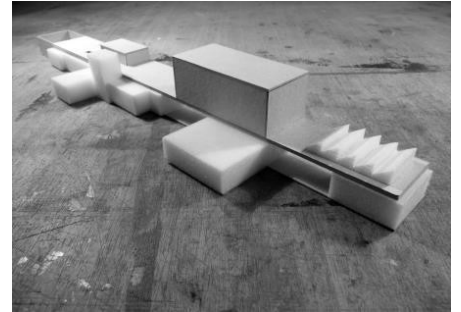


V+ - "STAGES OF AN ARCHITECTURAL TRAJECTORY"

In October 2010, the architectural firm V+ won the design competition for the renovation and extension of the museum and garden of 'cross-border life 1850-1950', in Mouscron, formerly called the 'Folklore Museum'. In June 2015, as the V+ exhibition opens in Bozar, construction is under way in Mouscron. The shell of the building has almost been completed, and the outline of the future edifice is already blending into the composite urban cityscape of this post-industrial city. Many months will be necessary before the long concrete volume with its crenelated profile becomes a museum, before the items in its collection find a place in it and acquire meaning, and before the public appropriates the space.



Writing

Events happen in one direction. (?) And the story continues in the other: the moments are no longer piling up haphazardly one on top of the other; rather, they are being drawn by the story's end that is attracting them and each one in turn is attracting the moment that precedes it.[1]

It goes without saying: the life of a building ? and the Museum of Mouscron is no exception ? begins long before and continues long after its official inauguration. Since it is expected, this transitory moment is a somewhat artificial event, one which architecture critics generally choose as a pretext for writing and whose importance they generally inflate. It is also something of a symbolic ritual that marks the chiasmus between the two traditional modes of existence of architecture: the discursive and hypothetical mode of its conception, and the tangible and pragmatic mode of its construction.

Yet this chronological and Manichaean division, typically modern, between idea and object, between thought and action, although mentally comfortable, fails to convey the complexity of the strange intellectual, temporal and social process that we still today call an architectural project. From its very first hypotheses, a project immediately leaves the realm of abstraction and takes the shape of countless representations, inscribes itself in successive states of mediation but, especially, mobilizes people, displaces things, transforms materials? even if at this stage they are only bits of cardboard, foam and Perspex; in return, the tangible, equivocal ground of reality is constantly interfering with its inner logic, putting both its

propositions and its parameters to the test. In short, in architecture, thinking and acting cannot be divided into a pure duality but are inextricably interlinked, and are immersed in many fields of interaction.

These rather general considerations are particularly evident in the case of V+. Since the firm's foundation in 1998, Jörn Bihain and Thierry Decuyper have seen this inherent hybridity not as a constraint, but as the engine of a committed and critical practice of architecture, which they prefer to define as ?a pragmatic approach to situations, i.e. the identification of the propensities of a space and the creation of collective negotiation dynamics.?[2]

How, under these conditions, is one to tell the story of a project? Is it even a story, considering the extent to which it consists of movements back and forth, of radical bursts of activity and unexpected compromises, of sudden accelerations and long sleeping phases, of internal dealings and external transactions? Neither linear nor diachronic, its process cannot be boiled down to the arc drawn between a clear point of origin and a definitive finality, between a design and a constructed form. A project is not a line but a point, an unstable point, a point of fusion. It is as though each of these moments ? whether of the first sketches or any other moment ? always contained its entire history, as though, at any moment, everything could be said about it.

Moving Visiting a museum is a matter of going from void to void.[3]

On 26 November 2014, in the late morning, an articulated lorry snakes its way with difficulty through downtown Mouscron, steeped in freezing fog. Through the narrow streets of this former village which blossomed during the golden age of textile, the interminable vehicle, fitted with a crane, seems colossal, monumental. With each bend in the road it sways its hips and looks like getting stuck between the houses, which are rarely more than one storey high. The lorry turns at the end of Rue du Luxembourg, entering the interior of the block, the car park that serves as the building site area. Once the steaming, rattling lorry has finally come to a halt, the driver eagerly unloads the pallets of bricks that will be used for the facing of the future museum. Opposite this dense heap, there is no building yet, but a big hole in the muddy soil. This long and profound groove, perfectly rectangular, measuring about 12 by 80 metres, and whose base is spiked with iron framework, marks the anticipated footprint of the building.

Like the lorry carrying the bricks, the museum slowly made its way across the city before arriving here. Founded by Léon Maes (1898?1956), a court clerk and local erudite, it first opened in a former cafe behind the town hall. In 1980, as an indirect consequence of the law on the fusion of the municipalities, it moved into a small street near the Grand Place, in the former house of the director of the municipal school of Mouscron-Centre, which itself had been turned into the Music Academy. In the small rooms of the large square

building, gathered under its four-sloped roof, its collection was once more put on display, like in the squares of a chessboard, in the form of picturesque reconstructions, dioramas staging all these dumb remains of a distant past in real-life situations. But the ongoing growth of the collection soon saturated the space and gradually forced certain departments of the museum into local annexes: the reserve collection into the attic housing the municipal archives, and the offices and the documentation centre into an adjacent former industrial building, rented by the municipality.

Following the 2002 decree which normalizes ?and, in a way, professionalizes ? Belgium's museums,[4] Véronique van de Voorde, the museum's curator since 1986, initiated a reflection which gradually led her to rethink the Museum of Mouscron from top to bottom, from the contents to the container. In 2008, an extension project at the back of the building, signed by the municipal architect but rejected by the curator, precipitated the organization of the public architecture competition, on a European scale, won by V+ in the autumn of 2010.

Soon to be filled by the vast folkloric collection, the large rectangular hole, which today guts the block, prefigures the next stage of this institutional journey, about 100 metres away, at the back of the current museum. Because, similarly to the other four finalists of the competition (Anorak, Baukunst, Herr/Monniez and AIUD), V+ chose not to graft the new building onto the old one, but to use its substance to reimagine the site. Two attitudes distinguish the projects submitted. The first (Baukunst, Anorak) consisted in heaping the programme onto a thick, vertical plot, with a small tower of sorts back off the street, and an isolated object in the interior landscape of the block, acting as a counterpoint to the cubic volume of the existing building. By contrast, the other attitude (V+, Herr/Monniez and AIUD) distributed the programme across horizontal, thin, linear buildings, liable to divide and recompose the block, but especially to configure the vast public hold of its free, somewhat unmoored spaces: the car park of the Music Academy, similar to a school playground; the ?Roussel' car park, a void left over by the demolition, in the late 2000s, of the eponymous textile factory; and the municipal park under development, a former property of doctor Lenoir, whose garden and picturesque villa, built in 1923, are now abandoned.

Dialoguing

We should finally be able to picture a building as a navigation through a controversial datascape (...) In this sense, a building project resembles much more a complex ecology than it does a static object in Euclidian space.[5]

In no way the competition's favourite, the team made up by V+ came out on top thanks to the blend of determination and openness that characterizes its proposal, but especially thanks

to its capacity to integrate the many heterogeneous and even contradictory parameters of the context and of the programme in a simple and unifying form: the drawn out and crenellated volume of the future museum will take its place in the continuity of the hangar that is currently occupied by the museum's administrative and documentation departments.

This position reinforces the importance of the small cobbled alley insinuating itself in the block along the right side of the existing building and naturally induces its linear prolongation, so that, from Rue des Brasseurs, visitors will access the future museum tangentially. As a result, it will appear neither as a static object nor as a focal point but rather as a vanishing line, opening up a certain depth instead of opposing a front.

Transversely, this same drawn-out volume will act as the interface between the Roussel car park, which will therefore be able to call itself a true 'esplanade', oriented towards the city centre, and the Lenoir Park, which will not have to call itself the 'Museum Park' to become so. Between the courtyard and the garden, in a sense, the elongated building will be able to regulate, with few means, the relations between these two environments, mineral and natural.

A rigorous process aimed at exhausting all possibilities and conducted in partnership with Taktyk Landscape+Urbanism, whose co-directors are members of the design team, led to this arrangement. Its obviousness transpires in the sketches made by Jörn Bihain for the competition, sketches whose 'ligne claire' is both abstract and evocative. 'I draw in order to test, to visualize, to communicate', he repeats, as volcanic, intuitive and fiery as Thierry Decuyper, his accomplice, is calm, introspective and phlegmatic. Seen through the countless sketches for Mouscron, and all the variants that were considered, the form appears highly labile, wide open to ulterior negotiations. In short, it seems gifted with a genuine capacity for alteration, i.e. for becoming something else while remaining itself.

It is true that a series of formal design principles have been set from the start: linearity, rectitude, and compactness of the building; a perfectly flat facade on the side of the square but a more discontinuous one on the park side; the modular and single-level organization of the exhibition space, conceived as a horizontal succession of 'rooms'; offices and documentation centre on the upper floors, forming one of the volume's outgrowths. But, within this frame, the project conceals in fact much functional, constructive, and aesthetic flexibility.

This project's 'potential energy' was released as discussions progressed, notably throughout 2011, within the framework of the 'accompanying committee', which was composed for the most part of jury members of the competition. Since it was founded in 2007, the mission of the Architecture Unit of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation has been to ensure that the public commissioning of architectural projects is systematically associated with this institutional body that encourages a dialogue between the designers and the commissioning clients in order to enrich and refine the project of the competition. The method devised by Chantal Dassonville's team was particularly necessary in dealing with a town where, up until then, the designing of public buildings had been automatically entrusted

to local municipal architects who possessed little architectural ambition or vision.

Each member of the committee was able to articulate and defend his or her own arguments, criteria and reflections before the design crystallized. But at the same time, the project shifted the lines. Véronique van de Voorde, who initiated this, for her, unprecedented architectural adventure but who, during the competition, would not have voted straightaway for V+, now recognizes that 'all the actors repositioned themselves as the dialogue progressed'.

Besides dealing with issues of museography, real estate, volumetry and structure, the committee was able to adjust considerably the distribution of the museum structures and spaces across the whole of the site. The central and diffuse arrangement of the future building, as chosen by V+, enables an archipelago-like organization which makes use of the different existing buildings: the reserve collection in the basement; the educational workshops in the former building, with direct access to the street; a cafeteria 'or at least a picnic area' in the pavilion in the middle of the park, etc. Subject to this combination of functions, the project is no longer quite the same, but neither has it become something else. And what had been formulated in the programme of the contest as a simple extension grafted onto the existing building, has ultimately come to resemble a genuine urban project that will radically transform this part of town and draw together the still scattered energies that crossed it, far beyond the scope of the commission.

Doing

Elephants to move a brick![6]

The cellophane-wrapped pallets of bricks delivered to the site by the articulated lorry are welcomed with feverish excitement by the artist Simon Boudvin, wearing his huge safety shoes. Although it appears trivial, this tiny event is nevertheless the first step in the materialization of a long and uncertain process. It began in the summer of 2011 with the first exchanges between the Parisian artist and Thierry Decuyper on Boudvin's possible participation in the Mouscron project. Seeking to avoid the usual dead-ends of the inevitable 'integration of artworks', the architects of V+ first took the decision, during the competition, to delegate this choice to Les Nouveaux Commanditaires ('the New Patrons'). Then, since the Architecture Unit insisted that they make this choice themselves, they put forward the name of Simon Boudvin, who they had already invited to collaborate on the scenography of an exhibition on Victor Horta's Hôtel Aubecq, and more particularly on the reconstruction of its façade 'or at least of the 634 stones that still remain'. [7] Passionate about the trajectory of the objects and materials of architecture, about their metamorphosis, the new uses they can be given, their conditioning, their entropy and even their 'anastylosis', [8] this conceptual artist, a disciple of Penone, who also trained as an architect, was immediately interested in the brick facade of the future museum. Rather than produce an

‘artwork’, clearly delimited and identifiable, grafted onto the architecture like a foreign body, he proposed to intervene in the work itself.

During his first visits to Mouscron, he was struck by a paradoxical phenomenon: as the town was welcoming the construction of the new museum, a splendid conservatory of its ordinary past, entire chunks of its industrial landscape were being wiped from the map. Beside the Roussel factory, the huge Motte mills were demolished in 2007, and the Flamme weaving factory in 2012 – gaping wastelands lying prey to real-estate predators. Rivers of bricks seem to cascade off these structures left suddenly dismantled, dilapidated.

Viewing this baked-clay parallelepiped, this elementary and modular material, as a cultural condensate, not only local but universal, convinces Boudvin of the fact that he can offer rare access to ‘what the hand knows’.[9] He then investigates the multiple uses to which it can be put: building practices (composition, cooking, recuperation, reuse, bricolage, etc.), aesthetic practices (equipment, chromatic inventiveness, enamelling, coating, etc.), or even scriptural practices (graffiti, imprinting, enamelled, painted or engraved inscription, etc.). Drawing on the recycling networks present in the region and across Belgium,[10] he then proposes to mix in among the new bricks of the museum other facing bricks coming from ten of the town’s buildings? factories, houses, farms, warehouse, convent, cinema – whose demolition he moreover documents photographically. Ten ‘brick-captions’, white-enamelled and numbered, will indicate their provenance on the wall.

Far from any fetishism, any nostalgia, any recycling ethic, Simon Boudvin sees this facade as a sort of architectural palimpsest which evokes, in an allusive, almost invisible manner, the long life of things, and which repositions V+’s building in a broader temporal cycle; as if he was rendering it permeable to time. No trace of any morbid ‘museumization’ or picturesque aestheticization in this arrangement but, on the contrary, attention for, even adherence to, the vital flow of so-called inanimate objects.

Initially misunderstood by the town authorities, who found it both too conceptual and tied to elements of the local culture that are overly banal, overly intimate and perhaps overly painful, this artistic project, although it intervened late in the process, is on perfect terms with an architectural and museum project that seeks precisely to mobilize things and people.

Mobilizing A coded message, an open letter. A love letter, a decree. A recorder, a slide rule – A challenge posed to the object that is quiet.[11]

What first needs to be set in motion is precisely the collection, frozen as it is in an overly determined museography that stages the objects as organic assemblages, more or less artificial environments, ‘ecological units’, as Georges-Henri Rivière would have said: the clog-maker’s workshop inhabited by a dummy wearing a big blue apron, raising his gouge in a

petrified gesture, surrounded by his tools, machines, furniture, materials; the classroom with its inkpots, abacus and stove, its schoolbags hanging from pegs, its letters drawn in chalk on the blackboard.

There is a real risk of a rift between the architectural writing of the future museum and the outdated picturesqueness of its contents. Faced with this challenge, the architects of V+ immediately took a stand. If there is a frontline, they certainly do not position it between the old and the new, but between two approaches to contemporary architecture: the first is formalist and demonstrative ? like that of the unfortunate author of the first extension project ? which risks not only being immediately outmoded but risks making the objects on display look old; the other, more demanding but more uncertain, which would be liable to deconstruct some of the original reasons for this folkloric collection, and to reorganize it spatially, but especially to update its significance.

Léon Maes, whose pioneering work beginning in the 1930s led to the founding of the museum in 1954, drew his inspiration from the initiatives of the Museum of Walloon Life in Liège and the Folklore Museum in Tournai. His motivations were not only scientific and ethnologic, but also political and ideological. His intention was to collect the traces of a world on the verge of extinction, the remains of a still rural culture being swept aside by the region's rapid industrialization. But this ongoing change, which he documented and which he resisted in his own way, was also affecting identity and language ? hence his insistence on recording local speech, dialects and popular songs. Through his work as an erudite folklorist, this activist of the Walloon League defended the French-speaking identity and cultural domination in the face of the massive influx of a Dutch-speaking proletariat that was gradually rendering it relative.

Even if these tensions between the communities are still far from being pacified, the current curator has clearly broken with Maes's ideological subtext. Going against any 'identity navel-gazing', she has on the contrary encouraged the museum to 'work on a cross-border area, a population that is the fruit of three cultures'[12] and has called for a more critical, more selective, more open display of a collection that is both material and immaterial. After exchanges between the Brussels architects, the Parisian museographers of Projectiles and the museum's team, the scenographic project is under way and is seeking an appropriate course of action, balancing between presentation and interpretation, science and entertainment, contextualization and neutralization, between the pitfall of dramatizing the collection and thereby falsifying its authenticity, and that of aestheticizing these everyday objects and thereby overvaluing the less opportune of their many dimensions.

For V+, these specifically vernacular objects must recover within the museum a domestic scale of exhibition. Arranged on a 5.30-metre framework, the exhibition spaces have been conceived as the rooms of a large house: the structure of the ceilings, in dialogue with the wooden structure of the partition walls, the size and the position of the windows break deliberately with the abstraction of the white cube. Instead of regarding these objects as sacred through an inappropriate monumentalization of the museum, the architects seek to

breathe new life into them by making the architectural space more banal, in a sense.

The whole approach of V+ could perhaps be summed up as this search for a contemporary vernacular, for an architecture that engages with everyday life, which welcomes the most ordinary uses, which spatializes the rhythms of mankind. That is why, instead of locking up the museum's objects in their antiqueness, they prefer to reveal their genius, their fantasy, their economy, the art of doing or, as Jörn Bihain would say, 'the intelligence of the gesture'. [13]

Exhibiting

Rather than one static entity representing another, I would prefer, as more productive, a notion of exhibition as a field. [14]

Relational, heteronomous, performative, almost situationist, the practice of the V+ architects leaves no one indifferent: neither their partners, nor their commissioning clients, nor even those who comment on it, the journalists, critics and exhibition curators. How, in fact, is one to exhibit the architecture of V+? How is one to convey the dense web of interactions and intentions that shape it from outside and inside? How is one to reveal the power relations in which it takes its place and which it generates itself? The cultural industry of architecture and, in particular, the museum institutions devoted to it tend to reduce architecture to its visual characteristics, its most exhibitable, most spectacular qualities, but certainly the least essential ones in the work of V+.

This injunction to submit architecture to the gaze, to reduce it to the surface of its own visibility, poses two well-known expographic problems. Firstly it de-realizes it. Ex-hibited, i.e. literally 'held out', or 'ex-posed', i.e. literally 'posed outside' of itself, abstracted from the complexity of its circumstances, architecture is in a sense shown in absentia, as though cooled down, cut off from most of its poetic resources. The already long history of the Mouscron museum project shows precisely that it would be vain to display the architecture of V+ without reproducing its scale, its fleshiness, its materiality, without rendering tangible both its spatial and urban agency as well as its construction, envisaged not as the simple execution of a project but as one of the multiple processes of mediation that help fashion it.

In the second place, the tyranny of the visual tends to extract architecture from its temporalities, including that of the project; it tends to put the evidence of the form before the mysteries of its conception, even when its graphic figurations are displayed. Hung on the walls of a museum, an architectural drawing can only be considered for itself, in its aesthetic autonomy, like a pure object of contemplation, with neither a before nor an after, 'divided between the desire to please and the refusal to give oneself, between seduction and silence'. [15] Yet, to fully grasp the importance of V+'s work, in Mouscron for instance, it is necessary for the exhibition to open up on the contrary the

black box, for it to serialize and connect the documents of the project, for it to deliver their operational power. In short, it must render intelligible all that is invisible of the architect's work, it must map out the frontlines and axes of dialogue, it must reveal everything that will escape the visitor's gaze when the building is finished.

If the exhibition ceases to be a simple tool for distant and external contemplation, if it shows not so much what architecture 'is' but what it 'does', if it both re-materializes it and historicizes its trajectories, then it may itself become, through its critical and reflexive scope, a stage in the act of architecture.

Pierre Charbard in V+ Architecture. Documents on 5 Projects.

<BR clear=all>[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea.[2] Didier Debaise, Thierry Decuypere, 'Une approche pragmatique de l'architecture', in Le Cinéma Sauvenière, Brussels, Wallonia-Brussels French-speaking Community (Visions: Architectures Publiques, vol. 7), 2009, p. 45.[3] Robert Smithson, 'Some Void Thoughts on Museums', Arts Magazine, February 1967.[4] Decree of 17 July 2002, relative to 'the recognition and funding of museums and other museum institutions', implemented by the decree of 22 December 2006.[5] Bruno Latour, Albena Yaneva, 'Le point de vue de la théorie de l'acteur-réseau sur l'architecture', in Reto Geiser, Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2008, pp. 87-88. [6] Henri Michaux, En essayant de revoir. [7] Exhibition 'Victor Horta ? Hôtel Aubecq', 1 July-9 October 2011, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium and in a warehouse in Schaerbeek, Brussels.[8] See Simon Boudvin, 'Anastylosis', Accattone, no. 1, March 2014, pp. 18-25.[9] See Richard Sennett, The Craftsman (2008). Chapter 4 deals entirely with the history of clay and its uses.[10] See Lionel Billiet, Michael Ghyoot, 'La brique belge de réemploi', in Julien Chopin, Nicola Delon (eds.), Matière grise: Matériaux/réemploi/architecture, Paris, Pavillon de l'Arsenal, 2014.[11] Georges-Henri Rivière, La Muséologie.[12] Véronique van de Voorde, 'Stratégie générale en terme de muséographie et scénographie', in the pilot study file, February 2012.[13] 'Que peut la chose?', talk by Björn Bihain, at Théâtre de Liège, 6 October 2014.[14] Michael Baxandall, 'Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects', in Ivan Karp & Steven D. Lavine (eds.), Exhibiting Cultures, Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. [15] Michel Vernes, 'Les ombres de la beauté', in Jean Dethier (ed.), Images et Imaginaires d'Architecture, Paris, Editions du Centre G. Pompidou, 1984, p. 31.

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