

WINTERCIRCUS MAHY GHENT / BE
transformation and renovation of former wintercircus building
into a multifunctional public facility
- concert hall, shops, restaurants, lecture spaces, public space

Site: Ghent / Belgium
Site area: 0,35 ha
Building size: 10.870 m²
brutto Building volume: 67.207 m³

Client
sogent
Ghent, BE

Architect concept holder
Atelier Kempe Thill
architects and planners
Rotterdam, NL

Supporting architect
aNNo architects
Ghent, BE

Executing architect
Baro Architectuur
Ghent, BE
SUM Project Brussels, BE

Timeline
Competition: June 2012 – October 2012
Commission: December 2012 – June 2015
Execution: January 2017 – June 2022



From the very beginning the **Wintercircus Mahy** in Ghent has always been a composite of a real ring circus and a series of service buildings. All of which completely blend right through its turbulent history, into the nearby buildings of the urban block it forms in the Waalse Krook neighborhood.

The first main design feature concerns the former circus space which is enormous and has the dimensions of a public square. Instead of filling it with a program or an additional built volume, the Atelier Kempe Thill team proposed to preserve it as it was and leave it entirely empty. It will serve as a flexible public space, a kind of covered square for all kinds of activities. It also connects three sides of the city and the new library building. This concept not only gives the building its backbone, authenticity and a relaxed generosity. It preserves as well the sensation of discovering its monumental scale when entering the building.

The second main feature concerns the acoustically challenging rock concert hall. Located directly in the under the ground of the round main circus building, it is set in a concrete housing construction. This prevents sound leakage to neighboring buildings and completely separates the logistics from the rest of the building.

The third main feature concerns the finishing after the renovation. The plaster had partly fallen off the walls in the periode that the building was abandoned.

The garage owner Mahy had painted the concrete floors red. It was decided to keep the rough appearance of the unplastered brick walls, the big atrium space as well as the red floors. This introduces a certain roughness and an unfinished character to the whole while leaving the patina of its historical development intact, as well as some of its decay.

The fourth main feature has the crucial task of dealing with all of Ghislain Mahy adaptations. How should an architect approach this sensitive architecture, which represents great intrinsic value and quality? The team was mesmerized by the beauty and logic of these elements. We decided to design with great modesty and empathy and, above all, respect the existing details to the greatest extent possible.

The building has different faces, the outer facades inside the block are all treated with thermal insulation on plaster and painted in light grey. The elegant steel window frames are black and follow the pattern of the old partitions. These facades don't necessarily act as the "face" of the buildings. They are hidden in the back and meant to function more from the inside-out than the other way around. The facade leading to the huge atrium space is actually the most important one of the entire complex. It closely adheres to the original in its openness and expressiveness. Thin black steel frames for the windows were used here as well, combined with the rawness of the brick walls, the concrete beams and the patina of the partly fallen off stucco.

