

# HOSPITALITY WITHIN ANCIENT WALLS



**Photos** Peter Staes ([www.peterstaes.com](http://www.peterstaes.com)), **Architect** Lieven De Wachter (<http://users.skynet.be/slie>), **Building contractor** StoneConcept ([www.stoneconcept.be](http://www.stoneconcept.be)), **Distributor** Joost Despriet Anseeuw & Despriet ([www.anseeuwdespriet.be](http://www.anseeuwdespriet.be)), **Ceramic surfaces** Gardenia Orchidea ([www.gardenia.it](http://www.gardenia.it))

In the town of Mechelen near Antwerp in Belgium, an ancient mediaeval chapel has been converted into a bed and breakfast establishment that combines historic charm with modern standards of hospitality

by Katrin Cosseta

**T**he Atrium5 Bed & Breakfast establishment is perhaps better known to locals as De Oude Kapel, or “the old chapel”, due to its former function as part of the Bethanië Convent located in the old town centre of Mechelen near Antwerp. Within the austere stone and brick architectural surroundings, it’s almost a shock to come across these two large studio apartments whose sober design would not be out of place in a high-level international hotel. The atmosphere however is warm and welcoming, specially designed to create a tranquil space conducive to relaxation.

The remodelling work led by architect Lieven De Wachter had two main goals: to enhance the historic building through a conservative exterior restoration project and to create spaces and functions ideal for new living requirements within a structure originally intended for an entirely different use. A key feature of the concept was the decision to maintain the original mediaeval stone of the exterior while creating a sense of stylistic continuity inside.

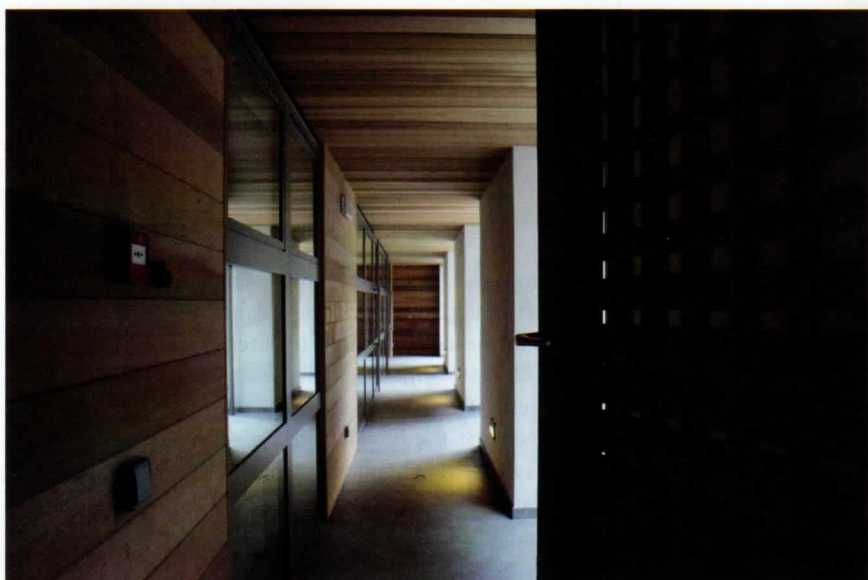
Atrium5 offers visitors two studios, each extending over an area of more than 50 square metres, complete with fully-equipped kitchenette, bedroom and separate living space and bathroom with shower. One also has a private terrace. The two studios display the distinctive features of Northern European interior design, based on simple elegance and functionality. The sparse, linear furnishings express a rigour and sense of measure that is in keeping with their former monastic vocation but without being overawed by it. The studios feature discreet decorative accents such as striped armchairs, soft rugs, and paintings above the beds (one

a landscape and the other an interior in a contemporary revisitation of typical themes of Flemish painting) that offer the only relief from totally bare walls. The sleeping area, dominated by a dark wooden bed with exceptionally clean lines, is connected via a full-height sliding door to the living area, furnished with a small number of items such as a circular table and two armchairs in the centre, and a white table with two chairs placed against the wall near the kitchenette. A major contribution to the calm, relaxing atmosphere comes from the neutral colour palette with a predominance of brown and

grey tones. The colour grey is enhanced by the Infinity Stone series porcelain floor tiles from Gardenia Orchidea (in sizes 60x60 cm and 30x60 cm), whose natural surface and tones reflect the mediaeval stone on the outside of the building in a play of visual and material continuity in which technology creates a link between the present and the past. Where the use of stone is unfeasible, it is substituted by ceramic, installed in a large format with a textured surface finish to ensure the maximum natural appeal. The same material is also used for the bathroom, furnished with minimal essentiality (as in the



**Facing page**, the living room in one of the two apartments of the Atrium5 bed & breakfast establishment, separated from the night-time quarters by a large sliding door and furnished with minimal elegance. On the right, the dinner table and the access to the kitchenette. **Right**, a view of the living area with the decorative accent of the two armchairs with their black and white striped covering, and behind the bedroom and bathroom.



**Above left**, the corridor leading to the bedrooms with wood covered walls. **Above right and below**, the two bedrooms featuring a sober, dark wooden bed and above it a painting, the only splash of colour enlivening the neutral colour palette chosen for the interior design project, from the furniture to the finishes.





**Technical details**

**Ceramic surfaces:** Gardenia Orchidea, Infinity Stone series  
**Main type and sizes:** porcelain tile, 30x60 cm and 60x60 cm sizes, colour grey, natural textured surface  
**Main technical specifications:**  
 Water absorption (ISO 10545-3): ≤ 0.5%  
 Chemical resistance (ISO 10545-13): compliant  
 Surface abrasion resistance (ISO 10545-7): class 5  
 Stain resistance (ISO 10545-14): compliant  
 Frost resistance (ISO 10545-12): compliant  
 Modulus of rupture and breaking strength (ISO 10545-4): compliant  
 Slip resistance (DIN 51130): R10 group B  
 Thermal shock resistance (ISO 10545-9): compliant  
 Craze resistance (ISO 10545-11): compliant  
 Coefficient of linear thermal expansion (ISO 10545-8): compliant



**Top**, the bathroom entirely clad with grey porcelain tile, also used on the floor for the walk-in shower.  
**Right**, detail of the countertop washbasin designed by Philippe Starck.

detail of the Starck countertop washbasin on a wooden vanity). Here the continuity between the ceramic floor and wall tiling culminates in a walk-in shower without the need for a shower tray, creating a space with a strong sense of materiality. But there are no religious allusions here, no hints of asceticism or the use of total white as a metaphor for purity or as a false show of poverty. The architect has resisted the temptation to create a simplistic and rhetorical design suggested by the unique features of the

location. Indeed, the concept could not be more distant from monastic cells or pilgrim accommodation. Instead of a bare, minimalist space that invites users to meditation and prayer, these airy studio apartments are equipped with every comfort and combine a high standard of hospitality with a strong personality. This location in the heart of Flanders is firmly anchored in the present while showing respect to its past roots.

*Katrin Cosseta, Interni*