

**TACTILE AND REFLECTIVE CONDITIONS: MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE'S HOUSE DECLERCQ**

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The architect Marie-José Van Hee (Ghent, Belgium, 1950) likes to design architecture from the inside out, conceiving interior spaces with a sense of classicism in their proportions, a mastery in the use of natural light and an accomplished handling of construction techniques. At House Declercq, her unornamented materials create the appearance of an objective architecture devoid of physical nuances, yet the texture of its solid surfaces and the landscape reflectivity of its glass point to the sensory effects of architecture.

At first glance, House Declercq appears as a simple construction embodying all the categories with which traditional domesticity is associated: a pitched ceramic roof is punctuated by a chimney that explicitly symbolises the warmth of the home, a brick wall is topped by a gutter that shows how rainwater is collected and drained and a flat grass lawn in front of the house creates a bucolic, almost pastoral, experience.

Originally a renovation of two old Belgian houses, this is a construction that seems to belong to a time of imperfect physicality. The non-uniformly baked roof tiles, the uneven horizontality of its roof ridge and the texture of its brickwork, technically distinct from the machine ambitions of early modernism, all display a handmade craftsmanship with a sense of gravity and primitivism. The proportions of its pitched roof and its windows take us back to a time before the structural audacity of contemporary architecture: a time when load carrying was readable, architectural materials were authentic and the landscape was natural. Even the wooden window frames, whose mullions create a 3x3 checkerboard, seem to hark back to the days when glass could not be conceived as a continuous flat surface. As it stands, the building could even be identified as an icon of old domesticity. Yet a closer look at the house reveals a deeper reality than that suggested by this description.

If we peer inside the windows, none of them reveal the predictable elements that the inside of a house is expected to contain. As if it were a *trompe l'oeil*, each of them shows a different reality. Whereas the window on the right remains almost entirely black, the middle window displays a smoky reflection of black and green tones and the one on the left reveals a few chairs, a swimming pool, a cross and a horse. None of these elements can be seen behind us, which eliminates any possibility that this is a reflection. One is even reminded of a surrealist composition *à la belge*, with that Magrittian genius for the interplay between super-realistic, almost mundane images and surreal conditions. Or even an installation where windowpanes have been substituted by a series of stained glass panels.

All of a sudden, the gravitational conditions of the house are distorted, endowing it with an atmospheric character. There is even a sense that the rules of gravity and perspective have been transformed, and that what before was easy to read vertically, from the ridge on top to the greenery in front of the house, is now difficult to read in perspective. While the roof tiles, the bricks and the gutter naturally guide one's sight, the windows now seem to absorb it. Even the blue of the swimming pool flattens the blue of the sky and all of the house's iconic elements that before were obvious now seem transformed, making it difficult to distinguish between reality and one's perception of it.



House Declercq. Marie-José Van Hee. 2017 / © Javier F. Contreras



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Marie-José Van Hee likes to design architecture from the inside out, conceiving interior spaces with a sense of classicism in their proportions, a mastery in their use of natural light and an accomplished use of contemporary construction techniques. Her understanding of technique is pragmatic, envisioning it not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. She enjoys the benefits of modernity without exaggerating its language. This is why her architecture achieves such radical results with such subtle decisions, which can be seen in her newly built projects, but becomes even more explicit in her renovations, that is, her interventions in existing buildings where she does not have to elaborate on the façades as a compositional exercise.

The entrance to the house reveals the characteristic features of depth and surface that the architect has been utilizing ever since she designed her own house at Varkensstraat. The brickwork has been coated with cement mortar, a solution that creates a continuous surface enriched by the texture of the original masonry, and a new wooden door has been painted with successive layers of primer and varnish that reveal the grain of the wood. There is an archaeological understanding of materiality on display here; a tactile sense that enjoys the accumulation of information rather than its use, ultimately narrating the biography of the building.

Inside the house, the game of perception is revealed. The load-bearing brick wall opposite the entrance has been replaced by a floor-to-ceiling wood-framed plate glass window that renders the landscape transparent.

This is a spatial diagram that Van Hee has been confidently developing for years. At Varkensstraat, for instance, a solid façade with elevated openings facing the street gives a sense of intimacy to an interior space that opens up on the garden, conceived as a room with no ceiling. Certainly, proportions, lighting conditions and the architecture itself vary considerably, but ultimately the logic is the same: the house contains narrow, subtle openings to the outside world, spilling out into the landscape.

In House Declercq, the asymmetry of the windows has been conveniently juxtaposed with the symmetry of the furniture. As a larger version

of what was revealed from the outside – a sense of augmented reality – the landscape is unveiled in front of our eyes with a literality that contests any pretension that the outside view could have hinted at. Van Hee is a non-rhetorical architect, confident of her work, with no need to adorn what she says. When asked about the surreal nature of House Declercq when seen from the entrance, she comfortably replies: “what you see is what it is.”

The landscape that was previously framed and reticulated is now unveiled naturally, with the greenery in front, the swimming pool and a Barragian wall on the left. These were all existing elements, yet the perception of them has been altered. Floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows that retract into the floor are, on the one hand, sophisticated technological devices in keeping with an orthodox view of modernism, but on the other, they can be read as a total abstraction of the tactile, material basis of architecture. This implies a malleable relationship between inside and outside and a definition of the inside that is far richer than the mere observation of existing reality. In an intellectual reading – one built upon an artificial discourse – one could be tempted to frame the landscape once again. Yet this is an architecture of the human condition that embodies the pleasures of physicality, thresholds and the spaces in between. The stone floor extends the space of the house outwards, yet a step that serves at the same time as a bench and a boundary conveniently protects this space from the garden, creating a sense of intimacy and belonging that limits the apparently infinite landscape beyond.

The *trompe l'oeil* seems to have been revealed all at once, yet the project is built upon a complex narrative that enjoys the accumulation of episodes. A closer look at the surfaces here reveals how all of the original tectonic elements, namely the wall and the pitched roof, have been softened. The thresholds of the windows do not reveal any differences between their four sides: the sill at the bottom, the two lateral sides and the top have all been whitewashed, *marshmallowed*, with a dexterous absence of joints that renders the architecture ethereal, becoming a soft container in which the objects of everyday life are celebrated.



House Declercq. Marie-José Van Hee. 2017 / © Javier F. Contreras



House Declercq. Marie-José Van Hee. 2017 / © Javier F. Contreras

Natural light bathes the architectural surfaces in white, as if pretending not to be interrupted by solid, seemingly massive elements, but instead highlighting the edges of the sliding doors and those of the fireplace. These elements, even the table, make their physicality, imperfections and joints explicit. There is a sense of inverted tactility that plays with the senses, emotions and, ultimately, perception. While with the main façade there is a univocal correspondence between material, function and technique, which is even underlined by a distinctive chromatic palette, at the back of the house the interplay between materiality and function displaces the sense of meaning. The same material – tropical wood – has been used for the load-bearing posts and sliding doors, intelligently playing with the ambiguity of immobility and displacement.

Once outside, all elements seem to recover their literal, intrinsic character. The landscape remains green, the brick wall recovers the texture of its masonry and the roof tiles again remind us that originally this was a piece of vernacular architecture. Yet this immediacy, as if in a final *tour de force* of perception, is finally contested through the use of glass. If we turn around and look back inside the house, the glass's double condition of total transparency and reflectivity creates a surface of flat depth, which contains more than its pragmatic property – the admission of light – and creates strangely atmospheric spaces. One is constantly immersed in the landscape, “nature” is imprisoned in glass; a screen filtering the garden visible behind it.

While there is a sense of directionality in the way that the window at the back frames the front yard, the reflections on the floor-to-ceiling plate glass, conveniently stripped of any mullion or division, embed us in a space that is both flat and deep, interior and exterior, domestic and wild.

Van Hee achieves a total condition of layered space and tactile tectonics: her unadorned use of materials creates the appearance of a domestic transparency devoid of symbolism, yet the texture of the construction and the atmospheric nature of the glass point to the sensory effects of architecture. The naked, essential space of the house on one side and the picturesque garden environment on the other are merged in different manners in the two exterior walls – one solid, the other transparent – accentuating the impression caused by the reflection of the figurative forms of the landscape on the abstract surface of the glass. Nature is not represented but displayed, enabling the observer to experience the sublime in the domestic, ultimately apprehending the world through a tactile, reflective architecture.

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