



Photo credit: Serge Brison

A UNIVERSE WITHIN

Belgian architects make a little patch of ground
go a long way

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Belgium has always been a little cramped for space. It's certainly not alone in this—its equally compact neighbors of France, Luxembourg, Germany and the Netherlands all share in this perennial tight squeeze—but what really makes space such a pressing matter for Belgium is density. Roughly 97 percent of its 10 million residents all pack together in the country's urban centers, making this one of the most urbanized and densely populated countries on the globe.

Luckily, it's also a country steeped in inventive architecture. From the forefather of modern structure, Victor Horta, a Belgian whose Art Nouveau style kicked off revolutionary ideas like an open floor plan, buildings that relate to their surroundings and exposing raw materials like iron support structures, to today's

architects, who look well beyond the usual paradigms of building, this little country has long been known for turning out big architectural ideas.

Recently, one Ghent resident abandoned terra firma altogether, calling upon Antwerp-based Cuypers & Q to convert an industrial barge into a private living space. The team kept one typical feature of Flemish homes intact in their design for the conversion: a large, open wall linking the living space with the outdoors. In this case, that meant also creating green space from a breadth of ship deck. Not a problem. The vessel's hold became the living space, an airy, open expanse that exploits the lack of interior load-bearing walls. Horta lives again, although this time, at sea.



To answer the charge of shielding Alden Biesen's courtyard in inclement weather, Ney & Partners looked to a natural ally—the umbrella.



Alden Biesen images credit: Jean-Luc Denu



Architecture firm 3-A had the opposite brief in creating the Brussels neighborhood restaurant, *Petit Coeur de Beurre*. Here, the challenge was to turn a cozy, family home into an open, modern restaurant. To do so, they completely opened up the rear wall, letting light from the rear garden—and now seating—area flood into *Beurre's* mezzanine and lower level. 3-A also played up the home's narrow structure, turning it into a design attribute by emphasizing the streamlined feel of the space with a long, sleek wenge bar. An electric red chasm in the floor pushes the verticality even further, and also bounces off the fruit-inspired hues of the furnishings and walls.

In the case of Ney & Partners' project at the castle of Alden Biesen in Rijkhoven, the team was tasked with creating a structure to shelter the courtyard area from bad weather. The solution had to be one that could be set up quickly, without interrupting any show or performance being staged in the courtyard and without disturbing any part of the historical building. Leave it to the architects to dream up a tiny detail that cleverly outsizes itself. Ney & Partners invented an inverted mechanism for umbrellas, the first of its kind, which allows all four to open and completely cover the square in only four minutes, while the band plays on.