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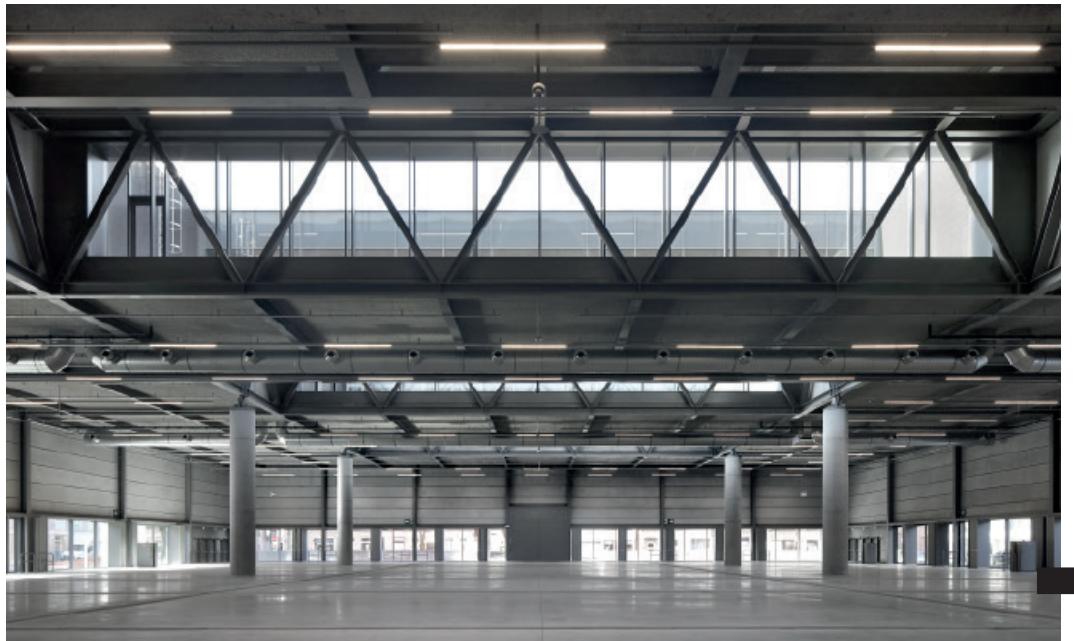
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Meet Up

Bruges Meeting and Convention Centre
Bruges, Belgium
Eduardo Souto de Moura Arquitectos
and META Architectuurbureau





Photography by Filip Dujardin

Squeezing a convention centre into the heart of a historic city isn't what most people would call simple (or wise). Generally, cities opt to shove these programmes out to the suburbs, preferably near airport or along good train connections. Bruges went another direction, deciding that the activities of the programme could benefit the commercial economy of the city centre, and that there ought to be a way to make such a facility acceptable. Given the inherent challenge therefore, best to have a reliable talent at the helm. Souto de Moura's solution conceives of the ground floor hall, fully 4500 sqm in size, as a civic covered square when not used by name-tagged conventioners. That allows the building to function in a slightly more communal, urbane manner. The remaining outdoor plaza space beside the centre is generous and welcoming, and a useful overhang along the base of the building becomes an amenity in hot or rainy weather. Mature trees on the site were treated as sacred, and the scheme preserves the sense of an established urban space... no small achievement. In turn, the lovely greenery softens the centre's character and enhances its public presence.

The site and context also encouraged the architects to open the elevations up, with glazed doors that give onto the plaza, invite natural light inside, and allow passersby to view the activities underway, even during exhibition events. This too, breaks the norms somewhat, as most conventions rely on introverted focus and artificial lighting. The principal entrance facade is a giant frame cantilevered over the recessed porch, distinguished by a row of four-storey brick columns. These allude to the city's historic architectural building traditions, and also screen the actual enclosure planes behind them, frame city views from the interiors, and shade the glazing in summer. Perhaps more directly, they lend the centre an instant seriousness suggesting public importance.

Once inside the centre, its scale becomes clear, and a programme of auditorium (divisible), a dozen meeting rooms, a catering area, panoramic terrace and underground parking and services (including for bicycles) is cleverly enclosed and highly flexible. This is a pragmatic shed set carefully into the core of a delicate city. From without, it could easily pass for a large city hall, museum or concert venue, or even market hall. For visiting convention participants, being in the centre of a place is infinitely preferable over the usual offerings, whilst citizens benefit more directly from tourist investment. The architects and city government have produced a win-win.

