



Auditoire NILE. Photo: Marie-Françoise Plissart

All about attitude

TEXT: COLETTE DAVIDSON

Whether creating buildings from scratch or restoring Belgium's most revered national heritage sites, Francis Metzger adopts the same approach. Defining himself as an 'architecte de situation', the architect and his team put context before everything, with a pragmatic and humble process that is both respectful of the past and proactive vis-à-vis the future.

A classified building, the Hotel Astoria, constructed in 1909, is legendary in the world of luxury hotels. When it was acquired by Corinthia Hotels in 2016, it had lost its splendour and no longer offered the standards of a grand hotel worthy of the name. But the new owner wanted to create a charming palace – previously lacking in the capital of Europe. That's when MA² stepped in. Now, CEO Francis Metzger and his team of more than 20 are working to not only create fewer but larger rooms, but have mostly reversed their positioning: the suites have been placed on the top floors, offering a panoramic view of Brussels. Opening onto several adjoining buildings, surrounding a perfectly renovat-

ed facade, the new larger and more comfortable spaces boast a spa, restaurants and characterful shops – all the 'musts' of a contemporary high-end hotel.

The hotel is one of several ongoing projects at MA², which has operated out of Brussels since 1993. The firm has specific experience in revitalising national heritage sites and has made its mark on numerous iconic buildings, many of them classified, such as Maison Autrique and Brussels central station (works by Victor Horta, the cantor of Art Nouveau), new secure entrances to the Law Courts of Brussels, Notre-Dame de Laeken Church, Solvay Library and the sublime Saint-Cyr House, one of the most photographed Art Nouveau facades in the country.

Towards a recapture of identity

Having sometimes been entrusted with complete ruins (such as the Château Charle-Albert) or places completely altered by the wear of time, various ownerships or vandalism, the Francis Metzger team applies a systematic method: ex-

cavation in the archives, exhuming old plans and period photos, undertaking stratigraphic or chromatic analysis to detect the initial intentions of the architect, to recover the spirit of the initial volumes, the colours and the original materials, the threads of wallpapers, etc.

For the Aegidium, an eclectic entertainment venue known as Diamant Palace,



Francis Metzger.

which housed a Louis XV ballroom and a Neo-Byzantine concert hall, LED bulbs that would distill the same luminous vibration of bulbs from the beginning of the last century are currently being sought. The purpose of the operation is to stage and modernise the new space, while recovering its soul of yesteryear.

For the flamboyant Villa Empain (an Art Nouveau masterpiece reconverted into a publicly accessible foundation), the exotic wood species that have since disappeared had to be found and replaced. No longer produced, the marble slabs of the entrances were sawn in their thickness to be split and replace the missing pieces of the puzzle.

Modern infrastructures included

Using the most specialised experts, tradesmen and craftsmen, these restoration campaigns aim to recreate original splendour, while having discreetly integrated modern techniques, such as automation, necessary for a building's current function.

Built in 1904 in an eclectic style, Delune House now hosts the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. Majestic once again, its fine restoration has invisibly integrated important elements, including security, to make it functional.

And while MA² may be best known for its restoration efforts, the architecture firm is

unique, as it specialises in both restoration and original creation.

Its Balsamine Theater received successive awards at the international architecture biennales of Costa Rica and Sao Paulo. Ten years after MA² designed two buildings on one of the campuses of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, the academic authorities commissioned the firm to design an auditorium on the esplanade that separates them. The result: between two buildings with a beaten stainless steel coating, stands a seductive black meteorite that accommodates up to 300 people.

Respect for heritage and a contemporary touch

Francis Metzger has no equal in creating a dialogue between old and new, resurrecting lost identities and giving them sense. This is the case of Tournay-Solvay Castle, built between 1880 and 1905 and partially ravaged by a fire in 1982. Situated in a protected green zone, the completely renovated building will soon house the BEL, an inter-university centre of excellence dedicated to physics as well as a refuge for bats. Housed in the roof and reimagined in a contemporary style, a meeting room will look up to the sky, reflecting the open ideas of those meeting there.

A personal touch

"To take advantage of what exists to reinvent it rather than replace or destroy,"

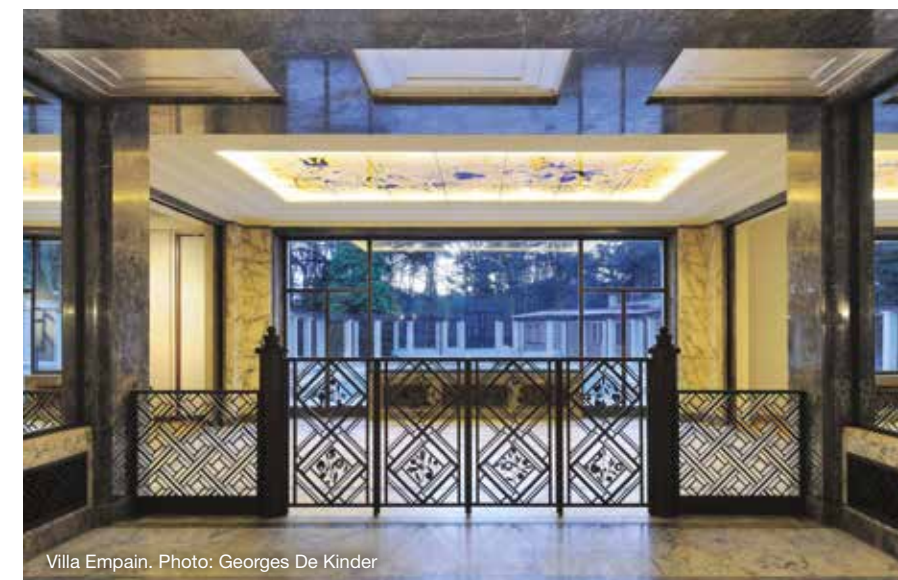
is the mantra of Francis Metzger. "We work more from attitude versus a specific style," says the architect. "Styles go out of date easily, which is why I prefer to come with a particular attitude. It's the place that dictates my attitude. It is up to us to converse with the building's environment, and then to integrate the client's programme, as they are a partner that we also have to listen to intensely.

Dedication reaps rewards

MA² has found immeasurable success in its unique approach. This is evidenced by the number of awards attributed to the company's various achievements, including winning the prestigious Europa Nostra (European Union Cultural Heritage Prize) three times. More recently, the firm won the Special Jury Prize within the 'Prix Européen d'Intervention sur le Patrimoine Architectural 2019' in Barcelona.

As the firm looks ahead to an ever-increasing list of projects, with the latest being the royal greenhouses of Laeken, Metzger hopes that his work helps to preserve the soul of the city while making it more viable, liveable and sustainable. "It is important not to break the emotional link between residents and their heritage," he concludes.

Web: www.ma2.be

Hotel Astoria. Photo: MA²

Villa Empain. Photo: Georges De Kinder



La Balsamine. Photo: Marie-Françoise Plissart