Analysis Euregional Prize for Architecture 2016
by Pieter T'Jonck

Choosing position

A final project can be a very daunting prospect for architecture students. Most of you are all too aware of that. It is the last time one can invent a project or a programme and fantasize about it without any hindrance from a demanding client. But still, a student does have to prove in front of future colleagues that he or she is up to the job and knows what he or she is doing. Professors even expect him or her to have a clear idea on what architecture is or does in general. That is not an easy task. As early as 1965, Robert Venturi pointed out how weak architecture' s status was, and that still is the case. To further complicate things, there are no longer any 'do's' or 'don'ts' in architecture. Students have to choose position for themselves, with or without the consent of their teachers.

Every generation and every student responds to these challenges in a different way. Some tendencies became quite obvious in this selection, which, as we may trust, offers the best of what these five schools of the EU Region produced.

Some students obviously don't think that it would be wise or interesting to go deeply into the practicalities of actual building. They prefer to develop a vision on the context for architecture that can underpin future lines of action. This is obviously the case in Heinrich Altenmüllers 'Ruin all inclusive' project. It tries to understand how the decline of resorts along the Egyptian coast can turn into a process of city making. The project is a peculiar mixture of on-site observations and ensuing speculations, resulting in an almost hilarious vision of high-rise towers with the same irregular floorplans as the former swimming-pools. It is more than a funny image though, as it proves how architecture can tap into societal forces and fluxes to direct them into a new type of city, by means of a strong narrative, based on a keen observation of an existing, only seemingly undesirable situation.

Heinrich Altenmüllers

Maximilian Schlechtingen & Martin Van Laack

In a similar vein, the baffling project 'Tales from a funny place' by Maximilian Schlechtingen & Martin Van Laack depict the story of Coney island, NY as a kind of evidence for a new project for the entertainment zone, based on augmented reality. It would be preposterous for us to say that we could grasp all of what the authors had to say, but the work is impressive by its sheer scope.

Storytelling

These projects are certainly not the only ones who explicitly have recourse to storytelling. Take for instance 'Aachen Onsen' by Adrian Steckeweh. It uses the existing hot water springs in Aachen almost as a pretext to investigate how architecture can provoke a certain experience or reading of city life. In passing, it also is an ironic comment on what tourism does to a city. As such is telling for the role of architecture in a post-fordian, or neo-liberal society.

Adrian Steckeweh

'Isle of Islay' even explicitly starts from storytelling. It is first of all a (pseudo-) historical account of the 'Hebrid isles' in Schotland but goes on as a phantasy novel about a future civilization that will be so far removed from actual sensations that it needs architecture to get aware of them again. The result almost looks like an art project . It is close in spirit to the work of James Turrell, and is reminiscent as well of the experimental architecture of the late John Hejduk.


'Isle of Islay' by Zhen Zhang

There is an obvious link between this work and the scenography projects by Lize Vanhoof and Jonah Veestraeten, which both use existing architecture as a springboard to provoke sensory experiences. Both of them do not focus on architecture as a discipline, but on its empirical sensory qualities.

What is obvious in these projects is that they are as much involved with the very tools for designing as with the final result. This is a characteristic of many of the projects I saw. It is amazing how much time and energy is spent on high quality models and drawings, or even on the production of furniture for the sake of presentation, as Nadine Nievergeld did. But to stick for now with the narrative-conceptual projects, this intricate link between content and form is exemplified in the clearest way by Julia Kaulens 'On the street -24 places'. It documents 24 stops on the road from West to East through Germany with coloured woodcuts, in the same way it used to be done in Japan.

Lize Vanhoof   *Jonah Veestraeten*
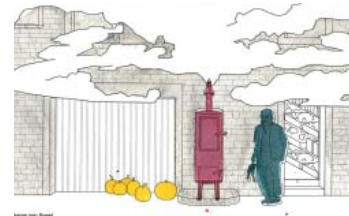
Julia Kaulens

Nostalgia for architecture

It is somewhat surprising to see that many a project in this competition had a more or less explicitly nostalgic streak. All of them make a case for an architecture that is self-evident, in the way Adolf Loos understood it: architecture that is born out of necessity and testifies, in its unassuming use of traditional modes of construction, of a pious attitude. It is an architecture that does not want to be original, does not make any statement, but merely makes 'the right gesture'. In an economy that is built on permanent 'creative destruction', this mode of working and the craftsmanship involved in it, is all but dead, but still it seems to haunt architecture as a bad conscience.

Kathrin Fach, for instance, reconfigures 'Haus Selbach' , an old settlement in NRW Germany, to make it correspond again with the seemingly 'natural', but profoundly human form it originally had. The aim however is not to go back to the 'old days', but to make room for a therapeutic community for children. The same is true for Dasha Kuletskaya's 'Banya by the white sea', a meticulous reconstruction of a traditional 'banya', a combination of a house and a sauna. The tiny scale of the construction allows her to investigate the constructional logic of such a building in great detail. But in the way she invents variations on these age old techniques, one discovers the problematic character of the endeavor to go back to 'the way it was' as the natural and social context that gave rise to it have gone forever.


Kathrin Fach

Dasha Kuletskaya

That is why 'Tour de curiosités' by Nadine Nievergeld is such a highly interesting, and in a way also provocative work. Without restraint, it goes back to the moment in history when a 'natural order of things' started to give way to a more objective point of view that opposed man to his environment. It is the period of the 'Wunderkammer'. Eventually, this would lead to the disenchanted view on reality that is ours, but at that point curiosity was still steeped in magic and delight. It is this magic and delight she tries to save. The 'wunderkammer' she designed is 'special' in every respect, not because it uses costly materials, but because every detail is treated in an unusual way, not one room looks like another, not any building technique is ready-made. Everything in the design is highly contrived and exceptional, but then not in a conspicuous way but with the kind of restraint that was typical of the late aristocratic and early bourgeois culture. The craftsmanship involved does not speak of piousness, but of a fetishist relation to objects of wonder.

Nadine Nievergeld

There are certainly other ways to relate to tradition. Oliver Wenz's Via Nuova Marina in Naples explicitly tries to compete with the attention for typology, urban form, tectonics and ornament that was already present

in the work of the early postmodernists. He wants to 'talk' to his predecessors or even reiterate their steps. That is also what Nathan Heindrichs & Chloé Janssen do when they made a proposal for an extension of Charles Vandenhove' s former 'Magasin à Livres' (1967) in Sart-Tilman. This exceptional building is illustrative for Vandenhove's genius as a 'constructeur', carefully assembling separate elements in a tectonic order that is highly eloquent in its own, architectural –and in his case non-narrative- way. Heindrichs and Janssen add an extra floor to the building in a similarly outspoken, 'elementary' way. But they do so on their own terms. The first thing they achieve is that they expose to view the hitherto invisible 'secret' of Vandenhove' s impressive loadbearing structure. But after this act of deep reverence, they get to compete with the master by inventing a similar loadbearing structure for the extra roof, and by using light-weight translucent panels instead of bricks as 'walls' for the extra floor. The result is at once respectful, inventive and very witty.
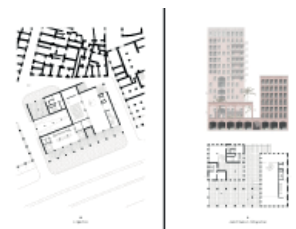
Professionalism

Architecture however is also, even primarily, a practical business. Professionalism often saves the day for an architect. Who else could say that he or she has a view on the overall construction process? That is obviously what many students think already now. The project for a fire station in Leverkusen by Sven Aretz is a strong plea for this attitude. It stands out because his explanation for the project is so similar to a regular technocratic list of norms, requirements and surveys that it becomes almost hyper-realistic , as hyper-realistic as the drawings of the 'inevitable' outcome of the process are. In that way, the project is as well dead serious as totally ironical.

That is, in a way, also true for quite some other projects. The mixed-use skyscraper in Paris-Grenelle by David Tarek Amir is a project in which the student takes full responsibility for the program as well as for the design of the tower. The result looks highly probable, but in that way also slightly predictable –as high rises often are. Still, it is a major effort to design such a building alone on a very short notice.

Equally impressive and all-encompassing was the endeavour by Romain Cordonnier and Grégoire Gatien to reprogram the derelict 'la patinoire'. These students went as far as to investigate seriously the need for a concert hall in the immediate vicinity of Liège, and then set out to save an impressive interbellum building along the Meuse by doting it with a 'box in box' concert hall. Again, such a projects shows the limits of this professional attitude, as –on closer inspection- some flaws in the program as well as in the design became manifest. But still, it is a baffling general rehearsal for a career as 'real architects'.

Reporting from the front

There is more to it however. Projects such as this one, but also those by Louise Mohr & Mathilde Weyer for an old stomatology building or Nathan Heindrichs & Jérémy Lelièvre for an old power station, both in Liège, are telling for a sense of responsibility for the environment many students have. In the case of these old modernist buildings in the vicinity of Liège, that sentiment is obviously fueled by their professors. It is also obvious that the responsibility is heavy: the combined effort of inventing a program, analyzing a building and inventing a plausible architectural answer seems almost too heavy a burden for but two students.

Oliver Wenz

Nathan Heindrichs & Chloé Janssen

Sven Aretz

David Tarek Amir

Romain Cordonnier & Grégoire Gatien

Louise Mohr & Mathilde Weyer

Nathan Heindrichs & Jérémy Lelièvre

But still, there it is: the old idea of the architect as a social benefactor or agent has not succumbed completely under the blows of a liberal economy. There is some 'Reporting from the front' going on in architecture schools again. This is especially true for several projects for developing countries. Lore Smeets for instance does a proposal for a series of tree nurseries in the outskirts of Dar-Es-Salaam that must bring a mangrove park to life again. The project tackles many issues at once: it is a social condenser, it provides an income for people and it strengthens the ecological and economical sustainability of the local community. The fish market 'Shade for trade' by Elien Bourgeois or the 'Kigamboni Performing

Lore Smeets

Elien Bourgeois   I Daan Sillen

Arts Centre' by Daan Sillen are obviously on the same track, as is the project by Theresa Kotulla for a school in the Himalayas. In the case of the base camp for the Mount Everest National Park by Di Wu, one again also discovers an unmitigated streak of nostalgia for an architecture that is a fundamentally honest and humble gesture.


Theresa Kotulla

Sustainability at home: shrinking settlements

One shouldn't necessarily go to countries far abroad to do well. It might be useful, for instance, to invent a typology for an urban dance academy, which is exactly what Martin Nolten did. Research on urban infill is as useful today as it was for the last few decades. 'Living in density' by François Gena & Shirley Stoudemire is a nice example of that type of research, as is 'C+', a hypothetical urban infill project by Sophie Debelle. Architecture could even be a research tool to think about a future in which the sea level has risen so dramatically that a new housing typology is required for the Belgian coast. Dries Jehoul shows a proposal for that in 'Tidal stones'.

Di Wu

Martin Nolten I Gena & Stoudemire

One of really pressing problems we are facing today however is the uneven development of the Low Countries: while city centers are slowly choking, many rural regions or former industrial towns are slowly abandoned. In the coming years, it will certainly be a real task for architects to invent solutions for situations such as that. Some really interesting research on that field is presented here. These architects show a real interest in shrinking regions without being nostalgic about them. They look for 'state-of-the-art' solutions , but nevertheless are sensitive to formal and typological characteristics of the places they work on.
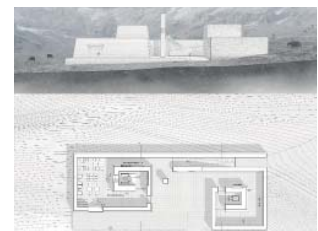

Sophie Debelle   I Dries Jehoul
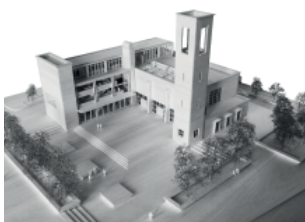
Roel Raeven, for instance, designed an extension for an old church in Heerlen, designed by Frits Peutz. He found the right tools for this challenging task through a profound reading of the tectonic and symbolic elements of the original building, which is left virtually untouched on the inside. François Gena and Marie-Charlotte Maréchal both made a design for a

Roel Raeven

François Gena

new building in Herresbarn, a small village that lost its identity because of badly conceived thoroughfares and the decline of the existing buildings. The design for a community center by Gena and for a riding school for horses by Maréchal cautiously but firmly restructure the village. While being definitely modern, they still have a strong and sensitive relation to the existing context. It is modest, but
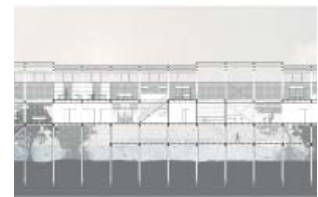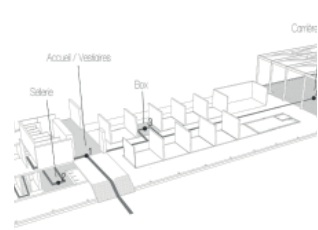
Marie-Charlotte Maréchal

highly valuable work.

As one can see, there is a multitude of positions that students can choose for, and all of them are valid in their own way. Which made it quite difficult for the jury of course. But they did reach a conclusion, as Rob Meurders, the chairman of the jury is about to tell you now.

Liège, 12th November, 2016
Analist: Pieter T'Jonck