



# A FLOWER CARPET FOR ANTWERP

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven  
Francis Strauven

Flower carpets have been a tradition in Flanders since the 1950s. As a rule they employ the pattern of an Oriental carpet, a symmetrical composition of geometric or vegetal motifs, punctuated by symbols of the city in question, all of it made of colourful cutflowers, nearly always begonias.

Anyone happening to visit Antwerp's Grote Markt in June 2015 saw something entirely different: not a pastiche of a traditional carpet composed of decapitated flower heads but an original work of art made with living plants, an enormous contemporary painting realized with vivid pigments of flowers and herbs in full bloom.

This position is not only a stance regarding the cultural policy of Belgian cities, it is in the first place the presentation of a work of art in its capacity of being a viewpoint. The work of art itself, the flower carpet realized by Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven in 2015 on the Antwerp market square, is presented and interpreted as a stance regarding its urban and societal context.



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**KVAB POSITION PAPERS**

**41 b**

Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium  
for Science and the Arts - 2018

# A FLOWER CARPET FOR ANTWERP



KVAB Press

## **KVAB POSITION PAPERS**

### **41 b**

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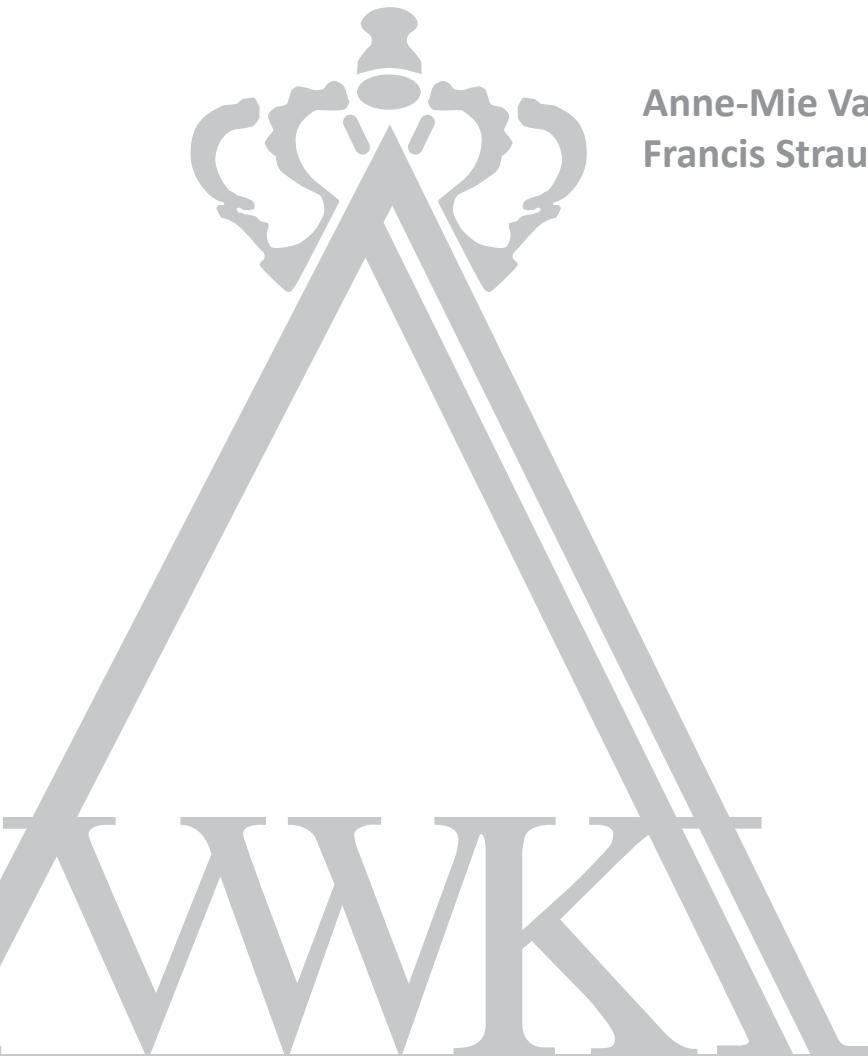
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## Foreword

The subject of this publication is a particular work of art, the flower carpet created by Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven in the summer of 2015 on Antwerp's Grote Markt. It was an event of exceptional quality that scored an abundant success with the general public, but which, due to its brief existence from 4 to 13 June 2015, did not get the recognition it deserved in the art world.

So, the KVAB Class of Arts decided to call attention to this ephemeral work of art and to perpetuate its memory in a publication. And since the carpet was perceived as a strong statement, the publication was included in the KVAB Position Paper series.

The carpet embodied indeed several positions. It advanced another, authentically artistic approach of a frequently recurrent public commission, and it could be read as a meaningful statement in regard to both its urban and its societal context.

This booklet consists of two parts.

The first part is a description and an interpretation of the carpet, written by Francis Strauven, historian of art and architecture.

The second part is about how the carpet project originated and the way it took form. It was written by the artist who offers the reader a candid look into the gears of her creative activity.





Brussels, 2014

# A STATEMENT IN FLOWERS: FLOWER POWER REVISITED

Francis Strauven

Flower carpets have been a tradition in Flanders since the 1950s. Every summer they are rolled out in Oudenaarde, Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, Kortrijk, Hasselt, Tongeren, Antwerp and Brussels. As a rule they employ the pattern of an Oriental carpet, a symmetrical composition of geometric or vegetal motifs, punctuated by symbols of the city in question – coats of arms, emblems, sometimes portrayals of local heroes or regional products – all of it framed by a broad decorative border and made of colourful cutflowers, nearly always begonias.

Anyone happening to visit Antwerp's Grote Markt in June 2015 saw something entirely different: not a pastiche of a traditional carpet composed of decapitated flower heads but an original work of art made with living plants. The visitor was treated to an unprecedented spectacle: an authentic contemporary painting realized in interaction with the vivid pigments of flowers and herbs in full bloom.



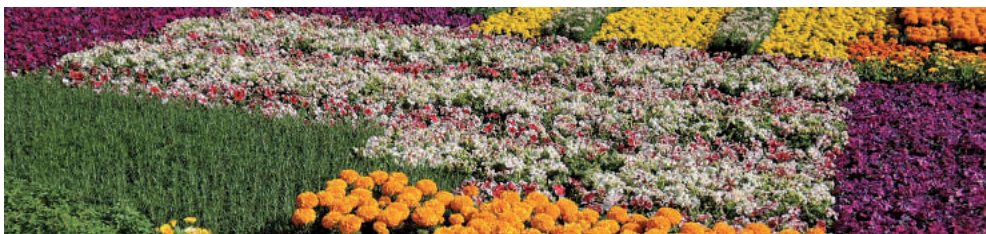
Antwerp, 2015



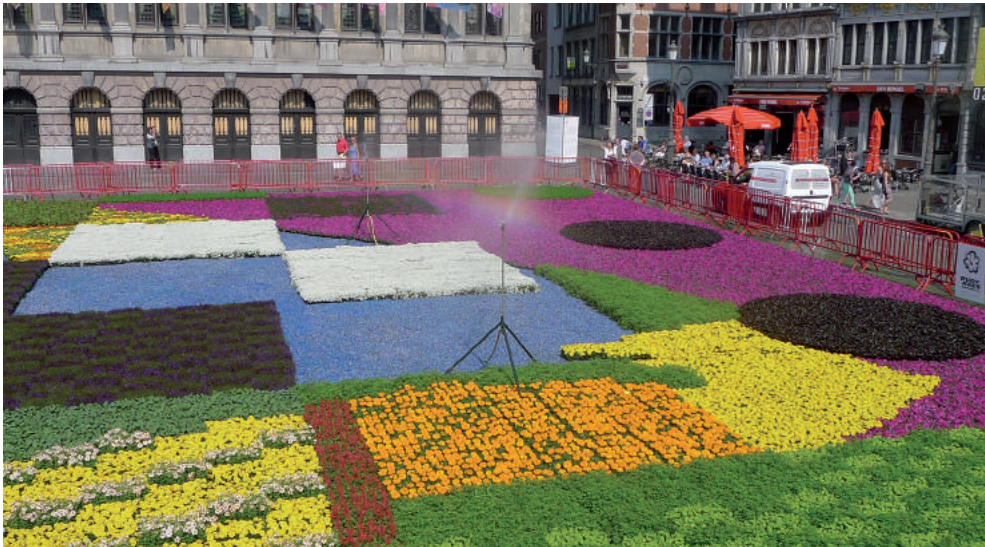
Photo Philippe Van Wolputte

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, an artist known for the confrontational images and bright colours with which she tackles emotional and social reality, produced a swirling composition of various coloured surfaces of all sizes: squares, rectangles and triangles, circles and numerous distorted or fragmented figures.

The first thing to catch the eye were the different colours and textures of these areas. Depending on the chosen plants the areas were alternatively monochrome or multi-coloured, even or rough, smooth or slightly undulating.



A number of areas were purely monochrome: some white and blue squares, a large purple corner in which two almost black circles emerged, and several green sections.



The green sections were composed of various herbs and vegetables: parsley, thyme, rosemary, sage, verbena, basil, sorrel and chard.

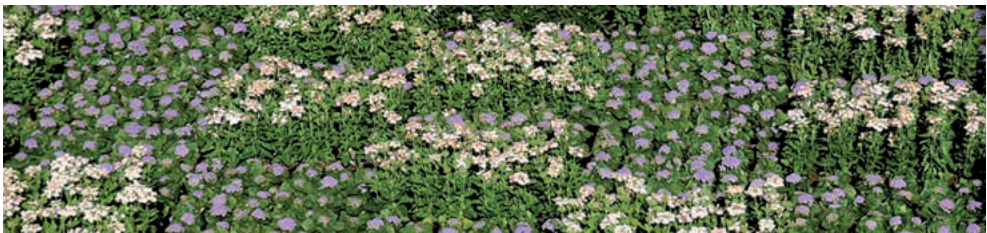


Basil with sage

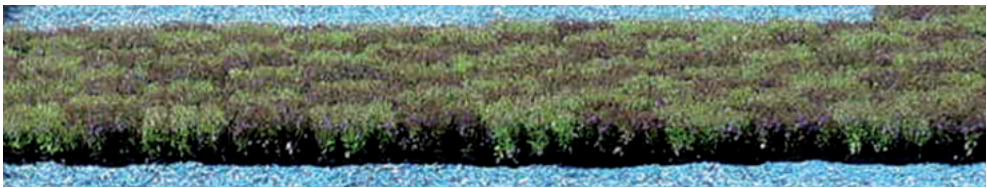




Petunia 'Limra Purple' and Lobelia 'Laura Blue'



Ageratum 'Packstar Blue' and Verbena 'Tuscany Apricot'



Lobelia Laura 'Blue' and Lobelia Laura 'Deep Blue'



Chard and Tagetes 'King Flame'

On the other hand, most of the flowerbeds consisted of two interweaving and different, sometimes complementary colours, which activated each other through their very contrast: various kinds of African marigolds – yellow interspersed with orange, orange with red – alternating with beds of English marigolds; crimson petunias interwoven with dark-green thyme, vermillion sage with bright green parsley, purple lobelias with yellow African marigolds, as well as light green sage subtly interlaced with strips of light purple wild marjoram.

All in all a multi-coloured opulence of flowers and herbs that, thanks to their bright full colours, cheerfully contrasted with each other and thus paradoxically reinforced each other.



*Tagetes patula* 'King yellow' and 'King Orange'



*Petunia sublima* 'Picotee Red' and *Petunia sublima* 'Star Red'



*Antirrhinum* 'Lion King', *Tagetes patula* 'King yellow', *Tagetes patula* 'King Orange' and 'King Flame'.



*Petunia sublima* 'Vein Blu' and *Petunia sublima* 'Vein Red'



*Tagetes patula* 'King Orange' and 'King Flame'



While the visitor could rejoice in these fresh colours and fragrances at ground level, a better overall view of the whole composition could be enjoyed from the platform erected at the east end of the market place. There you could see the underlying geometry of the whole carpet, a chessboard motif or at least the remains of one.

It may be well-known that the chessboard is traditionally considered to be a symbol for black-white contradictions, for situations of conflict and strategic tensions, but in this case most of the black and white areas seemed to have been coloured in and blurred in the course of development. That was apparently the result of a whirlwind constituting the second layer of the composition, a whirling that started from a large, central circle with an inscribed eight-pointed star. This figure constituted a mandala, a shape that symbolises the universe in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy.

Van Kerckhoven's enormous mandala formed a radiant honorary flowerbed for the Brabo Fountain which rises up in the axis of the townhall on a craggy rock formation. This configuration demonstrated that the carpet was by no means conceived as an autonomous abstract composition enlarged for the occasion and rolled out in front of the town hall. It was a work that was closely connected to the market place and derived a large portion of its significance from that place.

It developed around the Brabo sculpture, the mythical hero symbolising the emancipation and independence of Antwerp. Sculpted by Jef Lambeaux, the young hero, standing on one leg, twists his torso backwards for producing the necessary propulsion to hurl the hacked-off hand of the despot Druon Antigoon into the river Scheldt. By positioning him in the centre of the large mandala, Van Kerckhoven connected the dynamic action of the hero to the steadily revolving universe.

She used Brabo's impetuous fervour, supported by the symbolism of the mandala, as a starting point for her swirling composition, a whirlwind that unfolded right through the initial chessboard pattern, creating turbulences and ripping the squares around the mandala to shreds. Remarkably enough, the artist availed herself of the ensuing shreds and strands to develop her finest colour fabrics in which she implemented the impressionist principle of simultaneous contrasts with virtuoso verve.



Photo Elsbet Nyens



In addition to its aesthetic quality, the carpet also had, precisely through its expressive power, an unmistakable urban, and even a societal meaning. The platform looked directly out over a section of curving blue areas which connected to the mandala of the Brabo Fountain. These blue areas, which were slightly sunken in relation to the surrounding plant beds, consisted not of flowers but of a thin layer of blue-dyed wood chippings which suggested water, more precisely the water of the Scheldt into which Brabo had thrown the hacked-off hand. It was an evocation of the curve in the river Scheldt where Antwerp originated and developed.



Foto Elsbet Nyens

Seen in this way, the carpet called up a city map, not a literal recognisable map of Antwerp, but an abstract allegory of the city, a complex coherence of various districts and neighbourhoods which, all fresh and cheerful, in fragrance and colour, with various blooming flowers and herbs, exhibited their own character and affirmed their identity.



The whole carpet appeared to be a wonderful metaphor of a colourful, multicultural city depicted literally in natural materials; a city whose districts, although manifestly different, form a dynamic and harmonious whole: a unity in diversity based on complementary contrast and reciprocal receptivity for each other's ingredients.



The flower carpet embodied an optimistic vision of the city. It offered a cheerful image of urban society, partly utopian ideal, partly a portrayal of the current situation. It gave fresh, stimulating substance to the 1960s concept of 'flower power'.

The town hall, whose 450th anniversary was the occasion for the carpet laying, was of course involved in the celebration. The artist connected town hall and carpet by adorning the building's façade with 67 flags, all of them different, all displaying the same colours as the carpet.

Last but not least the residents of Antwerp were also enabled to take part, or rather, literally to obtain a part of the carpet. At the end a harvest festival was organised during which the responsible alderman and his staff shared out the 175,000 flowers and herbs, divided into trays of 6 pieces, among the population. Everyone was invited to take the plants home as a memento, either for decoration or to add to their food.





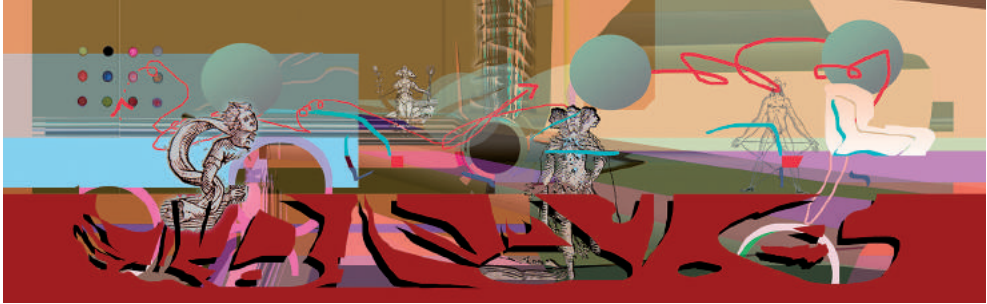




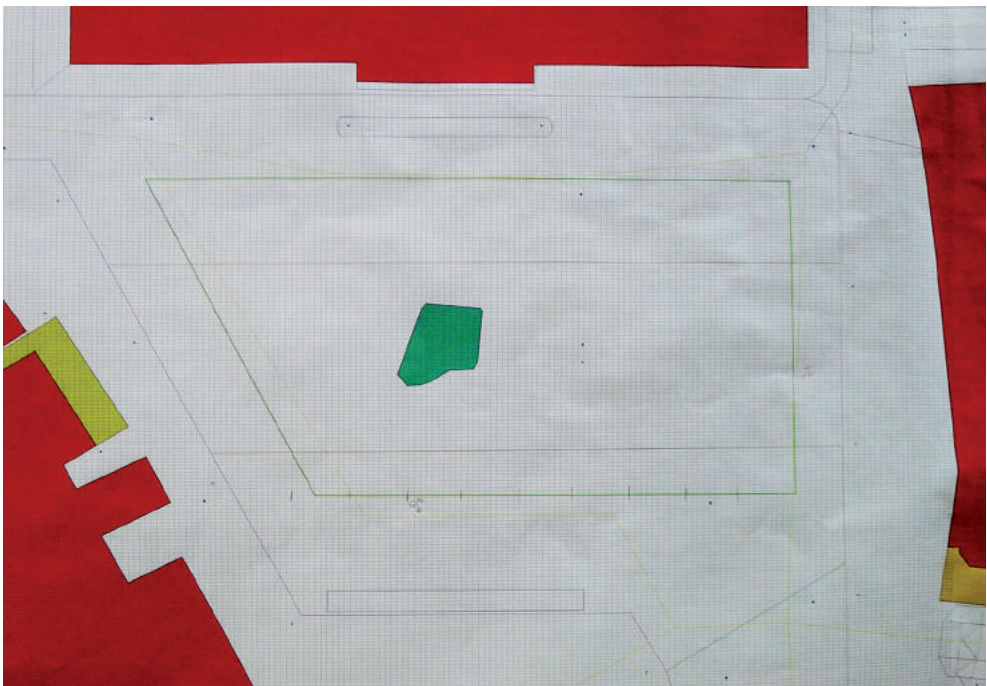
Photo Toon Grobet, taken from the cathedral tower, on 4 June 2015, when the carpet had just been laid. Not all the flowers were open, so the colours could only be seen in their full glory a few days later.

In summary, the flower carpet amounted to **4 statements**:

1. Compared to the usual Flemish flower carpets, it was not a pastiche of an Oriental carpet made with cut flowers, but an original work of art carried out with living plants and flowers.
2. From the aesthetic point of view it was an authentic work of art effectively grafted onto an existing public space, conceived in an outspoken contemporary visual language, using pictorial features from the tradition of modern art, and accomplished with living pictorial resources.
3. From a societal point of view it was a suggestive statement with regard to the city and city life, an evocation of a cheerful multi-coloured society, a celebration of contrasts in dynamic equilibrium, harmony in motion, social coherence based on the cultivation and reciprocal appreciation of mutual differences.
4. Ecological and sustainable, engaging the public in art: the plants were not cut but were given a second life at the end when the citizens were invited to take them home. The inhabitants effectively received a piece of the flower painting that gave form to the dream of a multi-coloured society.



Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, *'In Power everything meets'*, light wall  
(2,86 x 9,11 m) for the MAS, 2011



The map of Antwerp's Grote Markt included in the commission, outlining the trapezium-shaped project area defined by the city council. The green spot is the location of the Brabo Fountain.

## HOW THE CARPET ORIGINATED

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven

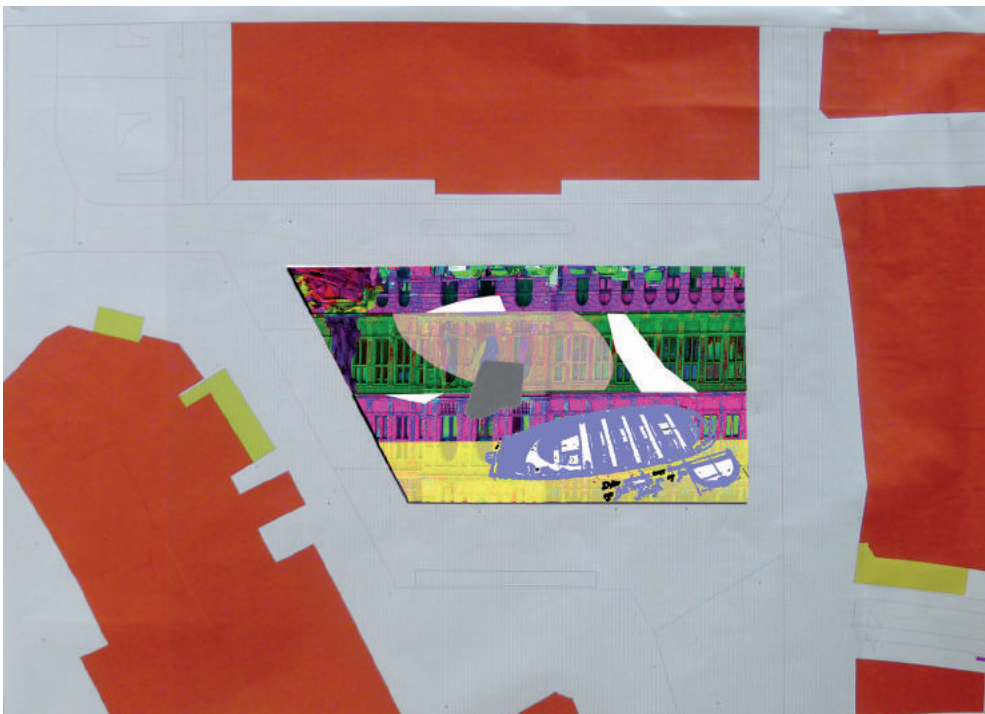
At the end of July 2014 I was contacted by Helke Soenen, head of Antwerp's Green Department. She asked whether I was interested in designing a flower carpet to celebrate the 450th anniversary of the townhall. Soenen and her colleagues called me because they wanted something different from the usual Oriental-style flower carpet made from cut flowers. They wanted an original design by a contemporary artist, and because they were very concerned about sustainability, they wanted it done with living plants and flowers in pots. They contacted me because the use of bright colours is one of the features I am known for as an artist. They notably liked the colourful light walls I had designed for the Museum aan de Stroom (the MAS).

When I agreed to accept the commission, the following specification was presented: the carpet had to be made of flowers that would bloom in early June. I was also highly pleased by being allowed to use herbs. Trays of 53x30 cm, filled with 18 pots, would form the building blocks of the project. The carpet would cover a trapezoid section of Grote Markt, as indicated in the map on the facing page. My design had to be ready by 1 November 2014. The installation was planned for 4 June 2015 after which the carpet would remain in place for 9 days.

The plan was also to involve a number of Antwerp schoolchildren in the project: departing from my drawing and under my supervision, they would, in groups of four, think up a new version of the carpet. The winning design would be executed after 13 June with the flowers and plants already present on Grote Markt. On 14 June the residents of Antwerp would be invited to harvest the carpet and take the plants home to brighten up their house or garden.

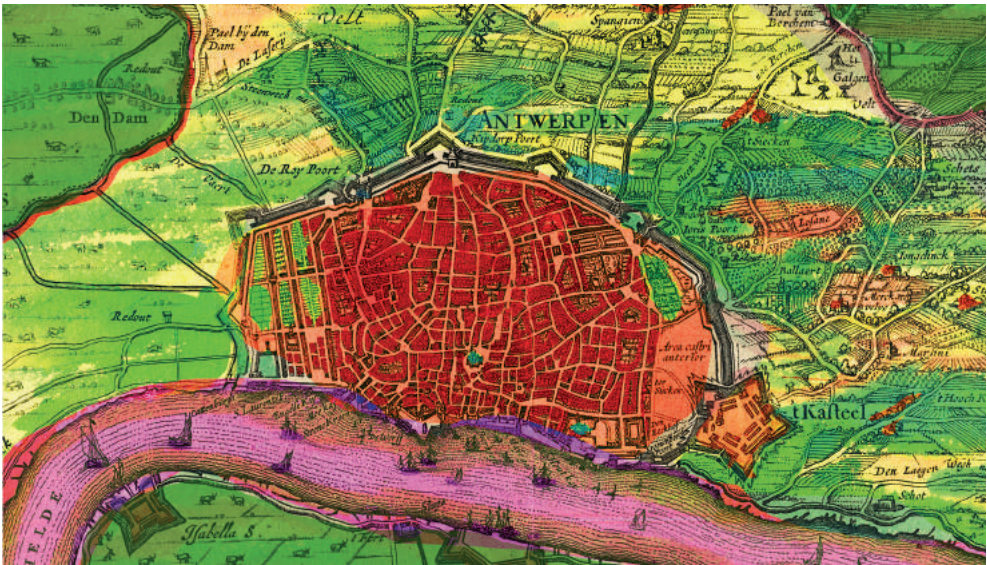
The design process proceeded gradually, in various phases, most of which were perceivable in the final result, as so many layers. There was interaction with the interested city institutions at all stages of the design. The office of alderman Philip Heylen and Sara Weyns, director of the Middelheim Museum, provided support and acted as a sounding board. There was close collaboration with the city's Green Department because not only did suitable flowers have to be chosen for every colour, but they all had to bloom at exactly the right moment.

Since the carpet was to be part of the celebration of the 450th anniversary of the town hall, I sought inspiration firstly in the architecture of the building. I began by projecting the monumental façade of the building in a mirror image on the market place. I treated the successive floors - basement, bel-étage, first floor, mezzanine and roof - as distinct strips that I painted in contrasting colours: cyan, green, purple and yellow. The idea was to lay down a number of parallel monochrome strips of flowers and herbs like in the Dutch tulip fields. To emphasize the character of the city, I added the image of a ship, an old picture of a sloop that I found on the web. Since the composition would only be clearly visible from above, for example from the town hall, I went looking for another concept.





Elspeet Polder, South-Holland



Map of Antwerp contained in the representation of the Antwerp Boundary County (*Marchionatus Sacri Romani Imperii*) in the 17th century, a copper engraving by N.J. Piscator from 1624

In the Hendrik Conscience Heritage library I found an old coloured street plan of Antwerp. I placed it next to the Brabo Fountain, which resulted in a duality between City and Brabo. Brabo ended up in the green area outside the rampart, near the Citadel. Basing myself on an enchanting colour palette that I borrowed from an old illustration of a float with the giant Antigoon, I worked out this design. I painted the walled city in crimson, the surrounding green areas in green, the fields in yellow and the Scheldt in magenta. The colour spectrum of the Antigoon picture would then continue to be active in the successive designs.

In order to assess my design from a visitor's standpoint, i.e. from the ground, I mounted it in a photo of the situation, a perspective view to envisage how the visitor would perceive the carpet and how it would relate to the surrounding buildings. This method, which I also used on the subsequent concepts, would be decisive in choosing the final design. And thus projected in the situation, the juxtaposition of Brabo and city proved to be equally ineffective as mirroring the façade of the townhall on the market place.



16th century picture of the giant Antigoon, a picture of the giant puppet on a float designed by Pieter Coecke in 1535.



In my search for a more universal vision of the duality between Brabo and city, between past and present, I decided to give the Brabo Fountain a central place in my next design. To this end I introduced a mandala, an ancient symbolic form that had already appeared in my work on several occasions. This time I did not opt for a 'normal' concentric mandala from the Buddhist tradition but for a swastika-shaped, polycentric mandala from North American Sioux Indian mythology, where it is a symbol for the four directions of the wind and the seasons that gently merge into each other. I placed the Brabo Fountain at the centre of this strong archetypal shape, whose complex curved strips I filled in with a complete range of colours. In order to fit the mandala into the trapezoid project zone, I distorted it stretching it sideways. Mounted in the perspective view of the situation, it worked as a powerful modern statement. But a discussion with the Green Department's technical staff revealed the difficulties of implementing this design. It proved to be virtually impossible to achieve the complex curved strips of the shape with rectangular plant trays.



Sioux Indian Mandala from M. and W. Küstenmacher, *Energie und Kraft durch Mandalas*, Munich, 1998



After having experimented with the façade, the city map and a mandala, I decided to conceive the market place as a floor, a city floor. I wanted to establish a basic design for which I tried to draw inspiration from the floors of the town hall. However, none of them proved to show strong, characteristic patterns since the originals had been destroyed in the Spanish Fury of 1576. Still, I did remember that there was a beautiful floor in the Plantin-Moretus Museum, part of which was built at the same time as the town hall. When I was there looking for emblemata for my light works in the MAS, I became intrigued by the floor in the hall. With its chessboard motif, its black and white squares, its fat black circles and the eight-pointed star in the middle, that floor really fascinated me. Moreover, the central encircled star suggested a mandala and a stylised calyx. I took a series of photos of it. One of these photos offered the perfect basis for my new and final design.

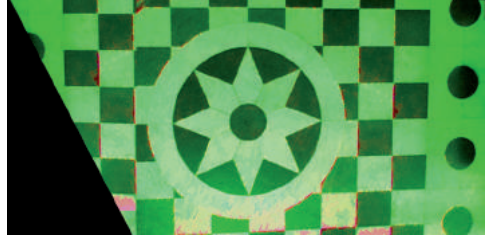


Plantin-Moretus Museum, baroque wing on Vrijdagmarkt, 1761-63



I made a photographic cut-out of this floor and mounted it in the project zone such that the Brabo Fountain rose up out of the eight-pointed star. With the encircled star I re-introduced the mandala: a radiant circle which, albeit in a simpler way than the Indian swastika, symbolises just as well the revolving universe. The inscribed eight-pointed star is traditionally a symbol of the solar wheel that generates the successive seasons.

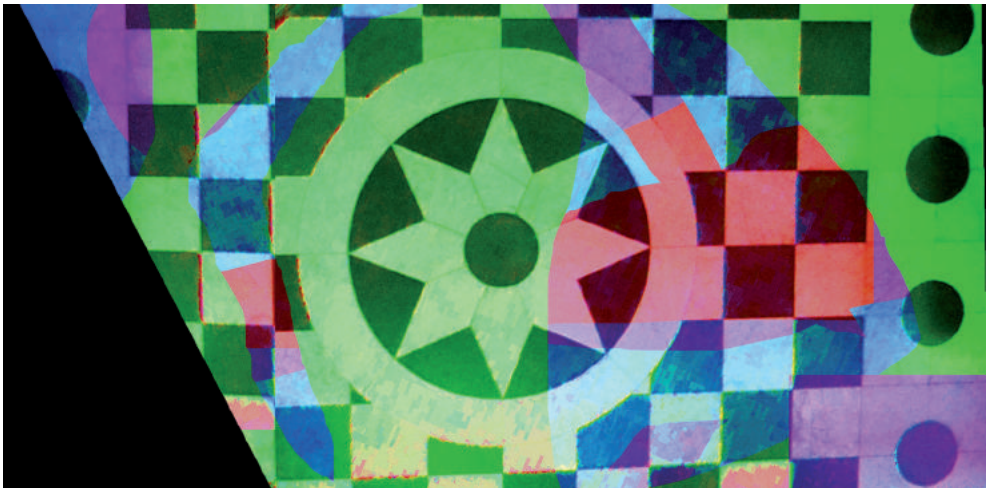




I tried out various colour combinations on the cut-out floor drawing but found the results too static. Then I projected the street pattern of the 16th century city map over it and connected the lines of the Scheldebocht to the central mandala.

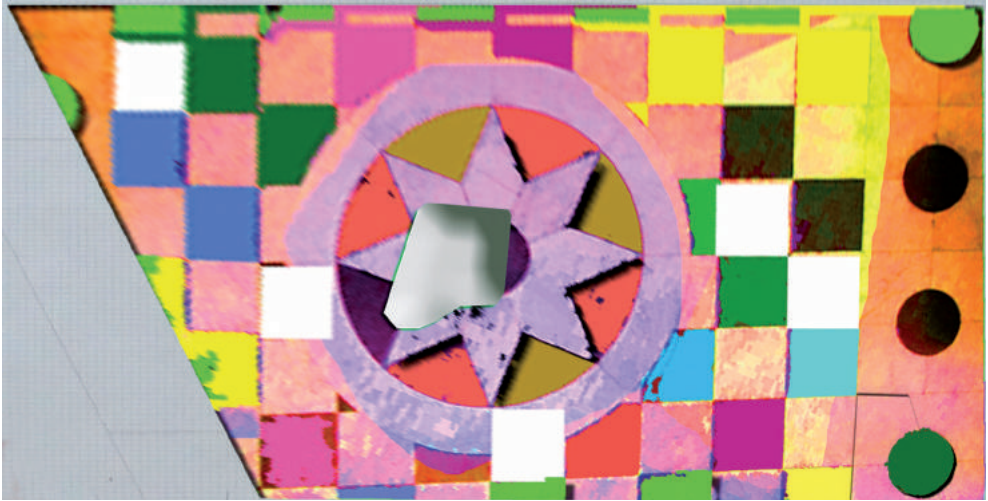


Section of the Antwerp map by Pauwels van Overbeke, 1568



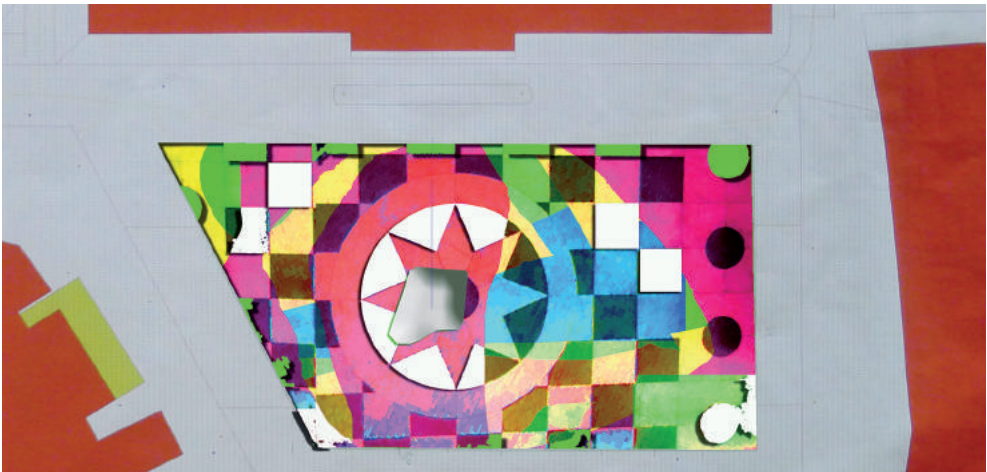
The mutual penetration of the three layers, the baroque floor, the mandala and the city map, generated a complex dynamic figure, a whirlwind of energetic fields that I then interpreted again in colours. I tried out various colour arrangements, from sober muted 'meadow colours' to flamboyant versions such as 'ethereal' and 'swinging sixties', all of which I assessed from the perspective view of the situation.







Finally, in discussion with the city administration, the Flower Power of the **'swinging sixties'** was chosen, a period I witnessed myself in Antwerp at the time, in art galleries such as the Zwarte Panter, in cafés such as the Groene Michel and the Muze. It became a design with exciting, saturated colours. And that's something surely everyone is susceptible to. In nature, the colour of a flower is the cry for attention.

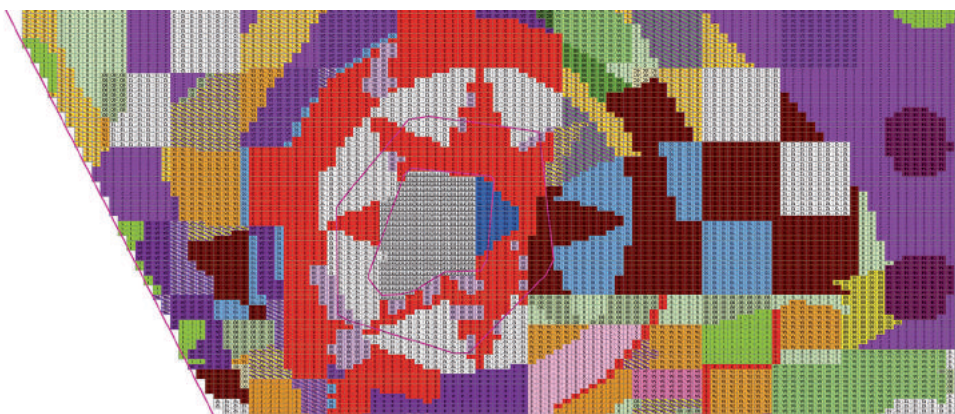


Once the choice for the Flower Power project had been made, the appropriate flowers and herbs for every colour shade were selected in close collaboration with the professionals of the city's Green Department. Thirty kinds of plants, all of which had to be in bloom at the beginning of June, were chosen: 19 flowers covering a range of white, yellow, orange, red, blue to purple; 10 herbs and one vegetable (chard) in various shades of green.

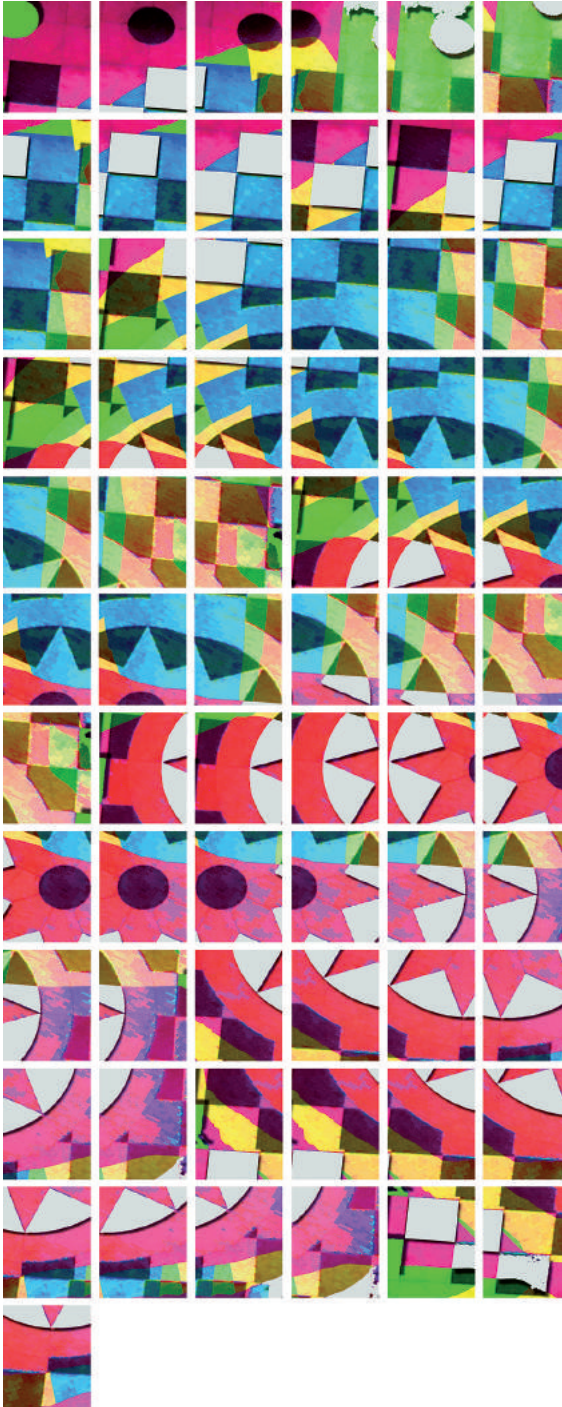
The cultivation and the delivery of the plants were put up to public tender, and at the beginning of December the order was placed with Rudy Raes Bloemzaden in Destelbergen.



At the same time the logistics department of the Green Department made the digital calculations in modules of 53x30 cm, the dimensions of the trays, in order to determine the correct numbers of the necessary flowers and herbs, in total







173,448 plants. At the same time we tested several experimental setups in the city's greenhouse in Wilrijk.

For organisational reasons the city administration decided to cancel the kids' programme that had been part of the original commission.

However, Councillor Philip Heylen did give me the task of involving the town hall in the celebrations. For that purpose I designed 67 flags to cheer up the town hall in a festive way. I took the coloured drawing of the Flower Power design, tilted it 23° according to the modernist canon and made 67 aesthetically pleasing cut-outs from it. The result was 67 different colour flags, which I called "Plantin meets Van Ostayen meets Flower Power".



The 173,448 plants, divided over 9741 trays, were transported on the night of 3 to 4 June by 10 trucks from Destelbergen to the Antwerp Grote Markt, where the Green Department with a team of more than one hundred volunteers began laying the carpet at 5 a.m. The numbered trays were placed on black plastic sheet, their position indicated by means of a detailed system of coordinates. The carpet was completed by 3 p.m.



## Summary

This position is not only a stance regarding the cultural policy of Belgian cities, it is in the first place the presentation of a work of art in its capacity of being a viewpoint. The work of art itself, the flower carpet realized by Anne-Mie Van Keckhoven in 2015 on the Antwerp market square, is presented and interpreted as a stance regarding its urban and societal context. Contrary to the usual Flemish flower carpets, the Antwerp one was in no way a pastiche of an oriental carpet, executed with cut flowers. It was an original modern painting made of living flowers en herbs. The enormous painting showed a dynamic whirling of bright, mutually contrasting colour planes hovering around the Brabo statue. The colour planes themselves consisted in an interweaving of different colours which reinforced each other by their very contrast. Carried out with living material, the clustering of the vivid colour planes evoked the image of a city plan, the plan of a multicoloured city whose districts and neighbourhoods, though manifestly different, constitute a dynamic harmony: unity in diversity based on complementary contrast and mutual receptivity of each other's ingredients. The carpet embodied an optimistic view of the city. It offered a cheerful image of urban society, partly utopian, partly a picture of the already existing situation. It conferred a new, exhilarating meaning to the 'flower power' concept of the sixties.

## The authors

Since the 1970s **Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven** has been making drawings, texts and paintings on paper as well as synthetic material. She shows them in installations and makes short films, videos and digital animations. Her work, in which erotic and machine fetishism are combined almost scientifically, is permeated by an unashamedly feminist tone. Interiors, often household spaces, serve as the background for her drawings and collages, which are the setting for dreamy futuristic meetings between people and machine-like forms. In the 1990s the handmade works evolved into computer graphics. The pictures are usually accompanied by texts, emphasising the message of Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's proud, sometimes exhibitionist female figures, as song lyrics. In addition to the visual aspect, sound plays an important role in her creative production. Together with Danny Devos and under the name Club Moral (1981-present day) she has played a key role in the Antwerp experimental music scene for years.

She is represented by Zeno X Gallery in Antwerp and Galerie Barbara Thumm in Berlin. Since 1975 she has exhibited regularly in Belgium and abroad, where she also gives lectures about her work. Since 1991 she has been affiliated to the KASK in Ghent and became a member of the KVAB in 2008.

**Francis Strauven**, who took the initiative to publish this standpoint and also edited it, is an architect and a historian of art and architecture.

He has been on the board of the *Archives d'Architecture Moderne* (AAM) in Brussels since 1969, and lectured in History and Theory of Architecture at Ghent University.

From 1971 to 1991 he was editor of the Dutch architecture journal TABK (*Tijdschrift voor Architectuur en Beeldende Kunsten*), from 1973 *wonen-TABK*, from 1986 *Archis*. He then became editor of the *Jaarboek Architectuur Vlaanderen* (1993-2000).

He became a member of KVAB in 2000, and from 2010 he is part of the Scientific Committee of the *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek* (NWB).

Since 1968 he has conducted research into the origins and evolution of modern architecture, in particular in Belgium and the Netherlands, a quest in which he is driven by a fascination for the meaning of architectonic form.

His publications include monographs about the work of Charles Vander Straeten, Victor Horta, Jos Bascourt, Jean Eggericx, Louis H. De Koninck, Renaat Braem, Albert Bontridder, Georges Baines, Paul Neefs, Eugeen Liebaut and Aldo van Eyck.

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