

## Member Spotlight: Koen De Puydt

# From rock journalist to intern, Koen De Puydt's unusual journey into the family business.



Koen De Puydt heads the Real Estate law and public law department and is responsible for all real estate/construction law and intellectual property matters.

Koen De Puydt graduated in 1998 with a degree in Communication Sciences (VUB), while he worked for the independent music magazine RifRaf as a journalist. After his studies, he continued his career as a music journalist with De Standaard and Studio Brussel. At the same time, he obtained his Licentiate Degree in Law, specialising in Public Law at the VUB (2002). In 2009 he obtained a Master of Business Law at the University of Antwerp.

Koen has forged a successful career in real estate and IP law, setting up his new firm in Brussels that has flourished in the past two years. But it is a far cry from his early years when he travelled the world as a music journalist writing about famous rock & hip hop legends.

When Koen was growing up, he spent a lot of time around lawyers, artists and writers – his parents were lawyers, while his father was also a poet – so it's no surprise that writing and the law should play such a big part in his life.

After studying communications at university, Koen became a rock music journalist, including a spell writing for one of Flanders' leading newspapers. "I saw all the top rock & hip hop acts, did all the festivals and interviewed all the stars," he says.

While he enjoyed his job as a music journalist – he was a full-time writer for nine years – the law was always a passion.

"Both my grandfathers were lawyers. My dad was a lawyer. My mother was a judge and my younger sister is a lawyer. It really does run in the family," he smiles. "In fact, I scared my family when I told them I was going to go to drama school and then become a journalist."

Eventually, Koen left the music industry and theatrics and took up work as a real estate and IP lawyer. He had his last summer festival season as a rock journalist in 2002 and on September 1st joined a law firm in Brussels as an intern, aged 29. "I went from being a rock journalist one day to an intern the next," he recalls.

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And, surprisingly, the transition from music to law was fairly straightforward thanks to Koen's background in writing: "It was a small firm where I started, and I specialised in administrative law. One of the major skills one needs is to be able to write – you'd be amazed how many lawyers can't write very well, certainly in English."

After working in several areas of law, Koen finally decided to specialise in real estate: "The fun of it is that you're always occupied with helping people construct something, instead of just having a fight before the courts. It's a nice way to do law."

He also enjoys the IP side – and there are links between the two: "For instance, if you have the drawings of an architect, they are protected by intellectual property law. It keeps me sharp because I know a lot of aspects on one topic, which I use to help me do the other."

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He has now been practicing law for 17 years, but it was two years ago that Koen decided to set up a new firm with a focus on company and real estate law. "I worked at another company that specialised in real estate, and we had a difference in opinion in how to evolve the business," he says. "The best way to resolve it was for me to set up a new business – and that's what I did, with the help of my future colleague Leo Peeters."

It was around this time that Koen met Leo, a company law specialist with almost 40 years' experience. "We were looking for someone to do the M&A element in our real estate practice and I met Leo for lunch and we really hit it off," he says. "We talked and we had a good understanding of the way we wanted to do it. It wasn't an easy decision to go out on our own, but it was the right decision for us."

With their specialisms in company, real estate and IP law, the firm has grown quickly since its inception and there are now 24 employees, with 19 lawyers.

Moreover, the company is looking to expand to cope with the increasing workload, which is a complex mix of Belgian and international work. Koen's cross-border work has also become increasingly important since he signed up to the IR Global network: "It really helps to know and trust different lawyers

in different jurisdictions. We help each other a lot and it's important to know there are professionals you can refer clients to and vice versa."

This trust also extends to Koen's own practice and he's meticulous in his approach to recruiting the right people for the job: "The team is very important to us. With any new recruits we think: 'are they team members? Are they willing to help each other?' If that's not the case, they are out. I'm absolutely clear on that from day one."

He's also eager for junior partners to advance their careers within the company: "We want to work with people for the long-term. That's the basis of our company. We're bringing a lot of people through and that's really important to develop the company; because I want it to have a long-term future, even if I'm no longer working (not that he has any intention of retiring anytime soon)."

One of the key areas of expansion for Koen is in real estate – the market has proved hugely resilient during the past 12 months of the Covid-19 pandemic: "The Brussels market for real estate is going well as people are looking for real estate with a garden or terrace. I haven't heard estate agents complain – and that's across the country, not just Brussels."

There may be more work coming involving companies in financial difficulties, he adds: "We have dealt with a lot of owners of retail parks and they suffer because their tenants ask for a rent reduction, but they are stuck with the same costs and their expenses."

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"That's going to be tough in the coming months. Companies were protected so they couldn't go into bankruptcy, but since the end of January it has been possible again. There will be some of those in the next couple of months."

The company also deals with many clients who become entangled in the complexity of Belgian law. "International clients don't seem to understand the community and language issues in Belgium. There's quite a job to explain this and not be called a madman," he laughs. "We have three different regions in Belgium – Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia and each region has its own legislation – even rental law – so it makes it interesting. We have foreign companies coming and want to build something in Flanders, but they have to do it differently if it's in Brussels, and that's where we come in."

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"We try to help our clients from the first moment they want to construct a building or a business. If you come into the process later and are dealing with litigation it gets very expensive and takes a lot of time. We try to get clients to understand that this isn't necessary – and that we can help them from day one so it doesn't get that far."

And one final question – out of interest what was Koen's favourite band when he was rock journalist? "There are many good bands, but my favourite were The Police," he smiles.

Possibly the perfect choice for a lawyer.

## Koen De Puydt

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