

OCCASIONALLY WHITE, DEFINITELY NOT A CUBE

When we started to work on the extension of the Frans Masereel Centrum, it felt like an architecture school exercise. The relationship between platonic volumes and the open landscape suggested some kind of fundamental act of architecture, profoundly anchored within the discipline. The dome, the A-Frame houses and the two small ellipsoidal domes formed together a village, inhabited by what seemed to be a strangely urban tribe, surrounded by ponies, open fields and pine woods. Adding a new pavilion to Lou Jansen's dome required us to be both attentive to its architectural qualities and to be prospective about its potential. The new building is neither an ode nor a critique of the existing centre. Above all, it tries to find rich and complementary interrelations with the existing environment and to charge the space, in and around it, with new possibilities.

Within this context, particularly charged both in terms of form and landscape, we felt that there was the necessity to go beyond the *white cube paradigm* – an architectural standard that was celebrated throughout the last century as the ideal art space. Of course, there is a need for neutrality, to leave the front stage for art and make architecture vanish. Yet, should neutrality necessarily produce boring spaces? Shouldn't architecture stimulate a state of receptiveness, creativity and *quiétude* without compromising spatial quality? All along the design process we felt an important engagement with these questions, imagining that Art and Architecture can interact differently particularly within the walls of the Masereel Centrum. As an art space, FMC is not really a gallery, nor a typical *atelier*. It looks like a small factory with its cast-iron machinery, pressure washers and ventilation pipes: a place of creative production and strange things, a place that produces sound, colours, and mess. All this paraphernalia is staged and shown as part of the experience, unlike a somewhat pedantic art gallery on an urban street corner.

In geometrical terms the starting point of the new building is a circle, just like the dome but slightly larger. This circle generates both a vertical glass cylinder with a conical domed roof on the top of it. Pieces are cut out of the cylinder and cone assembly, like a cake, dividing it into spaces with sharply angled corners in between them. This layout leads to non-hierarchical relations: the spaces are both scattered and connected. The new pavilion does not enclose the different programmes and their relationships within a pre-determined scheme but offers a multitude of possibilities. This allows a unique spacial experience both from the artists' and the visitors' point of view. There is no clear limit between the exhibition space and the work space, but a series of junctions between the two. Visitors and artists bypass each other without trespassing the one or the other. Visitors are encouraged to make their way and to fix their own limits, according to their level of curiosity.

