





Avéoles municipal events hall, Saint-Nazaire^{FR}

51N4E and Bourbouze & Graindorge

⇒ Project file 07
Photos: Filip Dujardin

The Avéoles bunker complex in Saint-Nazaire is a stubborn witness to the Second World War. This French port town was the base for the German submarine fleet and was a crucial link in the Atlantic Wall defensive line. In 1944, almost the entire town was destroyed by allied air raids, while the actual target of this violent air offensive put up material resistance. The German military machine was defeated, but the massive bunker with its eight-metre-thick vaulting in reinforced concrete turned out to be indestructible. Even when, after the war, the town regularly wanted to demolish this alien object to erase the trauma of the conflict. At the start of this century, the town council decided to give this monumental construction a new use.

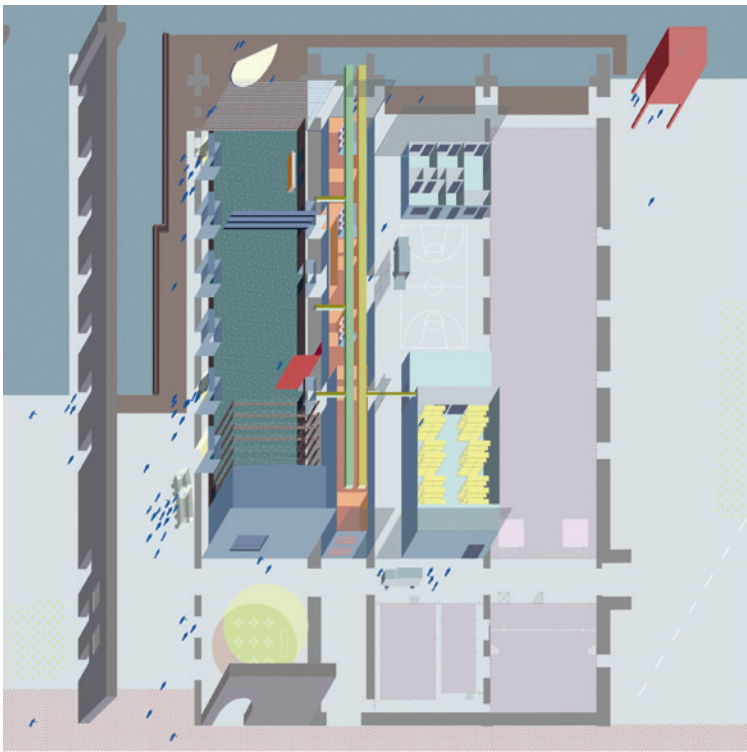
Together with its local partner, Bourbouze & Graindorge, the Brussels firm 51N4E executed the final phase of this conversion project, whereby a piece of military heritage was transformed into a new cultural centre. Over recent years, several architectural firms had been allotted one or more aisles in this vast concrete construction. 51N4E was the last team the town council invited, and this was on the basis of their previous projects for new uses, such as the transformation of the Lamot brewery in Mechelen into a congress and heritage centre, and of a former mining site into the C-mine cultural centre in Genk. The architects' task was to transfer the popular Salle Jacques Brel function room and concert hall from the town centre to the last three aisles of the bunker complex: Avéoles 11, 12 and 13.

For their intervention, 51N4E and their partners opted for a tried-and-tested strategy. The new amenities were inserted into the existing shell as independent structures, with a difference in cladding giving each of the three bays a different character. Each section gives an indication of its particular function. The first contains the actual events room and is made accessible via an open-air passageway. The exterior of the Salle Jacques Brel has received gilded entrance doors and a gleaming golden façade, while the opulent wooden panelling

and magical lighting bring a homely allure to the interior. A large window enables visitors to look through from one side of the hall to the other. This view is emphasised by a monumental light sculpture by Nathalie Dewez, which wavers between being a spectacular chandelier that is part of the interior design or a celestial body that illuminates the harbour landscape. The second bay, in building blocks, contains a system of storerooms and supporting logistical functions that enable the set-up in the two halls on each side to be changed. The third bay is left largely unfinished. Relatively low, large-scale metal elements are scattered around inside. They resemble props that reorganise the space in this rough bunker interior. Despite its rugged, unfinished nature – or perhaps precisely because of its punk appearance – this bay can be brought to life by concerts and other events.

The greatest strength of the design lies in the natural way it is able to unite seemingly antithetical expectations. The key to this lies not so much in the actual interventions, but in what the architects left undefined. They only partly filled the allotted space. Room has been made on the harbour side for a balcony which, like a viewpoint, looks out over the dock and thereby restores the broken link with the ocean. An internal street on the town side weaves together what goes on inside with the daily life of the town outside and thereby anchors this cultural centre in the locality. The ubiquitous, physical presence of the bunker keeps the memory of the past alive.

Maarten Van Den Driessche



Section Aa
Section Bb

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