

Kevin's room

From one child's dream to a city's history



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Category: ICOM COMMS Awards 2026 - Category 4: Best Storytelling Project

Institution: STAM - Stadsmuseum Gent (Ghent City Museum), Belgium

Exhibition: Buitenspel - Voetbal in de stad (Offside - Football in the City)

Project timeline: 28 November 2025 - 2 August 2026

Project link: www.stamgent.be/offside

1. THE CHALLENGE



City museums increasingly look for subjects that can connect urban history with contemporary audiences: familiar enough to invite people in, yet rich enough to open unfamiliar perspectives on the city. Football offered STAM precisely that opportunity - but also a risk. *Buitenspel - Voetbal in de stad (Offside - Football in the City)* originated in a collaboration between STAM and the KAA Gent Foundation (the social and community organization of the Belgian professional

football club KAA Gent), prompted by several anniversaries in Ghent's football history. STAM deliberately chose not to tell a club history, nor to build up a hall of fame neither to glorify individual players. Instead, football became a window onto the social history of the city. The exhibition approached the game as an urban phenomenon and mapped a much wider ecosystem: from elite football to neighbourhood teams, from women's football and migrant initiatives to supporters, public space, social change, emancipation and belonging.

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Within that framework, Kevin De Bruyne was both an obvious and a difficult figure. He grew up in Drongen, a district of Ghent, in the 1990s and early 2000s. He played for local youth clubs KVE Drongen and KAA Gent, and later became one of Belgium's most internationally recognised players. His name could open the museum door to people who might not ordinarily choose a city history exhibition. Yet celebrity could just as easily collapse the wider historical argument into a single success story.

The curatorial challenge was therefore precise: could STAM use the familiarity of a global football star without making fame the subject? Could one person's biography become a threshold into the collective history of the city?

As a reviewer in the national newspaper De Standaard later observed, *"the story begins in the room of a child who once just wanted to play football."* (De Standaard, 22 December 2025).



2. THE NARRATIVE SOLUTION

One deliberate choice: stop before fame

Kevin's Room was a full-scale reconstruction of the attic bedroom in which De Bruyne spent part of his childhood. Just four by three metres, it was presented from an unusual vantage point: visitors looked in from a wardrobe, as if peeking into a private childhood world. One deliberate narrative decision shaped the entire installation: the story would focus on a child's dream and stop many years before Kevin became famous.

There are no Premier League trophies, transfer stories or heroic career highlights. Visitors encounter a small room in which the outcome is not yet known. Beneath the sloping roof is a child who follows football, collects images, keeps scores, does his homework, sneaks a ball upstairs and tucks it beneath the desk. He plays for local clubs and imagines a future. The visitor knows what the child does not yet know. That distance between childhood possibility and later public fame gives the room its emotional tension without turning it into a shrine.

The restraint also echoes a maxim De Bruyne has long lived by: 'Keep it simple.' For the museum, it became an apt narrative principle too. The room did not need the spectacle of his later career; its force lay in a small space, carefully chosen objects and the lives gathered around them.



Material culture as a biography

The reconstruction was developed through close cooperation with Kevin's parents, Herwig and Ann De Bruyne, and combined scenography with personal biographical heritage that had not previously been presented to the public. The first thing visitors encountered was a replica of his childhood bed, dressed in a Michael Owen duvet cover; above it hung a hand-drawn 1998 World Cup poster on which he had recorded match results.

The room also included family photographs, his first medals and first MVP (Most Valuable Player) trophy, youth shirts from KVE Drongen and KAA Gent, a Drongen training jacket, and the football that appears in his photographic First Communion souvenir.

These were not presented as celebrity memorabilia. Each element situated De Bruyne first as a fan, a pupil, a son and a local player. His childhood medals hung from nails beside the window. His father added another nail whenever Kevin came home with another small, inexpensive medal. The medals themselves cost almost nothing; to the boy who had won them, they were priceless.



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Together, the objects gave material form to the ordinary practices from which an extraordinary career later emerged: looking up to someone, collecting, playing, practising, studying, imagining.



Many voices, not a heroic monologue

A documentary film was created by the museum team and projected directly into the room, serving as the guide to the items on display. The film combined previously unseen footage of Kevin's early matches with four newly recorded interviews: his father, Herwig; Josiane, one of his primary-school teachers in Drongen; Frank, his first youth coach at KAA Gent; and Kevin himself.

Placing these voices alongside one another was essential to the interpretation. The film does not reproduce the familiar idea of the self-made sporting hero. It shows a child embedded in relationships - family, school, club and neighbourhood - and makes visible the social ecology around talent. The garden and the school playground emerge as spaces of endless play. The film also leaves room for the less celebratory side of determination: pride, but also the absences and sacrifices that surround a child whose talent increasingly structures everyday life. It allows for dreams without pretending that exceptional talent is cost-free.

The collaboration required more than a year of patient relationship-building and resulted in a rare interview with De Bruyne himself during a brief stay in Belgium. More importantly, it created the trust needed to bring private memories into a public museum context without detaching them from the people and places that gave them meaning.



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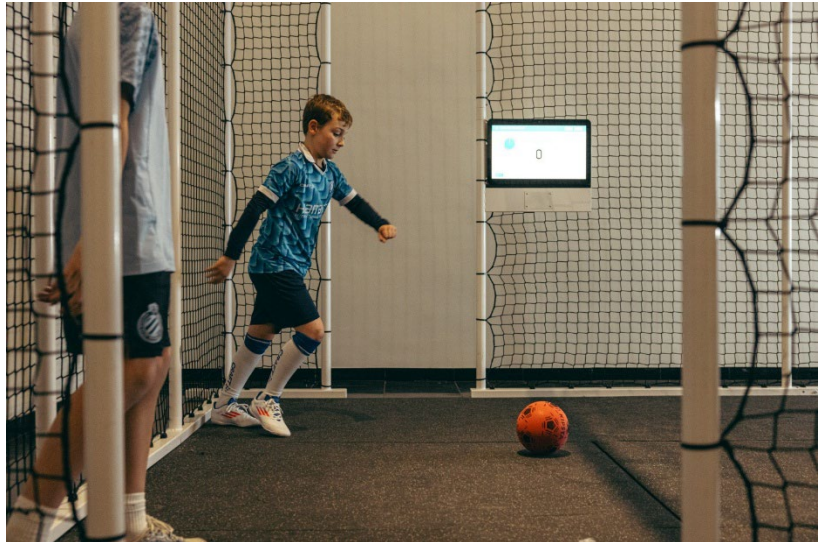
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From looking to doing

The narrative did not end in the bedroom. Later in the exhibition, it returned in a different form at the *STAM Talent Center*, an interactive football cage. Here visitors of all ages could aim, shoot, test their own skills and simply have fun together. The interpretation referred not only to De Bruyne but also to the striker Mariam Abdulai Toloba, who also has roots in Ghent, widening the field of identification beyond one male superstar.

The relationship between the two spaces completed the narrative arc.

In Kevin's Room, visitors entered someone else's childhood dream. Through the film, they encountered the people and places around a child growing up on the outskirts of Ghent. In the STAM Talent Center, the story shifted to their own bodies, memories and sense of play. The visitor was no longer asked to admire another person's success, but to recognise the shared experience that precedes it: trying, missing, practising, hoping and playing. The final question in the room's gallery text was simple: 'Do you dream too?' The Talent Center turned that question into an action.



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3. RESULTS AND PUBLIC IMPACT

An entry point

Kevin's Room became one of the most immediately recognisable entry points into Buitenspel. Its significance, however, lay in what happened after visitors entered. People drawn by De Bruyne encountered an exhibition that, across 1025 square metres, steadily widened the frame: from one child to a neighbourhood, from one club to a city's football ecosystem, and from sport to questions of migration, women's emancipation, friendship, family, public space, racism, health, money and belonging.

In this sense, the room did not reduce the exhibition to a celebrity biography; it worked in the opposite direction. A familiar public figure became a route towards less familiar histories. Personal memory became a way into structural urban history.



A story that visitors chose to cross a threshold for



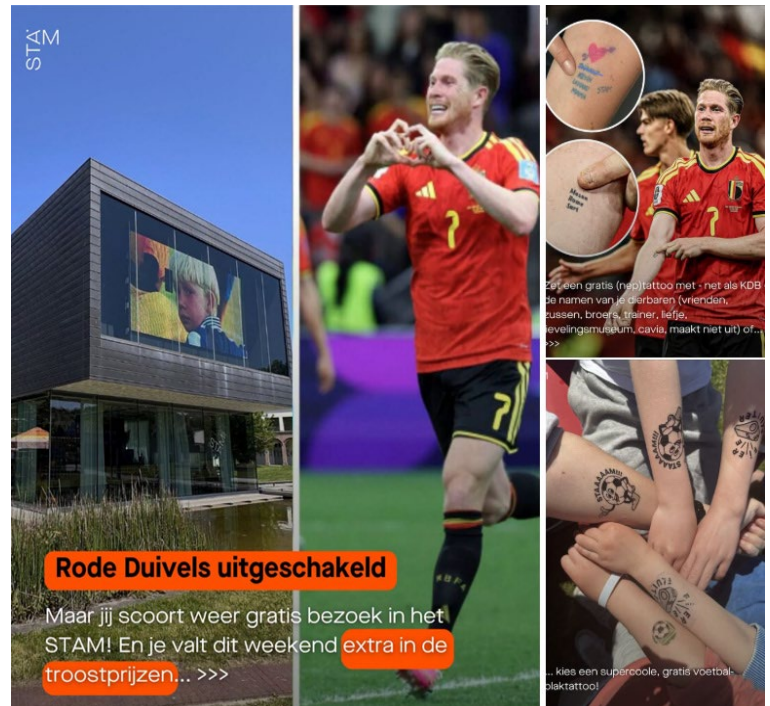
The response was visible not only in the general interest around the exhibition, but also in individual encounters. Among the moments that stayed with the team were repeated conversations between grandparents and grandchildren, and between parents and children, about childhood dreams that echoed across generations. On 17 December 2025, a visitor wrote to STAM that she had travelled from Berlin with her nephew specifically to see Kevin's Room. One anecdote cannot stand in for audience research, but it is revealing: the room offered a point of recognition strong enough to motivate a museum visit across both cultural and geographical distance.

The critical reception recognised the same curatorial function. In the same review, De Standaard described Buitenspel as an exhibition about how deeply football is rooted in the everyday life of a city and noted, tellingly, that this wider history begins in a child's room.

The narrative remained active beyond the gallery

Kevin's Room also became a recurring reference point in the public life of the exhibition. Its scenography was used in communication around the KDB Cup, the international U15 tournament in Drongen co-founded by De Bruyne. STAM also reactivated the room during the 2026 World Cup: after De Bruyne scored for Belgium, the museum opened Buitenspel free of charge for a weekend and invited visitors to return to the childhood story behind the public figure. After Belgium's elimination, a second free weekend connected De Bruyne's discreet family tattoos to an invitation for visitors to celebrate the people who matter in their own lives.

These moments did more than use a famous face in museum communication. They allowed current events to reopen themes already present in the exhibition: family, aspiration, local roots, community-building and belonging. Communication did not replace interpretation; it extended it, connecting the museum's historical narrative to conversations happening outside its walls.



Why it mattered

Kevin's Room worked because it resisted turning biography into a brand story. That boundary was deliberate: the exhibition was not built around any commercial partnership, and STAM chose not to extend the installation into any De Bruyne merchandise in the museum shop. The man was treated as a historical subject, not a brand. The room moved beyond the public image of a global star and returned to the material, local and relational conditions of childhood. Familiarity became a threshold, play became participation.

For STAM, this is the core result. Storytelling was the curatorial method that connected one small room in Drongen to 150 years of urban history, and one child's dream to the many lives, relationships and communities that make a city.

VIDEO LINK

Password: offside

Documentary Film Kevin's Room

<https://vimeo.com/1221810026>

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