

Analysis Euregional Prize for Architecture 2013

by Christoph Grafe

Ladies and Gentlemen,

first of all I would like to thank the organisers of the 23rd Euregional Prize for Architecture for their invitation. An invitation to provide an external comment on the projects submitted for this prize. A prize, as you know, not for a realised project or a result of professional practice, but one in which the various architecture schools in this region send in a selection of diploma projects. It is, in other words, not a prize about the status quo of architecture, but one which presents us with the work of young designers that still have to make a mark, that hold a promise – at least that is the implication of being selected by their schools. Schools that invest in this prize and which, this we should assume, are proud of the work of these students.

So, this is a prize for diploma projects, the meesterproef, das Meisterstück, l'oeuvre de maitrise that all architectural schools I know regard as the crowning glory of their curriculum. Works in which students invest a large amount of energy and passion, and which for their teachers is also the main indicator of the success of their teaching. For the students it is also often the first moment that they conceive of themselves as an author, not of a piece of course work or another step in obtaining the credits for completing their education. No, doing one's diploma work is an essential rite de passage in being initiated as an architect – including the perturbations and butterflies, the nights without sleep and the moments of overconfidence and despair, which probably everyone remembers well.

Here we have a selection of these projects from five schools in this area which launched itself a long time ago as a European core region. Three national languages (under which the careful listener cannot fail to detect a linguistic continuity of various Ripuarian dialects, and to the south those of the Roman soldiers left behind by the Empire). Three or four different national traditions of education and within these a series of subplots of how architects are trained in polytechnic, Beaux Arts and trade school traditions. Also different conceptions of what it means to be an architect, all of which are reflected and laid down in national legislations. Final projects, like every element in a curriculum, operate within a field of educational and administrative systems. For their intake each school predominantly relies on a national catchment area and the rankings within their national context. The education in Aachen, in other words, usually compares itself with that of Zürich, Munich, Vienna or any number of schools in the German-speaking countries. The same, one can presume, is true for the other schools.

This combination of geographic proximity and very different systems of education accounts for the unique character of the Euregional Architecture Prize. It reveals how great the gaps in cultural assumptions even in a small area still can be. On the one hand there is a great diversity of educational traditions here. On the other we see that these differences are not always made productive. Indeed, it seems that many of us are less prepared to accept the questions that may arise from the experience of another educational system today than perhaps a decade ago. That we are less interested in the preoccupations and thoughts of our neighbours now and that, sadly, the impulse to find emotional and intellectual safety in our own 'national' frames of mind is on the increase. Over the past few years this architecture prize has become more rather than less important.



model of a Palladio villa

Meanwhile you may be wondering why I show this image of a model that clearly is not one of the exhibits in the student show, but a model of a Palladio villa. I took it while wandering around the panels. For me it is a tag, a reminder that the projects we see here are products of particular educational environments and the references they put forward. When I studied architecture at the TU Delft in the late 1980s and early 1990s, for instance, Palladio literally was terra incognita. In the teaching the tradition of 20th century modern architecture

dominated everything so much so that the discovery of classical tradition became a countercultural impulse. For the sake of approaching the work exhibited here I suggest we look at the projects from two perspectives, which may also be a key to examine the themes and methods, the preoccupations which they reveal or hide, the working methods – implicit and explicit – and, finally the presentation strategies and graphic results. For, and this conclusion I am quite prepared to share with you much prematurely, it is in examining the drawings that we tend to make up our mind as to whether or not we are intrigued by a particular project and how we appreciate it. The first perspective for the examination is that of the context in which the project has been made, the second would be to look at the diploma projects as indicators of what architecture may be in some kind of future.

Let me start with the context of these projects and the schools. One of the universities, the Rhenanian-Westphalian Technical High School at Aachen clearly belongs to the tradition of the polytechnic schools, which dominates architectural education in the German speaking countries, Sweden and the Netherlands. The model of the education of the civil engineers – burgerlijk ingenieurs - in the universities in Belgium, at Leuven, Ghent and Liège is partly comparable to this, although they tended to be even more exclusively devoted to technology. These schools have a long tradition of understanding architecture as an act of problem-solving and as an act of service to society. Set up within the process of Prussian state building on the western edge of the territory, and against the background of producing cadres, civil servants and architects for a rapidly industrialising society, Aachen has always been geared towards delivering competent architects whose absorption into the professional corps has to be facilitated. Research in these schools is very strong in the technical field, while design education is clearly framed by the esprit de corps of the practice of architects. Professors are always practitioners, while theory and history is handed over to architects who specialise in writing and who are measured by what they mark they make in general cultural discourse and who then develop into the internal and institutionalised conscience of the school. The trade schools, the Fachhochschulen, tend to emulate this model even if their student intake tends to be more regional than that of the old polytechnic schools.

Students studying in such an environment, and their teachers, often find the proposition of their school limiting and have done so for a long time. It is revealing that it was particularly in the Technical Universities, in Berlin and Zürich, at the TU Delft and also at Aachen, that the student revolts of the 1960s and 1970s had a particularly strong impact. The diploma project, the piece of work which students produce when they are most fully formed and most aware of the limitations of their own education, often is a moment litmus test for the dissatisfaction and for the critique of the school. It is also the prime moment where the student can find a form for his or her critique and where he or she can assemble the teachers most congenial to what they feel to be of the greatest concern. At the same time, within the Technical Universities there is still a strong notion of standards of practical proficiency – often contested by professional associations – reflected in the Leistungsverzeichnis, the list of required technical drawings which is cast in stone. After all, the diploma project is the most important document in which young architects can provide proof of their technical knowledge and design capacities.

These requirements provide a foil for what an architectural project has to do, what it has to deliver. They also presuppose a clear idea of what it means to be an architect, which may well become fairly problematic when the modus operandi of the profession is subjected to changes, as it has been at various moments over the past century and, one feels, is at this moment. Perhaps it is also a sense of insecurity that prompts students to search for the fundamentals of the discipline, this as a critique of the profession and the way it organises itself. The selection of projects submitted by the school at Aachen, all of them strong in their particular ways, collectively renounce any wider social programme for architecture. There are two projects for huts in remote Alpine locations, another one in a protected dune area (the fact that one of the names in the location is not given in the language use in this part of Europe suggests that it clearly viewed as a general condition of light and soil, not as a locus with a particular history). There is a power station in rural Scotland and a writers' residence on a beautiful island in the Baltic. Even where the context is highly problematic, as in the Battersea

Power station in South West London, the long and arduous history of identifying strategies of re-using this dinosaur of the industrial age is explicitly not addressed.

One may criticise this attitude as a form of escapism. Yet it is also clear that these projects are extremely serious and refined works. By eliminating almost everything that makes buildings so complicated in our urbanised context of this densely populated part of Europe, the projects succeed in what they want to do with panache. We have delightful examinations of atmosphere and Stimmung, in the tradition of German Biedermeier painting or Hodler's representations of the Swiss landscape, in the work of Diana Köhler; or the representation of the Alpine hut as rarefied dream vision worthy, perhaps, Tarkovsky in the project of Daniela Opgenoorth. Benjamin von Pidoll's Battersea Power station then becomes a examination of architecture as lingua morta. And the power station by Milica Vrbaski is not only an exercise in analogous architecture, consciously matter-of-fact and utterly precise in the judgement of proportion and façade composition, but it also provides the excuse for a set of breath-taking drawings, that evoke the pleasure of mapping the word we find in Diderot's Encyclopédie or in the photographs of the Bechers. The extreme form of renunciation that informs all these projects pays off. But this also comes at a price – about which more in a moment. In any case, the projects from the Aachen University of Applied Sciences gain from their concrete contexts in the nearer environment of the city. One could imagine, for example, for the Jascha Mirko Gerlinger's project for a neighbourhood facility or Karen Kreft's house for Aachen spice biscuits to invite a public debate with people outside academia which is denied to the projects from the RWTH.

Let us move across the border for a moment. The Academies voor Bouwkunst in the Netherlands are allowed to continue the model of an education that infuses students with an established technical background with design knowledge. The relatively uncontested status of this type of education often seems to provide an environment in which individual students are given full support to explore what they feel to be their deepest desires and interests – and time to work at leisure. At best this results in projects that go against the grain, and against predominant fashions. Tatjana de Groot Trajovska takes her project to Skopje and a discovery of the fascinating late modern concrete buildings of the former Yugoslavia. Intended as a 'social wake-up call' the project might have been an investigation of existing and contested architectural languages – some of these buildings were redesigned as eighteenth century palaces – but the presentation of the projects would have benefited from being more clearly framed.

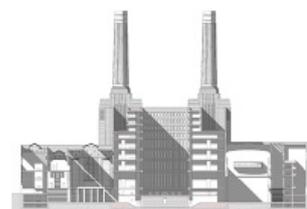
In Belgium the dynamics of architectural education show one general similarity north and south of the language border. In Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia the schools stemming from the tradition of the Beaux-Arts and those founded as Catholic artists guilds in the nineteenth century have been subject to a process of adopting academic methods of research. In this process the schools are also absorbed into universities. In Liège the new faculty of architecture is the result of a merger of the university faculty and the art school. I cannot claim to have much detailed knowledge of the conflict between existing didactic models and the effect of the need to formulate research projects which part of the faculty are confronted with. It is clear, however, from the projects for a school in Brussels by Justine Gloessner & Carola Mineo, Anthony Humbert & Olivier Lekien and Pierre



Diana Köhler



Daniela Opgenoorth



Benjamin von Pidoll



Milica Vrbaski



Tatjana de Groot Trajovska

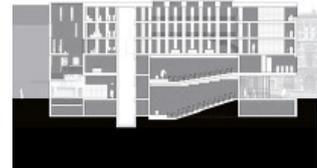


Justine Gloessner & Carola Mineo



Anthony Humbert & Olivier Lekien

Corman & Marie Noël that the school retains a strong idea of the diploma project as an act of social intervention and of collaboration. Something similar could be said for the project for bringing the university back into the city by Stéphanie Solheid, Matteo Franssens and Julie Litnhouvang. One would wish for the University to continue this path but also for raising the standards of presentation and design development.



Stéphanie Solheid

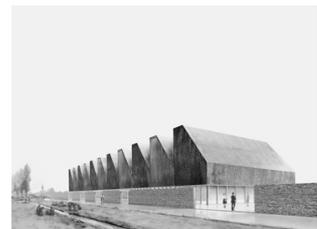
Finally there is the new faculty of architecture and art at the University of Hasselt. This school, emerging out of what was the newest design school in the Beaux-Arts tradition in Flanders, has gained recognition as one of the centres of excellence in research by design and design related research. Against all odds, as a late-comer and situated in an environment where everything is new, Hasselt has been successful in identifying its very own niches in the crowded field of architectural research, from universal design in interiors of public buildings to new planning strategies for the urbanised territory of Flanders, the 'land without a landscape' as Bas Smets recently called it. The way in which these themes feed into the design project are nothing less than impressive. Pim Jacobs' project 'home garden greenhouse garden home' takes up one of the themes of the Flemish 2013 Venice Biennale contribution, which focussed on the potential for re-thinking the productive landscape, and provides what was absent then: an architectural examination. Franky Larousselle's Interlinie Re:meat is a critique of the production methods of the agricultural industry and reworks this in an exquisite architectural composition that at once examines traditional typologies of production and the expressive possibilities of architecture. These project succeed in combining pleasure in drawing architecture with social purpose. They also are explorations of strong authorship which is nurtured by being framed. There is, one suggests, strong intellectual leadership in the teaching which, and this is important, does not limit the students but empowers them.



Matteo Franssens



Pim Jacobs



Franky Larousselle

Hasselt, 16th November 2013.

Analist: Christoph Grafe