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The Brussels Times

Culture: SMAK museum in Ghent wants to clone itself

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Tomorrow the museums of Belgium come out of lockdown, after weeks of closure despite claims of being well-prepared for any pandemic eventuality.

Before then, this Monday, the board of the City Museum of Contemporary Art (SMAK) in Ghent will hear a proposal from the museum's director, Philippe Van Cauteren, and architect Peter Swinnen, for a radical transformation of the museum.

It has long been clear that the SMAK, an arts organisation dating back to the 1950s that moved into the former casino at the edge of the Citadelpark in Ghent in 1999, no longer meets the requirements of a modern museum.

The issue has not yet come as far as a call for bids, but Van Cauteren and Swinnen – the former master architect for the Flemish region – are getting ahead of the game.

Their idea is audacious: to thoroughly modernise the existing museum fabric, and then duplicate it, right there in the Citadelpark, a clone of itself.

Swinnen explained that he had his idea when his office was taking part in a competition for renovation of the international conference centre ICC, also on the Citadelpark.

“I was the only one whose proposal took in the SMAK,” he told De Tijd. “I think the Citadelpark has to be considered as a whole, and should not be approached piecemeal.”

The idea of cloning the SMAK comes from a study carried out last year by architect bureau OYO, which looked at what would be required for the museum to have its wish of a permanent display of 500 works from the museum’s collection of 2,000 artworks. The study concluded the museum would almost have to double in size to meet that requirement.

The options are limited. Growing upwards is not seen as an option because it would be inappropriate in the surroundings of the Citadelpark. The SMAK adjoins the Floraleinhal – a huge exhibition hall dating back to the World Exhibition in Ghent in 1913 – on the other side of which stands a building that lies virtually abandoned.

The Van Caueren-Swinnen plan would take over that building and transform it and the existing SMAK into mirror images of watch other – dressing-table mirror images, in fact.

No mention is made as yet of price. As a public project, the renovations will have to be put to tender, and price is part of the tender process. But there is a completion date in mind.

“It needs to be there in 2028,” Van Caueren said. “Ghent would like to become the cultural capital of Europe in 2030. The new SMAK has to be part of that.”

Van Caueren, Swinnen and artist Berlinde De Bruyckere will debate the topic this evening in the museum at 20.00, and [online at smak.be](http://smak.be).

Alan Hope
The Brussels Times