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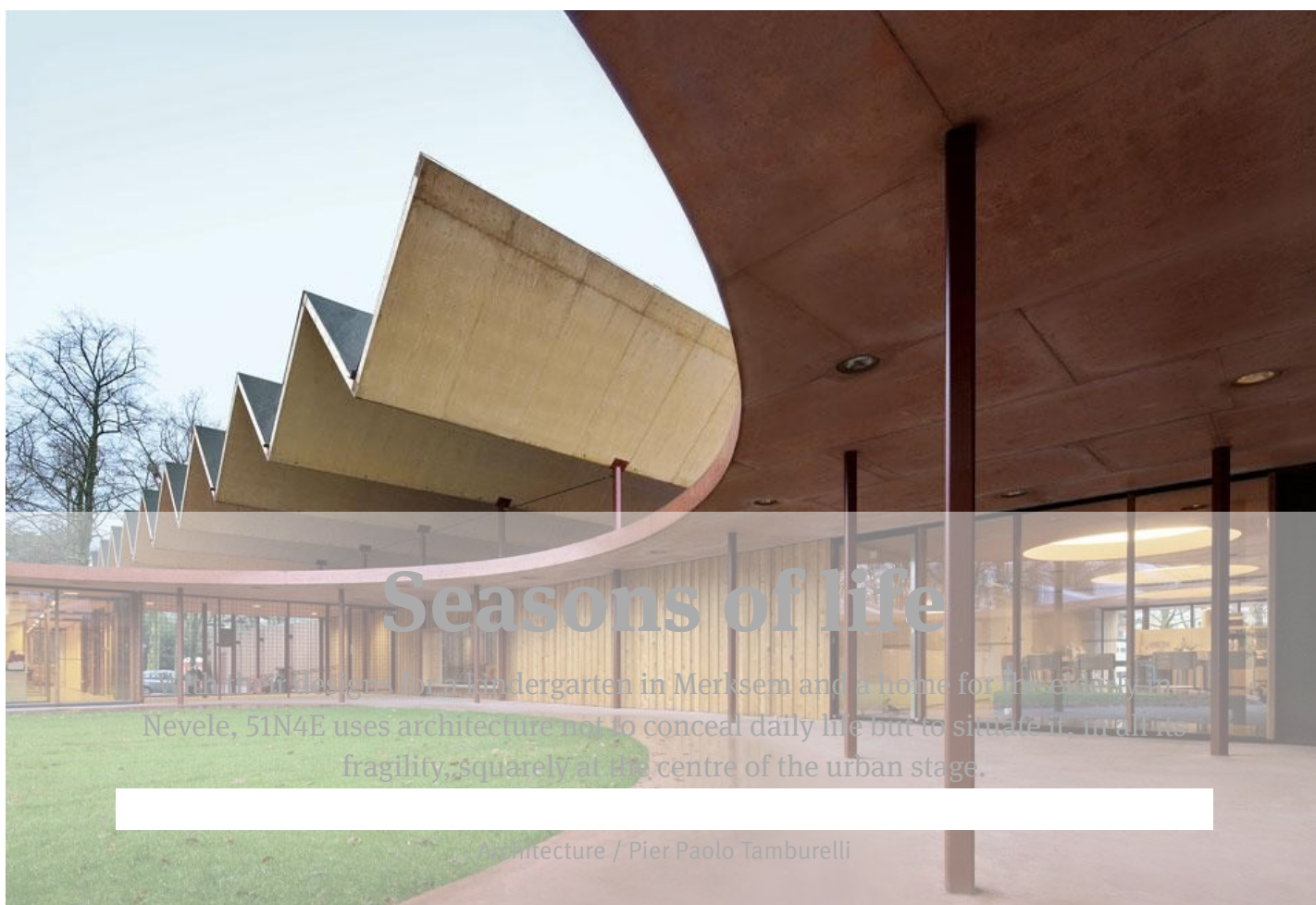
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Author

Pier Paolo Tamburelli

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Filip Dujardin

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Situated not far from Ghent, the Nevele rest home is a threestorey building clad in dark-red glazed tiles. With a large tree standing in front of it, it is attached to an old building that houses its communal facilities. Wedged between houses and sheds, the rest home has large square windows through which its old-age inhabitants can be glimpsed.

The kindergarten and greenery service centre in Merksem, a suburb of Antwerp, are housed in a circular one-storey structure. The kindergarten is built around a patio and lawn, while a quarter section of the circular plan is occupied by the greenery service's machine depots and offices. In both cases, the architects carried out a careful examination of these places' distinctive dynamics, without accepting set patterns or seeking to introduce questionable novelties.

The two projects present spatial devices that are normal yet unpredictable, displaying the richness of our daily actions and giving them dignity without exaggeration. The Belgian office 51N4E set about tidying things up, designating them one by one, endeavouring to include every element in their assessment without feigning blindness to the less appealing aspects.

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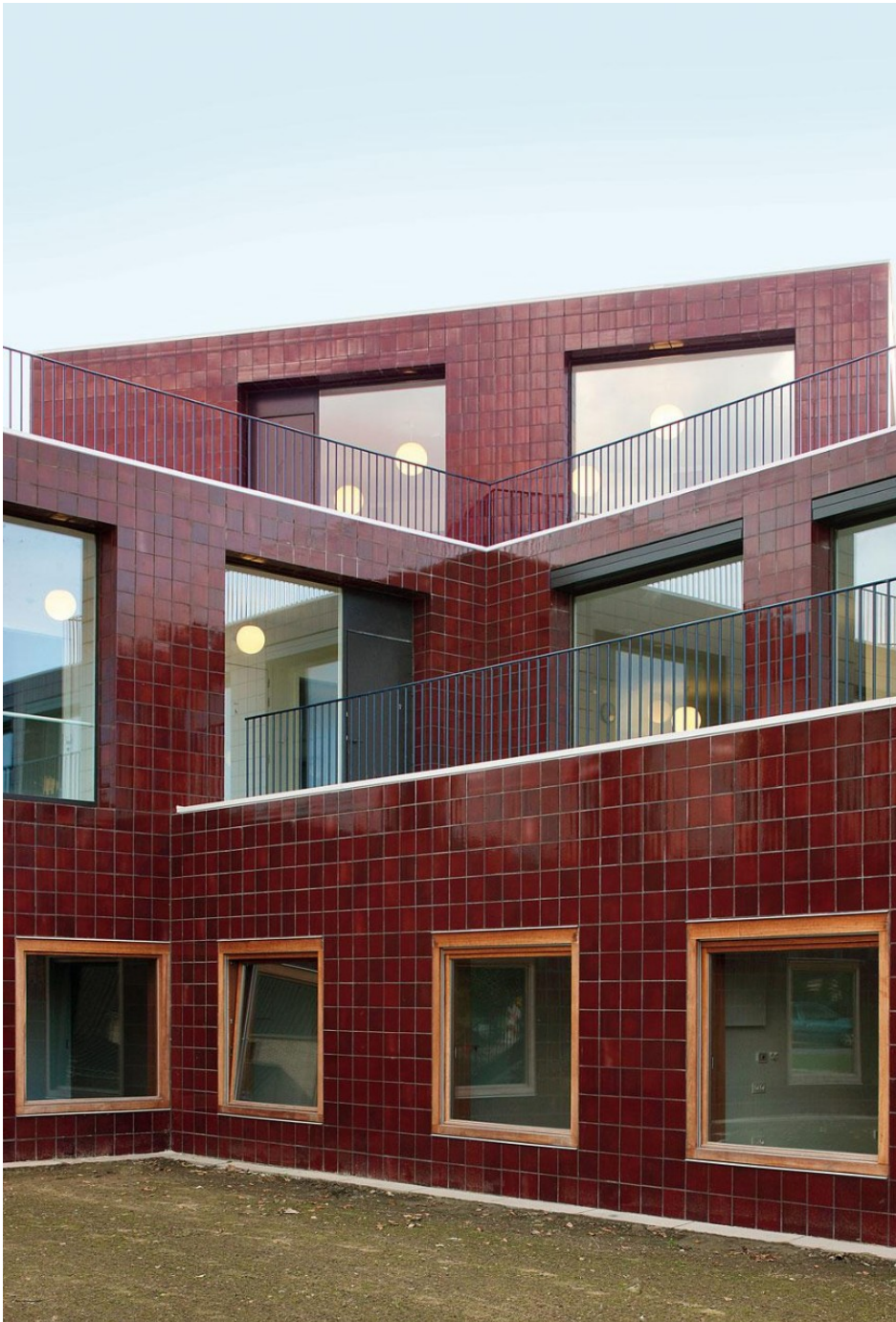




In apertura: 51N4E, Kindergarten and a home for the elderly in Nevele, inner courtyard. The building springs from the unusual combination of two social services: a kindergarten, and the office and depot of the greenery service in Merksem, a town just outside Antwerp. The part occupied by the kindergarten is raised above the surrounding land and the greenery service. Above: The presence of the two very different functions is also reflected in the design: a zigzag roof identifies the greenery service, while a ring cut in half accommodates the kindergarten. The circular forms—the central patio and the skylights—are a leitmotif in the section that houses the kindergarten. The framework is in concrete cast on site and integrally coloured in the depth of the mix

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In Merksem, the extremely diverse functions specified in the competition brief are neither hermetically separated nor forcedly united. The kindergarten, offices and machine depots are simply placed alongside one another within the building's circular geometry. The kindergarten is set around the circular courtyard, with spaces dedicated to the children's recreational and educational activities arranged in a radial pattern and interspersed by quiet rooms where the kids can rest. Situated at the points of contact between the two programmes are the entrance and the communal facilities, in which the predominantly female employees of the kindergarten encounter the mainly male workers of the greenery service.



This building is the extension of an earlier structure, to which it has added 54 new rooms. The complex also overlooks an inner garden and is not separated from its surrounding district by any kind of barrier

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Unlike certain architects of the Modern Movement, 51N4E does not use architecture to design new behaviours from scratch. Nor even, like Rem Koolhaas, does the studio indulge in surreal combinations of distinctly incompatible activities. The pairings proposed by 51N4E instead display sound judgement and absolute realism—their architecture simply observes and welcomes a complexity that already exists in everyday life. The complexity of this existence also consigns to redundancy certain precautions that might have been considered necessary. At the same time, 51N4E's realism also includes a negative aspect, in that the things requiring the most careful attention also sit alongside those that don't. Indeed, the building entirely ignores

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The north front with access to the kindergarten



Nevertheless, 51N4E—a bit like Michael Haneke in his film *Amour*—very convincingly asks the city to focus on this phase of people's lives. Furthermore, the architects ask the old people, too, to observe the city they helped to shape. The city looks at the old-age pensioners, and the old-age pensioners look at the city. Neither of the two sights is easy on the eye. Old age is not usually a cheerful subject, and in this case there is not a single person who can escape it; and the city to be seen here is indeed truly unattractive. And yet, only by starting from this realism can beauty and happiness exist in a city.



The south facade overlooking the garden



The design of the Nevele rest home is based on this awareness. It seeks to attribute quality to stages of a very ordinary existence, unafraid of its disheartening everyday drabness and undiscouraged in the face of a mediocre city. There is a touch of irony in the way the circular kindergarten and the semicircular apse of the memorial lie back to back, too far removed from one another perhaps to attempt any mutual understanding. From the cemetery, the pointed skylights of the kindergarten and the saw-toothed canopy of the greenery depot emerge like a bizarre dragon's back behind the respectable statuary of the war memorial.



The entrance. The building springs from the unusual combination of two social services: a kindergarten, and the office and depot of the greenery service in Merksem, a town just outside Antwerp. The part occupied by the kindergarten is raised above the surrounding land and the greenery service



At Nevele, the elderly rest home fits neatly into the crowded mediocre landscape of the sprawling Flanders city. Tucked into a smudgy urban mesh with no apparent rules, it adopts a Y-shaped conformation that allows it to face two different tracts of landscape.

With a show of great discipline, it seems to react to its messy context, as if Giorgio Grassi's library in Groningen had somehow got lost in the urban sprawl without managing to lose its rigidity, stretching in surprise at the absence of certainties provided by the Gothic city. When I saw this building I immediately thought of Grassi's library, though I don't really know why, as I realise it's a rather odd reference in the case of 51N4E. Yet the architects, too, recognised at once that there was something in the analogy. In fact the Nevele rest home is a monument, or at any rate the nearest thing possible to a monument in this city.



The circular forms—the central patio and the skylights—are a leitmotif in the section that houses the kindergarten. The framework is in concrete cast on site and integrally coloured in the depth of the mix



In this sense 51N4E's project is very clear-cut: the rest home must be seen in the city, and the elderly must continue to be a part of it, to be seen and to see the city around them—which, after all, is the city they contributed to making. Its goal is, quite understandably, to look after and support the old people within their community. But there is also a more radical, starker and deeper aspect involved: the rest home accommodates non-self-sufficient persons, often immobile or afflicted by serious diseases, not always offering the most pleasant of sights.



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Coming out of the rest home laden with parcels, a nurse trips and drops everything; the old lady at the window laughs—perhaps enjoying a comical moment, briefly lucid and happy. The nurse sees the old lady laughing behind the large square window and laughs too. For a moment, illness is suspended. Once again, this transparency has nothing to do with modernism or considerations of public health: the people and the things are shown for what they are. The architects confine themselves to displaying them all together, with no claim to be exhaustive and no concern for the system's coherency; without excluding the funnier combinations or disguising the more awkward circumstances.



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The city is everything that happens: an old lady in a green jacket crossing the street, a crow, the post office robbed in 1993, a tractor, the street cleaners talking about holidays, the ugly neoclassical villa where the notary public lives, the black car of the notary's wife, two oak trees and two sheds, the nursery, a girl with a trolley, an Indian restaurant, a lawn, a stable, the rest home, the kindergarten, the greenery service offices, and so on. — *Pier Paolo Tamburelli, Architect (www.baukuh.it) and professor at Milan Polytechnic and Berlage Institute in Rotterdam*



The presence of the two very different functions is also reflected in the design: a zigzag roof identifies the greenery service, while a ring cut in half accommodates the kindergarten.

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The rest home is distinguished by large glazed surfaces that give residents and staff the sensation of living in a continuity of the garden and city life. The first-floor balcony, in the architects' intentions, is a sort of urban belvedere



The three-pronged layout enables different open-sky spaces to be created around the volumes; these spaces can be completely public or endowed with a more private atmosphere





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