

EAP 2012 Project analysis

Power and impotence by Christophe Van Gerrewey

Ladies and gentlemen, but of course – and especially: all the fresh new architects of the Euregio and of the architecture schools of Aachen, Hasselt, Liège and Maastricht,

The wonderful thing about architecture is that we don't really know what it is. That is strange for a human activity that is so important – or that is at least omnipresent. We all know the words that Rem Koolhaas wrote on the back of *S,M,L,XL* in 1995: 'Architecture is a dangerous mix of power and impotence.' Maybe the real power of the architect lies in the fact that he or she can define, time and again, what architecture *is*, just by being an architect, just by making architecture.

Of course: it is not that simple. Many people claim to know what architecture is or at least should be. The architectural scene does not escape the mechanisms of institutions and ideology: at the offices of universities, academies, governments, multinationals, developers, managers, journalists and critics, clear-cut definitions of architecture are constantly forced upon the world. The worst thing about this control is that it uses architecture as a tool to realize other, strictly non-architectural and in our era mostly commercial ends; and that it does so, moreover, in a way that is most of the time completely unconscious.

There is a lot to be said about the things young people undertake when they are in the final year of their education. But one thing is certain – and all the 29 projects assembled here for this edition of the Euregional Prize, prove this: never in their entire life will these young (soon to be) architects be more powerful and more impotent at the same time. Impotent, because they have to work on paper, in the strict defined climate of an educational studio – whatever they design, it will remain a student project, impossible to realise, and judged and archived almost immediately.

On the other hand, graduating architects are powerful because they can take up every role in the process of making architecture, and they can define with a terrifying amount of freedom what it means to make architecture. To give an example: some graduate students can have so much bravoure, that they perform as their commissioner, they write their own brief, they invent a new program, they choose a site, and they present the project. Only the evaluation is left to someone else.

All this ensures us that this Euregional prize puts forward a liberating, hopeful but especially inclusive definition of architecture. What is architecture? When one looks around in the exhibition, the answer is very easy, and it is surprising that it is seldom put as such. Architecture is everything that is made by architecture students just before they complete their education.

This definition is important, because what lies at the heart of it is a desire – a desire, enacted by graduate students, to be occupied completely by what one considers important in architecture; a desire to engage in design activities that one finds amusing and relevant; and a desire to communicate all this – to others, but also to yourself, or to your future, more professional selves.

Architecture is enjoyable in many different ways. But: just like the body parts of a lover, it is – sadly enough – impossible to pay equal attention to them all of the time. This eternal obligation to choose what you will love the most when making architecture, makes it possible, tonight, to divide the 29 graduate projects on show, into five groups. Consciously or not, and whether completely independent or with the aid or guidance of a tutor or a predefined commission, in every project a choice is made to concentrate on one aspect of architecture – because it is the most important, the most relevant, the most urgent, or simply because it is the most fun thing to do.

I would like to propose five diverse parts of the body of architecture that are specifically loved in these

projects, namely: materials – stories – programs – forms – contexts.

(Every participant in the competition can now start to wonder in what kind of category his or her project belongs.)

1. Materials:

Although a student project does – usually – not get built, it is possible to define it by means of a material. Architecture is nothing without its materiality, its firmness (as Vitruvius said); architecture is stronger than the forces of nature. The design activity is enacted by means of objects – the architect thinks with and through materials, rather than with ideas, concepts or schemes. Jean Prouvé once said: ‘I am worried by what is done with new materials – or rather what is *not* done.’ This kind of attention is the most direct challenge to architecture, as it defines it by the *stuff* by which it will be present in the world.

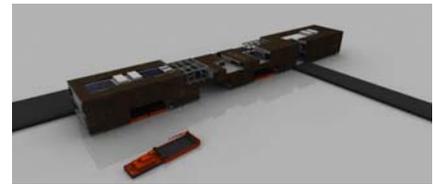
This stuff can be regional, unexpensive and sustainable, as is the case in Julian Dähne’s project, which is built by bamboo, clay and textile. It can – as in the project by Robbert Errico, – be inspired by nature, and mimic the structural solutions of the environment. The building material – in this case wood – can be both the reason for the construction as the reason for the existence of architecture, as seen in the project of Pieter Vanhees.



Julian Dähne

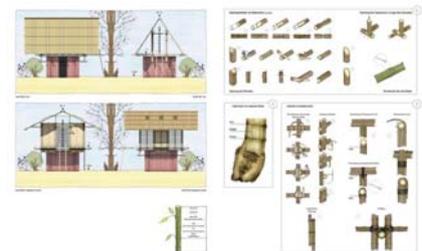


Robbert Errico



Pieter Vanhees

Rather than a material, rather than a physical object, the thing that makes and constitutes a building can also be a construction manual – a set of simple guidelines that enable every Chinese farmer to rebuild his house when it is destroyed, by only three persons, in three days time, and with a limited set of materials. This is what the design by Aryan Mirfendereski is all about: a booklet like the ones that come with an IKEA piece of furniture – but this time it’s serious. It has a necessity that relates the inhabitant with the building, rather than all too narrowly forcing him inside of a closed design logic. It contains honesty and inventive logic. This, too, is what we call architecture.



Aryan Mirfendereski

2. Stories:

One of the important aphorisms on architecture was written by the French poet Paul Valéry, already in 1923: ‘Architecture’, he wrote, ‘just like music, does not tell a story – on the contrary: it needs to engender in us this hidden force that needs to make stories possible.’ This might be true, but – then again: there *is* a kind of architecture that does exactly this: tell stories, not only by conceiving a stage set, but also by showing what can happen in this environment – how, by whom, when, why, with what kind of feelings, emotions and meanings. The architect becomes a storyteller, even in a more effective, powerful and contemporary way than any ‘real’ writer. Quite a lot of projects in this edition of the EAP tell stories, about life, society, love, cities – but also about architecture itself.

The group project by Frank Baum & Peter Franz Weber is for example a fantastic story – it could have been written by Don DeLillo – about the warmth that computers and databases engender, and about how these machines and mainframes could heat a bathhouse in Bruxelles. Maarten Huls tells a story about an oasis in the city of Maastricht – the story is that nothing happens here, or at least nothing should happen: no event takes place, no-one is one stage, nothing asks attention – which is rare in our cities and society. Rostislav Komitov's is an autobiographical story – a house not only *for* but also *of* the architect, and therefore it becomes relevant for everyone, just as an autobiographical novel like the *Recherche* from Proust is relevant. The project by Pentti Marttunen is a story like a *bildungsroman*, a trajectory that young people cross in order to reach the light and to become young adults.



Baum & Weber



Maarten Huls

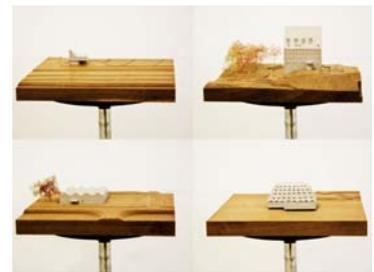
And then there is the story of Tim Panzer that could have been made up by the American architect John Hedjuk. It gives the village of Tonder in Denmark finally the infrastructure it needs, because a lot of Germans come here to get married, as it is easier here than in their own country. If these kinds of activities already take place - one may wonder - why build buildings for it? They are unnecessary. Sometimes this is what architecture can do: ask questions and tell stories about the necessity or the absurdity of architecture.



Rostislav Komitov



Pentti Marttunen



Tim Panzer

3. Programs:

The most human reason for architecture lies in the things that humans do: their activities, their plans, their gatherings. This is what links the fate of mankind with the fate of architecture, and vice versa. An architect who decides to concentrate on the programmatic nature of architecture, immediately realises that the quality of the architecture depends for a large part on the quality of the program. It is not surprising that a lot of student projects consist for a large part in the definition or at least the research of the program – in the uncovering of something special, something necessary, something that makes architecture selfunderstable, in the old-fashioned tradition of the form following the function.

The design of Rémy Barbier & Jonathan Freches is based on an interaction between the complementary functions of a museum, and Mattijs Brands has invented a complex research on the development of energy by means of a high grass. The book store by Kevin Cravatte is the symptom of its function, as it both represents storage and movement. The group project of Margaux Darras & Axel Serveaux welcomes the 'planet jobs program', collecting a mass of information, exhibitions and meetings. Hannelore Goyens has created a biopowerplant that also wants to be a landmark, asking attention for the landscape and Thomas Merckx designed a carpet factory, on the shore of a beautiful lake, in which the base materials descend from top to bottom during the production process.



Barbier & Freches



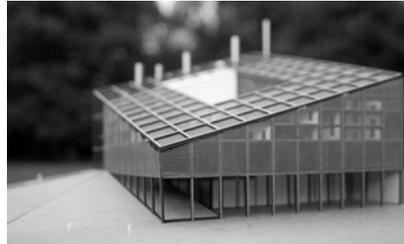
Mattijs Brands



Kevin Cravatte



Darras & Serveaux

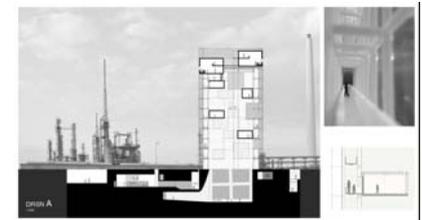


Hannelore Goyens



Thomas Merckx

Every preference for a part of the design has its own godfather, and architects who like to deal with programs, are indebted to the work of Rem Koolhaas and OMA. Rob Janssen's project seems to be conscious of that to an extreme – it looks like an outtake of *S,M,L,XL*, left out because the book was already too massive; more importantly, this 'fascinatorium', as it is called, uses the programs as means to mix people, to mingle them, to confront them with an unforgettable experience, and with the history of the industrial site in which it stands.



Rob Janssen

4. Forms:

Architects are image-makers: they design objects, from scratch if they feel up to that, as a sculptor if they feel like it or are asked for it, or from history if they are sceptical about the value of the new. Architecture is formal – if it speaks a language, it does not do so with words or sentences, but with walls, doors, windows, rooftops and so on. There is a view on architecture that clearly states that building amounts to nothing, when it does not revert to the use of typology – that is to say: the only contribution that architecture can have is the most autonomous one of which it is capable. Architecture that is not conscious of its formal mechanisms (and of those of the rest of the world) becomes useless.

The building by Boris Antoine is called a 'settled strongbox' – a forty meter-high shelter for the collection of books of the university of Liège. Charlotte Nelles made a design for the same brief, but its form is more serene, more modest and present at the same time; Thorsten Pofahl's project for a sanatorium is wonderfully indebted to the godfather of architectural form – Aldo Rossi; while Tim Witte's project – a central library for Helsinki – creates the most frenetic programmatic tension inside, while the exterior emanates a formal quietness.



Boris Antoine



Charlotte Nelles



Thorsten Pofahl



Tim Witte

Of all the – to a greater or lesser degree – formalist projects, the one by Anne Katharina Schulze – also a sanatorium – is the most pure. It has freed architecture of all its silly ambitions; it does not want to heal the patients because it knows very well it is not capable of doing that. Instead, the architecture offers a surrounding, a support, an honest and silent formal presence, that confronts with human fate rather than trying to resolve it.



Schulze, Anne Katharina

5. Contexts:

The fifth and last category in what you could call a dictionary of architectural obsessions or *objets d'amour*, is not newly invented – it is exactly what is already there. The physical context of an architectural project is impossible to ignore – deciding not to take it into account is probably the most difficult thing for an architect to do. And also the opposite is true: some buildings or designs are so much indebted to a context, that they become, to quote Bob van Reeth, 'the memory of what never was'. An architect who does not have a context to work with, or who thinks of the context as rubbish, has nothing to react to – and in the end needs to import his own kind of context.

From a certain point of view it is reassuring to see that a lot of projects here are explicitly contextual. The sports arena of Romain Arnoldy consists of an existing hill; in the thesis of Feyyaz Berber, the contextual history of Istanbul is used to design a hotel, whereas Stéphanie Collings & Caroline Thonnart use architecture to enlarge a green zone surrounding a parc in Liège. The project by François Flohimont is developed out of a correspondence with an existing castle and a drama school. Sanaz Kashi's prototype for low income housing in Oman wants to coexist in harmony with the old fishermen community and Chiel Schiffeler's theater in Kerkrade wants to rediscover a theatre-complex, and at the same time create connections with the city centre. In the project of Sylvia Carola Schuster, an old swimming bath near Cologne is very scrupulously and respectfully renovated.



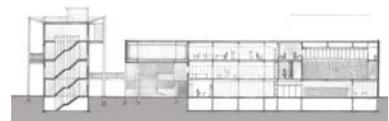
Romain Arnoldy



Feyyaz Berber



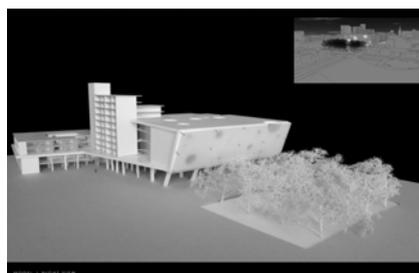
Collings & Thonnart



François Flohimont



Sanaz Kashi

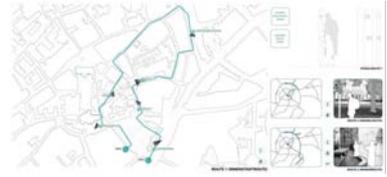


Chiel Schiffeler



Sylvia Carola Schuster

Of course: the larger the context, the more impressive its influence and the outcome. The Thermalroute by Eva Giebler & Anika Schausten asks attention for the memory of what threatens to be forgotten: a route through the city of Aachen is developed which leads to the important stations of the golden age of city history. Showing that a context exists might be the most effective way to eventually start changing it.



Giebler & Schausten

Contexts, forms, programs, stories and materials: five characteristics of architecture, five ways of doing and defining it, five desires being part of becoming an architect. What architecture is – or can be – is in an exemplary way shown by the 29 projects of this twenty-second Euregional prize for architecture. To paraphrase – and at the same time contradict Adolf Loos: that – this – is architecture!

But the question I have not dealt with – let alone answered – is the question of *good* architecture. If architecture is what architecture students do – when do they succeed in what they are trying to do? To put the question differently: who is the best architect? The one who concentrates on developing materials, on telling stories, on mixing programs, on designing forms or on dealing with contexts?

The answer is enclosed in the combination, and in the excellent development of the concentrated choice that has been made: a good architect is able to develop a material in such a way that also a story is being told, a program is mixed, a form is designed, and a context is dealt with. Or: a good architect tells a story, but at the same time he or she also develops a material, mixes a program, designs a form, deals with a context. And so on. By desiring to excell in one much loved part of the design process, all the other parts fall into place.

Apart from personal preferences and idiosyncratic desires, this inclusive approach to architecture is probably the only one possible – certainly when the difficult time has come to judge what the best projects are. Luckily enough, delivering that judgement was not my task tonight, but I am quite sure the jury did a wonderful job.

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Christophe Van Gerrewey