

The Forum, or the Figuration of a Public Architecture

These seem to be prosperous times for architecture. Even in the Flanders region – once considered the paradigmatic battleground of ‘laissez-faire’ and ‘wilde bouwen’¹ – it has clearly made it onto the agenda. Quite transparent selection procedures are being applied in granting design commissions for new public institutions. The stakes are set high for the most visible patrimony. Virtually no museum, concert hall or courthouse can be built without the legitimisation of an international architecture competition. At this level, expectations are high. The success story of the Guggenheim in Bilbao haunts the imaginations of policy makers. Suddenly it is conceivable that a building could have enough appeal to attract a stream of visitors and revive the local economy. Architecture has become part of urban development strategies. Cities want to count for more than what the catalogue of their collections and the register of their amenities hold out. They want to distinguish themselves individually, and they strive for recognisability in their spatial peculiarities and the specificity of their buildings.

The renewed interest in the effects of architecture, however, is matched by a faint-hearted husbandry of public property. It is not just obsolete patrimony that is being thoughtlessly discarded.² Recently – even before it had been completed – the courthouse of Antwerp was sold to a stock-market-listed real estate management firm.³ In the case of new requirements, the burden of investment, even the commissioning authority is increasingly being handed off to private enterprise. For instance, a very extensive modernization operation for the Flemish public schools is to be entirely entrusted to a consortium of financiers and developers.⁴ The government is becoming a tenant of its own lodgings, the community and its institutions leaseholders of private capital. In an era of mandatory reductions in state debt, rental expenses apparently are less problematic than investments. Nevertheless, manoeuvring room in balancing the budget is limited by strict EU regulations. To prevent the hidden growth of debt, the maximum lease period has been fixed at 19 years. In real terms, this situation favours a generic architecture. Rather than being designed for a specific use, a building leased by the government is actually destined to be marketed.⁵ Perhaps schools will start looking like office buildings. In any event, the presumption that architecture should imbue a programme and a societal or institutional condition is being undermined, negating the very notion of a public patrimony.

Paradoxically enough, the two phenomena are related. The demand for a spectacular implementation of architecture and the loss of interest in its potential public significance are linked like the two sides of the same coin. In the context of a consumptive culture, the value of any industry is evaluated according to market criteria. Building is aimed at meeting demands. It creates facilities and offers durable comfort. All of this is quantifiable. What architecture contributes is not so readily expressed. Yet just as the value of other cultural products is quantified by means of viewer ratings or visitor numbers, the significance of architecture is measured by its earnings. The labour of building produces infrastructure; that of architecture sensational form and allure. Architecture appends lustre to things; much lustre is glitter, and sometimes spectacle.

Under the terms of the facilitating perspective that now dominates every activity, the issue of the art of building has been reduced to a question of utility and prestige. Few architects will be happy about this, but a persistent doubt as to the possibility and the necessity of basing architecture on ethical foundations prevents them from offering resistance. These days their attention and energy are focused on their professional profile. As a profession, architects want to stand out through their specific competence in providing buildings with a purpose-driven functionality, elegant lines and a tasteful adornment. Here then architecture is civilized comfort. On occasion, professional design expertise can be applied to offer distraction and spectacle. Architects are uncommonly successful at this. More than ever before, their products are finding their way into the lifestyle sections of magazines and their accomplishments discussed in audiovisual media.

All of this makes architecture, alas, at least as suspect as it is desirable. In a societal system where, in principle, it is supposed to vouchsafe the quality of every building, it is being made to answer for the anaemia and the lack of significance of the built environment. Architects seem to be contemptuous of basic issues and to reserve their energies for a few select commissions. Worse still, they are sometimes suspected of abusing the exigencies of the construction and the programme to serve their own fame. It would thus seem imperative, where construction needs apply, to keep architecture out of the picture or at least limit its scope.⁶ Its costly interventions would then only come into play if there were a surplus of financial resources and the client cherished lofty ambitions.

A vainglorious concern for nice form and good taste disempowers architecture and compels it to negotiate its involvement. This mindset also hinders any reassessment of its current task. Most of the

time, a few ready-made or stale metaphors suffice to complacently satisfy any expectations still based on a vague remembrance of its societal engagement. Yet the question of whether architecture can make a critical contribution to contemporary culture is seldom raised.

Recently, the outcome of the international architecture competition for the design of the 'Forum for Music, Dance and Visual Culture' in Ghent demonstrated a remarkable convergence of a longing entirely predicated on the effects of architecture and a far-reaching indifference to its potential significance. The competition, launched with great ambitions, was called off without fanfare in its final phase. The course correction has been entrusted to the vision of project developers.

In many respects, nonetheless, the Forum project was carefully prepared. Consultations with the cultural sector at the Flanders and Ghent level were conducted before determining the Forum's artistic mission. Following a call for candidacies, five architects associations were invited to take part in the final phase of the selection in the autumn of 2003. The designs of Toyo Ito (Tokyo) & Andrea Branzi (Milan), Samyn & Partners (Brussels) and Neutelings-Riedijk Architecten (Rotterdam) were accepted. The project by Claus & Kaan Architecten (Amsterdam) was rejected because of its foreseen cost. For the reason that it had been submitted after the deadline, the proposal by OMA (Rotterdam) was disqualified. In 2004 Neutelings-Riedijk Architecten were named winners of the competition. Since then, the Flemish Community, through its Minister of Culture, Bert Anciaux, has withdrawn its support from the project. There won't be a Forum. There had been doubts about the financial feasibility of the project from the start. An ambitious project is by definition fragile, and what is worse than its failure is the way in which public debate on this issue has been conducted since.

Plans are now being made for another crown jewel to garnish the city. A brand-new library and media centre would complement the city's cultural amenities. In an opinion article, Willem Jan Neutelings and Michiel Riedijk expressed their reservations about the decision to entrust the project to developers: 'The unfortunate result of this sort of public buildings developed by "the market" can be seen all over Brussels. The fact is that a city's public interest is not always in synch with the shareholder value a market player strives for. Moreover, to an internationally renowned architect, nothing is more fatal than to fall into the clutches of a local developer. In Antwerp, examples of a second-rate Michael Graves and a third-rate Richard Meier are on display.'⁷ In the same article, they call for the design commission for the library/media centre to be awarded according to the results of the Forum competition or else for the organisation of an additional competition stage among the five designers previously selected from the pack of international candidates. Their plea fell on deaf ears.

Beyond the impact of hard budgetary reality, in any event, the idea of a thoughtful and well-founded design choice seems to have been long abandoned. The Ghent city authorities are hiding behind the excuse of time constraints in order to avoid the issue. On the dubious pretext that the winning project for the Forum had not been received with unanimous enthusiasm by critics and the profession anyway, the minister of Culture is showing no compunction in making public his personal preference for the Ito-Branzi team. Nevertheless, if we can expect anything more out of architecture than a slavish manufacture of facilities and the occasional presentation of visual spectacle, the divisions inherent in a discussion are yielding benefits. Authentic cultural products are being hammered out in the fire of the dispute, streamlined and tempered by the remarks of the debate.

In the Forum competition programme, project manager Gerard Mortier linked the events that were to take place in this 'performance hall for the future' with the notion of the 'community'. The show, the dance, the music are not simply experienced individually – they are the instigators of a collective sensation and a shared experience. The 'performance' is the product of a culture that feeds on its own fruits. From a potential collective rapture might bud the opportunity to break open the formal framework of society. Art is a public matter. The brief stipulates that architecture should be a part of this. It can initiate and mediate this experience. The full ambition of the project is summed up in its name. The 'Forum' is a collection point and a gathering place, a place where public matters are experienced and discussed. It should simultaneously embed itself into and stand out from the 'course of everyday life'.

Mortier goes on to stress that this place must be "entered": 'crossing the threshold – possible for everyone, but indispensable as an action – must give the audience the feeling that they are moving in an art landscape and thus behaving differently than in an open public place (...)' The threshold is as much a passage as it is a hurdle. It is how the architecture that puts it in place asserts its presence. Yet it is simultaneously how it lends materiality to a place. It makes it comprehensible and legible. The place is embodied and displayed by architecture. Architecture too is a public performance. Joseph Rykwert calls attention to the fact that the models we put forward to encapsulate the phenomenon of the city veil the conditions of our responsibility for its form. The formation of the city is

not a steady process, as suggested by such notions as that of a quasi-natural organic growth or of a system continuously secreting space. The city is formed in fits and starts, in spurts of localised activity. Both its mass and its open space were settled by people. All the things that comprise it were desired and decided at some point, in all their fragments, segments and bifurcations. It is a fabric, and it is in this guise that it presents itself to its residents and its visitors. 'Appreciated, seen, touched, smelled, penetrated, whether consciously or unconsciously, this fabric is a tangible representation of that intangible thing, the society that lives in it – and of its aspirations.'⁸

This is how the city tells the story of the community that formed it over the course of time. The architecture of the city is therefore eminently political. What it should be about, then, is the question of what it makes present, what it embodies and displays, what it signifies through and within its form and how it represents the public realm and the community.

The Forum competition produced five projects, each seeking its own balance and coherence in the face of a complex question and an intricate set of conditions. Ultimately the interpretation of a modular hall was to be the deciding factor in the contest. Yet our attention focuses on something else. It is compelling to note the fact that all of the designs were elaborated on the basis of specific assumptions and propositions in regard to the community and the collective. Each of them strives to identify the notion of a public architecture in its components and to adopt an appropriate posture. In doing so, they actualise an issue that has been excluded from current expectations and the common discourse. They offer an opportunity to examine the extent to which architecture can still provide a foundation for the definition of the collective.

The Forum was supposed to be implanted in the Waalse Krook. The site lies along the River Schelde, at the broad turning where the Ketelvaart flows into it.⁹ This ancient moat now runs through the centre of the city, but it still has an impact on the accessibility of the place. Because of the pattern of the waterways and its location on the flank of the Blandijnberg, the Krook has always been an out-of-the-way spot. The 19th-century development round the Zuidstation rail terminal did not include the site in its scenographic layout. The clearing of the Zuidkwartier area in the early 1990s was more focused on the benefits of new infrastructures than on an integral revaluation. Nevertheless, a whole comprising a direct connection to the E40/E17 motorway interchange, a large underground garage, an important transfer hub for public transport, a shopping centre, a public administration centre and a municipal library restored the role the Zuid area fulfilled when the rail terminus still existed. It has once more become a focal point: a forecourt for the old city centre. It is the place where Ghent makes visible its position as a regional centre.

While the promotional regeneration of the Zuid area has left the site of the Krook untouched, it has also inadvertently brought it into full view. Unused, dilapidated industrial buildings and old workers' houses seem to sit in patient expectation of new inspiration. The link with the city's fabric and the access to the Zuid area were an important focus for the Forum project. In order to make it all possible, a new river crossing over the Schelde was envisioned. In addition, the desired interpretation of the building was set out to a significant extent in advance. In the project definition, it was described as two-fold: a modular hall, contained within a shell that defines the distance and creates the link to the surrounding urban environment. The brief referred to Sharoun's Philharmonic in Berlin in order to sketch the image of a labyrinthine public space that 'inevitably' leads to the hall. For the hall itself, the metaphor of the spaceship was used. It was to be hermetically sealed and accessible solely through acoustic airlocks. An adaptable capacity (from 800 to 1,800 spectators) and configuration were to be made part of the spectacle. 'The word kaleidoscope is fitting in this regard. (...) The absolute modular capability of the performance hall creates a permanent interaction between the spectator and the performer.'

The project by Claus & Kaan is a meticulous rendition of these conditions. The designers claim to have applied a dual logic in a radical way. The hall has been developed from the inside out, while the surrounding spatial shell is meant to be tailored to the city. The entire production and support apparatus of the Forum is contained within the shell. The audience is guided around the shrine-like hall by an open traffic system. The complex of pathways and spots has been designed in continuity with the public space. On the ground floor, the design strives for connection with the adjoining streets. The 'landscape' of floating and overhanging platforms, voids, receding partitions, escalators and stairways is meant to provide a spatial spectacle, but its disparate and scattered configuration lacks architectural definition. It only comes into its own in the moments when the audience converges, when space and mass fuse into a frenzied spectacle. Urbanness is equated with the display of congestion. None of this may be lost. The project definition stipulated that 'the movement of visitors within this architectural

landscape should be visible from the outside without verging into an aquarium effect.' The outer skin is made entirely of glass. Silkscreen techniques and movable gold wire-netting panels would allow a precise management of the transparency.

The building rises vertically from the site's outline. The designers intend this to imbed the building in the organic structure of the city. This detail probably accentuates its rupture with the brick city. The glass façades flow into high, sharply angled roof shapes. Their peaks would blend naturally into Ghent's roofscape. A sketch is supposed to prove this. Yet the intended kinship between the pointy shape and the sawtooth expanse of Ghent's roofs is confined to the graphic lines of this single drawing. A night-time view shows the Forum during the performance: an oddly faceted lantern, a 'Kristalhaus' that seems to have been fished out of the dust in Bruno Taut's archives. The time when revolutionary virtues could be attributed to glass architecture is past; that contextuality is now being ascribed to it is new.

Toyo Ito & Andrea Branzi's Forum shows a number of striking similarities with the Claus & Kaan project, but with more consistency. It consolidates the complicated outline of the site within the building's contours in the same way. A glass façade is similarly positioned along this line. The building is a vertical extrusion of the site. The curtain façade's array of jambs underscores this operation. Here too, transparency and reflection are to determine the visibility of what goes on inside the building. But the separation created by the façade line is not ignored. The façade surfaces are the boundaries of a separate world. The designers describe the interior system of the building as a system of caves. The organic scale structure of concrete creates two complementary, branching spaces. The sharp incision of the glass façade demonstrates the contiguity and the labyrinthine quality of the correlated spatial systems. In this case, rather than a fictitious continuity, an analogy with the city is presented. Urbanness does not need to be staged and directed here. The analogue is a complex of coulisses – not the place where the formal connectedness of a community is professed. In Ito and Branzi's '*cour des miracles*' the collective is splintered, in order to bring the loner before the seductions of the unknown.

The effectiveness of the system is entirely dependent on its expanse and its depth. The performance hall cannot be allowed to undermine it, and therefore it has been installed in the largest void. This inevitability locks the hall into a spatial singularity that unfortunately precludes the requisite 'absolute modular capability'.

Samyn & Partners also aim for an affiliation with the city. Their Forum is the only one of the projects that cannot simply be described as a single object. It presents itself as a conglomerate. It occupies the entire site. The circulation routes are laid through, around and over it. The different units of the programme are linked together by the movement of the crowd flow. An inner plaza and a gallery articulate the complex. This kind of simulation of urban motifs has been used in stereotyped applications since the mid-1970s. Countless hospitals, service centres, cinema complexes and shopping malls derive their layout and an illusory accessibility from it.

The outline of the plan shows an agglomeration that manages to nestle within the organism of the quarter. However, the division presented in the plan and the interior is contradicted by the building's appearance. The elliptical hall and the workshop wings are enclosed under a continuous, curved roof surface. The uniform grey zinc cladding serves to create an overall effect. The surging contours and the rhythm of the vertical slit windows culminate in the gigantic window cut into the high convex wall of the hall. This display presents a framed image of the city. Urbanness is a performance. The ability to highlight this should redound to architecture's honour. But here consideration is overwhelmed by celebration. The momentum the architecture takes is one driven by bravado. A becoming desire to make the expansive complex blend into the urban environment is unseemly pushed aside by a compulsion toward monumentality.

Monumentality is also a component of the proposal by Neutelings-Riedijk. In this case it can be ascribed to the unabashed visibility given to the scale of the project. In essence, the Forum is a large shed. The hall, with its trapezoid profile, is the airspace spanned by the stack of all the other programme components. Little distinction is made between the arrangement of the public spaces and the set-up of the production apparatus. They combine to form the solid mass of the construction. The grim order imposed on the internal corridors, the foyers, the coat-check facilities and the promenades are not exactly the 'labyrinthine landscape' the project definition asked for.¹⁰ The project avoids any expression or expectation in regard to the audience it is supposed to receive, which the facilities subject to a minimal but indispensable conditioning. The interior is a prescribed passage that separates the crowd into fractions and indicates seating for the performance. The space itself is

conceived as an urban interior: the first and last configuration of the modular hall is its openness directed at the surroundings. The occasional or ceremonial opening of the hall encroaches on its resilient virtuality. The movable floor of the Forum is a stipulated urban spot. The Zuid area is often described as an interface of friction between the nebulous city and the core city. Anyway friction is inherent in all contemporary urban phenomena. Yet, an urban setting can lend a singular legibility to this, and so can architecture. A design can strive for this. With a capacity as high as 1,800 seats, the Forum is made for an audience recruited on a regional scale. The Forum is a place of intensification: the residents of the extensive network city are treated to urban spectacle. The critical outcome incidentally touched on by the Samyn & Partners project is presented as the theme here. Urbanness is thus a performance. The attention Neutelings-Riedijk devote to the stage-management of the surroundings is significant in this regard. A 'three-bridge plaza' articulates the link with the Zuid. The bridge segment leading to the Krook opens onto a raised platform. An open-air tribune grandstand faces the building. There is no question of integration into the surroundings here. The scenography brings the Forum onto the stage. Its role is the embodiment of the spectacle city. Why should its supposed dearth of iconography be lamented? Everything has already been said. The upholstery of the building is the costume that adds lustre to its appearance.¹¹

OMA's project makes no effort to improve the accessibility of the Krook. The complications of the existing link with Ghent's urban fabric are accepted and even reinforced. The site is excavated and sacrificed to the Schelde. The Forum rises, steep-flanked, out of the water. It is extraordinarily visible, but the public has to go into the city in order to reach it. The Forum in this case has no ambitions of telling stories about the collective. OMA uses the means of modern building technology to take architecture back to texture and shape. Architecture, after all, has forfeited its referential capacity through numerous infamous entanglements. Silence is an antidote for spectacle. So the Forum enters the stage of the city to show itself. Instead of an edifice, it presents itself as a telluric formation encircled by water, through which it seems to form a link with the Gravensteen castle situated on the other side of the Kuip. The public realm is not a stable fact; urbanness is not a consumer product permanently in stock. It emerges in the situations and in the places of its regeneration. The Counts' fortress was not the sort of building that we would now call public, but many burghers chose to settle under its protection, spurring the development of Ghent's Portus area. Contemporary urbanness can grow out of the limited but shared interest that brings many to converge on the Forum at the same time.

In the public building, the realization of the community is restituted as a likeness. The collective is outlined by what it brings into being. It can see itself in its architecture. This is given as a principle. Yet the portrait is of a different order than the model. The elaboration of this order is a task that concerns architecture. Now that it must go without stable references, it is no wonder that it is neglecting this obligation. Nonetheless, the Forum competition has achieved a remarkable result. In terms of the thorny issue of the significance of architectural form, three of the designs adopt sharply defined positions. They rise to the challenge the public debate has to dispense with. Neutelings-Riedijk Architecten recapitulate the scepticism of contemporary architecture. Even as they devise a prototype, they question whether it is possible to anchor it within a disbanded city. Iconography and scenography must resolve this dilemma. The failings of city and architecture are liquidated in an 'exotic theatre'. Ito & Branzi present themselves as their opponents.¹² They bravely put architectonic means to use to create substance as yet. Architecture must provide a foundation for events and experience. The place is demarcated as a reservation, where a fraction of traditional urbanness is preserved. Their forum is a relic in a display case. OMA doesn't take sides, but it keeps score.¹³ Solidity presupposes materiality. Substance is mass. It sets down a shape and occupies a place. Here, only the interior is a spectacle machine. Outside, the city's life can go on undisturbed.

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¹ The Dutch characterization of Flanders's unregulated building practice.

² A striking example is the sale of the National Administration Centre and Finance Tower in Brussels. The giant 'bureaucrat city' (1954-70, Design by Groep Alpha: Stijnen (until 1958), Ricquier, Van Kuyck, Lambrichs, Gilson) gradually emptied out in the wake of federal reforms and the regionalisation of administrative departments.

³ Design by Richard Rogers Partnership, 1998-2006

⁴ The planned operation is budgeted at 1 billion Euro. The examples are but a few of the many that could be presented here.

⁵ As this trend is facilitated by EU regulation, it is by no means specific to the Flanders region.

⁶ For some this is already the case. In spite of their overwhelming impact on the spatial environment, the design of large infrastructure projects is entrusted almost exclusively to engineers.

⁷ Cf. 'Het beste forum' in *De Standaard*, 12 February 2006

⁸ Joseph Rykwert in *The Seduction of Place*, New York, 2000, p. 6

⁹ The Ketelvaart canal was excavated around 1100 as the final section of Ghent's first defence moat. It connects the rivers Leie and Schelde. At the time, it formed the boundary between the Portus, which developed on the Zandberg, and the domain of the Abbey of St. Peter, which was located on the Blandijnberg.

¹⁰ The project attracted much criticism because of this aspect. Koen Van Synghele ('Een speeltje voor een verlicht despoet' in *De Standaard*, 7 October 2004) describes the programme here as 'stacked without inspiration' and says there is 'no hint of an architectural promenade through the building'. Pieter T'Jonck takes up the criticism ('Het circus rond de Krook' in *De Tijd*, 25 November 2004): 'The connections between the lower and upper levels consist of four boring stairwells and lift shafts. The passage along the building is a depressing corridor.'

¹¹ Cf. Van Synghele in *ibidem*: 'The misplaced Hollywood monumentality and the ostentatious Memphis design...'; T'Jonck in *ibidem*: 'This gigantic concrete tent, drenched in a Hollywoodian Art Deco sauce...'

¹² The discussion has been taken up in the realm of architecture theory. Viewed in contrast to the Neutelings-Riedijk design, the work by Ito & Branzi embodies the viewpoint expressed by Kenneth Frampton in *Rappel à l'ordre, the case of tectonics* (in *Architectural Design*, vol. 60, nrs. 3/4, 1990, pp. 19-25; reprinted in *Labour, Work and Architecture: Collected Essays on Architecture and Design*, London/New York, 2000, pp. 90-103). The article begins as follows: 'I have elected to address the issue of tectonic form for a number of reasons, not least of which is the current tendency to reduce architecture to scenography. This reaction arises in response to the universal triumph of Robert Venturi's decorated shed; that all too prevalent syndrome in which shelter is packaged like a giant commodity.' Frampton has delved further into the case in *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, Cambridge (Mass.)/ London, 1995.

¹³ The terms of the 'Substance/Sign/Mass' discussion are eminently expounded in the interview of D. Scott Brown and R. Venturi by R. Koolhaas and H.U. Obrist, *Re-learning from Las Vegas* (in AMOMA/Rem Koolhaas, *Content*, Köln, 2004, pp. 150-157, published previously in Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffery Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong, *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping vol.2*, Köln, 2001, pp. 590-617). In the interview Venturi argues that the Vegas of today is less relevant than it was in the 1960s and 1970s, because of the shift from 'iconography to scenography' (compare with footnote 11: Venturi seems to want to pre-empt Frampton with this observation; for an earlier description of this shift, see Venturi and Scott Brown, *Las Vegas after its Classic Age*, in *Domus*, Nov. 1996, pp. 9-12). 'Scenography is not necessarily bad – the Place des Vosges is scenographic, and architecture, in a sense, does involve making scenes. The danger is that it becomes an exotic theatre rather than an actual place. (...) The challenge would be to do it well – authentically – today.' (op. cit. p. 157)