



In House G-S, a nineteenth-century corner house in Ghent, GRAUX & BAEYENS have turned a conventional terraced house upside down, putting the bedrooms on the ground floor.

# A Hybridized VISION for Ghent

## GRAUX & BAEYENS architecten

BASED IN GHENT, BELGIUM

The dilapidated industrial heritage of northern European port cities like Ghent—the empty warehouses and abandoned docks—is often intriguing and can even be beautiful. However, they often seduce us into a narrative about life in these places that is not based in truth. While this abandoned infrastructure suggests a narrative of industrial and social decline, it often belies a very different, often opposite reality. While the city center of Ghent is historic and medieval, the wider city has always embraced growth and innovation, and thus is a relatively big city for Belgium—although small in comparison to Paris, or even Brussels.

Ghent is a city that is growing fast. As with many European cities, its historic center was depopulated during the 1970s and '80s. However, in the 1990s, the population started to pick up again and was booming by the turn of the millennium. The city has a large quantity of row houses between two and four stories high. Due to increasing demand for housing, prices have risen in recent years and continue to do so, with these town houses being particularly popular among young couples and small families. According to the architect Basile Graux, founding partner of GRAUX & BAEYENS, this arrangement presents a challenge and an opportunity. "A large part of the budget goes to the purchase of the property and leaves only the possibility to refurbish," he says.

This is the case with House G-S, which sits in the heart of Muide; a formerly working-class neighborhood in the port district to the north of Ghent. The nineteenth-century corner house is of particular value because of the singular view it offers toward the old city harbor docks. The house's prominent position lent itself well to a sculptural response. Renovation began as an almost aggressive stripping back of the original house to its very essence, represented—so the architects



thought—by the facade, the stairwell, and the structural components of the roof, which together envelope the new spaces created within.

But the conversion is not a simple recreation of the former house. Partly to take advantage of the view across the water and partly to provide more open social spaces, the architects have inverted the functional arrangement of the conventional terraced house. In the new house, the bedrooms are located on the ground floor and the living spaces are located on the first floor, while the kitchen and dining room occupy the top floor and provide access to an adjacent, enclosed roof garden/patio. In doing so, the architects have transformed this nineteenth-century Belgian corner house into a hybrid of contemporary and historical style.

Far from hiding this juxtaposition between old and new, the house celebrates it. Set within the rough-textured yet equally familiar facade, the

black-tinted windows are the first sign of this play of contrasts. On top of the husk of the old building, a white sculptural plug sits on top, evoking and adding to the roof pattern of the adjacent properties. A series of new windows have been punctured into the walls of the old building, chosen based on the view they provide. Inside the house, the brick walls have been simply rendered in gray and black, contrasting with the new, bespoke monochrome-white furniture.

Although the building provides a very particular experience on the interior, giving the clients a private world most unlike that of an unconverted property, it is rightly—given its prominent position—a very public realization of the relationship between the historic fabric of the city and those that now live and work there. Instead of an enclosed, claustrophobic series of rooms, the living spaces are arranged as a stack of volumes. The guarded delineation of areas into →