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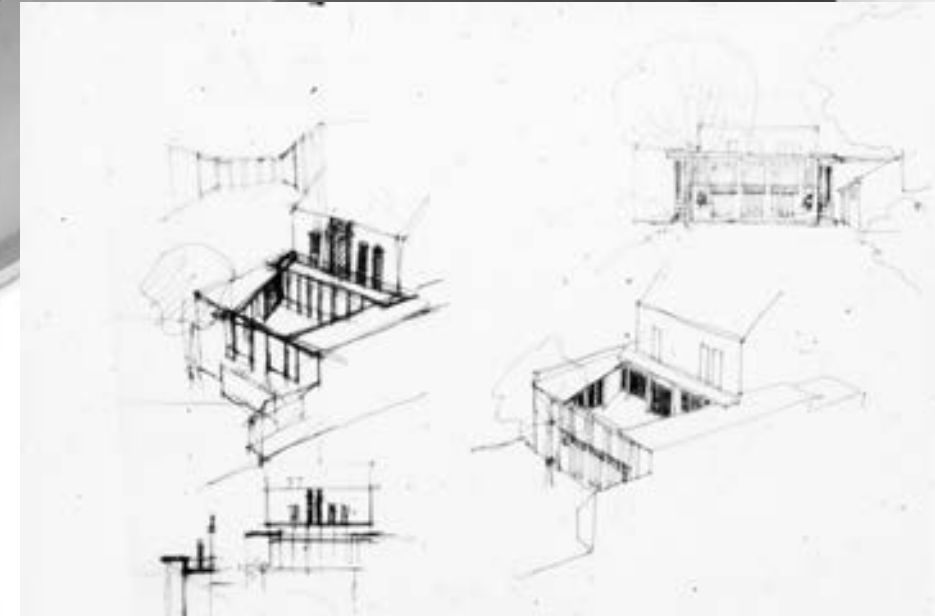
Portraits

Jef Jacobs

After a half-century career, this Belgian trailblazer still subscribes to an unhurried way of life yet shows no signs of slowing down.

Feature





Clockwise from top left: View of the dining room of the architect's own home (House Van Hee) in Ghent, Belgium, which she bought in the early 1990s; Photograph by Crispin van Sas. Sketch for the courtyard of House Vinken-Van Hee (1985), Passendale, Belgium. Detail of the white-painted wood panels at House Van Hee; Photograph by David Grandorge. Garden view of House Van Hee; Photograph by David Grandorge. View of the contrasting dark wooden beams of the ceiling with the Barragán-esque staircase at House Van Hee; Photograph by David Grandorge. All images courtesy Marie-José Van Hee Architecten.



*Architect Marie-José Van Hee is nearing her 50th year of practice, but unless you've spent time in Belgium, you're not very likely to have come across one of her buildings. Born and raised in Ghent, Van Hee came up in the early 1970s with the so-called *silencieux*, a group of five Flemish Architects from the Sint-Lucas architecture school who responded to the failing social ideals of the 1960s by focusing inward, refining their technique, and building whenever and as much as they could. As a result, instead of chasing international recognition, Van Hee spent most of her career shaping her local vernacular, the bulk of her halcyon houses, convivial public spaces, and other subtly-crafted projects found not just in Belgium but also in her immediate vicinity in and around Ghent (including her own house in the town center). Each of her projects exudes a timeless familiarity and palpable stillness existing in the hybrid zone of art and architecture, where proportion, composition, and craft unite to create a feeling of weightlessness.*

I was introduced to Van Hee in early 2017 after she was made an RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) International Fellow and subsequently designed a series of furniture pieces for Brussels-based gallery Maniera. Her work resonates with me not only for its practical beauty but also for its less obvious repositioning of domestic tradition. Van Hee's buildings and furniture, despite feeling undeniably resolved, are at the same time open to interpretation and expectation. Her public projects refer back to the home. Her houses prioritize a relationship with the street and the garden. Her furniture never serves just one function, but considers a variety of ambitions — sleeping, sitting, speaking, working, reading, eating. The flexibility offered by her work is not about customization, but about providing a foundation for a well-appointed good life on one's own terms. Shortly before publication of her new monograph, Marie-José Van Hee Works in Architecture (Copyright Slow Publishing, 2018), we caught up in her Ghent garden of lilies, grass, figs, and papaya to discuss her career trajectory, the necessity of slowness in her work, and the struggle facing women architects from the 1960s until today.

Alexandra Cunningham Cameron: Where do you start when designing a house? Do you already have ideas in your head? Or do you begin with the client?

Marie-José Van Hee: If you are making a house with the client, they already have a kind of idea of what they would like. And I think those desires are interesting — whether they like big places or smaller ones. The area around the house is very important to me. The context. The relation to the street and

MARIE-JOSÉ VAN HEE





Clockwise from top right: Detail view of Marie-José Van Hee's refurbishment of the market square in Deinze, Belgium, part of a larger project to improve the city's road infrastructure, public space, and landscaping of the Leie river banks (2009–14); Photograph by Frederik Vercruyse; Process drawing for Van Hee's renovation of the MoMu, a museum dedicated to fashion in Antwerp, Belgium (1999–2003); Detail of a public bench from the Deinze Market Square (2009–14); Photograph by Frederik Vercruyse. All images courtesy Marie-José Van Hee Architecten.

the neighbors and to the landscape or existing garden. We do a lot of transformations of older houses nowadays. I always say it's a bit like playing.

ACC: You like the constraints of working with an existing building?

MJVH: I can see very fast through the structure of the building — what's happening and what's going wrong, you know. It's something more than just looking. I just have to pick out the bad elements and introduce something new — for example, light, or connections with other rooms. In the beginning, I was working, working, working on it.

on gardens. I found that in our studies we focused only on the building, and there was never a connection to the surroundings. Anyway, when I graduated there was an economic crisis in Ghent and no opportunities to build, so I began working with the landscape architect Paul Deroose instead. It was in his office that I saw a photograph of an exhibition in New York on Barragán at the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA]. But I couldn't find the book here in Belgium. One day I went to get my hair cut. We were talking about my job and the hairdresser said, "I'm going to New York." And I said,

“The danger for originality is that you can get everything out of a library. Walls, windows, doors. It's so easy. And it shouldn't be easy. If it's easy, it lacks creativity.”

But now, at my age, I can truly see things.

ACC: Do you think you've developed this intuition from drawing? Because I heard you don't use a computer.

MJVH: I don't know. Maybe. I think computers are less free. The danger, for the future, for originality, is that you can get everything out of a library. Walls, windows, doors. You can just use what's there. It's so easy. And it shouldn't be easy. It should not be easy. If it's easy, it lacks creativity.

ACC: Were there homes you looked at as models for your own work?

MJVH: When I finished my studies, I went north. I had friends living in Denmark, and I went to Sweden to look at woodwork. Then I went to L.A. and I saw Greene and Greene's Gamble House, which has fascinating wood constructions. I was also interested in Italy — [Andrea] Palladio, Aldo Rossi's San Cataldo Cemetery, and his floating Teatro del Mondo.

ACC: Elements of your work have also been compared to Luis Barragán. When did you discover him?

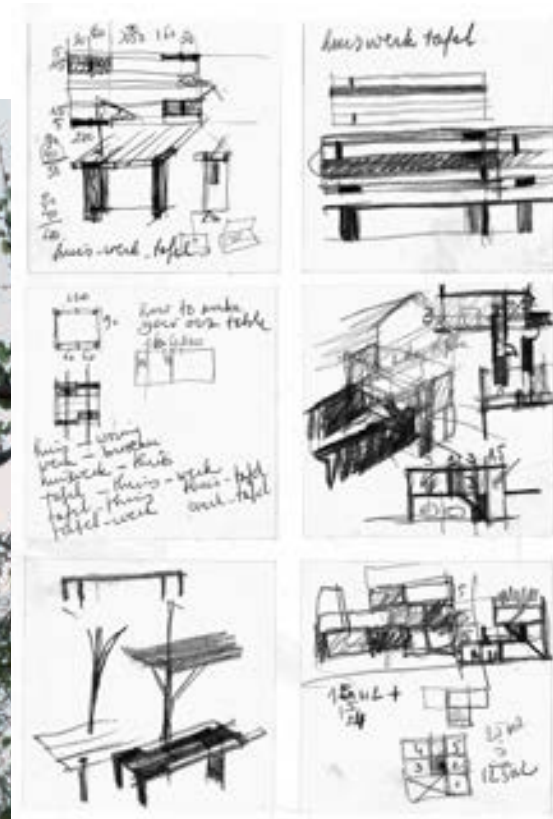
MJVH: That's old history. I have always been fascinated by plants and I wrote my thesis

“Yes! Would you please do something for me? Could you go to the exhibition. It will be interesting. And buy me that book?” This was sometime in the 1970s [the MoMA show opened on June 4, 1976]. He got me the book and we remained close friends until his recent death.

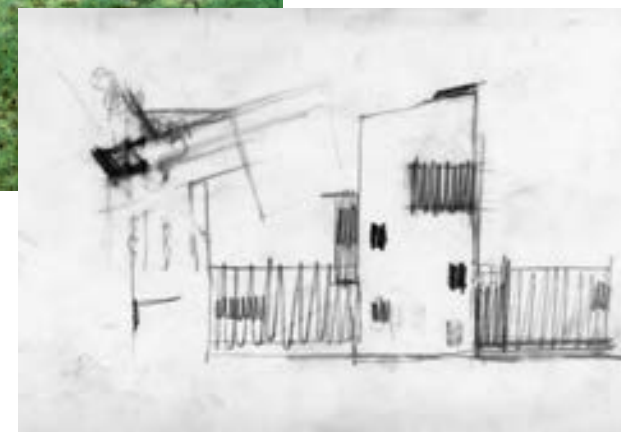
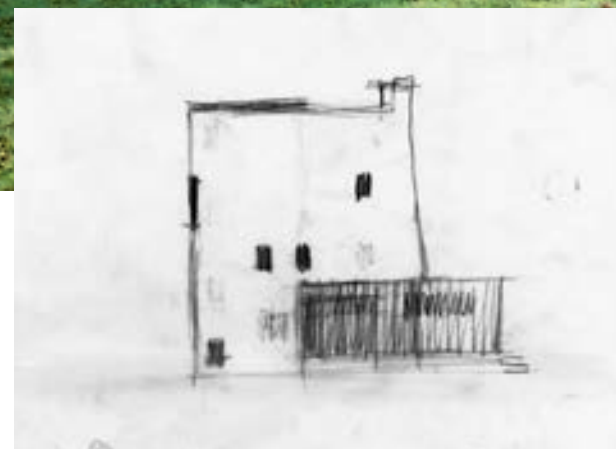
ACC: Mexican architecture is known for situating homes around a courtyard, which you've also done in quite a few of your urban houses. Tell me more about your thinking on the connection between the inside and outside.

MJVH: Well, you have different ingredients. Different relations between the inside and outside. I care most about this transitional moment. For example, my house [the Van Hee House, 1990] has a courtyard. I first came to live here as a student when it was a very small workman's house. The first thing I did was plant a tree. I need that. I'm not a person who, I think — I hope, will ever be put in an apartment. I need to have my feet on the ground. A courtyard is not more than the dimension of a room in a house, and that element of nature is absolutely necessary.

ACC: Aside from connecting people directly with



Clockwise from left: Photograph of House DF (2003), a private home in Zuidzande, a Dutch town near the Belgian border; Photograph by David Grandorge. Sketches for two of Van Hee's furniture designs, the *huiswerk-tafel* and *bed-bank* (2017). Detail view of the entrance of House DF (2003), Zuidzande, Netherlands; Photograph by David Grandorge. Detail parts of the *huiswerk-tafel*, a "home-work-table" Van Hee made from tulip wood and wenge, designed in 2017 for Maniera gallery in Brussels; Photograph by Maxime Prananto. Two elevation drawings of House DF (2003) in Zuidzande, Netherlands. All images courtesy Marie-José Van Hee Architecten.



FEATURE

nature, do you believe architects have a responsibility to be conscious of environmental pollution?

MJVH: I think it's very necessary, yes. But I'm not the biggest fan of all the regulations. I believe in simple structures and open windows. No air-conditioning. You have to consider the seasons and clean materials instead of adding a lot of technical things, you know? And timelessness is important. You have to think about the form of the room. If you look through the history of what people want to keep, it's good proportions, not necessarily utility. Just give people space.

ACC: Your rooms often have multiple functions, as does your furniture. Do you seek to emphasize flexibility?

MJVH: Yes. The furniture, for example, started with a bed. When I moved into this house, I slept on a futon mattress on the ground. And I said, "Maybe now that I have a real house I should design a bed." And then I started to design the bed and thought, "It should be more than just a bed." So I created the bed-bench by pulling two platforms together and tying them with leather. The idea came from camp, when I was a young child. My little friend and I wanted to sleep close to each other, so we used our socks to tie our beds together.

ACC: Where did you grow up?

MJVH: Just outside Ghent, in a little village called Bachte-Maria-Lerne. When I was ten, my parents sent me to boarding school, but I went home on the weekends. My father was in the building sector, and I liked to work in his atelier and make things out of wood.

ACC: What kind of house did you grow up in?

MJVH: Not a beautiful house. Just a row house. It was an awful house! It reflected my parents' taste, which is very far from my taste. It was not inspiring. [Laughs.]

ACC: So how, in that environment, did you develop your own taste?

MJVH: I have a distinct memory of a house we used to pass when my father took me to school in Eeklo. It was in the 1960s, when they were making those new houses with a V roof and glass blocks and all those kinds of things. I was so fascinated by this particular one. Everything about it was new to me. Everything. The door, the windows, the curtains. It wasn't the classic idea of a house with a pitched roof. One day in school, the drawing teacher asked us to draw our dream house, and I designed a house just like that one. She was so

fascinated by it, and I won the drawing competition. [Laughs.] I remember that teacher well. She was a nun. She later pushed me to study architecture. At that time it had only been three or four years since they started accepting girls at the architecture

your work to change society?
 MJVH: I think not. Architecture won't change the world. You can try to build something that makes people happy in a certain way, but it won't change the world.
 ACC: So what changes the world?

“When I’m driving, I never do U-turns unless I meet a dead end. I hate dead ends. I rather want to continue somewhere and end up in a marvelous place with time to look around.”

school. So then I studied architecture. Even if my mother didn't want me to.

ACC: Why not?

MJVH: The director of my boarding school didn't want me to either. She told my mother that architecture was for boys. Because that was 1968. There were 80 students in total with only four girls in the class. And to this day I'm still fighting for my freedom. I'm really battling for freedom.

ACC: What do you mean by that?

MJVH: I'm somebody from the generation of 1968 who's tied to the idea of freedom. That's why I don't like rules.

ACC: Including environmental and building regulations?

MJVH: Yes. All the regulations that take away personal responsibility. People shouldn't blindly follow a set of rules laid out for them. Otherwise, they stop paying attention. They stop making decisions for themselves.

ACC: Do you consider yourself a Modernist?

MJVH: I'm certainly a child of that time. I learned something from the Modernists.

ACC: You and your cohort of classmates — Mark Dubois, Paul Robbrecht, Hilde Daem, and Christian Kieckens — are sometimes referred to as the Ghent Five, and the group has been compared to the New York Five for the same rejection of the social project of Modernism. Do you now expect

MJVH: [Laughs.] I don't have an answer to that. I think it's important to start with your own small surroundings — your friends, your family — and then go a bit further out, with the world. But I'm not a preacher.

ACC: Are these ideas running through your mind as you create the plan of a house? Do you intentionally subvert traditional layouts, as some feminist critics claim?

MJVH: Is there a feminist critique of my work?

ACC: Yes!

MJVH: I didn't know about it. I care about transitional moments. From room to room. From indoors to outdoors. I don't have drapes on my windows; they are high so you can't see inside when passing by, but my lamp lights the street — that's an invitation. And my front door is just a bit covered. You're already in the house as you stand on the threshold.

ACC: The Ghent Market Hall, which you built with Robbrecht & Daem in 2012, includes an outdoor fireplace in one of its four concrete supports.

MJVH: Because the building is a roof. The space is intended to connect people, especially during the winter. In a home, people come together around a fireplace and around a table. So the hearth is a symbol.

ACC: A symbol of domestic intimacy?

MJVH: Yes, of a gathering space.

ACC: Your work is often compared to sacred spaces.

Could you discuss the kinds of symbols you use to affect people?

MJVH: For example, I always plant a tree that belongs to the house. The Celts planted trees to mark their property. Outside of Ghent, lime trees are planted at road crossings to symbolize caution. We've stopped looking with our eyes when we travel. We don't read the landscape to find our way. Sometimes I think people are losing that real orientation because of the tools nowadays — GPS, apps, and so on.

ACC: Yes. The navigational part of our brains is shrinking.

MJVH: It's true. We can't experience a city in a car. When I'm driving, I never do U-turns unless I meet a dead end. I hate dead ends. I rather want to continue somewhere and end up in a marvelous place with time to look around.

making a plan.

ACC: There are many of your drawings in your new book and they always have a sense of urgency to them. It's as if you're exercising an idea.

MJVH: Sometimes there's a lot coming through my internal library. But I can't get started without a client. Otherwise, I'd just rather spend my time reading in the garden. [Laughs.]

ACC: What would you like to design that you haven't?

MJVH: A bridge. I've been looking at photographs of bridges. Dominique Issermann photographed her daughter on a bridge over the water — a very high bridge. Her daughter is lying on a wall between the water and the parking lot. Such a wonderful idea of a bridge. I like to stand on a bridge and look

“Timelessness is important. If you look through the history of what people want to keep, it's good proportions, not necessarily utility. Just give people space.”

If you are just on the highway, you end up with nothing. There is so much to find in life and introduce into your architecture.

ACC: Do you think it's essential to visit a place in order to experience it?

MJVH: I have never seen or been inside a Barragán house. But I know it. In fact, I am sure that there's a mistake in my MoMA catalogue. I can imagine the house so clearly, that I know one of the negatives has been flipped and the image transposed. For my thesis, I wrote about the gardens of Louis XIV. I was most interested in the medieval period. That was a moment when private gardens were incorporated into abbeys and palaces. I wrote a description of the walk through the Villa d'Este. The people who read my thesis said, “When did you go to the Villa d'Este?” I never went. But I recreated the scene from the plans I had. They said, “How did you do that?” I said, “I can dream it.” I still do it when I'm

over the water. It's like seeing the city from a boat — a totally different perspective from when you're walking in the street. Bridges create new ways of looking at the world.

ACC: I was talking to Yona Friedman recently, and we were discussing how people look at each other and not at buildings on the street. This eye contact is integral to the urban plans in his mind. The interior sightlines of your houses are similar. They maximize perspective between the inhabitants of the house.

MJVH: I think that architects create the scene for things to happen. That's important. I don't see myself as directing the possibilities of people interacting. Just creating some possibilities. Then, whatever happens happens.

ACC: But you're the one setting the stage.

MJVH: Most of the people we make houses for say that their home feels like a holiday house, more than their actual holiday home. They



come to rest in the houses we design for them. They find in my architecture some kind of slowness. And that is the most important thing to me, because our lives and work are full and you need to come home and feel good in your house.

ACC: You are also known to take your time when designing a project.

MJVH: [Laughs.] Yes. People try to force me to move faster, but I don't. If you are in a hurry, pick

work or talent as an architect. That kind of gossip has now gone a bit out of fashion.

ACC: You think it's easier for women in architecture today?

MJVH: Yes. I think so. In the past I may have been treated like half an architect.

ACC: Have you designed mostly domestic spaces by choice, or because there was an expectation that a woman should be designing a private house, as opposed to a public building?

“I'm tied to the idea of freedom. People shouldn't blindly follow a set of rules laid out for them. Otherwise, they stop paying attention. They stop making decisions for themselves.”

somebody else. But I think you know a lot about me, I don't know where you got all this information. [Laughs.]

ACC: I have my sources.

MJVH: That's okay. [Laughs.] But, you know, clients are starting to come from farther and farther away, and you don't know them exactly, and you need time to meet them, to learn to know them. I usually make a kind of first drawing to see if we will find each other. Often, the youngest people are the most challenging ones. They are still finding themselves, but they already know too much. They bring me Pinterest mood boards. Can you imagine? They say, “We know you're a good architect, but we want it like this.” I say, “Then I'm not a good architect for you. Because you want other things than the things in my work.” They really want to make somebody else of me. I won't have that.

ACC: Do you think of yourself as a feminist?

MJVH: I *am* a feminist.

ACC: What does that mean to you?

MJVH: I have had to fight for everything. I think sometimes it would have been easier if I were a man. In the beginning, they started rumors about me whenever I got a job — implying that I didn't get it based on my

MJVH: It started like that, yes. Now, I think, there is a more open view. My first major project was Antwerp's fashion museum [MoMu, 2002], but for all the others, I was expected to work alongside a man. A lot of women are still working in connection with a man. For a time, I was just one of the few women working in my own office. But more and more, girls come through my office and afterwards set up on their own. If I say, “I'm going to retire,” they say, “No! No! Don't stop. You're an example to us. Just go for it!” And I have fought for me and also for them. I try to be an example for a generation of women.

ACC: And are you thinking of stopping?

MJVH: I cannot stop.