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Musée de la Photographie
Charleroi

The *Musée de la Photographie de la Communauté française de Belgique* (the Museum of Photography of the Belgian French Community) celebrated its 20th birthday in 2007. In 1987, a former Carmelite monastery in Mont-sur-Marchienne (one of the districts in the city of Charleroi) was converted into the French Community's Museum of Photography. It presents around a dozen different exhibitions annually, in addition to its permanent collection.

It is a curious destiny for a building that had long echoed to the sound of the silence and discretion desired by the Carmelite monks. Suddenly its spaces were full of photography lovers, and photography started to enjoy a renaissance with the general public.

The museum's inauguration in a renovated space – using financial means that were inversely proportional to the passion that motivated its founders – was the logical consequence of a series of reflections and projects undertaken during the 1970s. During the crisis caused by the gradual decline of the industrial belt in southern Belgium, Georges and Jeanne Vercheval were conscious of the rapid transformations affecting the landscape that was so familiar to them. Therefore, they started to create photographic archives, collaborating with a team of photographers, who often offered their services on a voluntary basis, and whose work complemented purchases and donations of Belgian and foreign photographs.



Church and choir, ca. 1950



Exhibition rooms in the transformed church, ca. 1987

The *Archives de Wallonie* (Walloon Archives) association was long the driving force behind this sociological and political project that struck a balance between historical and contemporary exhibitions, as well as between monographic and thematic exhibitions.

Whilst remaining a not-for-profit association according to its statutes and therefore benefiting from greater autonomy, the museum started to receive more support from the French Community which has been in charge of culture since Belgium introduced its federal structure. In 1995, after having acquired the Carmelite monastery buildings, the French Community undertook some building work, representing the first phase of renovations with the intention to improve the property from both a scientific and museum-related point of view. New areas were constructed, in particular so that the collection, which now includes nearly 80.000 photographs and three million negatives, could be dis-

played in line with elementary conservation standards. Other areas were revamped whilst remaining true to the building's original style, intimacy, arrangement, and paths radiating out around the cloister.



The Carmelite refectory, ca. 1950



The exhibition space of the transformed refectory

The museum then revealed its richness by presenting its collection chronologically, embracing 150 years of the history of photography and laying claim to an international reputation that many would be quick to envy. Once again, the well known adage, „a prophet is not without honour save in his own country", seemed apposite and the museum was initially recognised abroad, by peers, friends, and photographers. The creation of an educational area called the „Discovery Area", a team of guides (that was recently enlarged but that still requires further enlargement), and a library entirely dedicated to photography, completed the museum's range. There was widespread agreement that it was at the time one of the most complete and coherent museums in existence and that it was therefore an example to follow.

Georges Vercheval chose to step down at the beginning of 2000. When I succeeded him in March 2000, I had the definite impression that I was taking over a very stable ship, but as the new captain, I lacked sails to set out for sea again; some work in dry dock remained to be done and many changes were required. Although the renovations of 1995 had given the museum a modern appearance, there was still damage that had to be repaired urgently. The entire roof had to be replaced, the basement had to be drained and the dry rot that was lurking menacingly had to be tackled. My first years as director therefore resembled those of someone who has moved into a property that remains to be finished and for whom each new task reveals a nasty surprise. However, the French Community soon granted me the little house opposite the museum (left vacant by inspectors) to be renovated as an artistic space and a residence. This new project enabled me to renew the museum's connection with Olivier Bastin, the architect who completed the renovation work in 1995.

Georges Vercheval had also left the outline of a project to add a room for displaying contemporary photography, as the current exhibitions spaces did not allow for the satisfactory presentation of new large format displays or the sequences that technical developments as well as the emergence of „fine arts" had brought into the field of photography. In my eyes, it fell slightly short of requirements: I thought that it lacked a cafeteria, a conference room worthy of the name, a more welcoming public library adapted to readers' needs, a shop (an addition that is now essential to any museum), and above all, access to the beautiful gardens behind the monastery buildings – a trump card that I considered it absolutely essential to play.

For those of you who do not know Charleroi – and who does not? – I can say without exaggeration that Belgium's third largest city can hardly be qualified as a tourist magnet. It still bears the aftermath resulting from its prestigious industrial past and suffers from a

reputation of being a dangerous and violent city. Liverpool suffers the same fate in Londoners' eyes, as does Chicago in New Yorkers' eyes and Marseille in Parisians' eyes, East Germany for West Germans maybe, and although there is rarely smoke without fire, it seems to me that this is rather over the top. More than just adding a new room, we therefore had to rethink the museum's different functions, the concept behind the way the collection was hung and its arrangement, but also its function as a port of call given that the majority of our visitors comes from outside of the Charleroi region. This was the frame of mind in which I opened discussions with Olivier Bastin and, in agreement with the French Community, in which we presented the museum extension project for *Objective 1* EU funding, which aims to subsidise cultural projects by 50% if, among other things, they generate employment.

The project was accepted and progressed from around € 800.000 to nearly € 4 million – four times the initially predicted sum. For two years before the work began on 21 June 2006, we developed the project in partnership with the architecture firm and the infrastructure service of the French Community, questioning museum staff, users, the site's close neighbours and also the people living in the region, in order to identify the real needs and most suitable solutions. After two years of work and the inevitable delays caused by particularly bad weather conditions, the museum now benefits from 6.000 m² of space (2.000 m² more than it initially had). Over half of this space is accessible to the public, and that does not even include the entirely re-landscaped gardens. They are now a green island in an industrialised country, making the Museum of Photography an exceedingly tempting destination.



First sketch of the extension, 2005



Extension spaces, 2009

In terms of surface area, the museum is now the largest photography museum in Europe, as far as I believe the journalists and most of my colleagues. I do not know if it is true or not, but I must confess that I do not care. Museum interest is not a competition of space and one could be the largest but also the most boring one and, who knows, the poorest one. Now all that remains is for it to become the largest photography museum in terms of interest and reputation. For this, it must rely on its temporary exhibitions (eight to ten a year) that combine renowned Belgian and foreign photographers and that take a punt on new discoveries, as well as on its re-hung and redesigned collections. The extension work freed some space within the monastery building and the permanent collection has greatly benefited from this. There is now more space for the 19th and 20th centuries, doubling their presentation potential, but also more space for the contemporary section, a thematic and confrontational exhibition that defies chronological presentation and that pushes us to question the entire collection, its acquisition policy, the way it interacts with the public and how new technologies are integrated, at the same time as continuing our scientific work and the in-depth study of our photographic stock. In order to abolish the boundary between permanent and temporary, we intend to re-hang pictures regularly.



Construction of the extension, 2008



Extension spaces, 2009

This task will no doubt be as long as it is fascinating. We do not have the kind of funds that large American, French, and German museums or Emirate's Countries as we have seen this morning, benefit from. Belgium's federal system has not always promoted culture, and the French Community that oversees it is not exactly in a prime position compared to the multitude of operators and subsidised museums. This means that we also need to approach the private sector in order to arrange partnerships and sponsorship schemes. As an educational tool and area open to the general public, the museum should be able to increase its own resources without sacrificing its soul or neglecting the tasks assigned to it: when all is said and done, passion is as important as money.

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