

Project analysis Euregional Prize for Architecture 2010

Celebrating a jubilee is always a time to stop for a moment, to reflect upon what has happened over the years, but also to think about the challenges that may arise in the future as the architectural debate is opened up to related disciplines and as a result of new approaches.

Thirty five of the best graduation projects were nominated by the six participating universities for the 20th Euregional Prize for Architecture 2010.

The majority of the projects set out to fulfil a public and cultural purpose and what was striking was that only very few students developed projects involving dwellings and housing or were engaged with disciplines that are related to architecture. Besides the main focus on public buildings, we can also identify four trends - Architecture as social practice, the Designing of Cultural Landscapes, Utopias as Critiques and the Position of an architect between arts and architecture - each of which gave rise to a heated debate within in the jury. First of all, however, I will focus on public buildings and especially on two projects that are striking as a result of their strength of their concept.

The first project I want to mention is the *Designdepot Oud-Rekem*, which was designed by Kevin Winters. In a very intelligent and aesthetical way, he complements an existing historical structure with new buildings, which do not compete with one another, either in terms of their urban scale or their interior, but actually complement each other. With a sweeping gesture, Winters widens up the nearby channel to a basin, in order to give the ensemble a new orientation to the waterfront. This project is a very nice example of how to interweave spatial and historical layers of a city.

As far as the few projects that are dealing with the subject of dwelling and housing are concerned, I would like to mention the project *Wohnpolitik* by Johannes Jung. His residence for a European President does not set out to compete with the large buildings in the neighbourhood. Instead of creating another iconic building, Jung starts by subtracting spaces as volumes from the mass of an existing plateau. Around deep patios, the functional program carves into the ground, creating a diversified spatial sequence of public and private zones.

Alongside the projects relating to public or cultural uses or dwellings, which students always tend to favour, we have also seen some specific projects that makes us aware that in this day and age, architecture has to be understood in a wider context than merely creating physical space and the linking of architecture with other disciplines.

Architecture as social practice

Worldwide natural disasters and the growing problems of poverty and social inequality that affect developing nations in particular means that the discipline of architecture is now taking on a social role. Two projects seek to address this particular context. Their authors not only elaborated a measure that would provide a type of emergency relief, but an elaborate concept of "Help for Self-Help"- as a means of emergency and crisis management for two regions affected by natural disasters.

Patrick Lingenberg developed a concept for a rural population in the earthquake zone of Peru. Besides

providing “emergency relief” and emergency treatment during the first few hours after an earthquake, his project focusses on teaching the population about earthquake-resistant construction. Based on local construction materials, this method creates the ability amongst the local population to design their built environment, without recourse to external help.

Another project, named “*Keimzelle Haiti*”, was designed by Anne Bauer for the area of Haiti that was affected by the hurricane. The project takes the form of a prefabricated unit that contains all of the necessities for first aid and can be transformed into an emergency dwelling for up to 5 people.

Both projects prove that aesthetic aspects pale in view of the emergency, as the emphasis is upon creating the simplest forms of housing. It is in settings such as this that architecture enters in the domain of social practice, by educating people how to construct simple housing on their own or by giving support to restart or establish a new quality of life, based upon only very small interventions.

Designing Cultural landscapes

In order to illustrate yet another tendency that figure amongst the projects, I would like to highlight four projects that consciously chose locations situated outside the urban context of a city, but within cultural landscapes:

In his design for an *ecological agricultural business in Stokkem*, Maarten Wauters gives a new interpretation of the traditional typology of a farm. In a very intelligent way he deals with the existing spatial conditions of the separating dyke to interconnect the nearby natural flood plain, the bypassing touristic cycle path and the village. He introduces a consistent separation between the agricultural and machine-based activities, on the one hand, and human activities on the other. He does this by creating two different levels, giving rise to a functional mixture of commercial use, housing and farming.

Another very interesting project is the *Floating Farm* by Nele Mortelmans. Nele develops her project for a care farm for problem children in an area, where building is now allowed due to the risk of flooding. Mortelmans proposes a subterranean construction that integrates the building completely into the landscape. Deep patios are cut into the terrain to guarantee sufficient illumination. In the event of flooding, these patios are transformed into basins and cause the entire construction to rise up and float like a boat. In this way, the building becomes part of the landscape and the controlling conditions forced by nature.

The projects by *Maike Basista and Nicole Richter / Julika Metz* deal with the cultural landscape that is characterized by infrastructure and industries. Each of these involve enabling industrial constructions to transcend the appearance commonly associated with industrial buildings and understanding them as objects to be aesthetically designed by architects.

Utopias

Jerome Paumen, on the other hand, takes a more critical stance with regard to the landscape characterized by industrial and infrastructural use. With his utopian project *IRIS pillar 8*, Paumen

questions the common practice of constantly increasing the amount of space used to feed industrial expansion and the effects this has upon land-use. In view of the quantity of building plots that have been designated for industrial or business use within the next 10 or 15 years, he creates a utopia based upon spatial concentration and a mixture of different functions.

Another utopian approach is presented by Huub Donkers. With his project entitled *Le bleu du Ciel*, he criticizes the disappearing perception of the urban spaces and the built environment caused by the passive movement through the metropolis of Brussels. By dissolving spaces of fluctuation, he highlights the sense of the arrival and departure, to turn the permanent movement into awareness.

The fact that these two projects take the form of utopias, I would not regard them as being suitable for future realization. Their potential, however, lies in the fact that their theoretical approaches are criticising current tendencies in politics or sociality. By pointing out these problems and turning them into objects for research, these theoretical approaches can provide the impetus for further research that brings a critical view to the current situation.

In between Art and Architecture

Finally, my aim is to mention a very subtle project that gave rise to a highly controversial discussion within the jury about the disciplines of art and architecture. How can we draw a line between arts and architecture, if the boundary between them is becoming increasingly blurred? Both deal with space and each one creates space. They are actually interlocked, with one flowing into the other.

In her installation *Hotel de Boot Gemist: a choreography of longing*, Wytske von der Veen evokes spaces, as part of what is a serious examination of our understanding of architecture as built, physical space. How is it possible to integrate a space or a place that comes out of the memory, activated by (maybe) a haptic impulse, a smell or a sound into this definition? It is a real place. But maybe it no longer exists in reality.

Architecture lives from the author's capacity to imagine the space that he is going to create. I believe that the way how Wytske von der Veen tries to evoke an imaginary space only by its fragments demonstrates a very subtle understanding of space, composition, proportion and material as the main elements involved in creating architecture.

New future challenges

Given that the number of projects totals thirty five, it would be desirable if a greater variety could be represented amongst the winners. The few approaches that seek to identify links with other disciplines demonstrate the need and the willingness to search for new forms of articulation. These kinds of experiments should be supported in the university context, so as to integrate other perspectives into the architectural debate. The perception of space, the spatial sense of the location, the analysis of its built surroundings and its fluxes helps to understand how a location functions and the way how it is used by the people. Attaching greater importance to these very important analytical processes can enable us

gain a more effective understanding of how we can interconnect and integrate the project within its surroundings. To understand architecture as a single discipline within a conglomeration of many different disciplines, problems, solutions and realities that affect and form our built environment can perhaps generate new and interesting impetuses and new future challenges when it comes to creating and designing our spatial environment.

Nicole Opel, editor ARCH+