanine’ provides space for encounters.

pic\_05: As the historical structure is not permitted to bear any weight, the VISS façades rest on the ceiling beams of the second floor.

pic\_06: On the third floor, the VISS façades are fastened to the ceiling and also secured at two additional points by means of struts.

pic\_07: Additional stability is provided by offsets in the corner areas and entrances that are set back slightly into the building.

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