

The Quiet Euregionals

EAP 2017 project analysis_Ariane Wilson

Ladies and gentlemen,

First and foremost, I would like to thank Andréa Croé and Jeanine Ruijters from Schunck and the Maastricht Academy of Fine Arts and Design for organising and hosting the 27th Euregional Architecture Prize, as well as congratulate all the talented young architects whose work is shown in this year's exhibition. In the present context, "Euregional" takes on a particular meaning, an ideal we must defend while we are still living within and across open borders.

As project analyst my role is to extract some salient or implicit tendencies from the twenty nine selected projects. These, however, emanate from diverse schools with diverse ways of teaching throughout the curriculum and of structuring their final design thesis: the time given to undertake it differs, as does the degree of freedom granted to the choice of site, theme and brief, and the balance between theory and pragmatism, realism and speculation.

For two days, I have been playing at sets and subsets, so that I now have a kaleidoscopic vision of these projects. I cannot impart to you the diabolic scope of possible combinations! So before I highlight a number of attitudes that struck me, let me briefly present all twenty nine projects grouped according to broad themes that allow very different projects to be associated.

living together

In a first group, four projects examine various ways for different categories of people to live together, be it old people in a vertical village on the Belgian coast, the Y generation with its desire to share certain aspects of daily life, the inhabitants of Berlin Kreuzberg in a dense housing block, or holiday makers seeking simplicity in the Belgian countryside.

requalification

The requalification and revitalisation of public space is the theme of another set of projects. This is achieved through spatial and programmatic densification in the Îlot Saint Georges in Liège or, in the same city, by punctuating a large open space with carefully placed architectural objects to extend the La Batte market.

urban landmarks

With the same aim of dynamising the city, urban landmarks rising above the average height of the neighbourhood are proposed in Charleroi, with a structural study of trussed facades for three towers housing a hotel and congress centre, and in Aachen, with an affirmative public building incorporating a library and a community college in two imbricated volumes forming a cube.

The figure of the tower is also explored in close articulation with heritage of the twentieth century: in Aarhus, with a Student Learning centre at the new entrance of the 1930s university campus, in Liège, with a new tower for storing archives opposite a refurbished museum building of the 1970s, and in Ougrée with a belvedere acting as a

signal in a changing industrial landscape. In this group of projects, I would also include a Media Theatre celebrating the film and music industry of Tanzania. Part of a sequence of four designs for Dar-es-Salaam, it is built using advertising billboards and can expand to follow the city's increasing prosperity and activity.

the productive city

The idea of placing productive activities back into the heart of the city is shared by a fourth group of projects including a mixed use "creative factory" in the former Garbe-Lahmeyer-Halle in Aachen and the conversion of the derelict Bishopsgate Goodsyrd in East London into spaces for a community of working craftsmen. To stimulate rural regeneration in a Belgian village of 8000 inhabitants, one project designs a centre for co-working around its historical church while another implants a family-size market gardening company on the edge of its wetland area. Serving a more private economy, a vinotheque overlooking a village in the Moselle intensifies local production and tourism.

escape and identification

Opposed perhaps to these industrious visions are a number of designs that respond to a need to escape from the hub of urban activity. Two projects link contemporary issues on water with the desire for bodily well-being, insularity, evasion and contemplation.

The retreat into or exploration of the borders of our personal sphere are approached in two beautifully sensitive and experimental projects. The first externalises intimate memories and experiences, the second tests the flexibility of one's intimate bubble in its interaction with the outside.

Several projects build on archetypes to nurture memory and support identification, be it the primeval anthropological function of the fireplace, recognisable elements of local material culture as reference points for people suffering from dementia, or a series of structures belonging to a lost industrial world strung into a promenade along a pipeline.

geometric principles

In another sense, references are used in the search for guiding geometric and structural principles: the Fibonacci sequence, the golden section, proportions used by Dom van der Laan for his thick concrete architecture transferred to wooden construction, the standardised dimension of as-found elements to achieve a kinetic structure.

erosion

Finally, I would tentatively associate two projects that to me talk of erosion of material artefacts, land and landscape, and poetic ideas of infill.

Having outlined a number of themes, let me share with you four characteristic attitudes that struck me as I studied the projects.

1. De-traumatised history

The first tendency is that the majority of projects reveal a relatively uninhibited relation to history. The selected projects give the impression that you, EAP candidates, are liberated from the mental scars of the post-war, post-holocaust, post-colonial, post-industrial mid-20th century that young architects a decade ago would have carried as a weight on their shoulders and tackled with greater despair and scruples. Symbolically, it seems OK to put a circus on the edge of the recently closed Cockerill coking plant in Ougrée. This **Salomé Baczinski** does without a hint of impertinence, making the most of the freedom given by a modernist post-and-beam town hall to remove ceilings and create double-heights. In a very different context, it seems OK to put a toilet in the choir of a church, as **Julien Bovy** does as he installs a community centre in a disused church. It's also OK to remove the roof of a listed historic building, inverting the usual instinct to protect it from the elements, as **Silvana Hecklinger** does for the nave of the assembly hall of a former production plant of electrical equipment.

I found that another traumatic legacy for architects and urban life, the modernist heritage, was not treated ideologically as it long has been. It is respected and preserved for its aesthetic and material qualities but might be reskinned where necessary, or partly sunk in new layers of covered public spaces. Cultural programmes, as so often, are used as a balm for modernist urban spaces that seem to have failed. But all this rid of ideological discourse.

There is no impudence, nonchalance or indifference in these intentions; perhaps rather an intuitive need to eschew the burden of inherited drama and suffering.

2. Distanced memories

Nevertheless, or as an antidote to the traumas of history, the theme of memory is extremely present. Collective memory, intimate, personal memory and also material memory. This abstract way of dealing with history might be a way of keeping its tragedies at bay.

Clara Godon and Emile Raquet stage collective industrial memory but also keep the viewer at a distant from immediate physical experience of its relics, allowing just a peep, from a tower, at the daunting, somehow monstrously beautiful coke plant that stopped just three years ago, before it is erased by real estate speculation. **Baczinski** strings a narrative promenade along a pipeline linking several obsolete archetypal industrial structures such as a gazometer.

It is interesting to confront this project with **Hannah Fokken's** careful "Little world of memories" that deals with another form of erasure, of personal rather than collective memory, in dementia. Exploring the principle of familiarity, she creates a nursing village composed of small buildings that evoke the outlines of material culture of the Ruhrgebiet, to help patients identify and orientate themselves, and reminisce.

The embodied memories of everyday spaces and actions, collaged and articulated into a building, also serve as a base for **Li Lin's** subtle Bachelardian design of an autobiographical house in Aachen. But here, personal memory eclipses references to shared memory.

Retreat into a personal sphere to escape, but also indirectly address, societal issues characterises three projects that adopt various phenomenological approaches. **Carmen**

Martens' insular swimming pool placed on the canal that separates two social worlds in Brussels and **Sander Lambrix's** clean water basins capturing floodwater in Dar es Salaam are comparable in that their atmospherical and autonomous architecture plunges the naked body into strong spatial and sensorial experiences that can, in the moment of this experience, dissolve social cleavage. This question of the borders of dwelling is theorised and experimentally explored by **Kerstin Meerbach**. Tracking her own movements in everyday life, the forming and reforming of her personal bubble, she develops beautiful and efficient graphic devices to map the immaterial, fluid borders of smell, sound, texture and climate perceived by the senses, and help understand how physically built elements influence and inflect these.

This interaction of physically built space with phenomena is studied carefully in a series of models that inform **Jeroen Brosky's** design of a carpenter's workshop. Here, the sense of dwelling is linked to a *genius loci*. Landscape itself has a layered memory, crystallised in the building materials that are extracted from it. **Kijong Lim** also plays on the materialisation of invisible historical processes, this time archaeological rather than geological. Memory is the built negative form, or cast, of a long-gone Roman amphitheatre in Milan. Absence petrified, the outer core of power.

3. Millennials?

One might expect this abstraction from the ideological strifes of historical legacies and a retreat into the haven of mental and material memories to be counteracted by a progressive, utopian, futuristic enthusiasm for the promises of new digital technologies. But despite the definition of a Millennial generation for whom **Elizabeth Mullens** conceives housing, the digital creed is very absent from these projects. This is the third posture that struck me. Architecture is not dematerialised. Site is not displaced or fragmented by IT. Place remains place.

Roy Ruigt refers to Frank Lloyd Wright and Rudolf Schindler in articulating fireplace and horizon, and many projects take pleasure in expressing material mass and anchorage. *Bodenständig*, one might describe them.

When it comes to building in wood, **Jara Katharina Baarlink** is not interested in the potential lightness of this construction system but prefers to experiment its thickness. **Brosky's** workshop, faithful to the late nineteenth century creed of "truth to materials", is a "manifest of the tectonic", and its wooden canopy, though in tension, presses down on the concrete walls to better express gravity. **Nicholas Dome's** winery is monolithic and rooted in the landscape. **Natalie Langohr's** library in Aachen adopts the form of a bold, monumental cube.

Not only in the architectural materiality and idiom but also in the programmes do we find technological idealism to be absent. There are few fab labs, digital nerds or smart cities in the twenty nine projects. Rather, we find solitary craftsmen (again in **Brosky's** workshop), or a remarkable megastructure in London designed by **Julia Cramer** for a community of craftsmen, open to experimental and informal processes. And even when robotisation is the theme of **Viktoria Falk and Lukas Malhendorf's** research on "kinetic weaving", it begins with hand-made prototypes, is tempered by reuse of materials and rests on the deeply anthropological metaphor of weaving.

4. Ecological self-evidence

The fourth characteristic that struck me is the salutary absence of ecological clichés. No banalities are iterated about "nature in the city". The urban landmarks are not trickling with hanging gardens. The words "green", "sustainable", "energy-efficient" hardly feature on the panels. Ecological designs are integrated in the projects, as a sort of self-evidence, but hardly proclaimed.

While discreet echoes of the ecological discourse are found in projects based on the re-use of materials (bicycle spokes in **Falk's** and **Mahlendorf's**, advertising billboards in **John Silverstand's**), ecology is treated most explicitly by the common brief given to students in Liège on the village of Hailot or to those of Hasselt in a studio on water.

A thorough knowledge of the local economic, social and environmental context combined with an understanding of bioclimatic processes amounts to an ecological stance in **Gilles Blaffart's**, **Gabrielle Vanackere's** and **Bovy's** proposals for the rural regeneration of Hailot. The first relies on tourism, the second on a vegetable planting zone that also helps protect the fragile ecosystem of a wetland, the third on a small-scale complex of coworking offices, workshops, cafeteria and community hall articulating a disused church with new buildings to form a village square. All three use local materials, as, elsewhere, does **Dome's** winery on the Moselle.

The projects on water management turn global warming into an opportunity to reflect on new urban landscapes. For **Ianthe Lindelauf**, a tidal basin for flood control on the Belgian coast becomes the landscaped location of a prototype for vertical villages with care facilities.

However, just as there are no utopian or dystopian visions of smart cities, there is no real venture to reinvent the city from the point of view of environmental issues. The projects' approaches to the city are relatively traditional, based on studies of surrounding morphology and typology.

Jan Strelzig elegantly continues the architectural language of Aarhus University, deploying it vertically rather than horizontally. **Luca Claußen and Isabelle Winsberg** elaborate on the traditional Berlin block to optimise living space for social housing including common areas, with a street-side façade reminiscent of the Critical Reconstruction. Differing from these contextual approaches, **Louise Carpentier**, rather than inducing a model from the urban fabric, generates it from a structural principle she transposes from another environment.

Against all the odds of today's processes of privatisation, the projects show a persisting belief in public space as a civic virtue and the ability of public programmes to reinvigorate the surrounding urban tissue. **Jean Hanisch and Baptiste Huchant** improve access, animate the ground-floor interface and evoke the figure of the colonnade in their design for the Îlot Saint Georges in Liège, while **Lars Henkes and Ralf Louges** skilfully subdivide its large square into smaller patios and squares, as though injecting an older model of the city on a modernist scheme. **Christa Wigger** reconfigures the Place Léonard in Liège according to the typological model of the Greek agora. In **Langohr's** library and community centre, on the site of a former Landeszentralbank, exterior public space runs into the ground floor with its open exhibition, café and reading areas, and the publicness of the programme is expressed through a glazed terraced traversing the cubic volume.

These projects deal with traditional urban figures rather than large-scale infrastructure, the metropolis, the mega-city, territorial management or the structuring presence of topographical and hydrological forces in the landscape.

So all in all, as I walked around the exhibition examining the projects, I had the impression of quiet projects.

Formally, they are gently generated, with a search for order and proportion in **Baarlink's** project, the use of the golden section in **Brosky's**, the search for material harmony with the landscape in **Ruigt's**... They refer to simplicity and primordial references. Also, if this can be counted as an index, half of the projects are low-rise. There is no flagrant sign of exuberance, none of the formal contorsions of a decade ago, no virtuosity for virtuosity's sake. Not much exultation?

Socially, they seek harmony, which of course is a political project and a constant thriving in architecture. Harmony between social and age categories, tranquility for inhabitants, peaceful aging, harmony in coworking, shared space.

The drawings themselves are soft and delicate, often returning to hand-drawing, sometimes to painting, many strikingly beautiful.

Where is the loud polemic, where is the anger ? Where the cynicism? Apart from the potent, daring, poetically and ominously allegorical Citadel of Tides envisioned by **Mary Moors**, where fleeting refugees occupy the intermediary spaces of a succession of high dam walls, there is no head-on confrontation with geopolitical issues such as border territories or migration...

Is this gentle generation a melancholic one? It is perhaps no coincidence that three projects borrow figures from Hopper's paintings, or that home is signified by a lonely double bass.

Quiet Euregionals. This name, that came to me as I analysed your projects, contains no criticism, no irony, no contempt, no accusation of lack of courage or engagement. Quiet does not mean silent. Your projects are full of care and empathy and sincerity, far from the muscular, macho, arrogant starchitecture or world-saving claims of certain generations. In this sense they are radical.

Quiet Euregionals, I understand you. I sympathise. The current chaos in Europe, at its borders and beyond, the suspicion, the irresponsibility, the violence, the fear would also baffle me, and I would choose to advance with humble and careful hope.

Paradoxically, however, Graham Green, from whose novel *The Quiet American* I have adapted the title, has his character Hinh say :

"Sooner or later, one has to take sides - if one is to remain human."

Which side to take?

You may have to choose...