

# C.E.C.A. HOUSE

## EXPEDITING THE UN-PRIVATE CLIENT

*The primary responsibility of the architect is not  
one of representing the interest of the client,  
but representing the public interest*

Wouter Van Stiphout, *The Self-Destruction Machine* (2014)

On March 24<sup>th</sup> 1954 architect Léon Palm delivered a seminal lecture at the Brussels Chamber of Commerce entitled *Immoralité du gaspillage dans les constructions dites 'A bon marché'*. Palm, a young entrepreneurial builder, exposed a fundamental critique towards the ruling practices of post-war housing construction. According to the architect both industry and national housing policy advocated an all too dogmatic and traditional take on building technology, pushing a needless inflation of material consumption and labor efforts. As a provocation, Palm suggested in his lecture he could build a 100m<sup>2</sup> 'all mod cons' workers' family house at less than half the market price. An enlightenment he pitched as: 'A house at the price of a FORD car!'. Furthermore, the housing unit's ensuing mass production could yield a necessary shift in output velocity, a much-needed injection for a housing policy that, at the time, was backlogged by more than 250.000 dwellings.

### BLUFF

Annoyingly intrigued by Palm's provocation, the Brussels Chamber of Commerce decided to challenge the architect by offering him a stand at the upcoming Coal and Steel Exhibition in Liège. Confronted with a sheer impossible time frame (the venue was to open in less than a month) Palm decided to team up with architect Willy Van Der Meeren, who's architecture he had positively reviewed in a recent *Beaux Arts* article, but never met. Myth has it that the architects arranged a meeting at the Brussels Central Station's buffet, where Van Der Meeren sketched the house's principle on a beer felt: a two-bay square plan with a steel portico structure and a centralized heating system. The weeks following the buffet session, Palm's bluff was molded into a partial 1/1 scale model and on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1954 the concept was put

on display. Baptized as the ‘C.E.C.A. House’<sup>1</sup>, the dwelling clearly referred to the *Communauté Européenne de Charbon et de l’Acier*, all in line with the architects’ will to promote modern affordable homes for working class’ families. The accompanying billboard at the Liège show read: “MAISON C.E.C.A.? HABITATION OUVRIÈRE MODÈLE ... - ECONOMIE N’EST PAS MEDIOCRITE MAIS QUALITE DES MATERIAUX - SIMPLICITE DE CONCEPTION - FABRICATION INDUSTRIELLE - RESULTAT: CETTE MAISON POUR LE PRIX DE 148.000 F - AVEC: CHAUFFAGE GENERAL - SALLE DE BAIN COMPLET - CUISINE EQUIPE - ARMOIRES PLACARD DANS LES CHAMBRES”.<sup>2</sup> The Liège exhibition was soon followed by a second fair,<sup>3</sup> enabling Palm and Van Der Meeren to gather a staggering 4.500 clients in hardly six months.<sup>4</sup>



C.E.C.A. 1/1 partial scale model, Coal and Steel Exhibition, Liège (April 1954)

<sup>1</sup> The CECA name was somewhat provocatively chosen by Van Der Meeren and Palm since Belgium had the poorest level of housing facilities for steel and coal workers within the future European Union (Ziggurat, BRT 1995, televised interview with Willy Van Der Meeren, conducted by Jurgen Persyn)

<sup>2</sup> “C.E.C.A. HOUSE? A MODEL WORKERS’ HOUSE ... - ECONOMY DOESN’T EQUAL MEDIOCRITY BUT QUALITATIVE MATERIALS - CONCEPTUAL SIMPLICITY - INDUSTRIAL FABRICATION - RESULT: THIS HOUSE FOR THE PRICE OF 148.000 F - INCLUDING: GENERAL HEATING - FULLY EQUIPED BATHROOM - FULLY EQUIPED KITCHEN - BUILT-IN BEDROOM CUPBOARDS” (translation by the author)

<sup>3</sup> Exposition Internationale Technique et Industrielle at the Palais des Expositions in Charleroi

<sup>4</sup> Ziggurat, BRT 1995, televised interview with Willy Van Der Meeren, conducted by Jurgen Persyn

Evidently, the key to the instant success was to be found in a deadpan logic and an ultimate sense of economy, both in volume and materiality. However, if C.E.C.A. was to represent any true invention - beyond the advanced socio-economic ethos - it had to be its apparent capacity to link thousands of individual households (private house owners) through a shared longing for generous and affordable dwelling. Palm's bluff and Van Der Meeren's upfront design managed to tap into a crucial middle ground, fluidly bypassing the antagonistic doctrines of both the bourgeois post-war house and the (social) apartment slab. In a stealth manner, C.E.C.A. aimed at 'un-privatizing' the individual home owner, guaranteeing the right to a private compact property all the while maximizing the potential for social place making and local community creation. A perfect - Belgian- compromise?

### BOYCOT

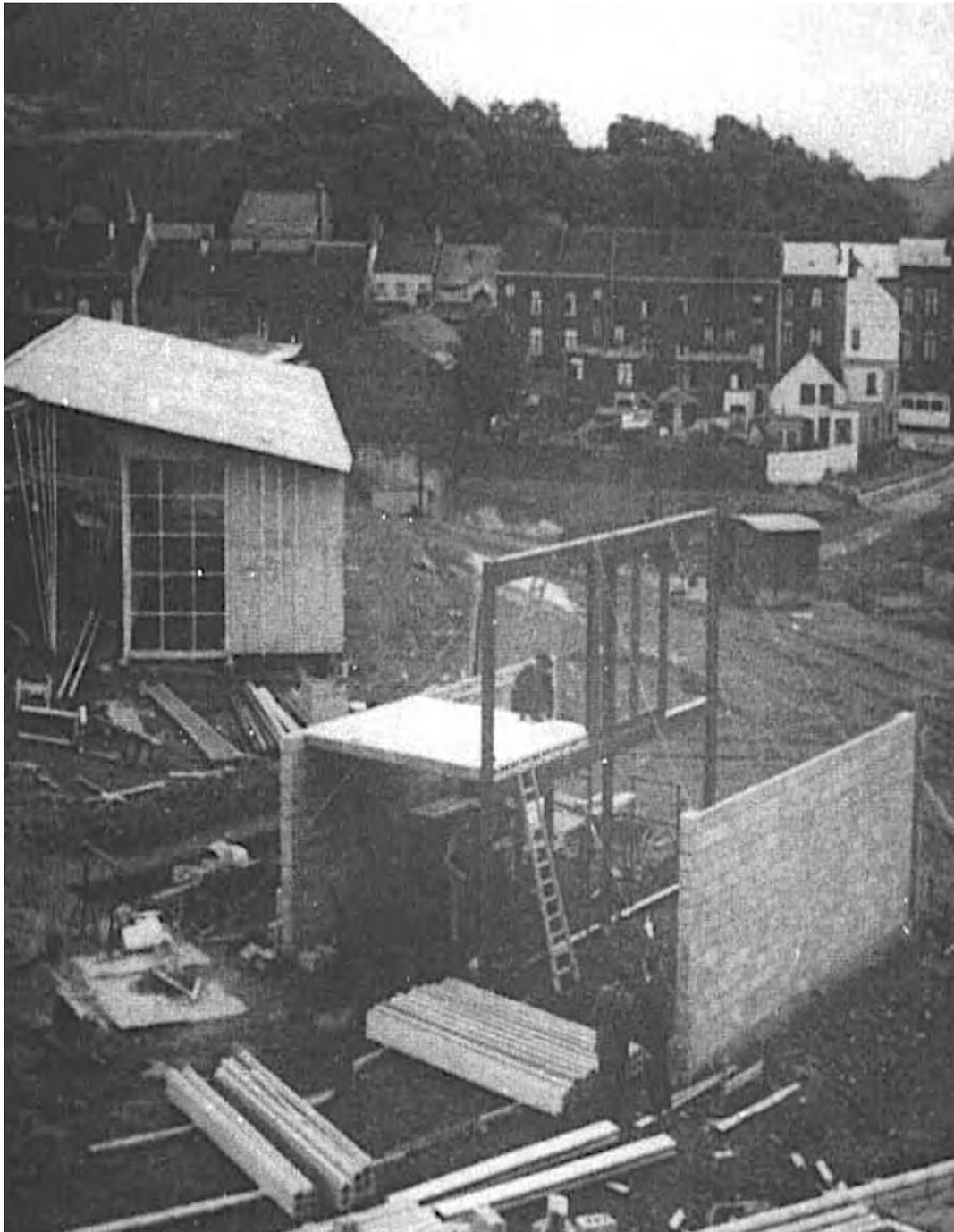
Like many experimental housing architectures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the C.E.C.A. house failed to outgrow its prototype phase. Infamous pre-cursing examples like the Eames House (1949), the lightweight shelter program by Atelier Jean Prouvé (1944) or Le Corbusier's M.A.S. program (1940)<sup>5</sup> are fine examples whereby intriguing prototypes were conceptualized, sometimes even built, yet without ever reaching in a convincing manner the necessary level of mass-production.

In Belgium, fellow-architects like Peter Callebaut or René Heyvaert were interested in similar socio-economic housing experiments, though devoid of any active ambition for serial reproduction. In C.E.C.A.'s case, the final push - away from mass production - was given by the Belgian National Housing Company (NHS). The idea that two young daredevils could effortlessly merge social ethics and astute economics didn't go down well with the ruling traditionalist housing companies. Instead of being hailed as a fresh and urgent complement to post-war housing industry, the C.E.C.A. project reaped a fierce anti-lobby. As a consequence, the NHS refused to *okay* the prototype's structural principle, falsely claiming that the central

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<sup>5</sup> M.A.S. or *Maisons Montées à Sec*, was a never executed housing program based on complete standardization, offering a steel construction with steel façade cladding and a centralized heating equipment (source: website Fondation LeCorbusier)

steel portico would be too weak. The unilateral veto caused construction companies to withdraw and overnight the project's prime mission - *Construire pour le plus grand nombre* - became its fundamental weakness. Any chances for mass-production dissolved and 4.500 potential clients had to be annulled.

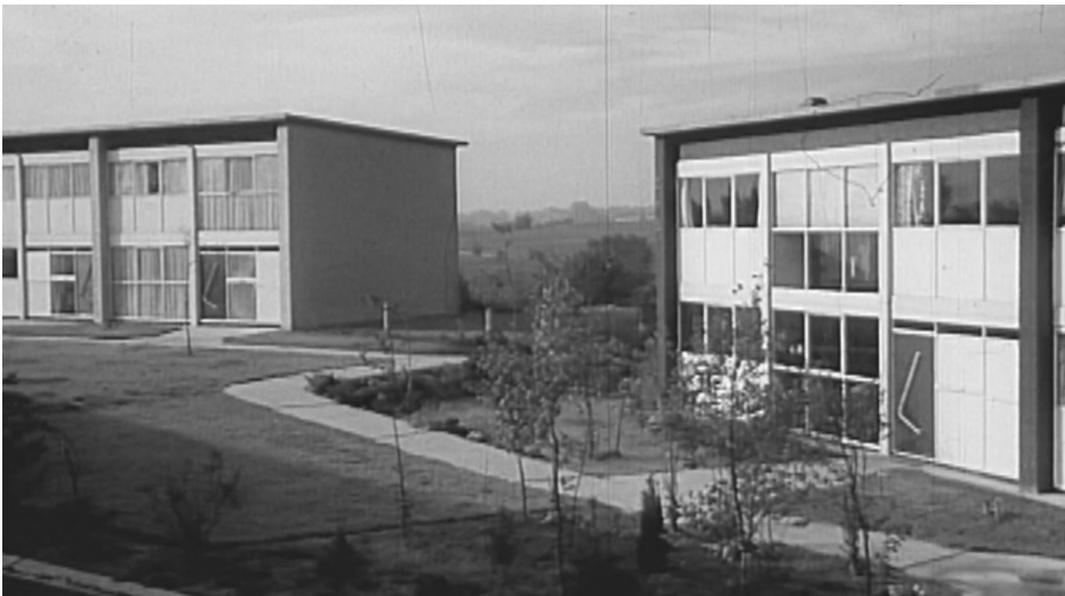


C.E.C.A. 1/1 prototype with steel portico  
Exposition Internationale Technique et Industrielle, Charleroi (September 1954)

The NHS's attack did silently cancel yet another C.E.C.A. trait. Though never fully developed, the architects aimed at a rather revolutionary ruling regarding the design fees. In the minds of Palm and Van Der Meeren, the C.E.C.A. type was developed as a simple building kit that could be adopted by other architects or housing companies. In order to render such 'ghostwriting' credible, the architects planned to implement a royalty arrangement, instead of claiming a regular designer's remuneration. Such shift on authorship was crucial if mass production was truly envisaged. Unfortunately, the financial concept was never seriously developed or tested in real-time. The truth of the matter is that C.E.C.A. never got adopted, or even copied for that matter.

#### AFTERLIFE #1

A couple of weeks after C.E.C.A.'s initial decline, a new and unexpected chance arose. Benoît Verhaegen, a begetter of a large family and one of the original 4.500 applicants asked Palm and Van Der Meeren to re-think C.E.C.A. and develop an 'XL version' (three bays instead of two bays). Verhaegen owned a sizable terrain near Brussels, named *Clos des Quatre Vents*. The generous plot with its jazzy topography convinced the architects to imagine not one but eight C.E.C.A. units, all fluidly arranged around a communal garden and playground.



Clos des Quatre Vents, Tervueren (still from *Moderne Woningbouw*, BRT archive, 1955)

House of Willy Van Der Meeren with centralized double height living space on the right

The tenants for the remaining seven houses were called upon by Verhaegen and the architects, based on the Liège and Charleroi applicants' lists. Hence, the *clos* was to become home to a medical doctor, a politician, a civil servant, a writer, ..., and an architect (Van Der Meeren himself). By means of this social re-arrangement, the *Clos des Quatre Vents* abstracted two prime C.E.C.A. creeds: mass production and a socially challenged user's profile. Middleclass families and intellectual peers - hungry for a comfortable living experiment - had silently traded places with an intended laborers' public. Additionally, the production of but eight units did skyrocketx the foreseen 'FORD selling price' by 50%, equalizing a 'normal' post-war housing budget.

The contextual concept and extremely rapid realization of the *clos* produced however new insights. Even in its 'bourgeois' version the C.E.C.A. type continued to un-privatize the architectural client in a substantial manner, both economically and socially. Without the C.E.C.A. opportunity all eight house owners would have built their own individual home, presumably on a private plot. Moreover, for all C.E.C.A. units an absolute minimum of primary sources was used, processing but a fraction of the material implemented for a typical post-war house. But most importantly the community's careful arrangement, i.e. the subtle inter-distances between neighbors, allowed for an untapped modern practice of social interdependency. Arranged in a 2/3/3 block system, completely engulfed by a variety of garden conditions, the compact C.E.C.A. principle gave rise to a continuous live experiment, of which the first decade proved to be incrementally unique, since Willy Van Der Meeren and his family actively lived and thus implicitly 'watched over' the evolution of the co-housing's reality.



Clos des Quatre Vents, Tervueren

Garden arrangement, hand colored drawing, part of the tenant's dossier House nr.5, 1955

### EMBEDDED

The *clos*' newfound communality didn't straightforwardly offer a complete bliss, since it - evidently - had to deal with the whims and fancies of human individuals. Together with the new inhabitants, Van Der Meeren continued to push the boundaries of the C.E.C.A. type, boasting an intriguing catalogue of 'personalized' versions, including different interior finishing, varying color schemes and alternative facade arrangements. Such differentiating strategies, crucial within the un-privatized realm of co-habitation, allowed the inhabitants to be 'themselves' amidst one another. In his house (nr.6) Willy Van Der Meeren - being his proper un-private client - went beyond the esthetical diversity, altering the C.E.C.A. type by introducing a centralized double height space. This extremely clear move did fundamentally re-conceptualize C.E.C.A.'s spatial potential - from an economical prototype into a cultural one, whereby the private interior and the semi-private exterior had merged into an un-private continuum.



House Van Der Meeren with double height space (nr.6), Clos des Quatre Vents, Tervueren (1955)

In retrospect, the presence of Van Der Meeren in the young community proved to be a necessity. Clearly, such way of experimental co-habitation needed a healthy supervision as well as punctual recalibration. Despite the presence of a protocol on how communal spaces and amenities should be used (acte de base), the minutes of the clos' community meetings mainly reveal banal positions and day-to-day frustrations on how to live together. On June 25<sup>th</sup> 1958 the minutes read: *'l'objet principal de l'assemblée est d'établir un plan d'aménagement des parties communes et privées dans la mesure ou celles-ci concernent l'ensemble des propriétaires. En particulier chaque propriétaire est prié de faire connaître les modifications et derogations qu'il desire apporter dans son lot soit au cahier des charges, soit à la situation acuelle, par exemple: construction ou aménagement de bassin, claustra, grille, clôture de type spécial ou même absence de clôture, plantations débordant sur le lot indivis, etc...* On July 28<sup>th</sup> 1962, Willy Van Der Meeren (acting as syndic) noted: *'Je me vois obligé de vous rappeler que les intentions des architectes Palm & Van Der Meeren étaient de réserver le jardin commun exclusivement aux piétons et jeux d'enfants. Depuis quelque temps, on prend la malheureuse habitude de charger sa voiture devant la porte.'* After Van Der Meeren's timely departure in 1964, the co-habitation continued to be challenged by outlandish wishes or simple neglect. A report, dated November 7<sup>th</sup> 1969, stated: *'Comme vous pouvez le constater, il est difficile de contenter tout le monde...et son voisin. Il s'ensuit donc, la partie commune est destinée à presenter sous peu, l'apparence d'un terrain vague.'*

The brittle balance between private and communal profits has always haunted the clos, from its very onset. Over the years, new tenants and owners continued to 'challenge' the un-private equilibrium, either out of simple ignorance or a clear disinterest for the unique formula of this wayward neighborhood. So far, the summum of such a luring re-privatization is best resumed by the curved extension of house nr.1, executed in 1998. Willy Van Der Meeren, back then aged 75 years old and no longer living at the clos, had been alerted by the co-inhabitants that house nr.1 was being enlarged without respecting the architectural ensemble or the color scheme (a white curved extension adjacent to the initially red end wall).

In a letter dated September 20<sup>th</sup> 1998 Van Der Meeren addressed the Mayor of Tervueren, stating that this curved extension read as an ‘aggressive groin rupture’, destroying the balance of the whole site. Importantly, Van Der Meeren wrote the letter in the name of the co-owners of the *clos*. Unfortunately, the extension was already well on its way. In his letter Van Der Meeren suggested, presumably for the first time, that the *Clos des Quatre Vents*, being an internationally recognized prime example of modernist architecture, should be listed as a monument. The split between the original ‘ghostwriting’ stance, in favor of a potential mass production (1954) and the architect’s seemingly over-protective patronage 45 years later is intriguingly puzzling, to say the least. At the same time, in order to guarantee C.E.C.A.’s intelligence and social potential, heritage listing could be deemed the last lifeline available?



Extended House nr.1, Clos des Quatre Vents, Tervueren, image: Leonard Streich (2018)

## AFTERLIFE #2

It would take another decade before Van Der Meeren's hint at listing the *clos* would be picked up by official heritage policy. On October 10<sup>th</sup> 2008, the Van Der Meeren family house was officially acknowledged as a monument, and on October 15<sup>th</sup> 2010 the complete estate was recognized as architectural heritage. Surprisingly enough, this time around the listing was objected by the majority of co-owners of the *clos*. In a letter dated December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007, the inhabitants of houses nr.1, 3, 5, 7 and 8 reclaimed that listing would be an unnecessary burden on the *clos'* autonomy. A demand that in the end was not granted by the Heritage Department. So, as a regrettable reaction to the nearing of presumed 'heritage sclerosis', the owners of house nr.1, 2 and 3 proceeded in replacing all the slender steel facades by 'energy efficient and user friendly' PVC window frames. If anything, the new facades have clearly indicated how quickly the DNA of C.E.C.A. can be subverted and even erased.

Further contemplating the importance of heritage listing it must be stated that the C.E.C.A. house, especially through its fierce economy of means, was never meant to last but more than one generation. Hence, the original choice for lightweight construction, 'poor' materials and euphemistic stability calculations. In the end, the prefab construction had to be easy to dismantle and recycle, a specification that perfectly fitted Van Der Meeren's prime idea on housing or any other program for that matter, i.e. human amenities shouldn't put a permanent claim on the limited space at hand. After one or two generations, new societal insights would rule and thus architecture shouldn't burden these unpredictable evolutions. So, it goes without saying that the listing of the *clos* fundamentally modified C.E.C.A.'s ephemeral intentions. At the same time, it equally gave rise to other necessary freedoms. Today, exactly sixty-five years after C.E.C.A.'s inception, the *Clos des Quatre Vents* is welcoming its fourth generation of inhabitants. The past decade, the *clos* has primarily turned into a cultural good, bearing witness of what could have been (the mass-production), what has been (an unencumbered modernist co-habitation) and what currently is (a listed dwelling environment within an urban sprawl condition).

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the *clos*, post-listing, is the fact that it has become a rule-avoiding mechanism. Listed monuments are absolved of complying to generic urban and ecological ruling. In an era obsessed with ‘eco-correctness’, ‘compact urban living’, etc..., the C.E.C.A. house seems to have become State Enemy number one. The project is in effect one huge thermal bridge. A dwelling that is hardly insulated, allowing in winter maximum temperatures of 18 or 19 degrees Celcius, while in summer demanding all windows to be opened for minimum air flow and cooling. By today’s housing standards and its aggressively lobbied energy guide lines, the C.E.C.A. house successfully fails on all levels. Updating C.E.C.A. in order to comply to these top down rules would simply end the project, forever.

P.S.

Living at the *clos* is a challenging pleasure<sup>6</sup>. The project, even in its ‘failed’ version(s), remains a societal pre-cursor. As a fourth-generation inhabitant we feel to represent an enhanced version of the un-private client. This implies consciously activating elements of social place making (ongoing community creation), ecological rule bending, cultural production and maintaining an economy of means. Perhaps, the true genius of Palm and Van Der Meeren resides in C.E.C.A.’s ‘promise’, the promise that through reformatting the smallest entity imaginable – the affordable house – society and its predominantly static political policy system could be subverted and opened up. The fact that this never truly happened, because of a multitude of reasons, is presumably not as crucial as it seems. The promise has installed a joint - almost immaterial - responsibility within the *clos*. To curate C.E.C.A. on a daily basis is what should be understood as our current and future un-privatized nature. C.E.C.A.’s ultimate lesson is one of taking private stakes seriously while simultaneously producing communality.

Architecture serves society – the public – through the inevitable agency of a client. Independent of the client’s inclination (private, public, semi-this, semi-that, ...), the

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<sup>6</sup> Since May 2017, my family and I have had the chance of residing at House nr.6, and nr.7. House nr.7 is the most original C.E.C.A. unit to this date, partially composed of elements from the 1954 prototype, and comprising the originally intended steel portico structure.

architect should always venture at un-privatizing the architectural client. Making the project, again and again, relevant to public interest. Ultimately, with Palm and Van Der Meeren in mind, the architect should perform as a producer, not as a divine creator.

Peter Swinnen

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*Historical facts relating to the initial conception of the C.E.C.A. house have been based on rare live interviews with Willy Van Der Meeren conducted by Prof. dr. Emiel De Kooning, as well as the ZIGGURAT TV documentary, edited by Jurgen Persyn (BRT 1995). Prof. dr. Emiel De Kooning's work has been reproduced amongst other in:*

*-Willy Van Der Meeren (catalogue d'oeuvre), Vlees & Beton 21-24, Laat-XXste-eeuws Genootschap, Damme, 1993.*

*-Willy Van Der Meeren. Architectuur. Stedenbouw. Design. Research. Onderwijs (2 vols.), unpublished PhD thesis, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Ghent University, 1997.*