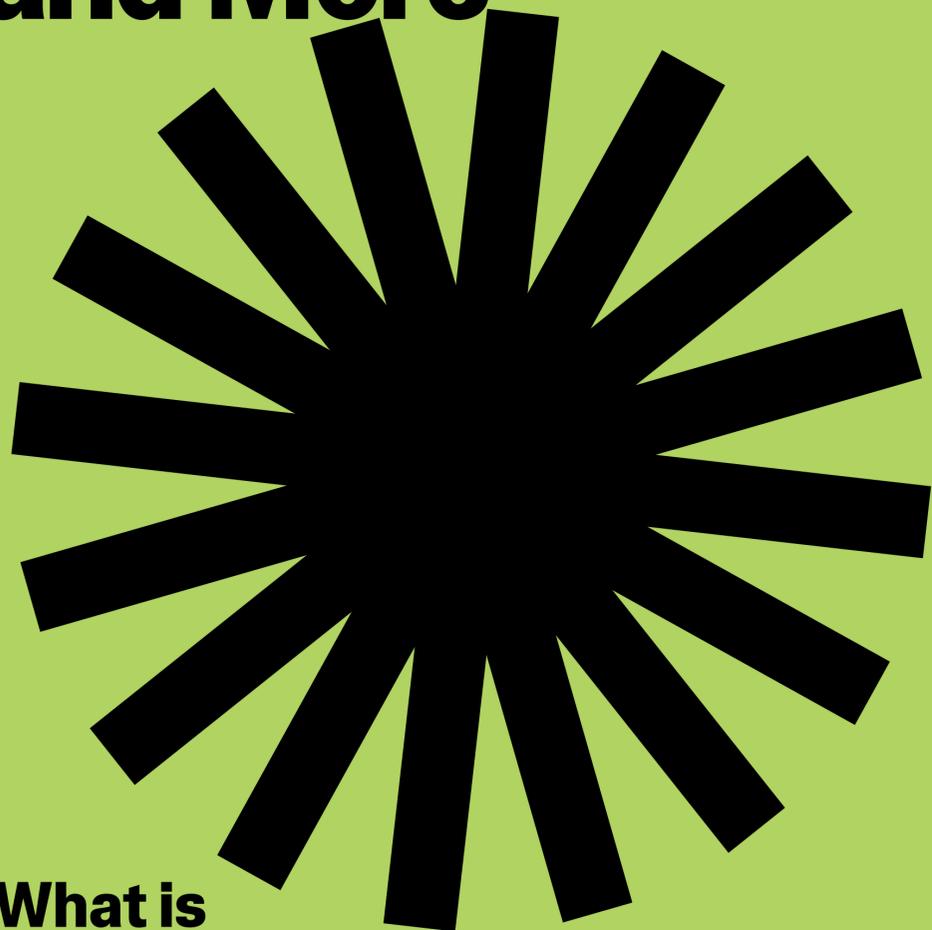


Archined *The Persistence of Questioning* Critical Reflections on the Future, on Architecture and More



With the long-term and multi-faceted project *The Persistence of Questioning: Critical Reflections for the Future, on Architecture and More*, Archined wants to stimulate discussion about key aspects of architectural practice and culture. In addition to written and visual essays, both online and in print, the project includes podcasts and an in-person gathering. The questions posed by Archined in *The Persistence of Questioning* are not easy to answer, yet that does not make them any less important. How relevant will the profession be in the future? How do design and ethics relate to each other? When can we speak of architecture and with what criteria do we assess it? And what is the state of architectural culture?

This publication presents various stories about architectural

culture in Belgium and the Netherlands, considered from the perspectives of both public institutions and private initiatives. Sergio Figueiredo, Sereh Mandias, Sophie Czich, Gideon Boie and Rob Ritzen explore the relationship between architectural culture and practice. What are the conditions for a vibrant and critical debate on architecture in the world of today and tomorrow? Should architectural culture serve the economic interests of professional practice, or should it instead reflect critically on them?

‘What is the state of architectural culture?’

What is the State of Architectural Culture?

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What is the State of Architectural Culture?

It is an iconic picture. The year is 2011, and the Dutch architecture community is beginning to feel the effects of the crisis in the banking sector. A nondescript space. Office tables are pushed together to form one big conference table, filled with cups and nameplates. A holder containing a flag in the Chinese national colours and the Dutch tricolour placed emphatically at the centre. Seated at the head of the table are two men: one wearing a sharp grey suit and tie, the other in a black shirt, top button undone. The former is Ole Bouman, the then and also last director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute; the latter is Mao Daqing, 'executive vice president' of VANKE, a big Chinese property developer. Between them is another man, also suited and tied. Halbe Zijlstra of the conservative-liberal VVD party, the then Under Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, known for his severe cutbacks in the field of culture (almost 25% of the original budget), the introduction of a revenue standard for cultural organizations, and mergers forced by the government that led to the establishment of Het Nieuwe Instituut and the Creative Industries Fund NL. Zijlstra is witnessing an historic event, the

signing of a collaboration agreement within the framework of a matchmaking programme initiated by the Netherlands Architecture Institute. The aim is to let Dutch and Chinese architects work together on the issue of (affordable) social housing – one of the specialities of the Netherlands. In the programme, the Netherlands Architecture Institute acts as a 'matchmaker' between the local property developer and Dutch architects.

The photo prompts a question. Should architectural culture serve the economic interests of the profession and its practice, or should it instead critically reflect on them? You can guess our answer. What architects do, and especially the built results of their work, has almost always such a drastic and lasting impact on our social and physical environment that it cannot be separated from design process. Thinking about and reflecting on this impact is the essence of architectural culture. Or as Joachim Declerck (Architecture Workroom Brussels) described it: 'architectural culture builds a social agenda, literally and figuratively'.

Archined published its first article on 4 September 1996. Browsing through the vast Archined archive that has accumulated over the past 25 years – containing essays, opinion

pieces and reviews – the editors discovered, not surprisingly perhaps, that certain subjects have cropped up again and again, although the immediate reasons involved and arguments raised differed on each occasion. **If this yield from the past 25 years provides a framework within which to review the recent history of the profession, we see that a number of shifts have taken place.**

The pendulum of architectural culture in the Netherlands now seems to be swinging back towards critical reflection. There are plenty of reasons for that: the global impact of unbridled free-market thinking, the MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, and the drastic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on our lives have placed our world view in a different reality and made certain problems more visible. The recently published reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) show – not for the first time unfortunately – that the climate change caused by humankind is leading to unavoidable extremes and irreversible destruction and extinction. The comprehensive and vast scale of these confrontational insights and developments have thrown up concrete arguments for changes and shifts, and for a reflective architectural culture.

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This publication presents various stories about architectural culture in Belgium and the Netherlands, considered from the perspectives of both public institutions and private initiatives.

In his essay, entitled *In Spaces of Resistance: The Seeds of a New Architectural Culture*, Sergio Figueiredo takes readers on what many people see as the nose dive experienced by architectural culture in the Netherlands since 2013 as a result of

the dismantling of the supporting infrastructure. He then outlines a promising future for that same architectural culture with some developments from other countries.

In *Architecture as a Listening Exercise*, Sereh Mandias explains why she – together with Elsbeth Ronner – launched the narrative podcast *Windoog*, her reasons for engaging in architectural criticism without using images, and the importance of architectural criticism that does not focus on the object.

The drawings by Sophie Czich in her visual essay *Unwrappings* take architecture out of its context of aesthetic renderings and technical drawings, and place it in messy reality and in social and ecological conflict.

Since the turn of the millennium, Flanders has invested in a rich institutional architectural culture, one aspect of which is a vibrant climate of design competitions. This was prompted by the depoliticization of the way architecture commissions were secured, as Gideon Boie explains in *Flemish Architecture Culture for Beginners*, but it turns out that old habits die hard.

Rob Ritzen explores in *Architecture as Facade or Support System* a totally different form of architectural culture: architecture as a civic duty. Drawing on the example of a case study, the author exposes the property market system in Brussels that focuses on the temporary use of space, and the role played by architects in that process.

Spaces of Resistance: The Seeds of a Renewed Architecture Culture

Sergio M. Figueiredo

I must admit that I was always bothered by the untimely demise of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) as well as the intentional collapse of Dutch support infrastructure for architecture in 2013. Engendered by the market-driven ‘cultural policy’ by then State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science Halbe Zijlstra, the drastic overhaul of the Dutch cultural infrastructure also had a crushing impact on Dutch architecture culture. Through a severe defunding of the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR), Architectuur Lokaal, Archiprix, the (Dutch) European and the Berlage Institute, as well as the transformation of the NAi into the Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI) – that is, the institutions and organizations that mostly facilitated architecture culture in the Netherlands – the writing was on the walls: architecture and its culture were to be left to the market.

Perhaps, some will recognize the term, while others will question what ‘architecture culture’ actually means. In broad terms,

architecture culture refers (even if imperfectly) to the notion that there is a particular culture – with specific principles, protocols, premises, discourses, ambitions and practices – that is associated with and fostered by architecture and the instruments around it. A culture that has been created and developed as much by glossy, heroic architectural images in thick coffee-table books, as by dense texts of theoretical musings in the pages of academic journals. A culture that has thrived from both intimate conversations on spatial policies in obscure podcasts, and well-attended blockbuster exhibitions presenting the latest and greatest in architectural form. A culture that has been expanded with each polemic-driven lecture, with each boisterous debate, with each self-promoting post on the continuous churn of the usual architecture websites. Within this notion of architecture culture, while buildings and other projects retain a central position, it is the instruments around them that provide those buildings and projects with meaning.

Despite the inevitable differences among these instruments, the nebulous constellation of instruments creating architecture culture has always been critical for architecture. By making architecture available and understand-

able to everyone, they have made architecture public. At its best, architecture culture encourages each and every one of us to become more mindful of our relation to the built environment, as it insists that we value our spatial experiences and consider them through various lenses and perspectives. That, ultimately, invites us all to understand architecture as a fundamental public resource that shapes our lives and confronts our gazes, regardless of who owns any particular building or who is footing the bill for any construction. Ultimately, more than raising awareness and visibility, architecture culture stimulates a public appreciation of architecture. Discussing architecture makes architecture possible.

However, with the invisible hand of the market guiding Dutch architecture culture for the better part of the last decade, we have been confronted with architecture culture at its worst. Specifically, the chilling effect on public debate on architecture has been noticeable, with broad discussion becoming increasingly displaced by superficial promotion. As architecture culture shifted its attention from the construction of shared vocabularies and frames of reference to rather obscure technical discussions and narcissistic PR narratives, architecture debate became increasingly, and

rather conspicuously, absent in the Netherlands. Without a thriving architecture culture to assist in developing, disseminating and discussing architecture's social and cultural dimensions, nothing was left to counter the dominant economic discourse. Without this most crucial public debate, architecture has become a flattened, hollowed shadow of itself.

Seeds of Resistance

As bleak as the current condition may seem, it also presents the opportunity to think and act differently. Looking further afield across Europe, especially at the margins of the profession, there are encouraging signs of how a thriving architecture culture can be cultivated without generous public funding. One that does not conform to the present condition driven by economic discourses, but instead, forcefully resists them. Scheming, plotting and enacting alternative models that show how other ways of engaging with architecture are not merely possible, but also much needed. Across Europe, young architects are busy creating a renewed architecture culture that can revive public debate as well as engage pressing social, cultural and economic issues through architecture. For that

they are creating veritable spaces of resistance, both conceptual and physical. More than sporadic efforts, these varied approaches represent a shared commitment to open up architecture debate and to make it more inclusive, as well as a commitment to architectural experimentation and direct engagement. With these efforts, architecture is becoming, once again, public.

One of the first and most visible efforts to make architecture public, also provided a clear indication that business as usual would no longer be acceptable to a new generation of architects. In Spain, the emergence of several architectural collectives provided a new model to make architecture and change its culture. Established in critical opposition to office culture and construction booms (and busts), these collectives took ethical and political positions as their basis, adopted activist strategies, and committed architectural tools and skills to common social causes. Styled as practices of self-management and urban resistance, collectives eschew the vision of architectural authorship, spectacle projects, and real estate speculation, by focusing instead on developing alternative practices and discourses for an architecture that is communal and social.

The subversive approach developed by the Seville-based Recetas Urbanas [↗] (Urban Recipes) to intervene and activate different urban realities through self-build, local participation, and the exploration of gaps in administrative structures, is but an example of the inventive ways these collectives engage with social realities. While greatly varied, engagement with the community is, arguably, the most important element of these new forms of practice, by developing co-authoring processes where communities participate on the various stages of architecture, from design and construction to the occupation of space. For that, these collectives rely on developing networks of information and dissemination, with direct engagement and an open discourse with which the public is able to not only understand and discuss architecture, but also develop their own positions regarding it.

Much of this work is intent on making the invisible visible, and that has also been a guiding strategy for the Portuguese urban/architectural collective Space Transcribers [↗]. Specifically, through workshops and other forms of co-creation, they have deployed models to engage with disadvantaged communities and, with them, transcribe their lived experiences through various formats – from

video to model-making – so as to allow the complexity of their reality to be both acknowledged and understood by others. Through this work, they engage communities in an informal and emotional manner, one in which architecture also becomes a space of shared imagination.

Within these models of engagement, strategies of publishing and dissemination are crucially being reconsidered. Disillusioned by the narrowness of discourse and the lack of debate within mainstream architectural publications, a group of young architects and students have congregated on the loosely organized Architektūros Fondas [↗] (Architecture Foundation) in Lithuania. While their immediate goal is simply to make public discourse around architecture more visible and inclusive of (more) diverse views, their ultimate aim is to improve the quality of buildings and spaces by expanding the understanding of architecture by a broad public. For that, they not only talk about architecture, but also help others to do so as well. Notably, they have developed the format of a ‘decentralized publication’ where, twice a year, they invite contributions on various themes – be it as a podcast, a piece of writing, an illustration or a poem – but instead of publishing them themselves,

they share those contributions with existing publications and platforms. By cultivating networks of collaboration, this volunteer group attempts to shape architecture culture and challenge established dominant discourses from within, as they slowly reorient the existing architecture media apparatus.

The understanding that, sometimes, the most impactful manner to shift architecture culture is to change it from within, is also shared with the British group New Architecture Writers (N.A.W.) [↗]. Focused on people of colour who are under-represented across design journalism and curation, the N.A.W. is organized as a (free) year-long programme supporting the development of emerging writers, providing them with a space to develop their critical voices and the necessary tools for them to join the architectural media landscape. Either through workshops, writing briefs, or one-to-one mentoring from experienced critics, the programme aims to nurture a group of writers who can inject architectural discourse with a more diverse way of thinking, of writing and understanding the built environment. Much like Architektūros Fondas, the N.A.W. purposefully aims to occupy entrenched media spaces, thus exposing their established readership and

audiences to other experiences, trajectories, possibilities, and ways of thinking so that it can reshape and rearticulate various assumptions, as the way to foster change.

A complementary strategy has been to simply adapt existing formats or create new ones at the service of alternative architectural debate. Mies.TV [\[↗\]](#) – which originally started in Austria but has since then expanded globally – does just that by using casual video interviews to explore all aspects of architecture. By gathering different opinions on various topics through informal interviews with (mostly) architects, the student-led group produces short television shows that attempt to create conceptual frames for collective discussion in the live showings of their videos. Through these videos and these public debates, the group attempts to demystify architecture, make it more accessible and, ultimately, broaden public discourse.

The curatorial project *Unfolding Pavilion* [\[↗\]](#) is just as determined to broaden discourse and provide space for alternative conversations in and around architecture through pop-up interventions. Specifically, the group has organized short yet intense exhibitions as parallel temporary events to each edition of the **Venice Architecture Biennale**

since 2016, exploring themes that are both inspired and confronted by their unexpected exhibition spaces. By occupying architecturally significant yet previously inaccessible buildings around Venice, the group has created deliberate collisions between architecture and exhibition structured by compelling spatial and architectural narratives. Supported by a variety of commissioned original works that reveal and refer to reveal hidden facets of the commandeered exhibition space's history and cultural context, the *Unfolding Pavilion* instrumentalizes temporary occupations to propose new frames of reference that can instigate alternative conversations and shift perceptions on architecture and its discourse.

Although these are but a few of the various independent efforts bubbling around Europe, they already provide a glimpse of what the future of architecture culture could be. Either through videos, workshops, pop-up exhibitions, decentralized publications, or other formats that are yet to be imagined, the future for architecture culture is to be, once again, of broader engagement and of public discourse. Furthermore, developing at the margins of the profession and discipline, these efforts rely on open

structures and loose organizations that are nimble enough to quickly respond to changing conditions and engage in alternative forms of exchange. In their variety and diversity, they provide the space for multiple understandings of architectures that are fuller and richer than the narrow dominant discourse, mostly driven by economic interests. Effectively, these independent, sporadic, self-organized initiatives are already injecting new critical ideas into architecture and producing new depths of meaning. They remind us that architecture can and should engage in conversations that go deeper than superficial façades, spectacular forms or banal interiors. Conversations that can critically question not only the role of architecture in the privatization of public space or on the encroachment of technology in our lives, but also how architecture can and should engage with the major challenges that we face today, from climate change to social justice. Architecture must raise pressing issues and use its various means of communication as tools for engagement and instruments for broader problematization.

In the Netherlands, similar efforts are developing. From digital platforms ques-

tioning the changes to our surroundings such as the Amsterdam-based Failed Architecture [↗], to lectures series and discussions to grapple with new forms of architecture production such as the TALKS about architecture [↗] organized by the architecture office De Kort Van Schaik in Rotterdam, to rough zines questioning contemporary urban conditions published by Onomatopee Projects [↗] in Eindhoven, these initiatives provide spaces for resisting simple narratives about form and broaden architecture's scope beyond the profit-driven intentions of developers and the construction industry. Although thus far these initiatives in the Netherlands have mostly been confined to architectural, urban and landscape circles, they are the seeds for architecture to rediscover its intellectual project as a force for shaping society and through which society has been historically shaped. Effectively, if nurtured with consistency and visibility, with public engagement and inclusive conversation, these initiatives can also become the basic ingredients for a renewed architecture culture.

A Renewed Architecture Culture?

Within a renewed architecture culture, architecture must be framed and understood as the embodiment of ideologies, concepts, values and effects of human expression. Perhaps the biggest lesson from all these independent efforts in the Netherlands and beyond is that, as governmental support for architecture culture continues to wane, it is up to us now. The question looming over each and every one of us is, are we willing to be the change that architecture culture needs?

Although we are unable to significantly alter systemic conditions that have shaped the current state of architecture culture, we can all make an individual and collective effort to cultivate a more engaged and inclusive public discourse and to actively participate in a budding architecture culture. Can we support an appreciation of architecture beyond its economic value? Can we engage with architecture's cultural dimension as well as its historical intellectual project? And can we do all that in a way that is accessible and understandable to everyone?

Today as yesterday, architecture culture should set its goals on promoting

public discourse, and do so in an active way that can contribute to an inclusive architectural discussion. For that, a renewed architecture culture must purposefully frame architecture's discourse and practice into a broader context, reminding us how both of these continue to shape our daily lives. Therefore, what is needed is an architecture culture that can critically, yet clearly, reflect on the intersection between architecture and contemporary culture. A renewed architecture culture that must remind us, once again, of architecture's central role in any society while creating the space to be socially and politically engaged. An architecture culture that can discuss architecture no longer solely as discrete objects, but instead as a crucial apparatus that structures and shapes our everyday lives. A renewed architecture culture must be a strategic instrument for raising questions, developing positions, introducing ideas and initiating conversations, fostering a renewed culture of questioning that can, ultimately, propel architectural practice to, as yet unimaginable, new directions and heights.

Either through the depth of knowledge collected in the galleries of a research

exhibition or through supporting minority writers, a renewed architecture culture must be created by developing and supporting increasingly broad perspectives. Created just as much by plain television programmes on renovations as by decentralized publications, architecture culture must purposefully and actively ensure that a connection between the public and architecture is reinvigorated. From the themes of triennales, biennales and exhibitions, to online critical platforms, a renewed architecture culture must raise awareness and develop broad conversations on the pressing issues of the day, both by reflecting on those issues through architecture's perspective and by questioning architecture's role in them.

Can we understand contemporary supply chain logistics, the reorganization of labour, political polarization, social justice, the housing crisis, the climate crisis, and the role of technology by openly discussing architecture's (often complicit) role in their underlying systems? Can we expose potential issues and problems by developing new discourses and perspectives on architecture? Can we make architecture, once again, operative? Can

it be, once again, a cultural and critical practice?

In the end, architecture culture is what we – as architecture professionals, students, teachers, curators, authors, historians, critics and publishers – make of it. It is up to us to create the spaces and plant the seeds that can make a renewed and engaged architecture culture a reality. It is up to us to create more spaces for discussion and appreciation, to create the possibility for a robust public discourse. As Thomas Aquilina, one of the co-organizers of the N.W.A. programme, stated in *Learning To See Through Walls: Addressing Race and Space with the New Architecture Writers*, 'we must share the labour of transformation, not just in moments of solidarity.' Architecture can only benefit from it.

Architecture as a Listening Exercise

Sereh Mandias

‘Not great’

A windy afternoon in Nieuw-Bergen, a village in north Limburg. We are standing at the foot of a small tower called Landmark Nieuw-Bergen and asking passers-by for their opinion about the new addition to the centre of the village.

‘Not great,’ came the response. On being pressed, one resident added: ‘It’s an ugly tower.’

Not long afterwards, we are sitting with Sandor Naus and Job Floris of Monadnock, the architects of the building in question. We hear how they designed the tower and how they tried to make it both recognizable and alienating at the same time. It’s a story that we, architects ourselves, have no difficulty relating to it, but evidently it does not register with the people of Nieuw-Bergen. So there seems to be a chasm between the intentions of the architects and the perception of the public at large.

In the lead-up to the launch of *Windoog*, the architecture podcast that Elsbeth Ronner and I have been making since 2018, we noted that written architectural criticism in the Netherlands was not in great shape. The

number of specialist periodicals with a large readership had dwindled. A number had survived the crisis but they had lost some of their clout, and for content they were increasingly reliant on texts and pictures supplied by architecture offices themselves. Moreover, discussions conducted on the pages of specialist media usually remain beyond the horizon of the wider public. And the general press pays scant attention to architecture. Only sporadically do daily papers feature reviews of architecture, and when they do, they often approach buildings as isolated aesthetic objects that you can rate on the basis of X number of stars.

Well-founded criticism supported by historical, sociological or theoretical context is rare.

There is, however, a glut of flashy images that, together with the accompanying texts, yet lacking much context, find their way into coffee-table magazines and design blogs. Elsbeth and I had the feeling that this impoverishment and fragmentation only increases the distance between the context in which architecture is created (offices, professional discussions, criticism) and the social reality in which it is eventually situated, and especially the people who occupy and inhabit the buildings. This is precisely the distance we experienced in the episode about Landmark Nieuw-Bergen.

The story from the designers and that from the locals in Nieuw-Bergen were completely out of sync.

We were not the only people to recognize this weakening of debate about architecture. In late 2017 the Creative Industries Fund NL launched an open call entitled *Space for design criticism*. The Fund wanted to stimulate initiatives to find new forms of design criticism. As podcast listeners, we had already been fantasizing for some time about the potential of the podcast as a medium for architectural criticism. It was this open call that enabled us to turn our speculations into action.

A new medium

‘Each building tells a story. A built manifesto, an abandoned dream, the outcome of random circumstances. In conversation with architects, users and clients, *Windoog* explores the dreams encapsulated in the concrete, glass and brick of contemporary architecture.’

That is how we begin each episode of *Windoog*. It defines our ambition and shows what type of podcast we want to make. *Windoog* is a narrative podcast. In contrast to, say, an interview podcast, the narrative podcast is

based much more on storytelling. For this we draw on interviews, sounds and music, complemented by a host who tells the story. It is a complex entity to put together, certainly for self-taught people like us. And then to think that the art is actually to make it uncomplicated for the listener, to plot out a clear and appealing narrative, which contains enough surprises and discoveries along the way to sustain listener interest. We are getting better at it all the time.

When this project started, the podcast was still a relatively new medium, and there were no other Dutch-language podcasts about architecture. So we started with a whole series of questions. What format should we choose? How do you structure a story that you listen to rather than read? What subjects lend themselves for a podcast? But also more prosaic questions like: What equipment do you need and how do you edit sound?

In the beginning we listened attentively to podcasts that inspired us. One of them was *This American Life*, the ultimate in narrative podcasting from America. Each episode is devoted to just one theme. *This American Life* taught us how much information you can convey in a short space of time in a podcast in terms of both contents and mood. During the final editing you can select the right frag-

ments in a focused way, thereby letting various perspectives co-exist in a natural manner. By adding music and letting those involved have their say, on site or not, you can evoke a strong atmosphere. All these layers are placed on top of one another in a podcast and, if you choose to deploy them in that way, make it a very compact medium.

We also learned a lot from people in the podcast scene, which our initiative drew us into. We learned the technical tricks of audio editing, and also ways to make podcasts narratively interesting. We learned how to incorporate cliffhangers to trigger curiosity, such as posing questions for the listener, which we answer later. We learned how to use a voice-over to add meaning, tension or emotion to the story, and how much that means to the listener. Making this podcast also taught us to write in a new way. For although this is audio, we write a complete script for each episode. Making a narrative podcast is therefore time-consuming, and it would not be possible without the support of the Creative Industries Fund NL.

Ingredients

‘So the entrance hall where you came in... was the full three-floor height. And then here, in the centre, we planned a big round desk... where you could buy your ticket.’ The reverberating sound in the audio recording makes the height of the space immediately palpable. The voice, creaking from age, is that of Herman Zeinstra, architect of the Scheringa Museum in Opmeer, a building that never functioned as a museum because Dirk Scheringa and his DSB Bank went bankrupt. Because of what he says, and of the hollowness audible in the sound recording, it takes no effort to imagine yourself by his side during the tour of the building.

It is the opening interview in the first episode of *Windoog*. Later we speak to the Mayor of Opmeer – ‘a village with 11,000 inhabitants, and twice as many cattle’ – who explains from his perspective what the arrival of this museum would have meant for Opmeer. And we meet Emily Ansenk who, as the director of the museum at the time, acted as client for the new building. With the help of a stack of reports from construction meetings and brochures full of renderings, she effortlessly recalls the ambitions

and ideas of the project: '[Scheringa] really wanted a museum made of brick. His idea was that it had to exude an intimate warmth. (...) and that was also the connection with the painters in his collection, with the detailing, the craftsmanship, things that are well made and hark back to former times.'

These are the fixed ingredients of each episode. The starting point is one building, which is discussed from three different perspectives. The spine of the episode is the architect, who guides us around the building. Then the client, who talks about the genesis of and the intentions for the project. And then a third perspective, depending on the approach we choose for the episode. We weave these three interviews together with a voice-over in which we make connections and offer our own interpretation of the building. So within the space of 35 minutes we open up a whole world around one building and try to capture the various layers of the architectural project through sound.

Words or images

There is of course something counter-intuitive about talking about buildings, since architec-

ture is such a visual medium. In architecture we are so accustomed to taking in buildings at a glance that it initially feels uneasy to leave its appearance out of the equation entirely. But an image does not reveal everything. It does not show what lies behind a project, the thoughts of the architect and client, the various forces that influenced it, or the reasons why certain decisions were taken. One sense makes way for another. During a guided tour the acoustics carry you through the spaces and bring the building to life in another way. The voices of those involved bring you very close to the personalities and stories that made a project possible.

The absence of images forces us, as editors, to be much more precise in our commentary. How can we describe the building for the listener? What is important and what is not? Where do we stop describing and start interpreting? And what, for that matter, is our interpretation? This is never immediately clear while making an episode, but it emerges from the interviews that we conduct and the discussion we have among the editors. Then it is a matter of finding the right words. That forces us to look more carefully and longer. And slowing down ultimately makes us focus more sharply.

Architecture is a cultural factor

'For the thing also wants to be what the other things in the forest are. So the decay... the decay has to be evident. And then we let the slabs we had sawn out fall to the north. Then, at a certain moment moss will grow and turn them green. But that will take a long time. That doesn't bother me at all. It's a sign of decay. The same way nature is destroying those models, we have given the process a helping hand, so to speak...'

These are the words of Erick de Lyon, the artist who worked with RAAF on the transformation of the former wave basin in the Waterloopbos into the Deltawerk //. His speech is very associative, mostly consisting of incomplete sentences, though spoken with feeling.

The form we chose for *Windoog*, and the format we have developed along the way, relates closely to how we view architecture: not as a technical achievement or an aesthetic object, but as a cultural product inextricably linked to the period of its creation, which both shapes and is shaped by it. Architectural criticism, we believe, should approach buildings as the result of a complex set of interests, possibilities, demands

and preferences. In *Windoog* we try to unravel at least some of that tapestry of forces and see how it is made.

Based on our understanding of architecture, the purpose of criticism is, among other things, to situate architecture within its cultural and social context. When we started the podcast we formulated this explicitly as architectural criticism for a wide audience. We wanted to take the interested, non-professional listener into the world of architectural developments and projects, together with the stories behind them. To anchor this goal firmly within our organization, at the start of *Windoog* we brought together a wide-ranging board of editors that chooses the subjects and approaches. Besides Elsbeth Ronner (architect) and myself (architect and philosopher), the board includes Saskia Naafs (sociologist and journalist), Stef Bogaerds (urban designer) and Bart Tritsman (historian).

In the meantime, we have had to modify this ambition slightly. Yes, we try to get non-professionals interested in architecture through what we hope are appealing subjects, the social relevance of the buildings, the various perspectives, and the

ways in which we tell the stories. At the same time, we also want to let the professionals among our listeners view architecture from this broader perspective.

Up to now, *Windoog* reaches a mostly professional audience. That is because of our own network and because of our chronic lack of time to promote *Windoog* properly. We have ideas about collaborating with mainstream media, but we have never actively pursued them. After completing an episode we usually need time to recover. Besides, despite our efforts, we do not always succeed in avoiding jargon or in clearly explaining professional statements to non-specialist listeners. It is a tricky balance. The question that gradually presents itself is whether you actually can make something of interest for an audience made up of both professionals and outsiders. People from both camps have occasionally criticized us. On the one hand because we use too much jargon for non-specialists, and on the other because the architectural subject matter is dealt with too superficially for the architect listener. It is a dilemma we have yet to solve.

The podcast as criticism

‘One very important conversation was when the museum indicated that it wanted to be more visible. So they thought it was really fine that we wanted to keep the entrance in that old Lakenhal. But that blank wall, they found that to be a bit too blank for a museum.’ We are sitting at a table in Museum de Lakenhal as architect Ninke Happel talks about opposition from the city concerning certain aspects of the proposed transformation and how the architects and museum always responded openly. ‘So those people who lodged objections, we also invited them and had many discussions with them, and fairly quickly there came a realization, not so much for us but within the museum, that it was in fact a very special artefact from the past, and we had to take it as a given and search elsewhere for openness, rather than thinking we simply had to clear away the blank wall.’

Good architectural criticism allows one to reach a well-considered verdict about a building or development. So we view architectural criticism not so much as a matter of adopting a particular stance but

more as a matter of understanding the significance of a project within broader architectural and social discussions. On the basis of this, in *Windoog* we clarify the criteria that you can use to pass judgement. We therefore consider architecture from a somewhat greater distance and from all sorts of angles. We guide the discussion through the choice of project and choice of speaker. In that way, we situate the criticism not so much between ourselves but between us and the listeners, enabling them to arrive at a well-founded judgement on the basis of the podcast.

In a mature architectural culture, architecture is rooted in society as something that works in two directions. While the lasting impression in Landmark Nieuw-Bergen was one of mutual incomprehension between architect and user, the Museum de Lakenhal is a fine example of how the architect and client succeeded in embedding the transformation in the city during the process.

That is what we hope to achieve with *Windoog*. We want to relate architecture again to social questions, but without losing sight of architecture itself in the

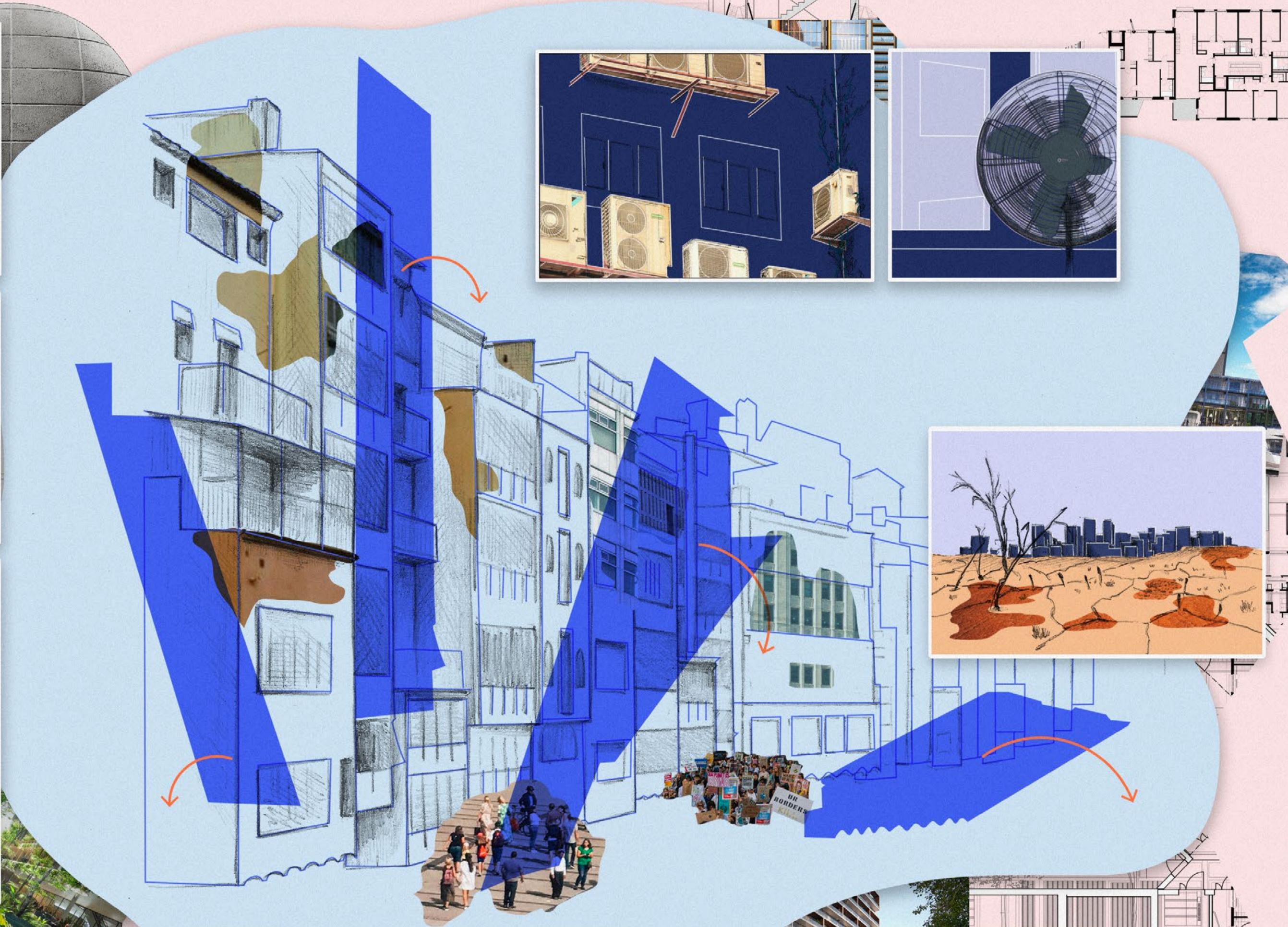
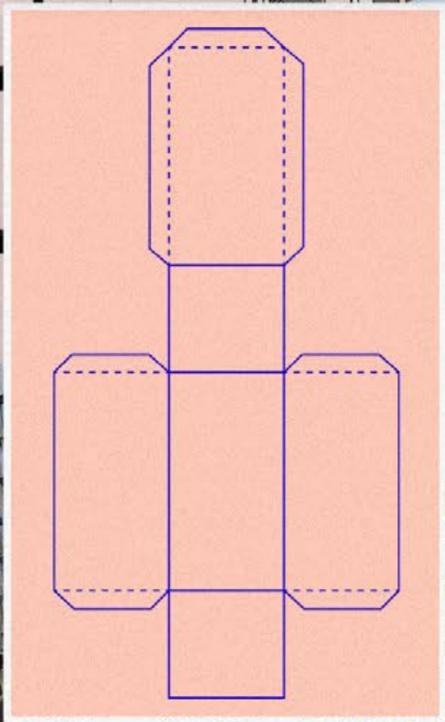
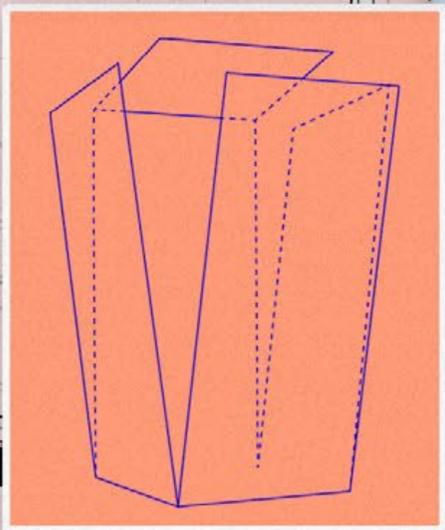
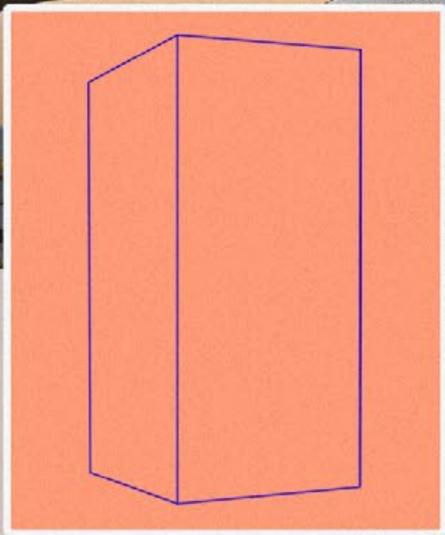
process. By taking time for a conversation about building and by thinking about how to capture architecture in words, we hope to offer an alternative to the fleeting visual culture in which we see a lot, but understand less and less.

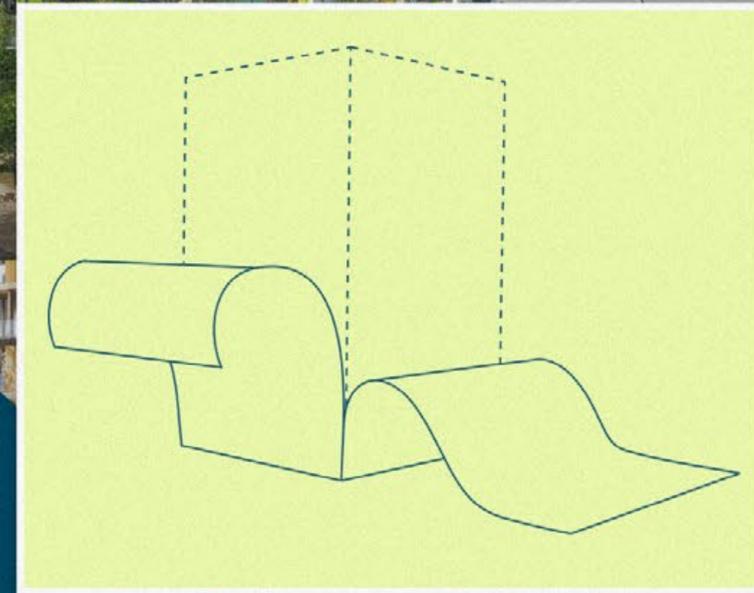
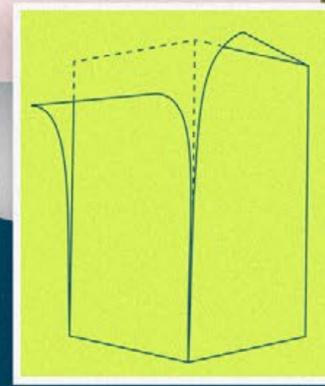
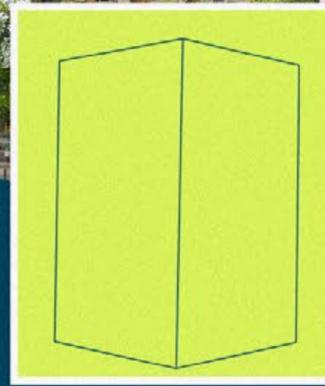
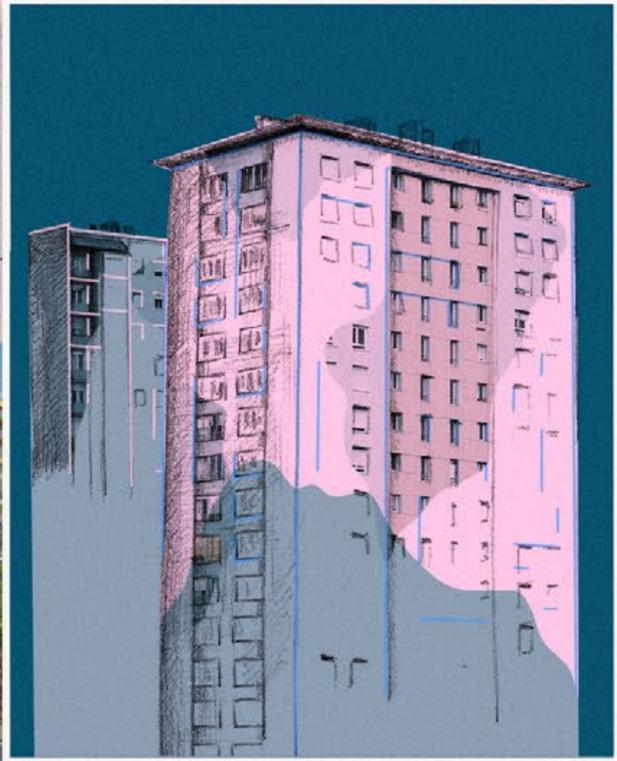
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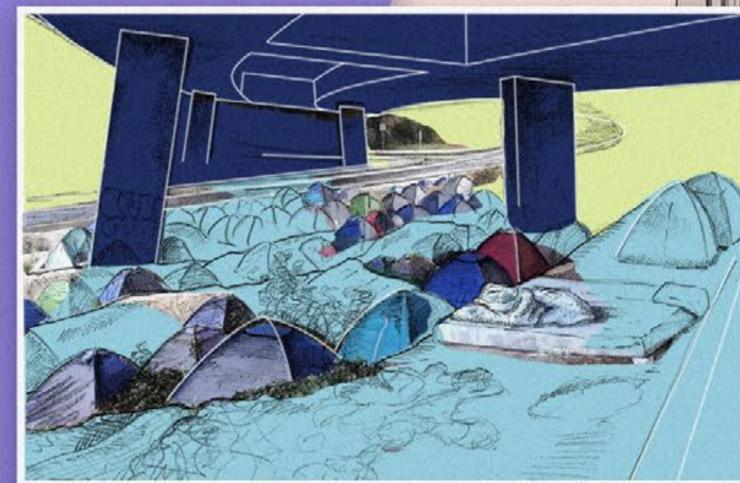
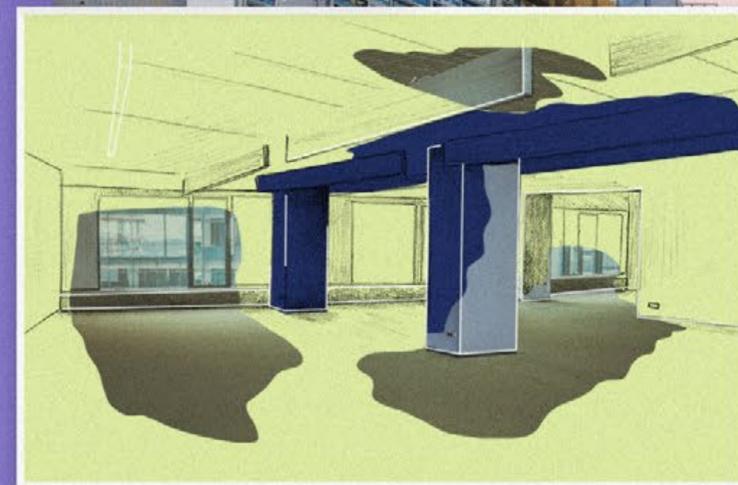
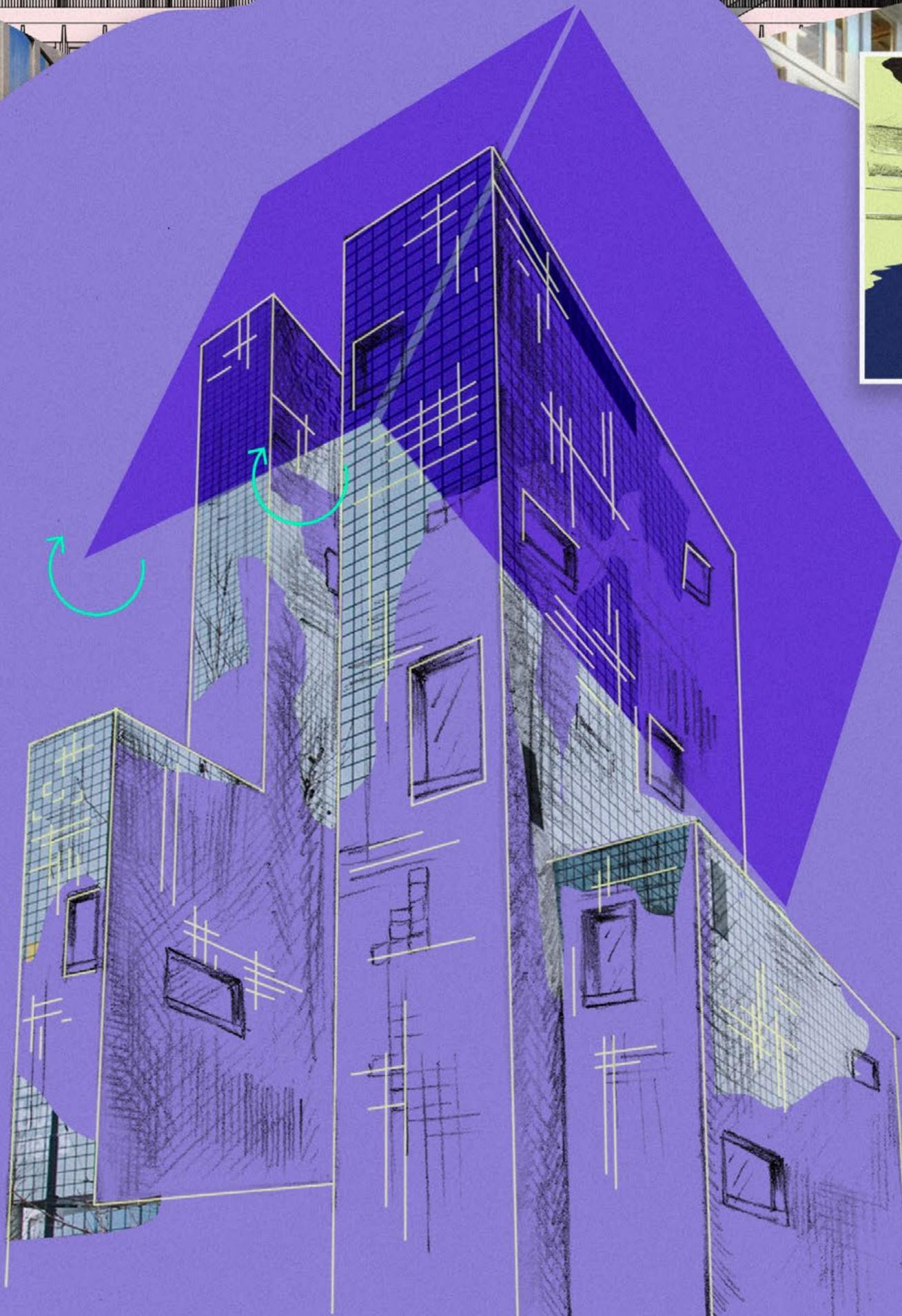
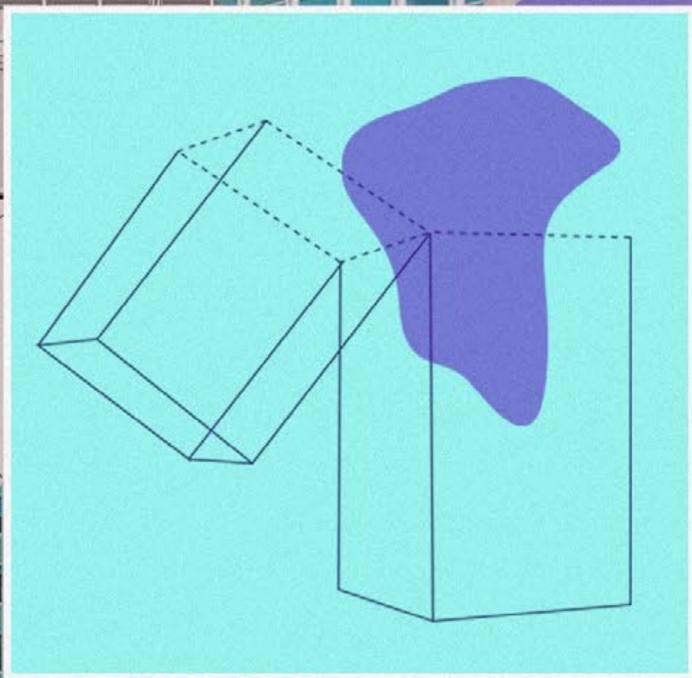
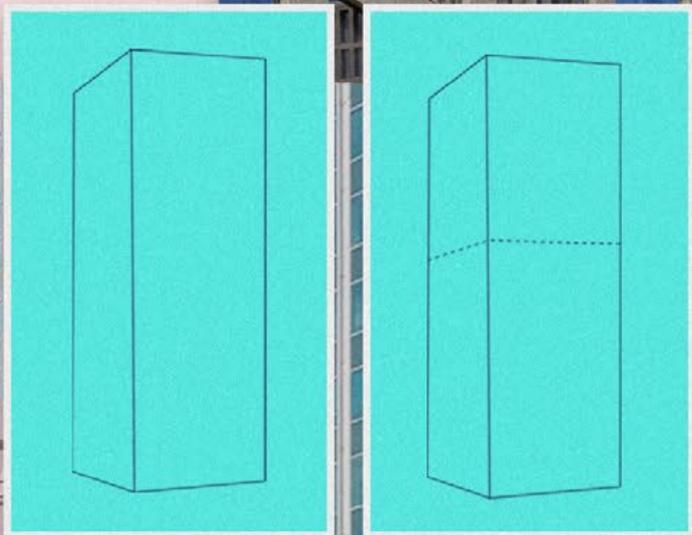
Unwrappings

Sophie Czich

The images reveal a complex story about places and buildings. They explore what has been erased, what is legitimized, and what story is imposed by economic forces. Space is observed and dissected. Architecture opens up to the context – social, ecological and political – from which it all too often seems **disconnected. Messy reality unfolds beyond the aesthetic renderings and technical drawings. If it is to play a full role in the future, the architectural community must allow for a multiplicity of voices, narratives and points of view.**







Flemish Architectural Culture **for Beginners**

Gideon Boie

Flemish architecture enjoys international recognition today, though that was not always the case. There was a time when some volunteers and individuals engaged in a lonely struggle to promote architectural quality in the physical living environment. Making the selection of architects less subject to political machinations was the goal in the battle against dubious property operations. That provided the inspiration for establishing the Flemish Architecture Institute and the Flemish Government Architect in the late 1990s. The Netherlands was the model for showcasing examples of good practice and realizing exemplary public projects. Over the years, in light of pressing social issues, architectural culture acquired a much more exploratory character, bolstered by built examples. In this text I outline three determining forms of architectural culture in Flanders.

The creation of a broad architectural community

The most important player in the field of architectural culture is the Flemish Architecture

Institute (VAi), founded in 2001 by Flemish Minister for Culture Bert Anciaux of the Flemish nationalist party VU-ID. The lower case ‘i’ in the acronym indicates that the VAI is modelled on the example of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) in Rotterdam, now called Het Nieuwe Instituut. The founding of an architecture institute had been a long time in the making thanks to the concerted efforts of various small-scale initiatives such as Archipel, Stichting Architectuurmuseum, Architectuur als Buur and Stad & Architectuur. Architects Leo Van Broeck and Koen Van Syngel eventually wrote the founding memorandum, some crucial sentences of which ended up in the Flemish coalition agreement after the 1999 elections. It states that the core activity of the VAI lies in creating a lively ‘reference framework’ to improve the ‘general quality of living’ and the ‘physical environment’ in particular.

The Architectural culture was the result of a civil movement – driven in this case from within the profession – that sought to pull design practice out of its dark shadow. It was a public secret that securing architecture commissions was largely determined by shady relations in the property sector and party politics. That is why people spoke of the much-needed ‘depoliticization’ of architecture.

First and foremost, the aim was to eradicate the culture of clientelism in selecting architects for public commissions, for which the Flemish Government Architect was set up. In tandem with that, the idea emerged that architecture should also address everyday concerns, far removed from politics. That came to be known as the ‘banality’ of architecture. For example, Geert Bekaert even described Hotel Solvay (1894) by Victor Horta, an art nouveau residence recognized as world heritage by UNESCO, in terms of everyday living and expressly not as a showcase for one of the wealthiest families in Belgium.

The ambition to remove politics from architecture also aims to preserve architectural culture as a breeding ground for a ‘broad architectural community’. Very innocent non-political cultural initiatives also act as a counterweight that helps to preserve the ‘architectural community’ and thus maintain a depoliticized architectural culture. Core tasks of the institute include the publication of the biennial Architecture Book and the organization of Architecture Day, now renamed Festival of Architecture, as well as the archiving of canonical oeuvres by the Centre for Flemish Architecture Archives (CVAA). It also develops an exhibition programme in collaboration with deSingel arts

centre in Antwerp, in whose buildings the VAI is housed. A comparison with the usual suspects within the community, such as trade unions and nature organizations, seems somewhat exaggerated because the architectural community possesses little political influence or financial clout. But the comparison does hit home when it comes to forming a non-governmental force that advocates for quality in the physical environment.

The ‘architectural community’ in Flanders also includes individual architects. Asked about key moments in Flemish architectural culture, Sofie De Caigny, the current director of the VAI, mentions the financial crisis of 2008 in the Netherlands, which not only resulted in spontaneous exchanges – Dutch offices were desperately looking for commissions – but also forced Flemish architects to construct their own discourse. Remarkably, De Caigny also mentions the documentary ‘Ordos 100’ of 2012 by artist Ai Weiwei and the architecture office Herzog & de Meuron, in which a number of Belgian architects feature prominently, and the state reforms in Belgium in 2011 as two other important moments that intensified architectural culture. The former was an important sign of international recognition, and the latter demonstrated the political will to showcase

the good achievements of the Flemish region. That brings us to the tricky balancing act within architectural culture, given its triple aim to act as a political counterweight, to promote offices and to serve as a political showcase.

Cultural logic of good patronage

A second player active within architectural culture is the Flemish Government Architect, a position created in 1998 on the initiative of the Flemish Minister, Wivina Demeester (member of the Christian-Democratic Party CD&V). The aim was to assist public clients in defining the scope of architectural projects and in selecting architects. An Open Call system was introduced as a limited procurement procedure that takes the design sketch as a means of assessing architects according to what was called their ‘process willingness’. The neologism alluded to the alignment of the architect’s qualities with the motivations and ambitions of the client. The project definition goes much further than the classical run-down of technical requirements and was considered more as the key moment in the creative design process. The Open Call places design assignments and construction projects within

a broader social context.

Although the Open Call is geared towards genuine construction projects, its knock-on cultural effect has always been very significant, if only because it created a platform for a new generation of architects that is now quite successful. The results of the Open Call did of course circulate as examples of good practice thanks to the efforts of the Flemish Architecture Institute. The adage of bOb Van Reeth, the first Flemish Government Architect, about good patronage, was the one-liner: 'Better not leave architecture to architects alone.' That is an acknowledgement of what happens before architecture is created: a good design process is only possible after thorough reflection on the social significance of architecture by the client. Moreover, drawing up a shortlist for participation in a competition is a key aspect of the procedure. It is very telling that publications about Open Calls usually present all selected proposals as equally valid contributions to developing a necessary vision, even if the context is competitive.

The cultural dimension acquired particular impetus under the third Flemish Government Architect, Peter Swinnen, active at the time as a partner at 51N4E, when the Open Call formula was broadened to include Pilot

Projects. The ambition was to take pre-defined spatial programmes and identify more urgent design challenges within the most wide-ranging policy areas. On each occasion, the relevant minister and government agencies helped to elaborate and define the building programmes, such as hospitals, schools, brownfields, agriculture, student housing, collective housing and much more. This phase also created the basis for specific building programmes that were to stimulate innovation. The high ambition eventually provoked strong opposition from right-wing populists who, with the Flemish minister-president Geert Bourgeois, were responsible for the Flemish Government Architect. Peter Swinnen was eventually dismissed after accusations of fraud, which later turned out to be false and unfounded.

Political tensions in Flemish architectural culture reached a climax during the tenure of Leo Van Broeck (2016–2020), who had identified sustainability, biodiversity and global warming as the central themes of architectural quality. Van Broeck's approach caused resentment, and he never shied away from public debate, constantly hammering home the same points. However, it was his support for 'climate truants' that went down particu-

larly badly with the authorities. In January 2019, Flanders was hit by a series of protests by young school-going pupils, organized by Youth for Climate, an initiative launched by Anuna De Wever, Kyra Gantois and others that followed the example set by Greta Thunberg. When a political response was not forthcoming, Leo Van Broeck and Professor Jean-Pascal van Ypersele (vice-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change set up by the UN) took the initiative for a climate panel of academics that would write a report in support of the climate truants in Belgium.

The unprecedented visibility of the Flemish Government Architect in this initiative alarmed many people because it conflicted with the so-called 'primacy of politics', which the right-leaning Flemish government championed. In the primetime television programme *De Afspraak*, philosopher Patrick Loobuyck criticized Leo Van Broeck for undermining that 'primacy of politics'. This denotes a clear hierarchy in decision-making between the preparatory and considered groundwork by government departments and the final decision taken by the executive. The fear was that the Flemish Government Architect might be confused with the

Flemish Minister for the Physical Environment, certainly since the then minister Joke Schauvliege was not exactly visible in climate discussions, to put it mildly. For example, the so-called Mobiscore, a point system to calculate the ecological footprint of a house, a rare initiative by the minister, was quickly swept under the carpet out of fear of criticism. Leo Van Broeck voluntarily stood up for the Mobiscore and, in doing so, shocked plenty of mayors of small provincial towns and villages. However, the resulting commotion ensured that the messy use of space in Flanders and the impact of architecture on the climate were intensively discussed in the press.

Make way for the cultural operator!

In recent years, architectural culture in Flanders has seen the emergence of a new type of player, and the most striking exponent is the Architecture Workroom Brussels [\[7\]](#), a hybrid between both previous manifestations: the depoliticized architectural community and good public patronage. AWB is a think tank that offers a highly operational interpretation of culture. The idea is to use

architectural culture to proactively create a 'meaningful context', in which architects can find a place and deploy their skills in practice. An early model project is the programme The Ambition of the Territory: Flanders as Design, which was presented in the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2012. It brought together a number of government players to discuss spatial planning in Flanders. The cultural context was used to establish the right atmosphere for assorted discussion partners with various backgrounds, among them cartography (GRAU), models (architects De Vylder Vinck Taillieu) and graphic work (Ante Timmermans). After the Biennale, the Flemish Architecture Institute continued the programme by reconstructing the Belgian pavilion, reduced in scale to 70%, in the exhibition space at deSingel.

Roeland Dudal, founding partner of AWB, described the project The Ambition of the Territory as a failure in terms of an exhibition, but a huge success in terms of spin-off: bringing together actors to discuss spatial issues, defining long-term programmes and building up commitment. AWB organized many other projects along similar lines, among them ParckDesign 2012, Festival

Canal Play Ground (2014), The Future is Here (2018) and Take Care! (2019). The Great Transformation (2021) is perhaps the most extensive and ambitious of them. It is presented as an 'independent learning environment, incubator and public programme' that brings together 'enterprising citizens, governments, companies, impact investors, academics and organizations' to connect major challenges to ambitious plans and many strategic projects that would be realized on numerous sites between now and 2030. The website of The Great Transformation [\[8\]](#) makes the algorithm clear: harvest and gather, force a breakthrough, speed up the design process, learn by doing, and then replicate. Time and again the cultural operator succeeds in acquiring a key seat at the design table where it can define the urgencies of our time, translate them into burning design questions, find funding to figure out solutions, define concrete actions, invite thinkers and doers, set deadlines for achieving goals, and so on.

Logically, using such a cultural space opens up more room for manoeuvre compared to working with the Government Architect, yet the influence and leeway within the culture is seriously limited,

because all works are dependent on public and private partnerships. It is difficult to remain neutral while a site is being prepared for urban development and property projects demand considerable capital investment. In the case of the Festival Canal Play Ground, the interventions cannot be separated from the sky-high property interests in the Canal Zone, partly incorporated in the Canal Plan laid down by the Brussels government. We are speaking here about the park and residential expansion on the old shunting yard Thurn & Taxis (including Gare Maritime designed by Neutelings Riedijk) and the residential tower UP-site. One intervention was the temporary BRIDGE [↗] (2014) by Gijs Van Vaerenbergh, in which a hoisting crane was placed horizontally to connect the two sides of the canal. Nobody doubts the good intentions of the artistic, temporary bridge – after all, the canal is largely a social fault line in Brussels – and yet it should also be seen as the innocent prelude to future developments by public and private companies who did actually use the Canal Zone as their playground. The administrative straitjacket – remember the ‘primacy of politics’ – seems to have been replaced

by numerous new boundaries in the area of public relations and market mechanisms, such as coalition building, placemaking, gentrification, and so on.

Finally

Architectural culture in Flanders has been standing on its own two legs for two decades and is visible today in public debates, but that successful presence now forms the big challenge. In a review of the *Flemish Architecture Yearbook 2008* (published by VAI), Christophe Van Gerrewey reversed the words of Geert Bekaert: the challenge lay not so much in the absence of an architectural culture – as Bekaert suggested in 1987 – but in its very presence. The Flemish Architecture Institute has consistently showcased examples of good practice, which has made architectural culture always seem a bit like a culture of celebration. Together with thinking in terms of examples of good practice, a number of exemplary architecture practices have emerged and now feature prominently on the international stage, yet their work is easily reduced to a benchmark that ren-

ders the functioning of Government Architects and Architecture Institutes redundant. In the same way, the success of the Flemish Government Architect seemed to cause some erosion. Leo Van Broeck certainly did not encounter opposition just from politicians but also from previous Government Architects and fellow architects who were all concerned about the continued existence of the Open Call. It was notable that, precisely at a time when the importance of architectural quality for the physical environment in Flanders was making headlines, architects remained silent. And what about the development of an architectural culture through an operator, like AWB, that looks for opportune transitions? Architectural culture undoubtedly enjoys great relevance and visibility once it enters into strategic alliances with societal actors. The key question, however, is whether this cultural operator is strong enough to hold its own amid the political and economic interests at play in city development, and thus do justice to the years of battle waged by the pioneers from within the architectural community.

Architecture as Facade or as Support System

Rob Ritzen

On the afternoon of Friday 26 February, forty housing activists from the Solidarity Requisitions Campaign, which supports people in precarious living situations, occupied a former retirement home in Brussels called the Pacheco Institute. Through Facebook I received the first message: 'Building Requisitioned'. *Bruzz*, the local newspaper, ran the online headline: 'Squatters occupy former Pacheco Institute in Begijnenhofwijk', and the news appeared in numerous Instagram posts. Not long after that, friends reported that the police had arrived to clear the building. The next messages reported the arrest and eviction of the activists. The following Monday, an open invitation for proposals for the temporary use of the Pacheco Institute was published as planned, but the activists' campaign had shifted the debate surrounding the temporary use of occupied buildings.

The many layers of Brussels

Brussels, as we know, is a highly layered and complex city in terms of administration.

It comprises one region, two communities, 19 municipalities, federal government agencies, the European Union and all that comes with it. It has therefore a market for office space and, hence, for property developers. In addition, government departments own all sorts of social property – administrative centres, hospitals, police stations, fire stations, prisons and so on. On top of that, there are companies, agencies and organizations active in the housing sector. So for groups that operate from the bottom up by proposing other ways of using space, the city context offers little opportunity to operate amidst all these players.

I have encountered all sorts of city activism in my decade and a bit living in Brussels, often as a follower of a movement, sometimes as a protesting participant, and sometimes through my involvement in city development. This ambiguity does me no favours, since you are either for or against. Together with others, I campaign on behalf of artists who need space in the city. This mostly concerns workspace, but affordable housing in the city is of course also necessary. Groups that campaign for space in the city often find themselves in situations where pursuing one goal makes another goal less feasible or attainable. For example, the prevailing idea is that artists indirectly raise the value

of property, as a result of which there comes a time when they themselves can no longer afford to occupy such property. If contradictions surface even within a seemingly unambiguous group interest – space for artists in the city – how can various groups that champion such a cause join forces in their efforts?

Opposition is definitely difficult to interpret: action, refusal, exodus, revolt, battle, negativity, creativity. Many political terms originate in mechanical physics, among them mass, action, reaction, force, movement and revolution. Resistance is a term that fits perfectly in this sequence, in the sense of inertia. That is to say, the property of a body to remain in the state of rest or movement in which it finds itself. For me, resistance as a force within a dynamic field provides a framework for reflecting on interventions for transformation. Shifts rather than victories are more likely to occur within this context. It is precisely amid such power structures and practices that architecture could operate. That is why I do not view ‘architecture culture’ as a matter of exhibitions, lectures, publications and the like, but as the context and set of relations within which architects operate.

Artists in the city

I have been involved from the start with Level Five, an artist collective that highlights the lack of affordable and good-quality studio space in Brussels and tries to tackle the problem partly in a cooperative way. The collective was formed in 2019 when various artists were forced to leave their temporary studio spaces roughly at the same time. A former government office building sold to market parties seemed the only possibility. Although the temporary use of the building was organized by a management company that was notorious for shifting responsibility and costs onto the occupants, collectively renting a space in this building gave us, eighty artists, an opportunity to unite. Our goal was to find a more sustainable way of organizing artist studios and creating a supporting environment for artistic practice.

It struck us that organizing studios for artists cannot be separated from the dynamics of the city and society. Who owns the building and within which development do we play a role? How do we divide the work within the organization? How do we relate to others who need space in the city? At the same time, the importance of studio space for reflecting

and experimenting became increasingly apparent, because the space was not completely stifled by these dynamics. What unites the members of the group is involvement in the arts, but the range of practices is very wide, just like the individuals themselves. This is reflected in the backgrounds and motivations of artists in Level Five: homeless, migrants, unregistered, against police violence, LGTBQIA+, ecology, racism, inequality... Such overlaps enable the collective to launch initiatives for social involvement, beyond the self-interest of the artists and their work.

Calculating government agencies

The occupation of the Pacheco Institute had a long history. The building closed its doors for good as a retirement home in 2017, and since then it had remained largely unoccupied. It is owned by OCMW/CPAS, the social security department of the city of Brussels, which ultimately plans to convert it into intergenerational housing that serves a social purpose. In early 2021 OCMW/CPAS invited proposals for the temporary use of the building, though it is unclear why there was so much time between the closure of the home and this

invitation for proposals.

Since Level Five had to vacate its space and was urgently looking for alternative accommodation for eighty artists, the Pacheco Institute invitation seemed like one of the few options available in the short space of time available. Yet there were concerns, because the collective included individuals who voiced opposition to police violence and were involved in supporting both unregistered foreigners and homeless people in Brussels. How could we submit a proposal to temporarily use a building that had been cleared by the police? Would our proposal for space come at the expense of shelter for the homeless? What solidarity would we show with unregistered foreigners by submitting a proposal? One option was to join a coalition of organizations that proposed a temporary use with a social goal. But it proved difficult to connect with such organizations since they refused to submit a proposal out of solidarity with the initiative taken by the Solidarity Requisitions Campaign. The invitation could have been seized upon to bring together the network of Brussels initiatives trying to make the city from the bottom up – and in that way to exert more influence on city development and social policy – but this avenue was

sealed off prematurely. This was largely down to how the invitation was formulated and the lack of consultation with organizations that supported temporary use of a social nature. Instead, the invitation was made to measure for an organization that pursues a generic placemaking approach in which, similar to physical zoning, functions and descriptions (solidarity, culture, education, innovation, ...) are allocated to areas and elaborated later.

Architects provide diversion

When it comes to placemaking and temporary use of space, there are a number of organizations active in Brussels. One of them is Up4North, an organization set up by property developers in Noordwijk. Up4North aims to stimulate, through a process of co-creation, a ‘turning point towards a dynamic, innovative area where different worlds meet, share and connect’. Under the name LabNorth, it brings together 51N4E, Vraiment Vraiment and Architecture Workroom Brussels to present itself as a mediator for temporary use with an eye on future developments in Noordwijk. The epicentre of this effort is located in the WTC building.

Organizations that campaign for the temporary use of space for social purposes usually seek to secure space for people who have less access to it, but LabNorth seems to seize the temporary character as a basis for engaging in design research. It is not immediately clear for whom they are doing this. All activity in the WTC building played into the hands of the design research conducted by 51N4E and served to advertise their suitability for taking on the commission to oversee the future development of the building. In exchange for what they themselves call ‘civic design’, the property developers allowed LabNorth to make free use of a floor of the WTC building. As a result, in collaboration with L’AUC from Paris and under the watchful eye of Jasper Eyers Architects, they eventually landed the commission to develop a small part of the project. So Architecture Workroom Brussels seems to have seized the opportunity mostly as a way of developing its own projects and studies, among them ‘You Are Here’ (IABR).

StamEuropa, a pilot project for temporary use, shows a similar detachment in the role of architects. The project is part of a European regional development initiative

aimed at temporary use, called 2nd chance. The City of Brussels is a project partner and the Federal Agency for Public Buildings manages the building where StamEuropa is based. Together with the European Quarter Fund, a company fund within the Koning Boudewijn Foundation with, among others, property developers, StamEuropa mediates the temporary use. The building itself is a concrete shell and requires some investment before it can be used. Because the Federal Agency for Public Buildings is allowing part of the building to be temporarily used, it avoids having to pay a surcharge for leaving it unoccupied. The money thus saved serves as a budget for the European Quarter Fund and for temporary use. StamEuropa organizes this temporary use. Some of the individuals and organizations involved here also figure in Up4North, among them Alain Deneef, coordinator of Up4North and chair of the European Quarter Fund and eQuama (European Quarter Area Management Association). So it comes as no surprise that we again come across 51N4E and Vraiment Vraiment at the start of the process for temporary use. Much of the budget available for making the building ready for use was spent on the

foyer and exterior of the building. Employing a refined do-it-yourself aesthetic, the designers turned the lobby, perhaps ten percent of the building, into a setting for debates, workshops and presentations.

It is no surprise that a use is still being sought for the rest of the building. It is no more than an old concrete shell, windows are missing or broken, and basic infrastructure such as electricity and water are lacking. The annual budget that is transferred from the surcharge imposed for unoccupied buildings cannot be used to remedy these issues because it serves as cost coverage for StamEuropa. So occupying a floor of this model project for temporary use would require an investment of tens of thousands of euros. What precarious organization could afford that, especially for a temporary facility?

Architects provide support

The organizations in Brussels active in the area of temporarily using space for social purposes engage in a form of architectural practice that unites societal and cultural functions by itself becoming

part of those functions. Consolidating these groups and movements in the city should be the next concerted step. Conditions for temporarily using social property should be more aligned with organizations with social goals. And organizations themselves should create more firm ground by jointly purchasing land and buildings (for example through the Community Land Trust). For the artists of Level Five, the first step is to establish collaborations with organizations for using space for social purposes. This should be based on solidarity, without our presenting ourselves as anything other than artists looking for space in the city.

The title of the intervention by 51N4E and Vraiment Vraiment at StamEuropa is 'New Ways of Working Together'. Let us read that as an appeal rather than a position: architects looking for a new way of working. Architects have specific knowledge and skills that can support groups or organizations in need of space in the city – not by seeing these organizations as study objects for design research, and not by designing façades for empty buildings. Architects should embed themselves in the groups concerned and learn about

which building blocks and tools are needed to develop and consolidate space for them. It is not about civic design but civic duty. That, too, is architecture culture.

Colophon

The aim of Archined Foundation is to stimulate discussion about urban design, architecture and landscape architecture as widely as possible through various channels, including the Archined website. Editorially independent, the critical online community-based site has been in existence since 1996. Archined articles are written by designers, academics, students and others active in the field.

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The Persistence of Questioning
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