

KU LEUVEN

WELCOME IN JASPERS TOWN

Open Class #1: Studenten als lokhipsters

Thursday 30/11, 15h30-17h, WTC24

Gideon Boie

Welcome to Jaspers Town

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THE START OF A LEARNING PLAY

Academic settings are driven by the promise of intellectual emancipation, which simultaneously makes this impossible. Years of experimenting with teaching a theory course on the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, in tandem with Lieven De Caeter, confronted us time and again with the hollow, suffocating, if not mortifying, apparatus of the auditorium. Behaving like an ignorant master, teaching via Skype, acting like the best student in the class, restless questioning from the fellow teacher, discussing texts I haven't read, walkouts, guest lectures in community centres, exams as a big colloquium game, self-assessment ... The results were surprising, but there was no way to escape the master-slave dichotomy on which the academic mind feeds.

The lesson we drew after teaching one-and-a-half years at the WTC Tower? Withdrawing from the school is the only way to rediscover the 'free space' of school. The Criticism and Ethics course in Brussels moved to the WTC1 Tower, where the 24th floor functioned as a temporary dépendance for the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, Campus Brussels. Fate decided that, in that same academic year, the Criticism and Ethics course at Campus Ghent would be banished to the Dr Guislain Psychiatric Centre.

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The heterotopic qualities of the madhouse and the WTC formed the ideal framework for further experimentation with our teaching algorithm. We wrote a manual on education as a self-organising learning play. In the end, apparently the manual was not that easy to follow, but at least it set the tone.

During the first meeting of the Criticism section at WTC24, we organised an evaluation of the previous weeks and set the agenda for the upcoming meetings. During the evaluation, form and content came together. Form dealt with ways to better direct the self-organising element of the learning game. For example, although we adopted the Indignados' gestures, they did not prove very effective in our small group of around twenty-five people. We also decided that, ideally, the aperitif debrief should be part of the class itself, not just an after-play. In terms of content, we brainstormed exciting topics that united politics and architecture, such as the new Belgian Anti-Squat Act, housing models for newcomers (on the occasion of an exhibition by HEIM), the architecture of the North Quarter and the typical Belgian phenomenon of the Mayor-Baumeister (on the occasion of a PANO documentary broadcast on television).

The next week's gathering felt like a sobering moment, as it appeared that nothing had happened in-between. A group

Apéro Debrief



Critique and Ethics seminar



of students — the suckers of the day — had prepared some chapters on the theory section, but silence descended like a wet blanket when we began discussing the topics in the beta section. We stared at each other, at the ground, at the phenomenal view of Brussels. It is a fundamental rule in architectural studies: the master is not only supposed to embody the truth, but he or she is also supposed to kill every quiet moment with an endless stream of consciousness. From that moment on, we decided to discuss only one topic: WTC24. There were only the following questions at stake: What are we doing here? Why architecture? Why education? Why the WTC?

It was the first lesson in the self-organising learning play: education should reflect on statements and on the place of enunciation. The reception inspired us to declare each class an Open Class and to publicly announce this. The poster to that effect was distributed throughout the WTC, especially in the lift, the only properly functioning public space in the office tower. The first Open Class was a failure and, perhaps for that very reason, an unforgettable event. The poster mainly had a PR effect as it garnered a lot of reactions on online platforms. Only one person showed up: an artist working at the 26th floor, having been seduced by the posters in the lift. He found us sitting in a circle, but his arrival created discomfort among all those involved. The unannounced guest said, 'Ah, you have already started'. I stam-

mered, 'N-n-n-no, we're still busy with the reading.' The students were frozen.

This turned out to be the second lesson in the self-organising learning play: the Open Class also functions without an audience. For each class, we made a poster and event announcement with abstract, disseminating it publicly. The gaping void of the floor was an invitation to experiment with the classical apparatus of the auditorium. A dream become reality. The spatial layout of the class changed week after week. The impossible task of creating an auditorium — moving a chair or table — became a habit to play with each week. It literally got students moving. The passive attitude of leaning back, hiding behind the back of another, waiting for someone else to answer, staring blindly at infinity: the strange symptomatology of education was gone — at least for the most part.

Another issue was freeing the students from the omnipresent productivity neurosis of the architecture school. When the question arose as to whether Criticism and Ethics had anything that could be shown at the 'Reshuffle 1' exhibition, nothing had been prepared. Everyone appeared to be 'busy, busy, busy' with design studio work. The theory course had no solidified ideas worthy of presentation. When the same question was posed at the 'Reshuffle 2' exhibition — also known as the 'Super Synthesis Tour' — we proudly presented the gaping emptiness of the section of floor beside the kitchen as symbolic of the presence of the Criticism and Ethics course.

This became the third lesson of the self-organising learning game: we produce (almost) nothing. School is free time: it's all about time, rather than a place.

The fourth Open Class hit the bullseye. The name Marc Dubois and the topic of architecture and real estate in the North Quarter attracted a real audience. The result was a professional debate. I, the teacher, now an equal in the audience, was hanging on the lips of the professor I had enjoyed classes from years ago, now restlessly questioning his speech, eager to know more. The shock of losing the master-student dichotomy induced a new problem. At the aperitif debrief, a student said, 'Shit, I prepared an A4-sheet full of questions, but I didn't dare ask even one from the list.' It takes guts to speak up, not just as a student but also as a professional, as an architect, on the use of architecture in the context of real estate, particularly about the WTC. The Open Class was no longer part of the schooling. It was a lesson in de-schooling: using the school context to get real for a change.

At one of the receptions, after the 'Reshuffle 1' exhibition, I was chatting with Kristiaan Borret, who appeared to be well informed on the announcements of the Open Classes, who felt personally reproached and who was especially keen to know what Marc Dubois had been talking about the week before. The friendly suggestion by Kristiaan Borret to invite him to an Open Class to allow him to respond was immediately agreed to. The only problem being that the course was already over and exams were just around

the corner. Once again, the reception brought redemption: the idea was to skip the exam, or better yet: to view the exam as foreplay to the serious business of addressing all our questions directly to the Brussels Government Architect.

Thus was the Sofa Talk born. The rule was very simple: no lecturing, no preparation, no PowerPoints. We would just kick-off with a set of burning questions on an urgent issue. The talks were announced with short notice, allowing us to adapt the programme, if you could call it that, to the urgencies of the day or to the feedback from previous talks. This is the short history of the self-organising learning play and how it led us to experiment endlessly with education. In the next chapters, you will read the minutes of five Sofa Talks that dealt specifically with the issue of the WTC. Some parts have been published already as an opinion article by the architecture review A+ or BRUZZ newspaper – which is another thing that we learned: criticism is a lesson in urgency and cannot wait for the slow book-production process.

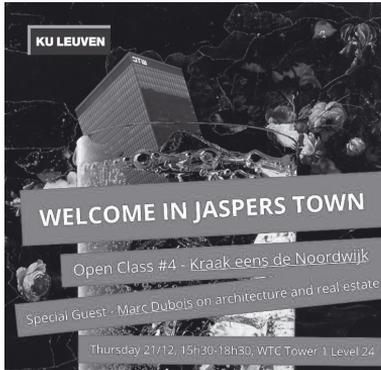
The following contains the notes on five subsequent Sofa Talks that addressed the issue of architecture and real estate in the North Quarter with:

Marc Dubois
 Kristiaan Borret
 Albert Martens
 Joachim Declerck
 Freek Persyn and Carl Bourgeois

(The guest list for the Sofa Talks is male only by accident. I'm not sure whether it had something to do with the WTC. In any case, it prompted us to only invite female architects to the next series of Sofa Talks.)

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SQUATTING THE NORTH QUARTER
Marc Dubois on architecture and real
estate in Brussels

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‘Jaspers is back at the top in Brussels’, wrote Marc Dubois, architecture critic and emeritus professor, in a private e-mail, adding an image of the new information panel at the construction site of the BNP Paribas Fortis headquarters. The panel shows the logos of the architecture firms involved, Jaspers-Eyers Architects, Baumschlager Eberle and Styfhals & Partners Architects, in that specific order. I was surprised because there had been no mention of Jaspers-Eyers in the design competition set up at the time by former Brussels Government Architect Olivier Bastin. On the contrary, the design of the new BNP Paribas Fortis building had to prove that high-quality architecture also stood a chance in the Brussels real estate market. Marc Dubois’ dry response was, ‘That’s how it always goes in Brussels... halfway

through the journey, this office [Jaspers-Eyers] gets on the train and puts itself at the driving wheel ... It’s happened several times already ...’

The downgrading of Baumschlager Eberle to the level of subcontractor was reason enough to invite Marc Dubois to an Open Class at WTC24 (21/12/2017). In the Criticism and Ethics course, for several weeks the students had been discussing the rather unsettling PANO documentary ‘Mayor and Master Builder’ (Broadcast on the Flemish Public Channel, 15/11/2017). The documentary dealt with questionable real-estate developments in Knokke-Zoute and Middelkerke but, in the end, it functioned as a reflection board for the typical Belgian ways of working. Although, it was to counter these kinds of developments that the partnership of Jaspers-Eyers and 51N4E in the design of the WTC1 and 2 towers had been announced as a historic break. In the background, the Brussels Government Architect Kristiaan Borret had invested a lot of energy, in continuity with the work by Olivier Bastin at BNP Paribas Fortis, to have WTC property owner Befimmo select another kind of architecture.

During the Open Class, Marc Dubois defended the thesis, to the surprise of many, that architectural quality and real estate in Brussels are not incompatible. He conjured up a whole series of examples of good practice on screen.

The ‘Residence Palace’ by the architect Michel Polak was presented as a prime example of a modernist package

boat that — albeit in an anachronistic style — gave way to a ‘proliferation of functions’ and, with a screed of no less than ten centimetres, allowed for a floor height that leaves space for sustainable redevelopment. With a sufficient screed, the structure of a building can be maintained in case of re-use, and not only the facades.

The Martini Tower (designed by Jacques Cuisinier) demonstrated how a building plinth can forge a meaningful relationship with the street while still engaging in the organic partitioning of the building into body parts.

The ‘Prévoyance Sociale’ (design by Hugo Van Kuyck) on the Kruidtuin was not only a final element on the traffic axis to the giant Koekelberg Church, but it also had a local plinth with a generous entrance hall, restaurant and roof terrace, four-metre-high door sections, and so on.

The Bank Lambert (designed by Gordon Bunshaft and SOM) displays a rich concrete structure in front of the glass façade, a location inspired by the Lever Building by Mies van der Rohe (relating to the other side of the street) and floor finishings in Travertino that continue from the public square to the interior.

Finally, two masterpieces at the Chaussée de la Hulpe in Bosvoorde: the CBR Building designed by Constantin Brodzki (1970) and the Glaverbel Building designed by Renaat Braem, Pierre Guillissen, André Jacqmain and Victor Mulpas (1964).

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In contrast, the WTC complex designed by André and Jean Polak around 1972 cannot help but appear as a child of its time. The pompous architecture fits the grandiose yet grotesque ambitions of the Manhattan Plan. Marc Dubois points out the ridiculously small corridor, the size of a mole rat, leading visitors from the revolving door on street level via the escalators to the lift on the first floor. The one-sided use of the floor capacity for offices (‘apartments were considered too great a legal uncertainty’) and the paltry three-centimetre screed (allowing one to reduce the floor height). Marc Dubois considers the WTC a symbol of a type of real estate that is ‘not about design, but financing mechanisms’. Over the years, there has been a shift from architecture created through family capital (e.g. the retail chain C&A with buildings designed by Léwwoon Stynen and Paul De Meyer) to buildings erected but awaiting use, awaiting income and awaiting resale directly after they are completed, usually to pension funds from the Netherlands, Germany and Norway as they are not allowed to play on the stock market, considering instead real estate a favourite investment product. For

Marc Dubois, the common thread between the WTC complex and the North Gate/ Ferraris office buildings in the North Quarter designed by Jaspers-Eyers during the '90s is the speculative element.

Next, Marc Dubois hints at the oil crisis of 1974 and economic growth that had plummeted to 1%. It made a world of a difference in the '60s, when economic growth of 8% generated an atmosphere of 'the sky is the limit' — made literally visible with the 1958 Sputnik endeavour and Neil Armstrong as the first person to walk on the moon in 1969. On top of that, the real-estate developments in the '70s did face fierce social critique, including from ARAU who put forward their famous 'counter projects'. Marc Dubois describes how the real-estate market in the North Quarter was saved miraculously in the '80s by the federalisation of the Belgium State and the Flemish Community, with Brussels as its chosen capital. The office space required by Flemish government administrations resulted in rental contracts of twenty years or longer, securing a safe income for the property developers. No wonder that the North Quarter remained in a comatose existence. There was never any need for the real-estate operators to seriously invest in a lively, public space. Marc Dubois describes how the climate in the North Quarter has changed completely after many Flemish administrations found shelter in the new Herman Teirlinck Building designed by Neutelings Riedijk Architects at the Tour & Taxis development area. The property owners in the North Quarter were in a panic, seeing no

alternative but to demolish the Baudouin Building (designed by Jaspers-Eyers) after barely twenty-eight years of use. Other buildings are also standing idle, such as WTC1, 2 and 3 and North Star (designed by Jaspers-Eyers and Atelier de Genval), which name changed into Graaf de Ferraris once the building was rented out to the Flemish Community. Marc Dubois sees the name change as the cynical sign of the limited participation of users in a mere speculation product. The fact that Befimmo took 51N4E on board with Jaspers-Eyers for the redevelopment of WTC1 & 2 could be read as a sign that the real-estate market is well aware that things need to improve.



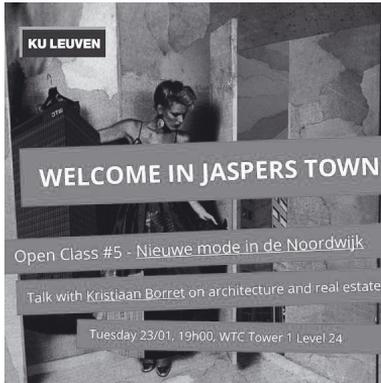
This was the context in which Marc Dubois had publicly warned the Brussels Government Architect Kristiaan Borret about the skewed relationships in the collaboration of Jaspers-Eyers and 51N4E. This gives rise to many ethical issues. In the first place, there is the danger of window dressing by a corporate architect-

ture firm like Jaspers-Eyers. It happened in the real-estate developments on the Pachecolaan, also designed by Jaspers-Eyers. 'Arno Quinze's ambient design served best to keep the sandwiches warm, disappearing from view at the appropriate time,' says Marc Dubois. Secondly, the question is how is it justifiable for an architecture firm like 51N4E to deliver the architectural quality but only operate for 1% of the architectural assignment? The total sum may be generous (Jaspers-Eyers has been allocated 4.75%, i.e. between €4-5 million, which means that 0.95% corresponds to €1 million), but it is intellectually unfair. Architecture firms like Jaspers-Eyers are particularly known for their sound office structure and good business relations, not for architectural quality. 'They give an impression of Wir Schaffen Das,' says Marc Dubois, 'even in a sector in which the firm has hardly been active, such as housing.' There's nothing wrong with that, but that job has a name: executive architect. Nothing more, nothing less. Delivering architectural quality is something entirely different.

NEW FASHION IN THE NORTH QUARTER

Kristiaan Borret on architecture and real estate in Brussels

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As part of WTC24, Brussels Government Architect Kristiaan Borret took a seat on the sofa (23/01/2018) to discuss the question of how much ‘architectural quality’ the North Quarter can tolerate. The immediate reason for the discussion was Marc Dubois’ fierce criticism of the competition aimed at linking a quality architecture firm to Jaspers-Eyers for the redesign of WTC1 & 2 – at the time of Dubois’ critique, the choice of 51N4E had not been made known. Marc Dubois presented the competition as a ruse by the status quo to maintain its grip, and he equally denounced the extremely low fee for architectural quality – barely 1%. Kristiaan Borret felt personally reproached: ‘It is my goal to break open the Brussels real-estate market, which is currently monopolised by

a small number of players’. The goal was to convince project developers to choose a different kind of high-quality architecture. Borret bounced the ball back with the proverbial question: is the glass half-full or half empty? Instrumentalization is a risk that cannot be ruled out, but in the end the charge is about 1/5 of the fee — to be precise 0.95% of 4.75% — in any case, a lot of money.

During the conversation with Kristiaan Borret, it became clear how the connection between Jaspers-Eyers and 51N4E is about much more than just the WTC.

In the first place, we are talking about a change in political trends. In the collaboration between Jaspers-Eyers and 51N4E for the WTC project, we see a significant expansion of the bandwidth in which architectural quality is discussed and assessed. Kristiaan Borret referred to the end of his period as the Antwerp City Government Architect — an end that began with Bart De Wever (also president from the rightist-populist N-VA party) taking office as the mayor of Antwerp in 2013. Statements by the City Government Architect about strategy, the social mix and the programme were no longer tolerated, as this content was considered to be the part of the ‘primacy of politics’. He described it as revenge for the years of attempting to professionalise architecture and a counter-attempt to reduce the juries of architectural competitions to a purely technical affair. The ideology was that the market and politics had to operate freely without the interference of a mediating level. Now, years later and acting as Brussels

Government Architect, Kristiaan Borret has experienced the opposite tendency, whereby the assessment of architectural quality on the basis of the glass façade is coming to an end. The contribution of 51N4E to the renovation of the WTC is certainly a symbol of the new openness in Brussels to intervene in the programme of the North Quarter.



This brings us to a second change in political trends. In view of the limited public ownership in Brussels, an architectural policy will only succeed if it manages to seduce the real-estate market to create an interesting urban project. Until recently, the real-estate market in the North Quarter only thought in terms of office floor square metres and any demand for greater ambition collided with the standard response: ‘Ça va etre compliqué!’ Kristiaan Borret says, and I paraphrase, ‘The good news of the current vacancy is that the real-estate market was obliged to reflect on the quality of life and work in the North Quarter. He used the end of year-long lease contracts with the government as an opportunity to proactively

reach out to the real-estate market. The role of the Brussels Government Architect consisted of broadening the scope of architecture, promoting good practice examples and matchmaking through open competition. In this way, idealism (the belief in capacity building within the real-estate market) goes hand in hand with a healthy dose of opportunism (cooperation as the quickest way to obtain a building permit).

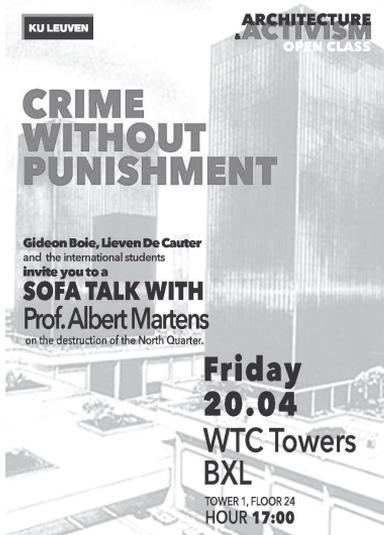
For the Brussels Government Architect, the WTC — since March of 2019 renamed ZIN — has to function in itself as a best practice at the moment that other vacant buildings in the North Quarter are put on the design table. The key question remains whether there are guarantees that 51N4E will not be used as useful idiots who, in their pursuit of architectural quality, ultimately offer the existing players in the North Quarter their only chance of survival. In response to this question, Kristiaan Borret confidently answered from the sofa: ‘Problems in cooperation will cause bad vibes’, suggesting that bad press is the thing market players cannot endure. However, this logic mainly plays a role in the rat race of the tendering process. The signing of the contract usually marks the beginning of a new era. It would not be the first time that the good name of architects had been used to embellish the bid presentation, but is apparently not worth a penny after the contract has been signed. In order for the Brussels Government Architect to succeed, it is vital to monitor the quality in the next step of the

building permit process. Kristiaan Borret is well aware of this and states, 'The risk of quality erosion or window dressing remains, but we will try to control the project for a longer time than just the competition phase.' In short, we can only present the WTC project as an exemplary project if we know whether the vivid dream images of ZIN have an expiry date.

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THE TRAGEDY OF THE NORTH QUARTER

Albert Martens on architecture and criminal urbanism in Brussels



After years of a comatose existence, the Brussels North Quarter is finally showing signs of life. During the academic year, the pleasant hustle and bustle of the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture on the 24th floor of WTC1 functioned as a taster. Shortly before the summer, the International Architecture Biennial Rotterdam (IABR) accelerated the process. Interactive think tanks left no theme unanswered. The vegetable garden on the unused roof terrace and street parties with food trucks

at the Bolivar roundabout provided photogenic moments. The most desolate part of Belgium was renamed with a wordplay the ‘World Transformation Centre’ – all under the approving eye of property owner Befimmo and associates.

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In the midst of the heightened dream work, we invited professor emeritus Albert Martens to the sofa on the 24th floor. Albert Martens is a local resident who has spent a lifetime fighting against the destruction of the North Quarter. He has a fist-thick book of figures and statistics he has collected on what he calls an act of ‘urban criminality’. Three mayors came together, designating an area of more than 530,000 square metres for the construction of two intersecting motorways and two towers for Schaarbeek, two towers for Saint-Josse and four towers for Brussels. The megalomaniac Manhattan Plan was the opening salvo for a demolition and relocation operation without precedent.



Particularly noteworthy was the interpretation of the prominent role that architects played in the crimes against the North Quarter. ‘The tragedy of archi-

ecture,’ said Albert Martens, ‘is that architects have actually come to believe in modernism.’ Questions about financial and political interests were pushed into the background by an absolute belief in architectural quality. A modern city became a blessing for people and fatherland. The North Quarter became the chosen laboratory. The architectural plan created the consensus. The ideology was ‘the future is here’. Turning dreams into action. ‘The reference to Manhattan reveals all the more the ideological lie,’ Martens laughs wholeheartedly, ‘as the architects, project developers and politicians actually went on a research visit to the Houston Business District.’

The daydream of the architect was the consensus that brought the most diverse actors around the table. It is too easy to only point the finger at the concrete suppliers and politicians. Albert Martens mentions, in particular, the trade unions that saw bread in the employment of their base. The media also gave a helping hand with juicy stories that denigrated the neighbourhood. Finally, the limited stamina of local residents undoubtedly also played a role. ‘Life in a permanent Pompeii of destruction cannot not be underestimated,’ notes Albert Martens resignedly.

The tragedy becomes even greater if we assume that modern architecture had quite a few social inspirations. Modernism promised the separation of traffic flows from esplanades as a connection between the urban plinths providing social facilities and the engines of human encounters. In judging good intentions and beautiful prom-

ises, Albert Martens advises to ‘always look at what has NOT been realised from a plan.’ In the Manhattan Plan, the motorways were omitted — although this was due to fierce protest from residents of the North Quarter. The urban platform and the plinth with social facilities were soon dropped due to budget cuts. The housing blocks can hardly be considered as a social mix. To sum up: the public facilities implemented according to plan were limited to the road works and the sewerage system.

History threatens to repeat itself in the North Quarter. The dream of modernism has been placed with the bulk waste in the meantime. Once again, the North Quarter has become the chosen laboratory. The gaping emptiness of WTC Tower 1 is considered the ideal stage for the new dream of ecology, sustainability, liveliness, productive cities and whatever. The building is a testing ground where social problems can be solved in a few exciting scenarios. The building is the manifestation of the ambition to take action. ‘The future is here’ is written in giant letters on the glass façade. Meanwhile, the interests of the stakeholders disappear into the background. The same players responsible for half a century of stagnation in the North Quarter present themselves today as key inciters for the future.

Isn’t it time that we find the courage to render the interests of the North Quarter visible in the plans for the future? The question is not only which qualities the North Quarter needs in the future. First and foremost, the question is to whom we entrust the question and what guarantees

they provide. Stating that the atmosphere in the North Quarter could become more lively or more sustainable is like breaking an open door. The demolition of the former Baudouin Building is the ultimate symbol of the efficient stupidity that lies at the origin of the quarter. The new plans for WTC towers 1 and 2, where 51N4E was added to Jaspers-Eyers, are still on the waiting line. The design is now in the hands of the building permit department of the city administration. Participation in the design was not even considered. The rise in ambition gets the benefit of the doubt. We already know the key question: What was NOT realised from the exaggerated ambitions?

INTERMEZZO:
ACTION AT SAINT ROCH

176 This intervention by the Manhappen Studio at the new Saint-Rochus Church on the Chaussée d'Anvers (Brussels) happened in the shadow of the official opening 'You Are Here' as part of IABR-2018+2020 – THE MISSING LINK in Brussels. The morning after (2 June 2018) the Bolivar Square was open for cars again and children could no longer swim in the fountain (the slogan 'No pool is no cool' was certainly prophetic). Junkspace was restored as the creatives and food trucks left the theatre. Around the corner, a group of students put up the poster of the old Saint Roch church, demolished in 1971 to make place for the so-called Manhattan Plan, in front of the new Saint Roch church, a refurbished hangar opened in 1995. The church made the news a few years ago by serving as a shelter for illegal refugees. In accompanying interviews, locals discuss the name of the non-square that apparently has no name. People simply refer to it by the bus stop 'Nicolaï'. Others suggest calling it Place CDA (the Chaussée d'Anvers cuts through the square), la Terrace or Place O Sole Mio (the Italian pizzeria). Against the wall of the monstrous North Gate government building (a piece of hyper architecture designed by none other than Jaspers-Eyers) a poster was put up with a super save from the Red Devils goalkeeper. Children helped to put the poster up and began to use it immediately, as a fantasy screen

for a play. An old lady has no time to join the happening as she catches the bus, but nods in agreement.

The action derives from the Sofa Talk with Albert Martens, who finished with the suggestion to draw the outlines of the old Saint Roch Church on Simon Bolivar Boulevard, along which the WTC towers stand.



THE FUTURE IS (NOT) HERE

Joachim Declerck on the future of the North Quarter and design practice

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The temporary use of the WTC is coming to an end. On 4 January 2019, the technical installations will be stopped and the tower must be evacuated by that time. The students have mixed emotions. One can feel their resignation about the imminent closure and yet one is hopeful about the follow-up. What next? All users are looking for alternative, temporary accommodation. The plinth of WTC3 and 4, the vacant CCN, the shopping mall of the North Station, the KANAL culture pole and other flight lines are discussed. The question remains as to what exactly will happen with the WTC complex. After experiencing one-and-a-half years of WTC24, students began to identify with the 'Bruxellisation' icon of the '70s. At the time of the Sofa Talk with Joachim Declerck, the design by 51N4E is still secret. It is an ideal moment to organise a retrospective at the beginning moment. We invite Joachim Declerck to take a seat on the sofa, the director of Architecture Workroom Brussels (AWB) who has held office for one and a half years at WTC16 and a co-curator of the 'You Are Here' manifestation that took place in the WTC as part of the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR).

The question about the future of the WTC should not solely concern the redevelopment of the complex (design under preparation by Jaspers-Eyers and

51N4E), but it should also focus on the immediate future for its temporary use. The reason to evacuate the WTC Tower was a calculation in which the added value of the temporary use did not outweigh the heavy financial burden of keeping the technical installations in operation (ventilation, electricity, water, lifts, ...). The renovation works will probably not start before 2020. Joachim Declerck reacts somewhat resignedly, 'It shows our fragile position in the WTC. The building remains an Excel sheet, a tool for profit creation.' The proposition of the You Are Here manifestation was to complete an architectural walk through the WTC complex, thereby allowing many people to cross the threshold of a formerly closed-off premises. The property owner Befimmo went along with the story, as part of their aspiration with Up4North to rethink the future of the North Quarter, but one day they did settle the bill.



In the evaluation, Joachim Declerck remains optimistic, as the eighteen months of temporary use of a few floors does break with trends. 'In the new developers' slang, this is called multi-tenant occupation', says Joachim Declerck, 'something

that until now has been regarded as difficult and complex on the office market.’ The temporary use of the building brought together many different, small tenants onto one floor, and that requires a completely different business model. Over the past few decades, property owners have been keen to conclude long-term leases with government administrations, often for a period of eighteen years or longer. In such a context of guaranteed profit, there was not the least need to think about the future, let alone consider multiple-space usage.

The stagnation in the North Quarter cannot be attributed solely to the real-estate developer. The facility services of the government bear an equally great share of the responsibility. Joachim Declerck says, ‘The government has the power, the tools and the regulations to initiate change, but it behaves like a zapper watching television and choosing between buildings X, Y or Z.’ Today there is a lot of movement in the North Quarter because some long-term contracts will soon expire and the Flemish and Brussels authorities are entering the market in their search for new accommodation. The Brussels architect Kristiaan Borret takes this as an opportunity to make clear that a real-estate project in the North Quarter will no longer be judged on the basis of the aesthetics of the glass façade, but on how it functions as an urban project. As part of the tendering process, a government must impose a visionary framework

on the building market.

Architecture Workroom Brussels (AWB) has taken the initiative for Lab-North, a partnership between Up4North (the non-profit left-hand of Befimmo and other real-estate owners in the North Quarter), Vraiment Vraiment, 51N4E and AWB. LabNorth is aimed at initiating a reflection on how to transform the North Quarter into a lively and inclusive district. It was in this context that the temporary use of the WTC Tower, that started years ago with artists on the 26th floor, got extended with the organisation of the AWB and 51N4E office space (at 16), the ‘You Are Here’ manifestation and the organisation of the so-called ‘World Transformation Center’ (in the plinth and on the 23th floor), KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture (24) and later the gathering architects, creative people and civil organisations (at 17, 18 and 25). The roof terrace was subsequently opened for festivities. Joachim Declerck describes the role of the AWB as an ‘instigator, rather than a consumer’. The aim was to attract attention to a positive urban project for the North Quarter.

Surprisingly, Joachim Declerck also considers a change in the field of architecture to be necessary. ‘Extensive reflection does not fit into the business model of the architectural profession’, says Joachim Declerck. Architecture competitions always run the danger of sliding into beauty contests and architecture magazines leave little room for the big narratives. Joachim Declerck provocatively calls it a ‘negationism in which

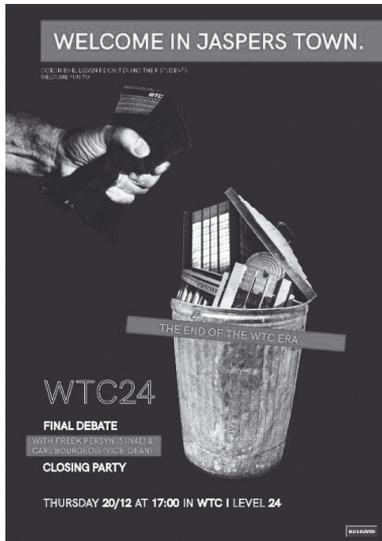
we [architects] are only concerned with the feasible'. It is within such a culture that architects (like Vincent Callebaut) easily get away with a wafer-thin story about sustainability, green façades and other ecological gadgets. Negationism is also present in the architecture of good taste, particularly when an architecture that tickles the imagination appears to be reduced to a commodity (think of the round villa of Office KGDVS).

The answer of AWB lies in what Joachim Declerck defines as a 'democracy of doing'. Achieving the climate objectives — part of the Summer Agreement of the Flemish government — is a case in point. In this case, people often think in terms of direct results, such as the electrification of the vehicle fleet, in order to 'actively not want to know what is coming at you'. In contrast, the aim of 'You Are Here' was 'to create a meaningful context' in which architects were placed to further the cause of sustainable transition. Transformation sessions were held focusing on waterscapes, the circular economy, biodiversity, sprawl and much more. The set-up was the development of a chain of causation that would stir actors and call them to action: developing working methods, designing questions, defining projects, identifying actors, building coalitions, connecting money, tools and people, and so forth. If the temporary use of the WTC was instrumental for one thing, it was about functioning as a cultural incubator for a discursive design practice that aimed to formulate the right question and bring the right people together.

7

THE END OF THE WTC ERA

Freek Persyn and Carl Bourgeois on the cohabitation of education and practice in the North Quarter



The temporary use of the WTC tower is to expire. On 4 January 2019, the technical installations will be stopped as the temporary use does not outweigh the costs. Artists, architects, students and other temporary users are looking for another location. WTC24 has already been largely evacuated. In this context, Carl Bourgeois (vice-dean of the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture) and Freek Persyn (co-founder of 51N4E) take a seat on the sofa at the 24th floor (20/12/2018) to

talk about the one-and-a-half year experience of bringing architectural practice and education together in the Brussels North Quarter.

A retrospective look at the origins of the temporary use of WTC makes clear that both gentlemen, not without reason, have their own version of history.

Carl Bourgeois talks about the search by the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, Campus Sint-Lucas, for extra square metres of useful floor space. The point of departure was the limitations of the faculty's accommodation on Paleizenstraat, the so-called Meurop Building, named after the former furniture shop at that location. In the background, there was a year-long search for a specific identity, in terms of school infrastructure and pedagogy, that could grant Campus Brussels a defined place between Campus Ghent and Campus Leuven. The overnight decision to seize the opportunity to organise a temporary school *dépendance* at the WTC Tower formed the blueprint for what later became known as WTC24. It was basically a copy-paste of the school programme at Paleizenstraat.

Freek Persyn got involved after the two-week 'Hybrid Business Districts' workshop (February 2017) on the topic of 'Adaptive Reuse' organised by Hasselt University in the WTC towers. The classic idea of the reuse of religious heritage was translated into modernist office blocks. The TAD Tower in Albania, designed by 51N4E, was highlighted as an exemplary

project. Many different people were involved, such as Vermeir & Heiremans (part of the artist collective Wolke and Overtoon, active on WTC26 since 2016), Christoph Grafe (director of the Flemish Architecture Institute), Peter Swinnen (Flemish Government Architect), Oana Bogdan (Bogdan Van Broeck architects, was the author of a feasibility study for the Ferraris Building), Petra Pferdmeiges (Alive Architecture), etc. The initiative took place within the framework of the non-profit Up4North, a collaboration (since September 2016) between AG Real Estate, Allianz, AXA, Banimmo, Befimmo, Belfius Insurance, ImmoBel and Triuva, headed by Alain Deneef and Sven Lenaerts. Freek Persyn says: ‘They [the landowners] are competitors, but they do share a sense of urgency: i.e. to generate public attention for the North Quarter.’

The divergent origin stories somehow hint at the fact that the ambitions of both architectural practice and architectural education never came together completely during the one and a half years of cohabitation in the WTC.

51N4E’s approach was entrepreneurial. The Adaptive Reuse workshop was the trigger for setting up LabNorth, a collaboration between Up4North, VraimentVraiment, 51N4E and Architecture Workroom Brussels (AWB). Freek Persyn says: ‘It was not just about cheap space, but to prove that diversity and mixed use in the North Quarter is feasible, using your own presence as an architect to activate the neighbourhood and establish alliances among diverse actors.’

The try-out caused what Persyn calls a ‘productive conflict’, since Sven Lenaerts (Up4North) was not at all prepared for the heavy logistics and security involved in the temporary use of the towers, especially with regard to opening the roof terrace (on top of the plinth) as a public space for the IABR exhibition.

The approach by KU Leuven’s Faculty of Architecture was based on self-reflection. Carl Bourgeois emphasises the notion of a ‘school being a sanctuary’ and finds it important to protect that in order to provide a ‘safe place for students’. Also, from a technical perspective, it was quite a challenge to organise education in an office environment, with the ventilation switching off after working hours. Given the relatively high cost for renting the floor, the Faculty made the decision from the start not to provide administrative and technical staff. The WTC24 dépendance had to function without a reception or a back office. Turning need into virtue, self-organization became the watchword. Carl Bourgeois presented the empty floor as an ideal playground for ‘experiments with practices’. Someone in the public adds: ‘The openness of the floor became the main programme of the Faculty.’

The contrasting interests and desires are reflected in the contracts regulating the temporary use of the WTC Tower with the Faculty of Architecture acting as a tenant (consumer) and AWB/51N4E acting as a service provider (producer). For KU Leuven’s Faculty of Architecture, the initial rental costs were roughly _50,000, with added costs for the minimal

provision of a kitchen, printer, panels, tables, chairs, etc. In contrast, AWB and 51N4E enjoyed a service contract offering 'free' space in return. In the case of the AWB, the service was to drum up attention for the North Quarter and to have people visiting the building (which happened in the context of the IABR exhibition and its public programme).



In the evaluation of the asymmetric cohabitation, the important issue is not so much the number of zeros in the contract, but the obvious question: is it conceivable that a university would also provide services in the context of the temporary use of the WTC? Again, the opinions diverge. Freek Persyn gives a straight forward, positive answer: 'Yes, a school can provide dialogue, experimentation and inspiration, all the things a market player lacks.' Carl Bourgeois is equally clear in swearing by the 'safe atmosphere for students'. Strikingly, both visions do not exclude each other, as the school sanctuary is perhaps the best way to organise dialogue, experimentation and inspiration. In that respect, Freek Persyn expresses

regret about one thing: 'During our stay of one and a half years in the WTC, we failed to set up a common space.' In the end, the cohabitation of architectural practice and education was limited by having only the lift and roof terrace as the space for spontaneous cross-pollination.

Critical reactions concern the opposite question: has the presence of KU Leuven's Faculty of Architecture yielded nothing in terms of attention for the North Quarter? Petra Pferdmenges intervenes in the debate, arguing affirmatively: 'Like nobody else, we did animate the parties on the floors, on the rooftop and in the neighbourhood.' Which brings us to the follow-up question: did property owner Befimmo not derive any benefit from the presence of the Faculty of Architecture on the floor? Here Lieven De Caeter intervenes: 'We had great pleasure, and we also did a great service to capitalism... they [property owners] should have paid for our stay at WTC.'

A final question in the evaluation of the stay at WTC concerns the inheritance. Someone in the public asks: 'Is temporary use only fast food or does temporary use also have lasting power?'

After the closure of the WTC was announced, there was a great deal of enthusiasm among the occupants for a 'permanent temporariness'. Befimmo/Up4North organised information sessions on the temporary use of other vacant facilities available in the North Quarter, such as the plinth of WTC3 & 4, the

NMBS Museum, the vacant CCN, the former cycle service station besides the North Station, etc. Finally, all occupants swarm out. A lot of architects moved from WTC26 to an empty office space in the North Station. 51N4E and AWB ended up in a new but empty office building on Guimardstraat, using the building before it was introduced onto the market. The KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture will move to KANAL Centre Pompidou, together with its sister faculties of UCL and ULB, organising an 'Interfaculty Lab' in the former Citroën garage until the construction works kick off there as well.

An entirely different sequel lies in the question of whether the 'temporary' can be converted into something 'permanent'. In answer to this question, Freek Persyn reacts enthusiastically and points to the design for the renovation of the WTC complex – at the time of the Sofa Talk not yet made public. Although Freek Persyn cannot yet go into the detail, he insists: 'The design is completely informed by our presence here at the WTC.' It is an important victory, as it was initially feared that 51N4E's collaboration with Jaspers-Eyers would be limited to the design of the façade. Persyn continues: 'We thought we could change the neighbourhood, but after all the neighbourhood did change us more.'