

## EAP 2011 Project analysis

### "Foxes and hedgehogs" by Bernard Colenbrander

Although not insensitive for fashion or trends, architecture seems to be a slow business. It takes time to become a grown-up architect. It also takes time before a design process ends up in a good design, with the characteristics of the inevitable and the necessary. It takes time before a design transforms into a building in real time and real space. And it also takes time to reflect on the result, to come to conclusions and to find out if the whole thing was worthwhile at all. Architecture, so to speak, is something you will get accustomed to very slowly, if you wait long enough.

That architecture does not come quickly, has also to do with something else. At a certain point you become aware of the fact that architecture is not only an image and the result of a successful series of mental impulses, but that there is, or should be, a world behind the image. That world is the world of rational investigation into the roots and traditions of the discipline, applied to a case in the here and now. In the best cases, when everything goes as it should go, when the architect does not only lean on his rationality, but is also having his moments of epiphany, the design may show spectacular touches of irrationality that cause really great architecture.

Well, this world behind the first image of a design is not something that shows itself immediately to the outsider. That is why the visiting critic, which is my role today, is a pitiful figure. The visiting critic will never be able to really come to terms with what is offered to him on the posters, the drawings and the renderings. For this reason it must be unbearable for the students, whose work is presented here today, to endure the comments of me - not to speak of the comments of the jury - because we will certainly underestimate your good intentions and we will miss aspects of your genius, simply because we don't see them, while you are convinced that they do exist.

Because we probably will misunderstand your good intentions, I am afraid that at the end of the day you will have feelings that bring the famous words of Goethe in memory, who once stated, after having been mistreated by a critic:

'Schlagt ihn tot, den Hund! Er ist ein Rezensent.'

Now, Goethe knew what a critic could do. He distinguished between two types of judgement. The one type is the destructive type of criticism, in which the work of art that has to be judged is measured along an absolute standard, for example that of classicism or vitruvianism. When the work of art doesn't conform to the standard, it will not be taken seriously.

Then the other type of criticism that Goethe distinguished, next to the destructive type: that second type is productive criticism, which is not executed from a top-down standard, but functions the other way around, bottom-up. Productive criticism means that the intentions of the artist are the starting point for the evaluation.

What I tried to do, watching your work the other day, is to be neither destructive nor productive, but to combine the two. I tried to evaluate with the standard of what architecture needs to be in my view, and I also tried to take the work for what it is, or at least seems to be.

Whatever type of criticism you prefer, in postmodern times not only the slowness of architecture presents itself as a handicap, but also the conditions of the arts. Writing about his own domain of the arts, the Dutch novelist Arnon Grunberg recently stated that the novel has become completely "domesticated". He hereby means to say that there are no forbidden subjects anymore in literature, no words that have to be avoided, no taboos. He concludes that the novel has become an anachronism - and that its creator, the writer, is a dwarf claiming to be a king.

What has overcome literature is also the state of being in architecture. One might say that architecture in our postmodern times is about slowly forgetting how things should be designed, should be made and should be maintained. The meaning of architecture has become so fluid and vague that it is hardly possible to point at anything with permanence or significance.

We need a second writer to sketch this condition:

*Come to our well run desert  
Where anguish arrives by cable  
And the deadly sins may be bought in tins  
With instructions on the label.  
(W.H. Auden)*

The poem is old, but Auden points at contradictions in culture that are still there. We still live in an environment that moves into the direction of a desert. After many more crises than Auden survived, we may add that our desert is not even well run anymore. But the anguish is still there, and it also comes to us by cable and added to that it comes to us wirelessly. Even the deadly sins are all over the place and they are wrapped in beautiful labels as ever. Fill in your own sins that you wish to distinguish – but certainly there are a lot of them in the field of architecture.

But what are architectural sins, you may ask. I have my ideas about that, as you will have. It seems more relevant, however, to ask what instruments and means architectural theory delivers to act successfully in the desert of our environment. To refer to Auden again: what are our “instructions on the label”?

Difficult question. But in my personal experience I try not to rely on one specific advice on how to prepare architecture. I tend to make a mixture of various ingredients. It cannot be otherwise, because present-day culture is not a one way culture, but has a manifold, layered constitution.

There is a lot to say about a theoretical basis for a design attitude that is workable, intelligent and effective even in a world that lacks absolute standards. Personally, I try to rely on combinations in architectural theory of uneven parts. First of all, I present my students in Eindhoven with the ever reliable tradition of the Italians, the past years personalized by Antonio Monestiroli, for example. The interesting thing about reading and using Monestiroli is that there seems to be no problem at all with culture relativism or populism or whatever deconstructive trend, because he concentrates on the evolution of pure architecture alone. He concentrates on the attributes of language and style – and you won't find any disturbance coming from the rude vernacular of urban reality.

Monestiroli is not street-wise. That is why you have to add something completely different to this kind of theory, that fits more easily in the reality of the city. Colin Rowe, the author of the brilliant book *Collage City*, for example, is very suitable. Although his book dates from the seventies, he is still relevant, because in his theory the collage enters the scene, as a possible successor of the stylistic purism of earlier culture. For Colin Rowe the city is a combination of incidents, and its designer may mirror him or herself to the archetype of what he calls the bricoleur. The bricoleur takes what he needs and leaves all the rest. The total image or composition is of no interest to him.

Well, the behaviour of the bricoleur delivers a good starting point to arrive at the production of the students that are assembled for this Euregional Prize of Architecture. But before going into the graduation projects of the students, I want to introduce an archetypal duo that philosophy offers to distinguish the behaviour of human beings when they have to solve a difficult problem. This duo seems also very fitting for the behaviour of an artist, a writer or an architect when they try to come

to terms with their work.

On the one hand you have the type of the fox, on the other hand you have the type of the hedgehog. The fox and the hedgehog: they have extremely different attitudes towards what should be done in an alarming situation.

The fox is fast, he relies on his smell, on his taste, he is always improvising, he doesn't believe in fixed rules, he has no problem in crossing borders, he is for instant decisions, depending on here and now. The fox knows many things.

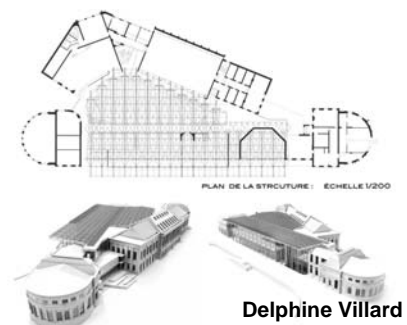
The hedgehog however, knows only one thing. He is not moving, unless everything is safe. He follows a rational, one way, path, respecting borders. His decisions are based on fixed patterns. Looking at the results of the Euregional competition of today, it seems as if all the hedgehogs live in Aachen, while all the foxes prefer Belgium. Of course, these Belgian foxes don't settle in one specific location but in a whole country, because improvisation makes them do so.

Distinguishing between foxes and hedgehogs points at fundamental differences. You may ask yourself: what am I essentially, am I a fox? Or a hedgehog?

I have tried to find typical foxes and hedgehogs among the participants of today's competition. It is important to state beforehand that both role models have to adapt to what I consider to be the intellectual standard for the production of architecture at an academy or university. That standard implies that the design which is produced at school is fundamentally different from a regular assignment. Designing at the academy or at school is not for solving this or that problem. At school there can be no drawing line without a serious explanation. Every image produced has to be linked to what we already know: to the 'state of the art'. This leads to a certain obligation to stay away from the specific solution, and to seek generalization.

By the way: as far as I am concerned this is also the case for the foxes among us. A fox may believe in perpetual improvisation, but I still want to track precisely what he is doing. I have the impression that foxes are not always prepared to let me do that. They prefer to confront me with an object without a serious explanation, other than that the architect has certain aesthetic preferences. I don't like aesthetic preferences; I don't like opinions whatsoever.

Here follow a couple of designers that seem to me real foxes.



Pierre-François Geenen. The specific issues of a program or a location may be the starting point for a design process tracing after abstraction and generalization, it may also be the starting point for formal complexity: for deconstruction, folding and what have you. This is what a fox typically likes to do.

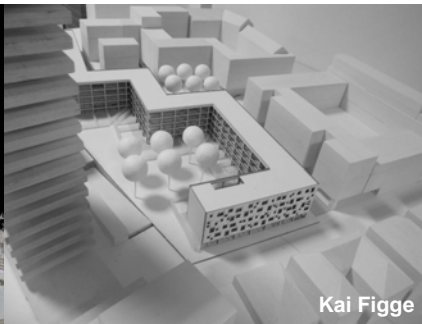
Aubane Furnémont. There are foxes who prefer no sharp angles, but soft shapes, suggesting an undulating movement.

Delphine Villard. It also happens in this category of designers that we get results that present themselves as "don't know assemblages": a loose collection of shapes.

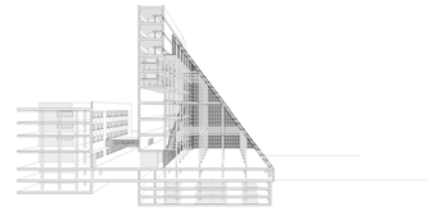
Now follow three examples of typical hedgehogs.



Juditha Rudolf



Kai Figge



Jannis Dickel

Juditha Rudolf. A storage building of books combined with offices. It asks for module and system and what we get is typically that.

Kai Figge. Also here a typical kind of iron logic. But I must say that aspects of irregularity in one of the façades suggest the minor presence of a fox, but happily the designer tells us that this façade is only 'seemingly chaotic'.

Jannis Dickel. I tend to say that no design shows more clearly the pitfall of the hedgehog, namely: end up in stone dead, ice cold formalism.

Now, after this, I can imagine that you think that you don't care at all for the intellectual game of foxes and hedgehogs. Go away with this academic freak show! Isn't architecture simply a means to make the world a better place? Isn't architecture a way to cause happiness? Indeed, that is one of the ways to look at it, also at school.

One of the founding stones of architecture is common sense: just do what seems reasonable and good.



Christian Leisner



Christiane Lennartz



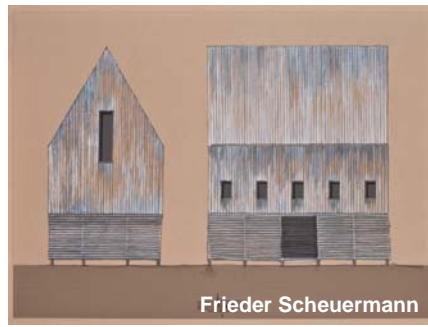
Juliane Greb

Christian Leisner and Christiane Lennartz seem to have done just that, showing thus to be ready for the outside world.

Then, there is also the founding stone of phenomenology: using architecture as a means to influence and improve the behaviour and the state of mind of the users.

Juliane Greb seems to be doing exactly that with her clever arrangement of garden spaces on a grid, playing with the idea of inclusion and exclusion.

Common sense is one thing, but architects sometimes suffer from the urge to flee from it all. Escapism is a character aspect of the architect, it happens sometimes with typical foxes, sometimes with hedgehogs.



Remy Kroese. This project is called the 'jachthut', so nobody can be in doubt about the escapist nature, which also means in this case that there is no architecture at all.

Frieder Scheuermann. Apparently the primitive hut is a permanent factor in architecture. It stands for nostalgia, for going back to the roots of architecture, in expectation that something essential may be found there.

Andrea Carmen Kuhn. Nostalgia normally means looking backwards, but there is also a type of nostalgia that is a nostalgia for the future. In the future we can solve all kinds of problems in a huge megastructure – if you believe it.

The top category in architecture are the buildings that suggest the involvement of both the fox and the hedgehog. The hedgehog stands for the logical order of the research procedure, the fox has been able to disturb it successfully with his unexpected movements.



Nancy Lohmann. The architect dares to describe this building as 'a flexible, empty space', but of course it is not something like that, because there is enforcing architecture all over the place. In the rigidity of the whole complex I suspect touches of madness, however.

Katrin Tacke. This is the last project that I want to show, because it contains the magic formula for a good graduation project. That is: a problem statement of a handsome scale, a clear cut research task and a design that plays with the research with great imagination.

I have seen 30 graduation projects during the past days. Some schools seem to be specialized in hedgehogs, others in foxes. That is not necessarily wrong in all its one-sidedness. But I would advise the schools of foxes to bring some system in the irregularities. And the schools of hedgehogs should keep in mind that every system needs life and dynamics to become convincing.

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