

Belgian architect Marie-José Van Hee receives the fifteenth Alvar Aalto Medal

The Alvar Aalto Medal is one of the most prestigious architectural awards, presented by an international jury every four to five years. On 22 August, Marie José Van Hee (1950) received recognition for her exceptional oeuvre at the University of Jyväskylä, in a building by Alvar Aalto.

By Marc Dubois

This is the 15th Alvar Aalto Medal that has been awarded. The list of people who have already been honoured is impressive, with the first in 1978 being James Stirling. Others include Jørn Utzon, Tadao Ando, Álvaro Siza, Glenn Murcutt, Steven Holl. In 2020, Bijoy Jain (Studio Mumbai) received the Medal. Van Hee is the first woman to receive this award.



Photo Maija Holma
© Alvar Aalto Foundation.

Flemish vernacular

The jury report states: “Marie-José Van Hee’s work shows a consistently sensitive, contextual, and finely crafted approach. Her architecture is rooted in its context and the surrounding landscape – not only reflecting but contributing to a Flemish local vernacular over the course of her career. Her work is characterised by a beautifully understated command of natural materials, light and proportions, producing quiet, intimate spaces, designed around daily life”.

Many will wonder what this contribution to a “Flemish local vernacular” consists of? Is her vocabulary sometimes indigenous or even native? It is certainly not what can be read on Wikipedia about vernacular: “An example of vernacular architecture in Western Europe, and perhaps especially in Flanders, is the shed of verandas, garages, sheds, pigeon lofts and garden sheds at the back”.



House in Opwijk photo Marc Dubois

Van Hee developed a “characteristic language” that creates a visual unity in her work that the average citizen will hardly notice. This is because her priority is not to get noticed but to design good homes.

The reference to Flanders is in fact related to a specific context in which building a private home is still possible compared to neighbouring countries. People from the middle class of society are looking for an authentic living experience and discover this at Van Hee. The small scale of the contractor base in Flanders also allows this oeuvre to be built. While in other countries public assignments are a priority, the private sector in Flanders offers other possibilities.

Modesty and silence

Van Hee has always had an appreciation for Scandinavian architecture and in particular for Aalto. In her oeuvre you will also find reminiscences of the work of Baragán, Siza, Schindler and Dom Hans van der Laan. An architecture that searches for modesty and silence, far away from the spectacular that is eagerly picked up by the media. Her homes have a warm homeliness and do not show soulless residential design. An atmosphere that you also experience when you visit the interiors of Aalto's homes. It is about an intense sensitivity for all aspects that give a space character. The starting point is always a search for an optimal plan in which all boundary conditions, including the negative ones, are used. The utmost care for detail and the way in which daylight enters receive her full attention. Van Hee also completely masters the correct positioning of the stairs in the plan, as well as the subtle transition from floor, wall to ceiling.



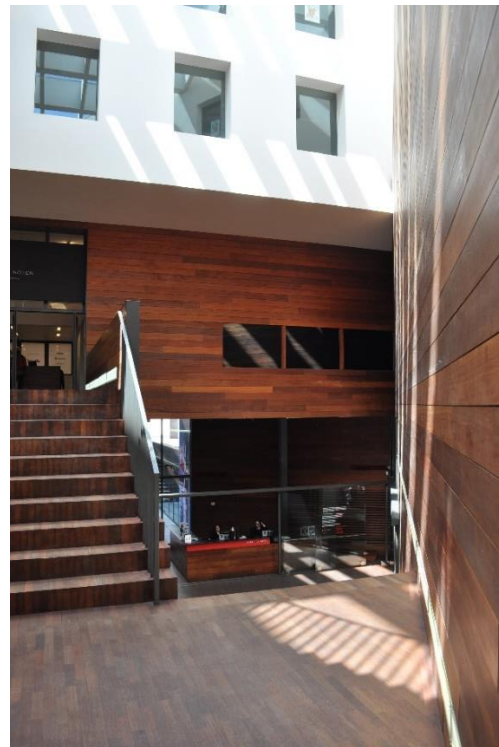
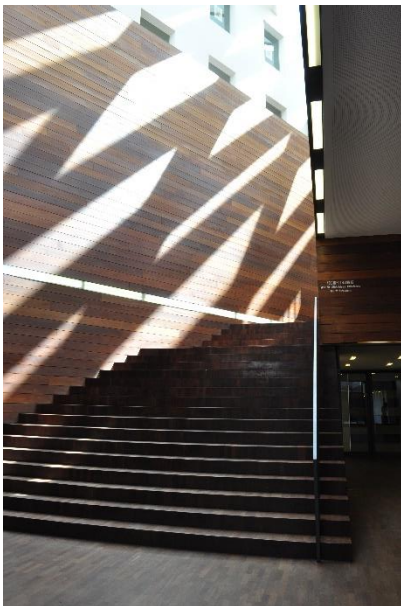
MJVH House in Ghent photo Chrispijn Van Sas

Her ambition has never been to expand a large office. The large number of homes required intensive collaboration with a small group of dedicated employees. There are not many large public buildings. With the "Modenatie", the fashion museum in Antwerp (1999–2003), she proved that she can master an increase in scale. The staircase that connects all the components is masterful. In recent years, she has realized a number of slightly larger housing projects in Deinze, Boordmeerbeek and Koksijde.

As a woman, Van Hee was confronted with opposition from the administration, often out of envy for her increasing appreciation. These were obstructions that required a lot of energy from her, such as during the construction of her own home in the Prinsenhof in Ghent (1994–1998). In the meantime, she has realized ten specific interventions in this historic district, where Emperor Charles was also born. The only architect I know who managed to make such small district adjustments almost unnoticed. Perhaps the city of Ghent can publish a book as a tribute to an architect who managed to improve the quality of a living environment.

Van Hee occasionally worked with Robbrecht & Daem Architects. The highlight of this is undoubtedly the redevelopment of the public space in the city center of Ghent, with the Stadhal as the most visible part. At the same time, she was a lecturer at the Sint-Lucas architecture school in Ghent (1991–2015) and subsequently a guest professor at the ETH Zurich (2016–2017).

Modenatie Antwerp Photo Marc Dubois



Vision on living

Everyone considers her own home in Ghent as the crystallization of her vision on living. This home first received international attention in the 6th Mies van de Rohe Award in 1999. Of the 33 projects of the final selection (also in the book), only two were private houses: her home in Ghent and the villa in Bordeaux by Rem Koolhaas / OMA. Two homes of a completely different order and not comparable. Her oeuvre has recently been increasingly appreciated outside Europe. She was selected for the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018 and in 2021 a thematic issue of the Japanese magazine A+U was published.



Housing in Ghent photo by Filip Dujardin

A+U (Japan) 2021



At the end of 2022, Van Hee had a major exhibition in deSingel in Antwerp by VAI / Flanders Architecture Institut. With this, the VAI celebrated the receipt of her archive. Shortly after the opening in December 2022, fate struck. In France, she suffered a stroke and the subsequent rehabilitation had little impact, resulting in permanent partial paralysis. With the help of many, attempts are being made to make her disability bearable. But the interest in her honest and very humane work is permanent. Next year her work will be presented in the Finnish Architecture Museum in Helsinki.

Marc Dubois is an architect HonF RIBA. Until 2015 he was a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture KU Leuven in Ghent & Brussels. Between 1986 and 1994 he was a member of the editorial staff of 'Archis' and in 1992 he was one of the founders of the "Jaarboek Architectuur Vlaanderen". President DOCOMOMO Belgium (2015-2022). From 1996 correspondent of CASABELLA (I)