

# THE RUBENS HOUSE, READY FOR THE FUTURE

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Rubens nowadays is such an important and inseparable part of the art history of Europe – and of Antwerp in particular – that we can almost forget at times that he is not just history. Rubens did live almost 400 years ago, of course, and as an entrepreneur and diplomat, his feet were firmly planted in his own seventeenth century. As an artist, moreover, he had a profound respect for the great thinkers and makers of the past. Yet he was bold enough to look firmly to the future as well. Rubens did not play it safe. On the contrary, he probed the limits, searched for innovation and helped to shape it.

It is thanks to this audacity that Peter Paul Rubens lives on in the twenty-first century. Not just as a name in art history classes, catalogues and museums all over the world, but also as an innovator. Above all in his own city of Antwerp. Almost 400 years on, you can still find traces here of his visionary thinking. We want to pick up the thread of innovation and to take it forward with the same boldness and vision as the artist himself.

Antwerp City Council therefore took the decision, backed by a leverage grant from Tourism Flanders, to draw up a master plan for the Rubens House site. The plan aims to make the dynamic biotope of Rubens the man and the artist even more visible and tangible, and to give it fresh impetus for the future.

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## RUBENS IS NOT JUST HISTORY



Peter Paul Rubens, Self-Portrait, Rubens House Antwerp, photo KIK-IRPA Brussels

## 1 —

## A master plan for the master

Completion in 2019 of the conservation of the portico and garden pavilion formed a new milestone in the history of the Rubens House. It was a highly meticulous process that further enhances the museum's international prestige and appeal. The portico and the garden pavilion are the only surviving architectural elements designed by Rubens himself. While they might appear very traditional today, in seventeenth-century Antwerp their innovation was unprecedented.

The master plan intends to continue in the same vein: with both immense respect for Rubens' work and an appropriate commitment to renewal. The plan covers the entire Rubens House site:

- The artist's residence, with the Flemish wing and the Italian wing designed by Rubens himself;
- The artist's garden, which also served as the verdant setting for some of his family portraits; and
- The adjoining Kolvenierssite, with both the historic arquebusiers' building and modern-day Rubenianum.

The site lies at the heart of the city block between Wapper, Hopland, Kolveniersstraat and Meir and was the focus of Peter Paul Rubens' work in seventeenth-century Antwerp. He bought the **house and land on Wapper** in 1610. He knew the neighbourhood very well, as the residence was adjacent to the parental home of his mother, Maria Pypelinckx, where he too

spent part of his childhood. He renovated the house, which was built in the old Flemish style, and added a new wing.

Rubens drew inspiration mainly from Italy, where he had spent no fewer than eight years as a young artist, from 1600 to 1608. His intense contact with the great Italian masters not only enriched his painting, it also meant that he returned full of ideas for powerful architectural creations, which he put into practice in and around his home. He built a new painter's studio, a semi-circular gallery for his impressive collection of antique sculptures and paintings, and a special portico and garden, all in an Italianate style. Something else he brought back with him from Italy was the attention to perspective: from the entrance gate, across the courtyard and through the richly ornamented portico, he created a magnificent view of the garden pavilion on the opposite side of the site.

The newly constructed elements made a huge impression on Rubens' contemporaries and were featured in paintings by Anthony van Dyck and Jacob Jordaens, among others. The overall result of the renovation and expansion was a genuine *palazzo* on the river Scheldt of a splendour and style unmatched in the Low Countries at the time.



Facade Rubens House, photo Ans Brys

The garden of the Rubens House is adjacent on the east side to the historic **Kolveniershof**, home of the arquebusiers' guild, which was one of the six city militias at the time. Its members were armed with arquebuses, a forerunner of the musket, and were commanded by Nicolaas Rockox, mayor, patron of the arts and a good friend of Rubens. The artist painted his monumental *Descent from the Cross* for the guild's altar in Antwerp Cathedral.

Rubens owned three more houses on nearby **Hopland**. They served partly as utility buildings, and in 1639, he also installed his extensive and prestigious library there.

The artist's home thus formed a vibrant focal point in Rubens' time, where residents, neighbours, employees, pupils and visitors encountered one another. Study, life, work, creativity and society were all mutually inspiring, with Rubens as the perfect host and driving force.

When the museum was developed three centuries later, this unity was broken down, with the artist's home taking centre stage. At the same time, there was a growing need for a research institute devoted to historic Flemish art. The **Rubenianum** moved into a new building next to the historic Kolveniershof and adjoining the Rubens House.

The Rubens House and the Rubenianum operate independently, making fragmentary use of the various buildings around the artist's home. Over the years, this use of space evolved to provide ad-hoc solutions for the increasing number of visitors and growing collections. Functions had to be housed in inappropriate spaces: offices located between library and archives, climate-control systems filling the ridge of the roof, and changing rooms for the heritage custodians in a cellar.

The master plan aims to improve the infrastructure and give the Rubens House back the lively and inspiring atmosphere it had in the seventeenth century. It aims to do so with a vision worthy of Rubens, so that the site is firmly anchored in the twenty-first century and ready to face the future. Rather than buildings or functions, the master plan focuses on Rubens himself: the artist, the family man, the friend, the collector, the businessman, the diplomat, the researcher and the visionary.

Because wherever Rubens' works happen to be exhibited in the world, it is only in Antwerp that you can truly experience what an outstanding host he was and discover his versatility and lasting impact.

*Rather than buildings or functions,  
the master plan focuses on Rubens himself*



Unbuilt space at Hopland 13, photo Ans Brys



The Rubenianum, photo Tim Van de Velde

## 2 —

## Approach

With the impetus provided by a leverage grant from Tourism Flanders, Antwerp City Council asked the Flemish Government Architect on 30 May 2016 to develop a vision for the reception, experience and operation of the Rubens House. In the design competition that followed, the architects firm Robbrecht and Daem came first. Their plan offers a comprehensive response to the current pressure on the site, while above all placing the figure of Rubens centre stage once more.

In the seventeenth century, Rubens was able, seemingly effortlessly, to connect tradition and future, the city and the world, life and work, scholarship and business. The result was an innovative and inspiring artist's residence, astonishing for its time, at which everyone was welcome. Robbrecht and Daem are restoring those lost connections in the twenty-first century. The infrastructure will once again be an expression of dynamism and cross-fertilization. From 2024 onwards, thanks to their architectural vision, visitors to the Rubens House will enjoy a truly total experience.

### Concrete challenges

Besides re-establishing connections, the master plan has to respond to several very concrete challenges. Pressure on the site has increased steadily in the seventy-five years since the museum opened: in terms of exponentially growing visitor numbers, but also of the rising expectations of a wide range of stakeholders.

### 1. From the visitors' perspective

*'How blessed is our city of Antwerp with two of its extraordinary citizens: Rubens and Moretus! Visitors will marvel at their houses, foreign tourists will admire them.'*

So wrote the Antwerp humanist and alderman Jan Woverius in a letter of 1 October 1620 to Balthasar Moretus, owner of one of the houses being eulogized. Just how far-sighted Woverius was can be seen from the visitor numbers 400 years later: in 2019, the Rubens House hosted over 210,000 visitors from more than thirty countries – roughly four times the entire population of Antwerp in 1620.

Visitation levels like this are fantastic, but they also bring problems. Ad-hoc interventions have been made in recent decades to ensure comfort and safety. The most striking example is Stéphane Beel's glass reception pavilion, which was installed in 1999 – Van Dyck Year – as a temporary solution for ticket sales, reception and the museum shop. Twenty years later, however, the limits have been reached and creativity alone can no longer conceal the fact that accommodation at the site is inadequate for a twenty-first century museum. It lacks basic visitor facilities, let alone space for a more intense experience.



View of the portico at the Rubens House, photo Ans Brys



View of the reception pavilion at the Rubens House, photo Ans Brys

All the same, this aspect has developed in recent decades into an important strand of how museums operate. Collections remain paramount, of course, but everything possible is done to provide visitors with a special experience. The Covid crisis has once again highlighted the fact that it is not the number of visitors that is crucial, but the quality of that visitor experience.

The 'legibility' of the site contributes significantly to how the (historic) location and the story are perceived. In order to make Rubens' biotope tangible once again, visitors have to be given a total picture rather than fragmentary impressions. This too is not the case today. Having bought their ticket in the glass reception building, visitors are not prepared for the spectacular view of the portico and garden pavilion through the entrance gate. They then abruptly enter Rubens' intimate living quarters, before going on to explore part of the Italian wing, the former working area. 'Part' because some rooms, including the apprentices' studio and Rubens' private studio are only accessible during temporary exhibitions. Today's routing does not, therefore, allow us to start by painting a broad picture of the seventeenth century, before leading visitors, step by step, deeper into the world of Rubens the man and the artist.

## 2. From the perspective of the collections

There are two main players here, each with their own collections and functions: the Rubens House with its broad museum operations, and the Rubenianum with its internationally renowned reference library for Flemish art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It was already apparent in the summary of challenges from the visitors' perspective that the **Rubens House** is not sufficiently able to fulfil the functions of a contemporary museum. It is also overburdened with all kinds of back-office functions needed to allow the house to operate as a museum. What's more, they mean that the Rubens House can no longer be a 'house'. The improvised storage space is scattered around the historic buildings, as are the technical functions. The latter are no longer, incidentally, up to contemporary

museum standards. Nor is there a properly equipped space for handling incoming and outgoing loans, or a climate-controlled storeroom for paintings.

The **Rubenianum** is struggling with similar problems. The fact that the library is linked to Rubens' home is unique and absolutely worth cherishing. Rubens himself actually kept a library on what is now the green zone along Hopland. But the 1970s building on Kolveniersstraat no longer meets the requirements of a dynamic and renowned twenty-first-century research centre. Growth of the Rubenianum's collections means that the space available to the researchers to work is shrinking year by year. Large parts of the underground book storage area cannot be used due to water infiltration. The building does not conform to contemporary climate-control requirements for the collection, etc. Here, too, a firm step into the twenty-first century is more than necessary.

## 3. From the operational point of view

The summary of the collection's needs has already shown that the Rubens House museum and the Rubenianum research centre currently have two separate functions. In practical terms, the two buildings are accessed and served separately: the Rubens House via Wapper, the Rubenianum via Kolveniersstraat. What's more, both the Rubens House and the Rubenianum have their own teams responsible for the conservation and management of the collection, for knowledge building, public outreach, and so forth.

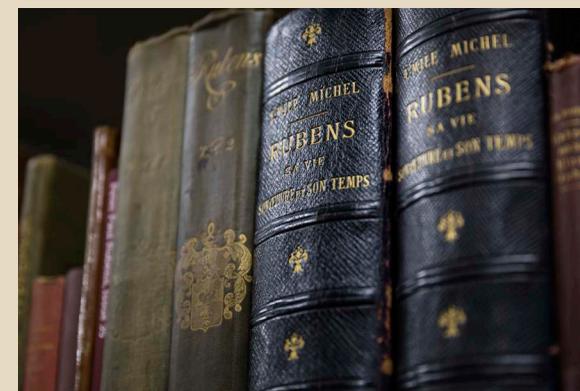
The master plan offers a fantastic opportunity to connect the two institutions more effectively, both physically and substantively. The overall vision will create opportunities to make the fullest possible shared use of spaces and services. In substantive terms too, the master plan creates the momentum to break down barriers and to return to the inspiring interplay between art, business, research and society that Rubens knew how to orchestrate so ingeniously. In this way, visitors will be drawn once again into a magical dynamic that encourages discovery and creativity.



Art handling at the Rubens House, photo Sigrid Spinnox



Documentation of the Rubenianum, photo Ans Brys



Library of the Rubenianum, photo Ans Brys

## Concrete answers

To be able to guarantee a high-quality service and an inspiring dynamic in the future, spatial expansion and integration of the two operations on the site are clearly necessary. Robbrecht and Daem have worked out concrete answers to this: a new building at 13 Hopland, with a reception area, experience centre, museum café and the Rubenianum's internationally renowned library, plus a new routing that will increase and deepen understanding of Rubens' work and life.

In addition to Robbrecht and Daem's interventions, the museum garden will be completely redesigned as a central connecting element, with respect for the past as well as responding to new needs. Various construction works will also be carried out in the artist's home to improve comfort and safety.

### 1. A new building

The various needs that exist cannot be solved within the existing infrastructure. Expansion is needed – that much is clear. A location study shows that the undeveloped space along 13 Hopland is the most suitable place to achieve this much-needed expansion. It is located behind the garden wall along Hopland, between two taller buildings.

Designing a new building for a historic site is not a matter to be undertaken lightly. It takes vision and imagination to bring past and future together on one site without compromising either the one or the other. Peter Paul Rubens did it 400 years before Robbrecht and Daem, when he flamboyantly combined an existing house in the

Flemish style with stunning new architecture inspired by Italy. Robbrecht and Daem have pursued that balance just as ingeniously in 2021.

They have sought the right proportions for the new facade – structured from horizontal lines and vertical cylindrical elements – on Hopland and the Rubens Garden side, in order to reference the rich building traditions of Italian *palazzi*. This creates a uniform whole between the new facades, which responds in turn to the facade of the Rubens House. Where the existing city block turns its back on the garden, 13 Hopland aims to provide the garden with a facade that responds to the one the Rubens House itself presents. This new facade will be designed in an abstract way that will not detract from the prestigious Rubens House. The use of round elements creates a fascinating play of light in the building, both during the day and at dusk and at night.

13 Hopland will be an easily 'readable' and very accessible reception building, equipped with all necessary facilities. Two monumental spiral staircases will begin from the ground floor. The stairs to the underground level will provide access to a multimedia experience centre on Rubens and the locale where he lived and worked. The stairs leading up will take visitors to the museum café where they can relax. From this level, a third staircase will wind its way up to the reading room, where interested museum-goers, library users and researchers can immerse themselves in the world of Rubens and his contemporaries. The back-office functions will be located above these three public building layers.



Front of future new construction at Hopland 13 © Design by Robbrecht en Daem architecten, Image by G2 Architectural Graphics

## Layer by layer

### LEVEL 0: RECEPTION

Visitors will receive a warm welcome on Level 0. In addition to the information and ticketing desk, there will be a cloakroom, museum (book)shop and toilets. The space is connected with the garden and Hopland. Inviting spiral staircases lead downwards, to commence your visit in the experience centre, or upwards to take a break in the museum café or explore the library. The spiral staircases not only provide a physical connection, they also immediately draw visitors into Rubens' dynamic and stirring visual language.

### LEVEL -1: EXPERIENCE CENTRE

This is the level where the whole experience really starts. Visitors will have the opportunity here to experience Rubens' biotope and become part of it themselves. The room nearest the front will tease visitors with glimpses of the fascinating figure of Rubens and his century, before all the stops are pulled out in the large T-shaped space of the experience centre. Floors, walls and ceiling have been designed in such a way as to immerse visitors in Rubens' creativity and the vibrant world he lived in. The two cabinets flanking the main space provide an opportunity – like the peep-shows of the past – to highlight aspects of the main narrative. Unlike the past, however, it is not a question of admiring from a distance, but of trying things out and discovering for yourself.

### LEVEL +1: MUSEUM CAFÉ

The first floor houses a museum café, which is freely accessible during museum opening hours or events. You will be able to feel the vibe of Rubens' work in the café, too. Visitors can enjoy a drink and a snack, as well as browsing the books in the museum shop. An intensive green roof with a view of the Rubens Garden can also be accessed from the museum café.

### LEVEL +2: PUBLIC READING ROOM

The second floor is the location of the reading room, with toilets for visitors and staff. The space is divided into a counter, reading areas, places for viewing the collection and open book shelves.

Level +2 is the final level open to the public. The levels listed described below are reserved for back-office functions.

### LEVEL +3: LIBRARY AND RESEARCH PLACES

The third floor houses part of the library collection and is reserved for specialist visitors and researchers. The central space also provides room for a large amount of open shelf space. Various individual workplaces and a shared worktable are provided between the shelves. This floor also contains a temporary store and a first climate-controlled archive store.

### LEVELS +4 AND +5: BACK OFFICE

Back-office space for staff is located on the fourth and fifth floors. Besides offices, there are meeting rooms, a rest and lunch area, toilets and a staff shop. Level +4 also has a storeroom for valuable small exhibits and works on paper, close to the library, but still under the permanent supervision of the staff. There is a second storage facility on the same floor. The uppermost floor has a technical space, so that the air-conditioning system for the historic Rubens House is not visible to the public.

### LEVEL -2: TECHNICAL SPACES, COLLECTION STORE AND GENERAL STORAGE

This level brings together the technical facilities of the new building. The latter not only meets its own energy requirements, it also provides some of the museum's cooling power. There is further general storage on Level -2 for the different users of 13 Hopland, such as the museum café. And there will also be a climate-controlled storeroom for the optimum preservation of the collection of books, documentation and paper.



Reception area of future new construction at Hopland 13 © Design by Robbrecht en Daem architecten, Image by G2 Architectural Graphics

*As you pass through new rooms and unknown corners, you will enter the mind and especially the heart of Rubens*

## 2. New routing

The new building at 13 Hopland provides breathing space for the entire site, and especially for visitors. Thanks to the new building and the new routing, visitors will no longer have to dive straight into Rubens' private life unprepared. From the redeveloped Wapper, where the temporary pavilion will disappear and you will once again have an unobstructed view of the facade, the routing will now begin via the new building. Visitors will have the time and space there to acclimatize, leave the twenty-first century behind, step by step, and move steadily deeper into Rubens' living and working world.

As visitors descend to the lower level at 13 Hopland, they will catch their first glimpse of Antwerp and the wider world in the seventeenth century. In the experience centre, they will be immersed in the vibrant universe in which Rubens lived and worked. Visitors will then exit 13 Hopland via the garden to enter the studio wing on the left, where they will begin a meandering circuit to discover the artist and the human being. In the large studio, you will sense the bustling activity and entrepreneurial talent of Rubens Inc., every bit as much

as the exuberant creativity of the master and his assistants.

Things will then move slowly but surely towards the apotheosis. You will feel the denouement approaching. In the Flemish wing, visitors will gain an insight bit by bit into the private life of Rubens and his family. As you pass through new rooms and unknown corners, you will enter the mind and especially the heart of Rubens. And just when you think you have fully made his acquaintance, Rubens will conjure up one last surprise for you: the breathtaking portico that he designed himself, which will draw the visitor towards the equally stunning garden pavilion.

After this grandiose final chord, visitors will not be left feeling lost and overwhelmed, but will be given the time and space to return to the reception area via the newly laid-out garden, enjoying a gentle afterglow. You will be able to linger there a little longer, browse the shop or talk about your visit in the museum café before returning to the reality of the twenty-first century.



Rear of future new construction at Hopland 13 © Design by Robbrecht en Daem architecten, Image by G2 Architectural Graphics

### 3. A newly landscaped garden

The garden was already a green oasis and a place of relaxation in Rubens' own time. The private quarters, his painting studio, the accommodation for assistants and pupils are all connected to the garden. Rubens saw to it that this crucial crossroads was a jewel of tranquility and dynamism. The beautiful Baroque garden that he designed himself even serves from time to time as a setting for his paintings, including several family portraits. In this sense, the garden is a kind of 'biographer' and offers a good introduction to the figure of Rubens. His fellow artists, too, incorporated the garden in their paintings on more than one occasion.

The Baroque character of the garden, and even actual sections of it, were lost in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century. The original character of the garden was restored as much as possible in the twentieth century, when the museum opened, then again in 1993 to mark Antwerp's year as European Capital of Culture.

Almost thirty years on, however, our knowledge of Baroque gardens and of Rubens' sources of inspiration is much greater again. High time then to revive

the garden too as part of the master plan. With the greatest respect, once more, for the past: sources on Rubens' garden as such are scarce, but the new design will be aligned as closely as possible with the seventeenth-century Zeitgeist, with garden paths running from doors and along lines of sight, and bounded by leafy passageways. The choice of plants will also refer back to varieties used in Rubens' time.

But also, once again, with an eye to the future: visual quality will go hand in hand with a sustainable energy concept and sustainable materials, with good accessibility, and so forth. The design is also flexible, so that the garden can grow along with the needs of future generations of users.

And again, of course, with a strong focus on experience. The new museum garden will give visitors the opportunity to pause and enjoy the artist's absolute genius, his unflinching ability to combine past and present, rest and movement, colour with colour. This will give the new museum garden a greater international appeal and make it a prime example of innovation.

*The private quarters, his painting studio, the accommodation for assistants and pupils are all connected to the garden.*



View of the garden and the portico at the Rubens House, photo Ans Brys



View of the portico at the Rubens House, photo Ans Brys



View of the garden and the portico at the Rubens House, photo Ans Brys

#### 4. An adapted Rubens House

The new building, the reversal of the routing and the reinstatement of the museum garden together offer a partial answer to the growing pressure on the Rubens House. But the artist's home itself naturally remains the key attraction. Interventions will thus be inevitable here too to alleviate the pressure and preserve the museum for future generations.

Fundamental changes are not always possible due to the building's historic character. Smart, surgically precise interventions can, however, already eliminate many of the problems. Within these limits, the City Council is seeking to achieve the following ambitions:

- Improve the comfort of visitors and staff, including climate control.
- Enhance the experience of the historic building, by removing unsightly technical elements, for instance.
- Bolster the museum's image. Improving climate control, for instance, should ensure that the Rubens House will still be able to accommodate international masterpieces in the future.
- Optimize care of the extremely valuable collection through adequate preventative conservation.
- Optimize the care of the historic building, including responsible structural modifications to counteract the climatological impact on the interior and to improve the indoor climate.
- Achieve a more ecological museum building through sustainable techniques and energy-efficient solutions.

At the same time, it is being investigated whether the accessibility of the artist's home can be improved without harming its historic character. One point of attention here is the full accessibility of the museum's exhibition spaces.

#### An integrated response to complex challenges

The master plan provides an integrated response to complex challenges. Each of the four pillars – the new building, the new routing, the newly laid-out garden and the modified artist's home – are not sufficient alone to enable future generations to acquaint themselves with Rubens' biotope in an attractive and responsible way.

The Rubens House will, however, be entirely ready for the future by 2024, thanks to the combination and interplay of the pillars. With greatly improved accessibility, effectively spread visitor pressure, sustainable technology and materials, enhanced comfort, optimal storage conditions and increased security, and above all a richer visitor experience. Visiting the Rubens House will then no longer be just a museum visit but an intense, lived experience of Rubens' seventeenth-century world.



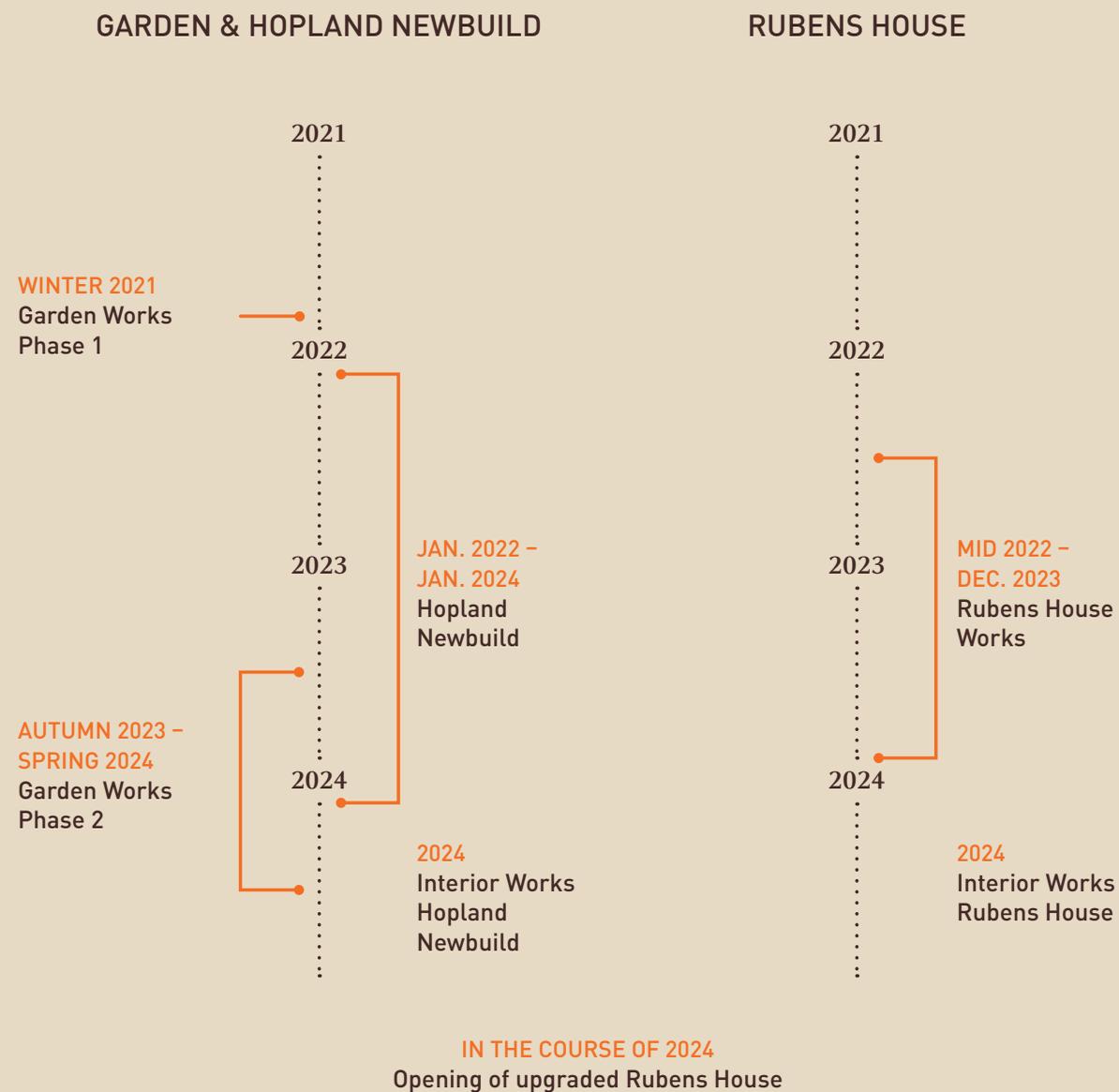
View of the large studio at the Rubens House, photo Ans Brys



View of the Italian wing at the Rubens House, photo Sigrid Spinnox

## 3 —

## Timing



## 4 —

## Sustainable and future-proof

Rubens himself was particularly adept and creative in combining past, present and future. Antwerp City Council is pursuing the same ingenious mix with this master plan. Using today's knowledge and respecting the past to respond to future challenges. Throughout the master plan, you will therefore find a thorough focus on sustainability, future-proofing and energy efficiency within the strict framework of heritage care and available resources.

It is a continuous balancing act. In the new building and the completely re-laid garden, these principles will naturally be present from the start: 13 Hopland and the museum garden will not only be smartly executed, they are intelligently designed too, with a view to maximum accessibility, sustainable materials and energy-efficient techniques, and flexibility, so that future needs can be readily met.

Things are more difficult in the case of the historic artist's home. You can't just widen passageways, install a lift, or insert sustainable technologies. Here too, however, every possibility and channel is being explored to open up the historic building to everyone as much as possible. The new routing supports this ambition and will in itself ensure a richer experience of the site for all visitors.

## 5 —

## Funding and partners

An important lever for the development of the master plan is a grant from Tourism Flanders of 2.989.540,53 euros. The subsidy is a contribution to a total vision for the artist's home and surroundings, drawn up in close consultation with the Flanders Heritage Agency.

The City of Antwerp is backing this integrated plan with a generous investment. In the current policy period, for instance, 17 million euros will be spent on the new building at 13 Hopland, the remodelling of the museum garden, the reversal of the museum route and the elimination of a number of bottlenecks in the artist's home.

In his day, Rubens set great store by cooperation: he always managed to surround himself with the right people. To realize this master plan, the Rubens House and Rubenianum are likewise working together with a great many experts and specialists:

- Draft master plan and design for 13 Hopland: Robbrecht and Daem Architects in collaboration with Callebaut Architects, Bureau d'Etudes Greisch, hp engineers, Daidalos-Peutz and Björn Schmelzer.
- Management plans for Rubens House, Rubens Garden and Kolveniershof: Robbrecht and Daem Architects in collaboration with Callebaut Architects, Ars Horti Landscape Architects, Ruben Williaert restoration & archaeology.
- Dialogue and research: Flanders Heritage Agency, Flemish Government Architect, Antwerp City Architect, City of Antwerp Listed Buildings and

Archaeology Department, Urban Development City of Antwerp, Citymarketing City of Antwerp.

- Project monitoring and implementation: AG VESPA Antwerp.
- Garden design and execution: Ars Horti Landscape Architects.
- Research on interventions in artist's home: Maat\_werk architects BV in collaboration with Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), Physitec, RCR studiebureau, Stabitec, EVA-International.
- Restoration of roof of artist's home: Maat\_werk architects BV & Monument Vandekerckhove.
- Routing: Studio Dott and Robbrecht and Daem architects.
- Subsidizing authorities: City of Antwerp and Flemish Community via the leverage grant from Tourism Flanders.

The Rubens House and Rubenianum are grateful to:

- The Mayor of Antwerp, Bart De Wever
- The Chair of the Municipal Culture Committee, Nabilla Aid Daoud
- The Chair of the Municipal Planning Committee, Annick De Ridder
- The Chair of the Municipal Heritage Committee, Fons Duchateau
- Flemish Minister for Tourism Zuhail Demir and their respective predecessors.



View of the portico at the Rubens House, photo Ans Brys

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## Appendix: interview with Paul Robbrecht

### Robbrecht en Daem architecten

*You've designed the new building to be constructed on the Rubens House site in the next few years. How did Rubens' work inspire or influence your design?*

I've been an admirer of Rubens for as long as I can remember. I used to draw his work as best I could even as a small child. He was someone who fascinated me. I've always been interested in both classical and contemporary art, but the figure of Rubens has remained a strong presence over the years. What fascinates me is the movement in his compositions. It obviously contrasts with architecture, which is a very decisive art form, specifying exactly how something is to be constructed.

One way or another, though, we've managed to introduce a sense of movement, just as you find in the works of Rubens. It's not something explicit, but rather internalized within the planning process. People cross the building diagonally, for instance: there's a constellation of staircases that aren't located in a line, one above the other, but which make a diagonal movement through the building. We haven't done it explicitly, but we did have Rubens' grandiose compositional technique in mind when we were working on it. There's more too: the way the building presents itself externally with a multitude of colonettes, for example. It's our way of referencing the musculature that Rubens used so emphatically. His immense corporeality, his muscularity, is there in our work too, though again not explicitly.

*We're talking about a new building to be constructed on the same site as the historic artist's residence. New and old will come together there. How do you ensure that the result is a dialogue rather than a clash?*

What's really special is that Rubens' house – which is a double house, actually – expresses itself through a portico and then through a garden and through a pavilion. A total site is already present so it's very unusual to be adding something new. We opted to concentrate a number of functions in a new building located adjacent to Hopland. Visitors will also enter the entire complex through it. It's where they'll buy their tickets, visit the experience centre, and so forth. But it's not only that: the Rubens research centre will be located there too. As well as the back-office functions, management, admin – all those things will be housed in the new building.

Rubens developed his site in a very special way: he built his house, a courtyard and a kind of arcade, the latter being an introduction, as it were, to an entire universe. Our building is entirely off to one side. It's there, but it's not explicitly in the middle or in the background, where you currently have buildings that are pretty unsightly in our view. Only after you've visited the whole of the ensemble of house and garden will you perceive the new structure. It's not on the same line of sight. You won't be able to see our building through those openings. It's to one side of them.



Paul Robbrecht, photo Mediamixer

*'I used to draw his work as best I could even as a small child'*

From the new construction itself, though, you can clearly see the totality of the site, while the building itself is only discreetly present. One way or another, it will insert itself into that ensemble of house, garden, pavilion, arcade. It also stands on a spot – which is quite special actually – where Rubens used to own a number of smaller houses. What was special about those properties was that this is precisely where he installed his collection of books. So the same idea of books and study will now live on in the new building.

*The portico and the garden pavilion are the only surviving architectural elements that were designed by Rubens himself. Four hundred years later, you as an architect get to dialogue with those elements by the master architect. Does that add something special to the design process?*

Yes, Rubens did leave an indelible signature here as an architect. And you have to deal with that. There's no getting around it. The portico with the arcade has a very strong presence leading into the courtyard, and beyond it you experience the garden pavilion, which acts as a kind of focus. Rubens didn't invent all that himself, of course: while he was in Italy, there was

a very strong new movement there, Mannerism. The name sounds pejorative, but it's not actually negative at all. Mannerism was a very rich, and above all imaginative style of art. Rubens saw it. He was in Mantua where he got to know Giulio Romano's work. In Rome he saw the entire legacy of Michelangelo.

What's remarkable is that there is a kind of complementarity between Michelangelo and Rubens. They worked roughly three quarters of a century apart, but Michelangelo too only actually became an architect through being a painter. He didn't get started until the Laurenziana in Florence before culminating in the dome of the Vatican. But it all grew out of his painting. The same is true with Rubens. He actually became an architect through his painting. You sense a lot of grain – something painterly – in his architecture.

So that's what you, as a twenty-first-century architect have to deal with. 'Grain' is a bit of a difficult word, perhaps, but I think we too have achieved a certain pictoriality in the facades, through the frequent use of columns, the shadow effects of those columns and so on. I feel like the memory of Rubens' architecture can be detected there.

*'First and foremost, there's nothing better than bookcases to make you feel good. They surround you, create a certain warmth'*



Paul Robbrecht, photo Mediamixer

*The Rubens House site is complex. Lots of different functions are interwoven within what remains a relatively limited area. And the ensemble is anchored within the urban fabric. That posed additional challenges, I imagine?*

Yes, Rubens decided to live on Wapper, which was a kind of boundary in his day between city and countryside. Urbanity was nearby, but there was a direct relationship with the wider landscape. Since then, of course, it has all been absorbed into the steadily expanding city. It has become a complex locale, in which the city now forms a substantial part of the visual experience. The landscape is a long way away – you have to imagine it.

But what's really important is that this entire complex, the house, the arcade and the pavilion, was a kind of mental universe, as well as a universe of family and friends. I'd include the Kolveniershof in that complex too, as the arquebusiers were friends of Rubens. They were the militia guild that commissioned *The Descent from the Cross*, among other things. Rubens' mother also lived nearby in what is now a shop on Meir. You find those traces, those memories, all over the place. Rubens' studio and so on might have been frequently remodelled, but there is still a great deal of memory in

those buildings. We're now adding a new building to it from our own time. I think we want to be as respectful as possible in doing so, while still being aware that we too are adding to the story. That's inevitable.

It must really have been something to see Rubens build his place in Antwerp back then. He brought a genuinely new voice to the city. Although you shouldn't underestimate Antwerp: even then, the city was plugged into the world in all sorts of ways. With Spain, for instance, through the port. People in Antwerp knew what was going on in the world. You also had amazing figures here like the publisher Christophe Plantin. All the same, it's still true to say that Rubens introduced a kind of new architectural language to the city.

And yes, the quest to create something new here is something I believe can be a legitimate gesture. At the end of the day, you have to be responsible and sensitive, but I think it's almost a duty to introduce something of your own into the city, even in the highly sensitive context of the overall Rubens site. I think it would be a lie to try to go back in time in search of Rubens. We were aware of him and there are elements of Rubens in our project, but they are interiorized much more than explicit.

The site borders a highly commercial zone in the city. So we're also trying to create a very clear signal from the street side: when you enter this site, at this point, you're stepping into a different world. It's true that you're coming out of those shopping streets – I accept that – but there's still a sense of entering a different kind of world, the world of a great artist, who made his own universe tangible in this place. That's what we're trying to express: that you're stepping into something different, into something that needs a bit more concentration, closer viewing, and so forth.

*Where do you begin with a design for such a complex brief, with a historic figure in the background who is bound to feature heavily? How do you approach something like that?*

You think about the person in question and certain things come to mind. Little things can sometimes be very inspiring, for example the knowledge that Rubens also had properties there. They've long since disappeared, but he used the houses he owned there as the repository for his enormous collection of books. The building we're constructing now is based on a very elementary idea of two bookcases facing each other on all floors. The number of documents and books that will be kept there will be truly unbelievable. Beginning simply with the bookshop on the ground floor, and up through the whole research centre with all the works about Rubens, all that literature from his own time, all the research and so forth. All in these monumental, five-storey high bookcases. An idea like that comes from a historical footnote such as the fact that Rubens kept his collection of books there. And then you just start to brainstorm. So that was one of the inspirations.

You have the great artist and at the same time you also see how he worked his family, his two marriages, into his work. And his children. The family life, the domestic, the homely. The new building we're constructing will have a certain monumentality; five layers can't help but have an impact. But the interior will still aim to achieve a touch of homeliness. First and foremost, there's nothing better than bookcases to make you feel good. They surround you, create a certain warmth. They're good

acoustically too: sounds are softened and muted. So the idea of domesticity certainly crept into our project as well. Rubens actually lived there. He played in the garden with his kids, and so on. He drew his children, both his wives too. He made beautiful portraits of them. And the fact that he was a homebody has also crept into our project a little.

*He was a homebody, but at the same time he was very active internationally. His work can now be seen literally all over the world. Did that international aspect play a part in your design as well?*

Every project has a memory. That's a fact. To me, there's something universal about that memory. Something that transcends the whole local context. I'd even venture to say that this memory is a kind of memory of the classics. The memory of antique art is present in Rubens too, throughout the entire course of this development. He saw those sculptures in Rome, the Belvedere Torso, and so forth. It's there clearly in his work. I think there's a certain kind of memory embodied in our project as well. The A B A pattern, for instance – that's the kind of typology you find in music, in geometry. I believe it's shared throughout the world, throughout the world's architecture even. The idea of the central and the lateral. But if you're asking whether it will be a very explicit, spectacular international building, then no, we've steered clear of that. Happily, we've been spared any more architecture as spectacle in the past few years.

*One last question: you obviously love Rubens' work. If you had to choose, is there one piece that stands out?*

Choosing just one work by Rubens is really difficult. I do like his big, monumental works, even though most people find them a bit over the top. But that appeals to me, because I view them as abstract paintings. I almost try to separate the content out and I'm fascinated by the immense dynamism, as in a certain kind of abstract painting. All the same, I'm going to choose a different work. He did several smaller paintings on the theme of the Lamentation or the Entombment. You see Christ's naked body and the women and apostles grieving over



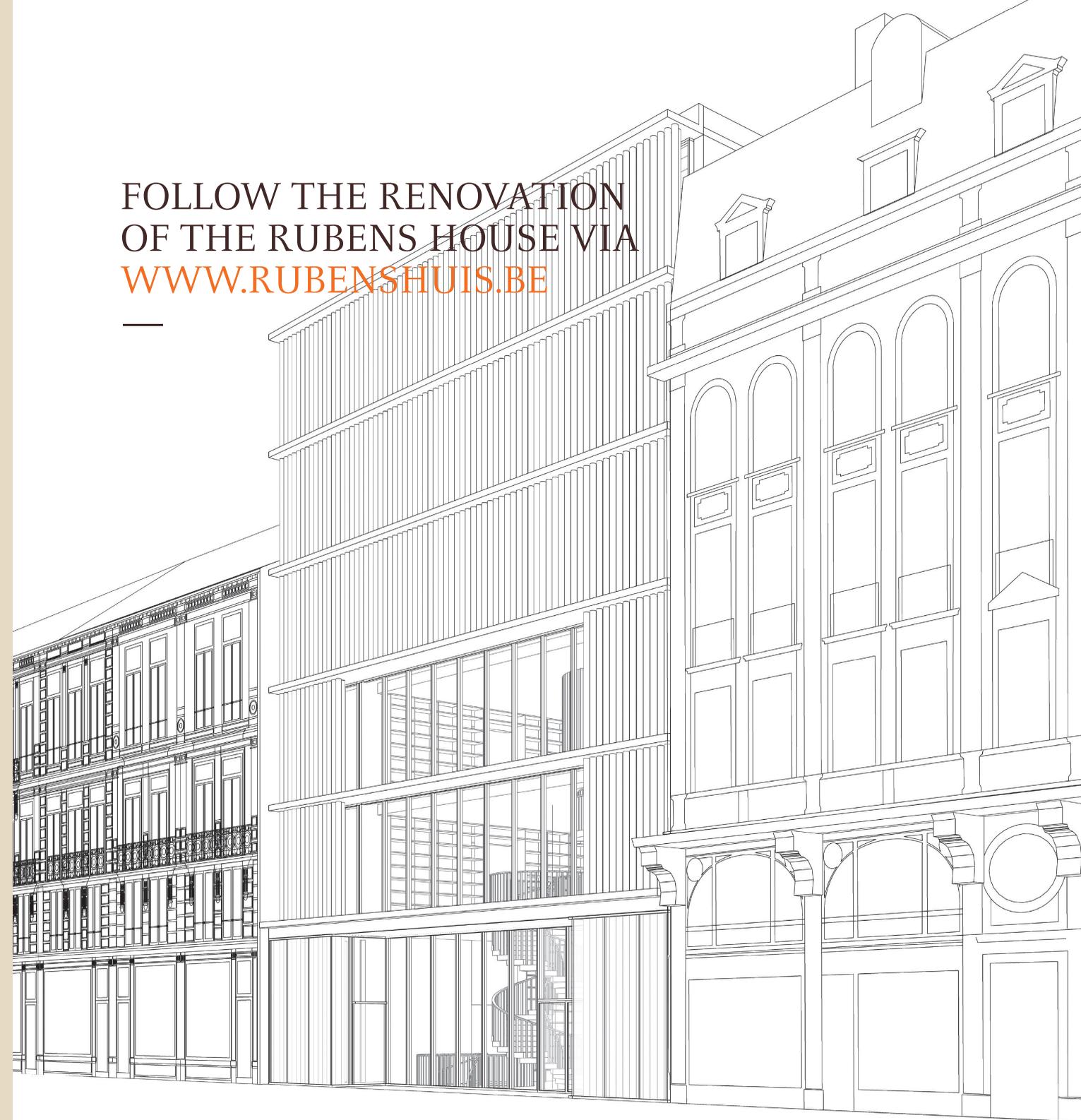
Peter Paul Rubens, Lamentation of Christ, photo Hugo Maertens, Collection Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp – Flemish Community

it. Above all, though, it's the movement, the diagonal movement of that luminous body in a kind of dark context that appeals to me so much. He repeated the theme several times. And then you obviously have the magnificent *Descent from the Cross*. I often think of it, I have to admit. It too transcends the spectacle.

What especially strikes me about Rubens is that he was one of the first artists to collaborate with others to achieve a final result. His studio was populated with very talented people. One had to paint animals, another the landscape in the background. People of the calibre of the young Van Dyck worked together. Just imagine! To me it's a bit like the architect's profession, which is also about more than just one person. It's a group of people you work with very closely and surround yourself with. Who are in dialogue and conversation with you. From very different disciplines too. What tends to be said about Rubens is that 'he didn't do that himself'.

No. And that's just the same as in more recent times: film-making, theatre-making, you name it. It might start with a particular person, but it then immediately becomes a group affair, which you can likewise compare with architecture.

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