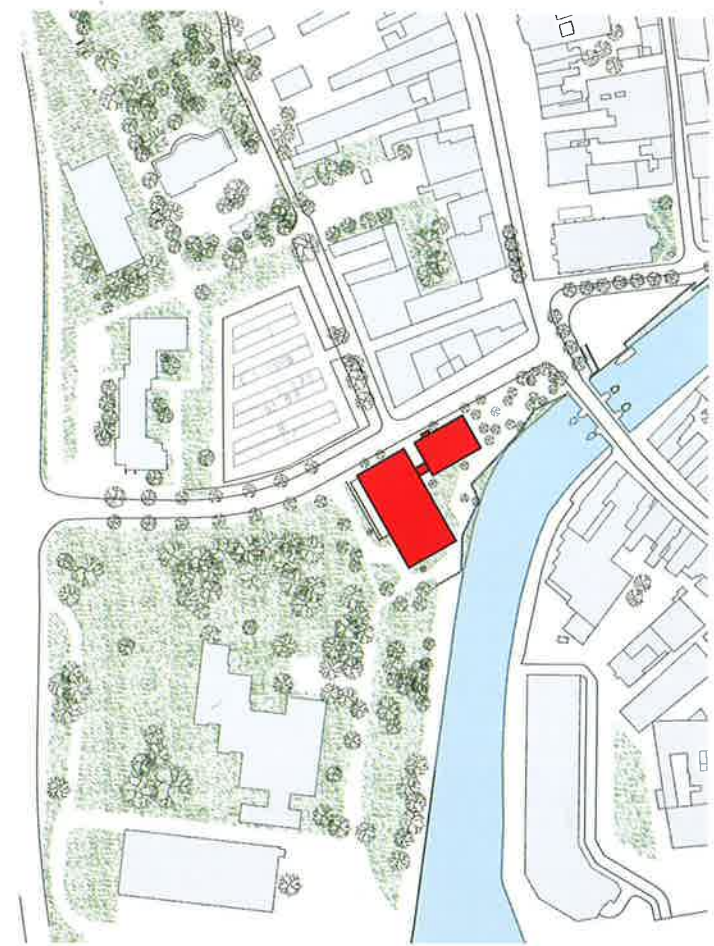




Building study

Reflecting a new civic pride

With its new town hall Tony Fretton Architects has created a key building in the regeneration of the city of Deinze in Flanders



Location plan

The brief for the Dienstencentrum Leispiegel (the Mirror of the Leie town hall) called for a building to set the standard for the city of Deinze's urban renewal policy in terms of sustainable development, urban planning and architecture. It also needed to be easily accessible, with a clear presentation of public services, supported by a logical and flexible plan layout.

Appraisal Christophe Van Gerrewey
Photography Peter Cook, TFA

In 1997, the exhibition *In Search of Public Space* went on show in the deSingel arts centre in Antwerp, Belgium, showing the work of four London architects: Pierre d'Avoine, Tim Ronalds, Eric Parry and Tony Fretton. In the catalogue, curator William Mann addressed the tension between public space and the privatised state that British architects need to confront. 'If this difficult period of Britain's history presents its fair share of cautionary tales,' he wrote, 'nonetheless the perspectives on a non-paternalistic public space which these architects have put forward are worthy of consideration,

both in Flanders, with its neglected and fragmented public realm, and further afield.'

Recent developments prompt a re-examination of this 20-year-old claim: Tony Fretton Architects has now built in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium. In 2016, the practice constructed two apartment towers in Antwerp, part of a series of six, the first four having been designed by Diener & Diener and David Chipperfield. And in the second half of last year, Fretton completed a city hall in Deinze, a municipality of 30,000 close to Ghent.

Many European architects have been offered work in Flanders – the consequence of an enlightened policy towards public architecture, which continues to survive the menace of (mild) austerity politics, often thanks to the mitigating influence of the Christian Democratic party. In 1998 the region appointed its first *Vlaams Bouwmeester* (Flemish Architect), a government architect who does not build or design, but supervises public commissions. Every time a municipality, school or other institution is in need of infrastructure, the bouwmeester can

organise a design competition to fulfil it. In this way the state has developed a firm and beneficial grip on public building, with the neglected public realm Mann wrote about in 1997 now being developed mostly for the better. This was how, in 2009, Fretton was selected to build Deinze's city hall, following a competition whose other entrants included Belgian office De Smet Vermeulen and Swiss practice MLZD.

Deinze is a good case study. At the turn of the century its centre had become an open-air car park, with some small and dilapidated factory buildings and run-down public facilities. In 2009 the municipality launched *Deinze 2020*, a long-term initiative to redevelop the central parts of town. Flemish architect Marie-José Van Hee designed a masterplan that included stony but welcoming squares, pavements, streets, benches and riverside walks – Deinze grew historically around some bends in the river Leie – as well as three new buildings: an academy of arts, a cultural centre and a town hall, next to the Leie and close to the church.

The model of Fretton's winning proposal, standing in the entrance hall in Deinze, shows how the initial design aimed for

Platonic qualities: a straightforward office building of five floors, harmoniously articulated by a columnar façade, and preceded by a smaller volume of one double-height floor, elevated on four columns. This volume, connected to the office building by a gangway, contains the council chamber, the heart of the municipality's decision-making process.

The transition from model to building, and from conception to use was not trouble-free. The Miesian perfection of the structural grid could not be maintained; to support the council chamber on nothing but four slender columns, would have required a floor of enormous robustness. Extra columns were needed, and one large, circular, concrete pillar in the middle. An entrance hall with a front desk was added beneath the grand council chamber, but the tranquillity of this space is slightly disturbed by the construction inconsistencies. In the main office building, the three-layered facade of thin glazing, the loggia and the columnar façade that made the model so impressively elegant, gets lost. The window framework is very heavy because of energy requirements.

Inside the main building, the floors are organised as open-plan offices, except for the ground floor, which houses a public café with a terrace, a tourist information office and a waiting room with smaller desks. The total floor area is surprisingly large for such a small city. This is partly because the public centre for social welfare is based here too, but also because the building was generously designed, allowing for future population growth, which would require extra space.

Tony Fretton Architects opted for a daylight building without air conditioning; most of its heating and cooling is ground-source technology. This keeps costs relatively low, although the intended advantage of the façade loggias as direct shading does not seem to work; when the sun is low, staff need to use sunglasses and cardboard panels to shield them from its rays – extra shading is now to be added on the inside.

The defining gesture of isolating a smaller volume in front of the main building is reminiscent of Denmark's Rødovre city hall, built by Arne Jacobsen in 1956. Both halls are characteristic of a generic monumentality, although in Deinze the façade is not a simple glass screen, but is duplicated by the set of loggias.

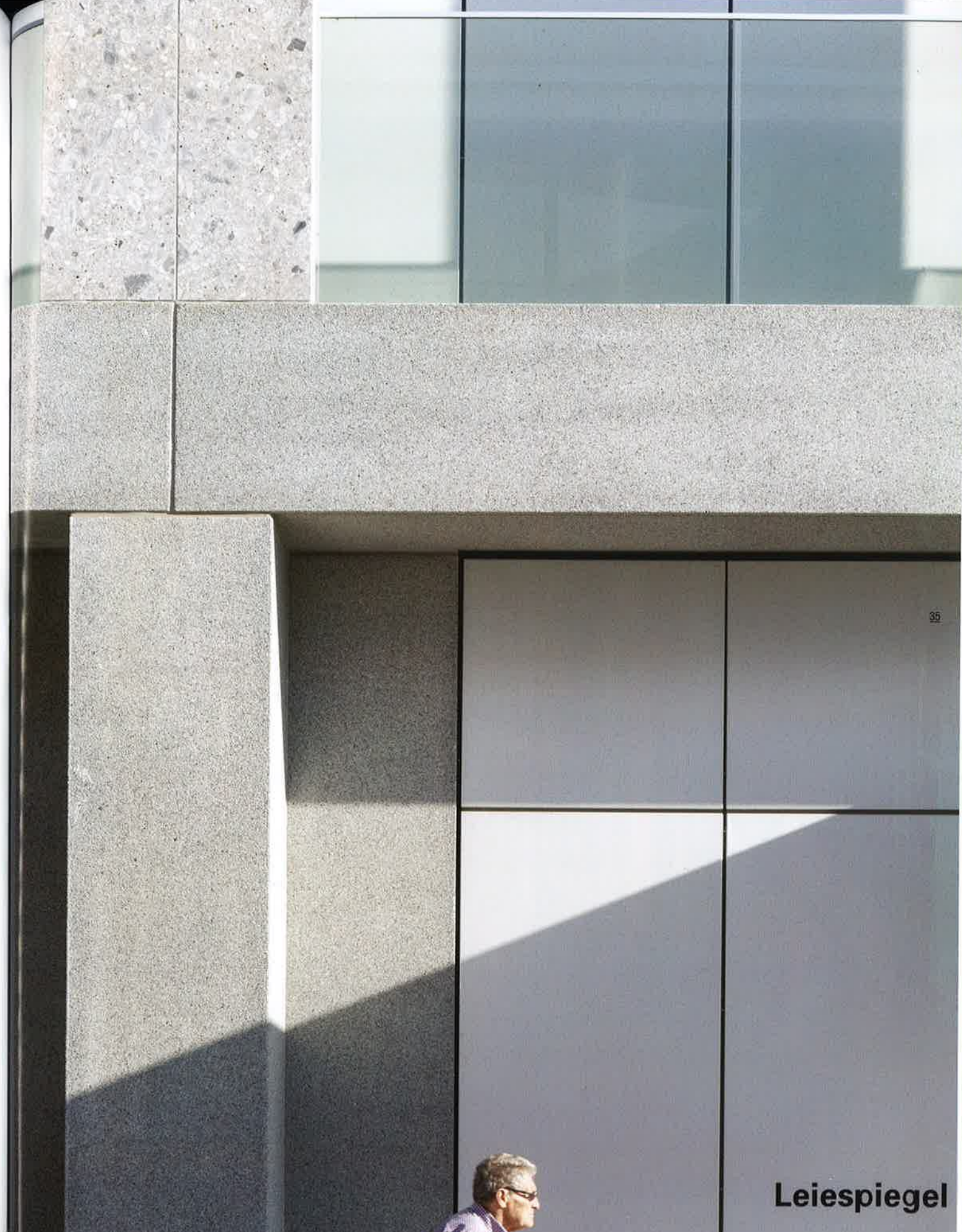
Moreover, all four façades of the main office building are more or less identical, and the staircases and elevators are positioned centrally, and not at the ends of the building, against the gable walls with its blind facades, as is the case in Rødovre. The result, in Deinze, is a less neutral building; a bit more imposing, maybe even somewhat austere, and certainly worthy of a dignified political institute.

Is this an example of 'non-paternalistic public space', as William Mann described it in 1997? Yes, because this government architecture does not limit the public's liberty or autonomy, but demonstrates that we are individual – though political – beings, united by a shared interest in a common good. *Christophe Van Gerrewey is professor of architecture theory at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland*

Project data

Start on site March 2014
Completion March 2016
Gross internal floor area 800m²
Total construction cost 13,300,000€
(£11,560,000)
Construction cost per m² 1,662.50€ (£1,444.78)
Architecture and structure cost 10,500,000€
(£9,120,000)
Architect Tony Fretton Architects
Executive architect Bureau Bouwtechniek
Client Stad Deinze
Structural engineer Arup (UK)/VK
Engineering (Belgium)
Cost consultant Davis Langdon/Bureau
Bouwtechniek/SWECO
Public space architect Marie-José Van
Hee architecten
Main contractor, architecture and structure
Strabag Belgium. Ghent
Electricity Fabricom
HVAC and sanitary Naessens, Deerlijk

'Is this an example of "non-paternalistic public space"? Yes, because it does not limit the public's liberty or autonomy, but demonstrates that we are individual beings, united by a shared interest'





Public space architect's view

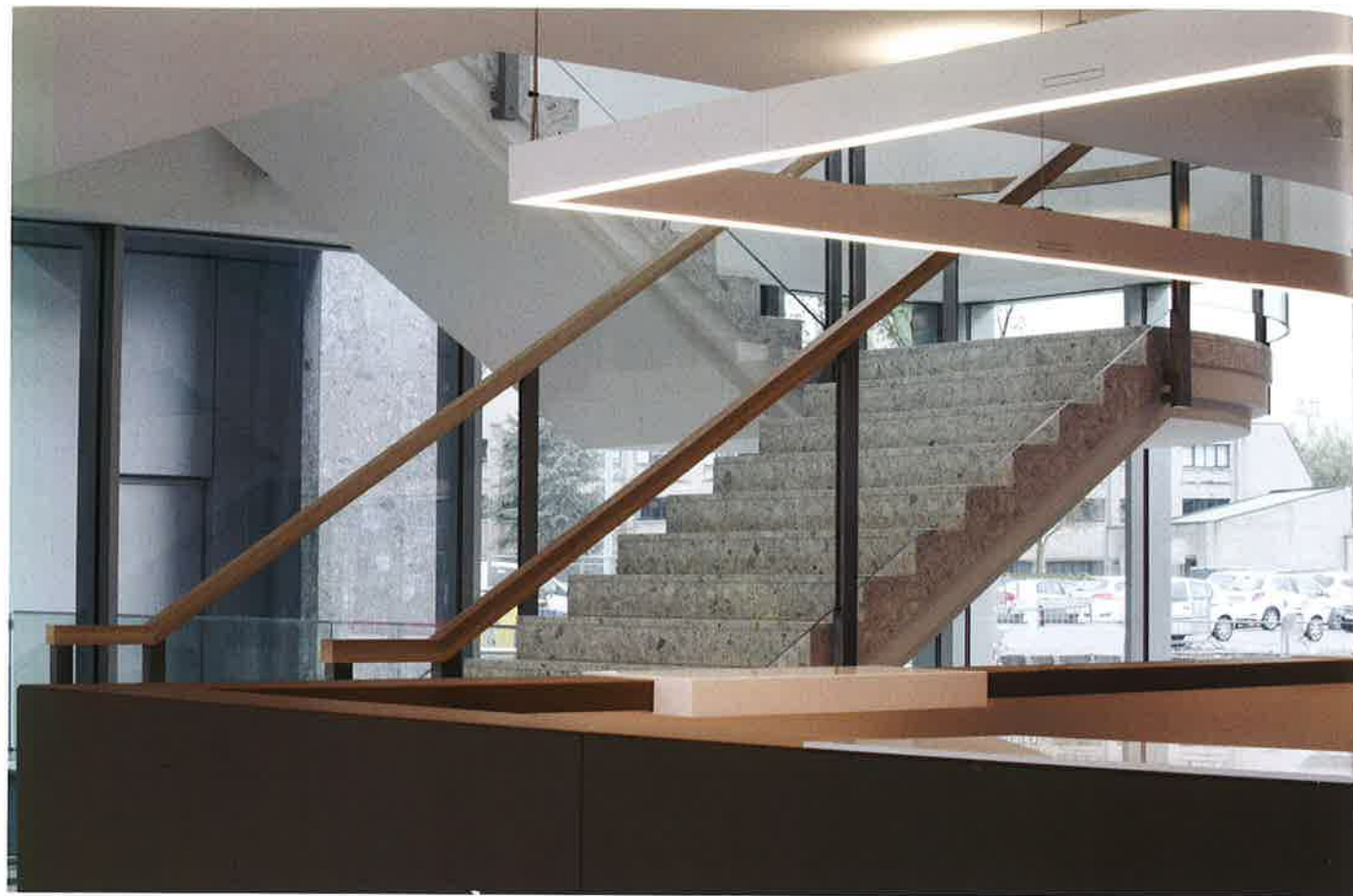
Carefully chosen trees and a flower garden perforate the mineral square of Reinbachplein in front of the new city hall. This city garden surrounding the new city hall communicates between the museum in the park and the church.

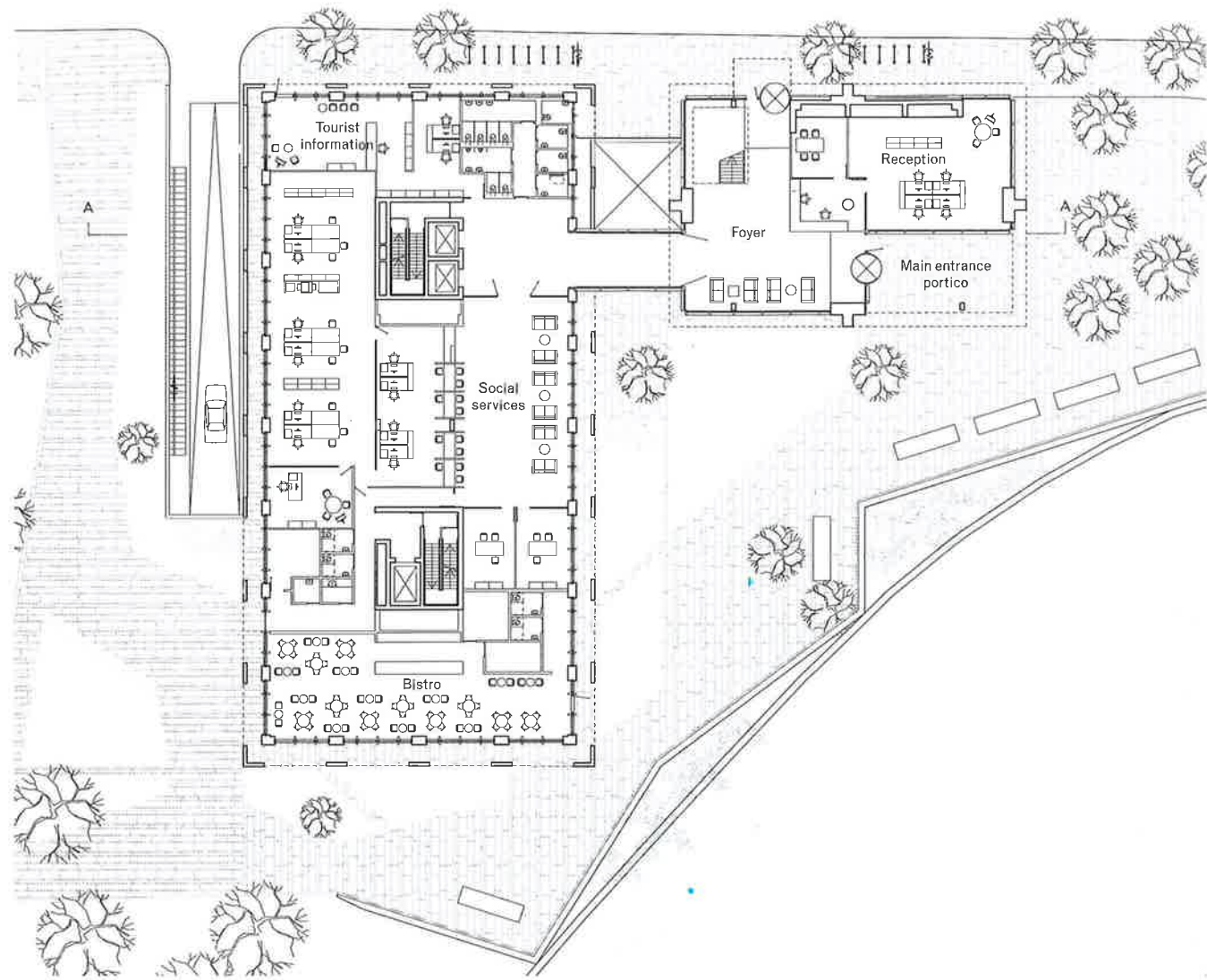
A visually open steel and wooden balustrade protects the visitors and allows views to the river from stone and wooden benches. A mineral path made up of the same stones as the square, but with a slightly different surface, lingers between the trees and guides visitors to the main entrance. At the rear of the city hall, cars enter an underground car park via a ramp bordered with a raised flowerbed and stone bench, overlooking the park on the south side.

Next to the church, another mineral square is situated on a lower level, closer to the water. Stairs and a slope give access to a wooden boardwalk where boats moor. A large wooden bench embraces the square with open arms, creating a protective wall between street and square.

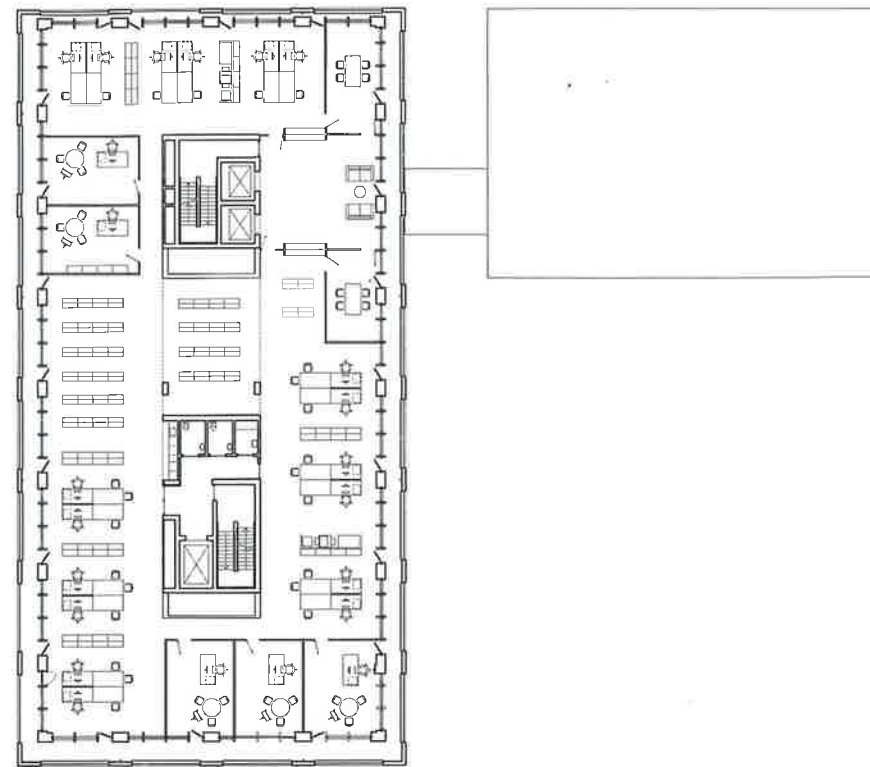
Trees now chaperone the façade of the church once more, as depicted by old postcards found while researching the project. An existing drawbridge connects both banks of the river and at the same time mediates between two different types of quay walls. To the north-east, the quay follows the curving bend of the River Leie, while transforming into a broken line near the city hall. The constant dialogue with the stream as experienced from various changing heights generated these different approaches.

Marie-José Van Hee, founder, Marie-José Van Hee Architecten

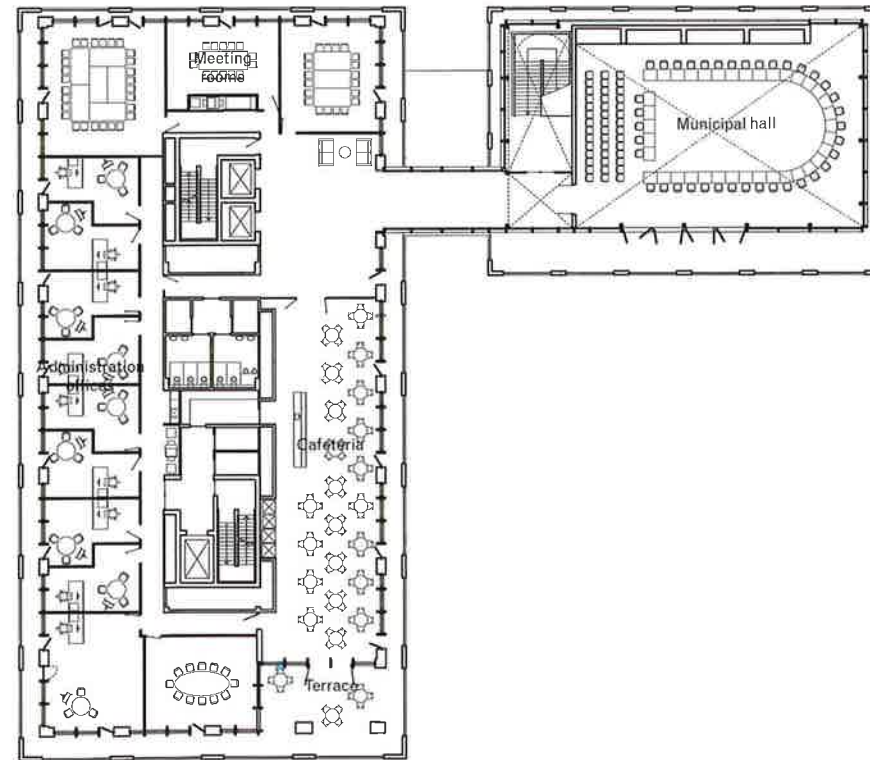




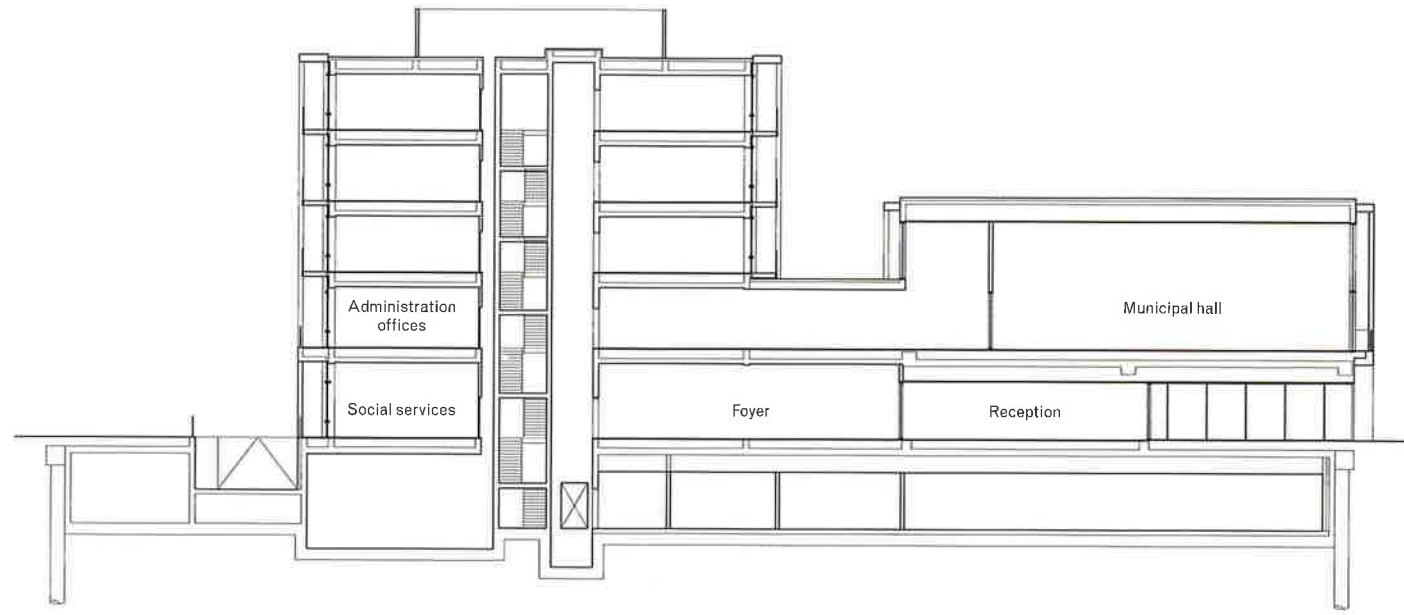
Ground floor plan



Upper floor plan



First floor plan

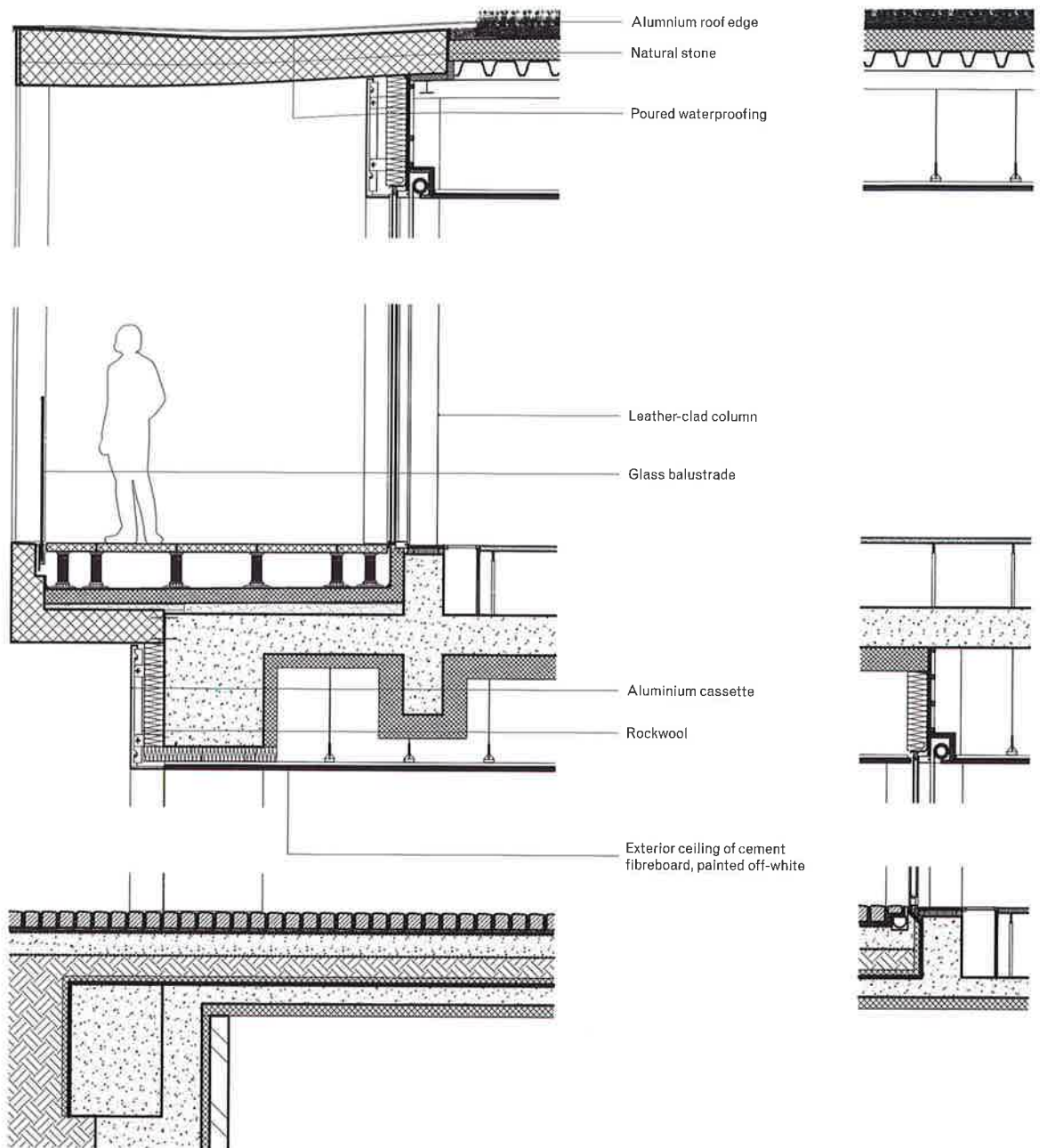


Short section

0 2.5m



South elevation



Detail

The council chamber provides a key symbolic element in the project set against a backdrop of the main office block when seen from the lifting bridge, the church and the main market street of Deinze. The chamber volume is somewhat like that of a moot hall, with a partially enclosed ground floor space, affording a sheltered entrance to the building and access up to the grand hall.

Had the chamber been conventionally supported by columns at each corner, the resultant structure would have restricted views toward the river and of the distant bucolic Museum Landscape. As a consequence, there is a substantial corner cantilever, the underside of which establishes the soffit height throughout the

entrance volume.

In order to reveal the interior of the tall council chamber to the public, deep external shading is created by a loggia toward the river. The structure of this is in uninsulated, partially stone-clad precast concrete. The roof itself is a lightweight metal system supported on leather-clad steel columns within the chamber, enriching the space.

The council chamber roof design needed to be considered as an outlook, as the lift lobbies in the main block of the building use their visual connection with the church and lifting bridge, and thus over the roof of the chamber, to provide orientation to visitors. *David Owen, associate, Tony Fretton Architects*



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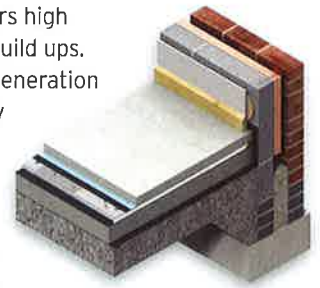
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