

## REFLECTION

### Town hall Brussels

This year, the graduation studio of Interiors Buildings Cities took on the project of Brucity, an ongoing project for a new town hall for the municipality of Brussels. The building will serve as a local administration and is one of the nineteen town halls that individually administer the city. Besides, its central location provides the opportunity for a place of engagement and debate for the citizens of Brussels as a whole. The recently proposed glass box of Brucity, procured through private development, has no clear relation with political engagement and thus limits itself to a merely administrative function for 1600 employees. Therefore, as a studio we are concerned with this new anonymous office building that should represent itself as a meeting ground or ‘political space’, rather than a monofunctional office building. With this project I assume that for economic, political or climate reasons, the municipality has changed its idea about the new building it proposed and therefore I take the current situation as a starting point, leaving a void in the city fabric which was created for an underground parking garage.

Over a time span of 15 years, the bureaucratic decision was made for a new building. However, one of the project

managers of Brucity<sup>1</sup> even concluded himself that, if the decision was made today in the context of the pressing climate crisis, the municipality would have opted for a renovation. Due to relocation issues while renovating the current building of the municipality, the former Philips tower offers the solution because of its central location and its floor capacity. Therefore, my graduation project entails the appropriation of an existing corporate office building along the Boulevard de Anspach. The former Philips tower stems from 1969 and was part of the Manhattan plan, which ignored the building’s direct surroundings. During the 1960s, the government of Brussels proposed an ambitious plan for which a neighbourhood of 530.000m<sup>2</sup> had to be expropriated and demolished (Lieven Brusselt, 2017). The priority of this so-called Manhattan plan was the central position of motorized vehicles and the modernization of Brussels, which is also referred to as ‘Brusselization’. This modernization resulted in many unattractive and rather outdated buildings. Since the former Philips tower was built amid these innovations, this graduation project is a manifesto on how to deal with the inheritance of this modernization.

### Palace

This years’ theme of the ‘palace’ generated a precedent research into political engagement and serves as a valuable resource for this design project. The relevance of this research, gathered in the form of a collective book, is characterized by the changing hierarchical structures and the notion of “a space in the city [which] can encourage or at least allow people to gather together and have their voices heard”<sup>2</sup> . Although the existing Philips building might resemble neoliberal ideas, in the future the new town hall should give its users a sense of civic pride. It should be inviting in the way it relates to anyone who wants to engage in local politics and citizens’ initiatives.

In the 1960s, Archigram<sup>3</sup> showed a different kind of architecture that mattered to the scale of the city (Van den Bergen, 2001). For instance, the design for Instant City was based on this ideology. In the 1950s Cedric Price had caused a revolution in architecture with his fascination for the real, the raw and the ugly. About his Fun Palace, Joan Littlewood said the following: “This complex, which enables self-participatory education and entertainment, can only work — and then only for a finite time — if it is not only accessible to those living and working in the

immediate neighbourhood but also, through its varied communication links, accessible as a regional and national amenity” (Littlewood, 1964, p.433). According to Joan Littlewood, a stage director with whom Price had a close relation, the Fun Palace would not only be a “laboratory of pleasure” but also a “university of the streets”, a place that would be easy for people to visit and offered hours of leisure-time activities (Littlewood, 1964, p.432). These ideas resulted into the main characteristics of the facility such as its non-permanent nature, the high level of appropriation by making it easy to dismantle, move or reassemble, and its ability to interact with local conditions. The facility would be defined by indefinite changes and would never reach completion (Littlewood, 1964).

In my opinion, this accommodating role suits best in the current economic, political and climate conditions, especially since we are left with a huge amount of inheritance (and therefore commodity) of a neoliberal policy. 85% of the buildings in Brussels date from before the 1960s and 74% of the energy consumption is used in the residential and office sector (Voorstellen van de renovatiestrategie 2030-2050 in Brussel, 2019). The appropriation of an existing building with ‘ordinary’ means

1. In an interview with a Technical Director of the municipality of Brussels (Stad Brussel), November 2019. As Technical Director he was involved in the decision-making process of the Brucity project.

2. As described in the hand-out brief number 1: City Halls. Provided by the tutors of Interiors Building Cities. September 2019.  
3. The first edition of Archigram, which was no more than a stencilled page, was published in 1961. According to David Green and Peter Cook,

the editors of the journal, Archigram served as a platform for young architects who were not represented in the generally known magazines (Van den Bergen, 2001).

seems to be a relevant project. One might say that the relevance of the Fun Palace in relation to my project lays in its idea for which the (existing) architecture can be seen as a container. This new type of town hall in Brussels is not only an administrative centre with offices, but also an accessible public interior for the proximate neighbourhood. The method used to appropriate the existing building is an exemplar offered by the municipality to its citizens.

The architecture of Archigram and Cedric Price is characterized by its high-tech appearance, in which the Centre Pompidou by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers (1971-1977) owns much of its imagery. During the competition the architects did not only respond to the brief to create an “information, entertainment and culture centre” (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, Stone, 1992, p.111), but also to the direct surroundings by only building half of the Beaubourg site, which therefore became a meeting ground for both tourists, artists and residents (Carr, et al., 1992). Since the Brucity brief asks for a new administrative centre, my response is the appropriation of the existing Philips tower and therefore creating a vast open space and meeting ground for the neighbourhood on the current location of the void. The surrounding buildings may get renovated or demolished (which should never be a starting point), however this new space behind the Boulevard the Anspach changes the city fabric forever. In this sense, the design proposal matters to the scale of the city, as Archigram stated before. The level of flexibility in the projects of Archigram, Price and Piano Rogers, is something that resembles the character of the base of the new town hall, given its high degree of accessibility, created by citizens’ initiatives on the ground floor. The interventions, in respect to the existing structure, optimize the functioning of the future town hall; to serve as both a face and exemplar in the city. My architectural project therefore gets an accommodating character in which existing qualities are exposed.

Political space

While elaborating on the theme of a political space, I referred to Lefebvre who argues that the “users [should] manage the urban space for themselves, beyond the control of both the state and capitalism” (Purcell, 2013, p.141). However, when appropriating a political space as governing body the intentions are anyway explicit, which differs fundamentally from how Lefebvre understood his idea. Nowadays, the rights of property owners outweigh the inhabitants’ right to use the public realm (Purcell, 2013). Urban space has become something that is marketed and therefore lost its ability to be claimed by its proximity. If a municipality is to provide ‘a political space’ as a way to engage with politics, should this meeting ground then not be appropriable by citizens to encourage them to transform the spaces meeting their needs? The research done on Brussels showed that many citizens’ initiatives and NGO’s struggle to find actual space in the city to carry out their ideas and political opinions<sup>4</sup>.

My design for a political space focused on appropriating existing structures, such as an existing open-source framework by studio Rebar to transform a parking spot into a temporary park for passers-by (Brandley, 2015). This raised the question to whom the street belongs. This is also one of the themes Richard Wentworth elaborates on in his book ‘Berlin, 117 landmarks’<sup>5</sup>. One of his photos shows three chairs in the middle of the road, which is in essence identical to a photo of the protest by ‘Picnic the streets’ in Brussels. With these pieces of furniture, the protesters claimed a piece of the urban space during the week, while the actual picnic happened on Sundays. These pieces were left there as intention or whiteness of their protest. I realized that for appropriating everyday activities I did not need a complete structure, but just a small intervention in a taken context. These interventions do not serve an explicit purpose but depend on their context like parasites. They can promote everyday activities by encouraging citizens to

gain access to their neighbourhood. However, I felt after making the structures to empower other, to me invisible, citizens, it was stronger to seek for something closer to home. Why would I not do that myself by taking something as found? Like Alison and Peter Smithson proposed the as found as, “where the art is in the picking up, turning over and putting-with...” (A. Smithson & P. Smithson, 1990, p.201).

I took the repetitive windowsills in our faculty as found. By adding a small intervention such as an extended table the value of this windowsill increases, similarly to the work of Gordon Matta Clark<sup>6</sup>. This table would have the sign ‘Open desk’ after the example of Rebars ‘Open park’. The image and ambitions for my resolved design proposal are also characterized by appropriating existing structures, focusing on reusable demountable building components. The intervention made me think of tolerance in two ways. Physical tolerance between the existing structure and new building materials. Social tolerance to its users; what is allowed? How far can citizens reach into the building? To what extend are they able to appropriate parts of the building?

Theme and objectives

When the pedestrian zone was constructed along the Boulevard de Anspach in 2015, after a peaceful and festive protest by ‘Picnic the Streets’ against the motorized city centre, a new possibility arose to establish a meeting ground (after the example of Cedric Price’s Fun Palace) and to transform the corporate office building for public use. Although the base of the building is intended for public use and serves as meeting ground for public initiatives, passers-by and the representatives of the municipality, the town hall is largely intended for administrative services to the city. One might question the implications of this transformation, from a corporate office tower to a new type of town hall. For instance, what does this mean for future employees of the

municipality who should work in an inspiring environment in close relation to the public, instead of being influenced by the neo-liberal idea of economic efficiency? How does the existing structure fit for offices of today’s representatives?

The decisions made by protagonists in the world of office spaces<sup>7</sup> contrast strongly with the idea of the Brussels’ municipality, which seek salvation in the transition from a closed office structure to flexible workspaces. However, the idea of flexible workspaces is nearly as old as the birth of the Brucity project, nearly two decades ago. One might say that the decision for this transition to something that was state of the art in 2003, won’t be as innovative and promoting when the building is scheduled to be opened in 2023. The current changes enforced by COVID-19 show the desire to be surrounded by familiar faces and the longing for the self-appropriation of a space one can identify itself with. The outdoor spaces, located in both the base of the building and in the office tower, are freed from regulations since they are not located within the thermal envelope. These spaces can be considered as extensions to the indoor activities and connect the floors vertically via open staircases. Above all, these spaces can be used by both employees and citizens and serve as a display for local issues and are used as a communication tool. The extensions located on the inside of the H-shaped office tower improve the connectivity between different departments and give an upgrade to the 1960s office plan. The construction is left exposed and due to the column and beam structure, the plan can be divided according to the grid of the structure. This creates a variety of possibilities for open and closed offices, which can change according to the prevailing opinion on offices and the specific needs of the municipalities’ departments themselves. Since the establishment of the Philips tower, regulations on fire and ventilation requirements for offices have changed drastically, which asks for implementations of (again existing) structures to improve the building’s technical aspects.

4. Which was concluded after the interviews with several activism groups in Brussels. For more information on activism groups in Brussels see booklet MSc3/4 Studio Research 2019/2020.

5. Wentworth, R. (1994). Berlin 117 Landmarks / Markstein. London, England: Art Data

6. As referred to in a lecture by Mark Pimlot, October 2019.  
7. In Silicon Valley the correlation between personal interaction, performance and innovation is “an article of faith” (Waber, Magnolfi, Lindsay, 2014, par.1). The article ‘Workspaces That Move People’, describes how Facebook chose for a single mile-long room for their several thousand employees, how Yahoo believes in intermediate

spaces as hallways and cafeterias, and how Samsung’s office design, consisting of “vast outdoor areas sandwiched between floors, [which] will lure workers into public spaces where Samsung’s executives hope that engineers and salespeople will actually mingle.” (Waber, Magnolfi, Lindsay, 2014, par. 2).

My ambition for the new town hall is to provide an inexplicit political meeting ground, which is made explicit by its users through the appropriability of the place. I believe the municipality has the opportunity, next to its administrative function which is described in their detailed brief, to serve as mediator in the city and to connect at different levels. The existing void in the city centre could serve as a space to appropriate and promote the circular economy. Not only people working in construction, but also students, can learn about this new economy. Our agency as architects is limited to the fabric of the building since the actual political action must be performed by its users. However, I believe that providing physical space for citizens, apart from the elected representatives of the municipality, enables the community to become politically active. This is also underlined by Hildebrandt and Milić (2016) in their book ‘Political space matters’, in which they state that “political space is simply understood as the space where people come together in order to act politically” (p.7). The level of agency defines how citizens interact with this new type of city hall and how people engage with each other. According to Giddens, architects can serve here as spatial agents who “are negotiators of existing conditions in order to partially reform them” (Awan, Schneider, Till, 2011, p.31). These existing conditions are also mentioned by Lefebvre who argues that the relevance of creating space, can only be allowed after paying attention to existing social structures of those who use and live in them (Awan, Schneider, Till, 2011, p.56). As architects, we have the ethical responsibility to enact these present debates by means of architecture. The call for climate action causes a new perspective for the future of the architectural profession. Working with the as found, in this project the current situation and the existing structures, enables architects to appropriate space for endless reuse and functions to come.

Research and design

By attending seminars and having conversations with

specialists<sup>8</sup>, I aimed to build a statement which could form the basis of the projects’ decision-making. While the research on post-war building materials has led to several insights in the second-hand market, it also made me realize the difficulty of reusing building materials one to one, even when they are reclaimed from the same structure<sup>9</sup>. Besides, scraping a website with reusable materials is necessary to produce a catalogue. The inconvenience on these websites is the use of different specifications. Therefore, for every website a new script must be written to produce a comparative catalogue of the website. What I have learned from the research on materials is that innovativeness, in relation to reusing existing structures, is not achieved by using inventive new materials or grand structural changes. It is exposing the qualities that are embedded in an existing idea or structure. Through in-depth analysis the alterations to a structure can be minimized, which in turn reduces the materials needed and therefore results in a lower footprint. This can be illustrated by the use of concrete blocks, a common building material. Instead of replacing the prevailing building material completely, the raw materials can be changed for something more sustainable or the way the blocks are mounted can be adjusted to make them reversible. Existing building processes and production lines should be adapted to the needs of today. Another aspect I have noticed is that while using this new approach, i.e. reusing existing materials or structures, a lot of regulations fall short in situations that are nowadays still considered an exception. Nevertheless, people are willing to explain the consequences in terms of regulations applicable to your design solution. Creativity will lead to adaptations of existing regulations and materials and when someone questions the given, it turns out that much more is possible than expected.

Relevance and potential

For my graduation project, I aimed to explore the way in which the new economy of reusing existing building

materials or complete structures can be used in a large building project such as the new town hall in Brussels and how it can serve as an exemplar to its surroundings. Sustainability is a relatively new concept. Architects who entered the job market a few decades ago, were barely confronted with the urgent call for sustainable design solution that current graduates are facing today. Nowadays, an architectural project is valued based on its sustainable characteristics with the help of certificates such as BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environment Assessment Method) or LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). In the case of the Brucity project, the municipality of Brussels collaborated with a developer who is obliged to build a new town hall according to the standards of BREEAM ‘Very good’<sup>10</sup>. One might question the degree of sustainability in a new building project when the option to reuse an existing structure, and thus reducing the overall impact on the environment, was never fully explored. Muck Petzet, a German contributor to the Venice Biennale in 2012, described the shift in value from waste to reusable materials with three R’s: Reduce/Reuse/Recycle. The avoidance of architecture comes first, followed by direct use and, in the third place recycling which changes the properties of the material (Petzet, 2012). He argues that “climate targets can only be achieved by improving what is already there. But the greatest task of refurbishment that lies ahead — the post-war buildings erected from the 1950s to the 1970s — is considered problematic. These buildings seem to be too unsuitable, too slipshod, too inefficient to serve as housing in the future. Where economically viable, “outmoded” buildings and housing estates are torn down and replaced. The “grey” energy stored in the materials is not factored into energy studies and unscrupulously released in demolition” (Petzet, 2012, p.1). The shift in transformation strategies requires a profound change in attitude and is a transition similar to the one brought by the environmentalist in the 1970s and 1980s with respect to waste management (Petzet, 2012). The large amount of

commodity in the building industry offers a new possibility for sustainable action.

Since the idea of sustainable architecture is relatively new, policy makers and architects struggle to find the most suitable approach. The diverse approaches used are highlighted in the book ‘Behind the green door’ by Rotor, which offers a critical look at sustainable architecture by means of 600 objects. Chapters such as ‘Nature, Waste, Performance, Living skin and Beauty’ illustrate a broad range of samples, prototypes, models, sketches, photographs, renderings and films. These artefacts were used for an exhibition, though not made for this specific purpose (Rotor, 2014). Personally, I believe that these existing ‘objects’ reflect current developments in society and in similar fashion, my proposal for a new town hall is a gathering, or collection of already existing ideas or developments.

Considering my graduation project as a manifesto, analysis of the prevailing materials and regulations is necessary for sustainable architectural interventions. During my graduation year it became evident that architecture should be able to overcome crises of all kind, including political, economic or climatic developments. Cities are fluid and constantly in motion. While designing, it is important to consider a future-proof structure, enabling a particular building to cope with these contemporary crises. The communicative sensitivity of the structure should empower citizens and give them a sense of civic pride; it should direct people’s behaviour in order to engage with it. Architecture that serves as a container for existing ideas and political opinions that allow for change is valuable.

8. Deliver ’20. New Horizon, November 14th 2019. Peter Luscuere (Building Physics and Services at the faculty of Architecture and the built environment), Peter van den Engel (Climate advisor graduation project), Ben Bronsema (Inventor of Earth wind and fire, ventilation system), Carlos Schellinck (Brusselse Hoofdstedelijke Dienst voor Brandweer en Dringende Medische Hulp; Brussels Capital Region, Department for Fire and Urgent Medical Assistance).

9. Rotor explained that reclaiming materials from a structure can be challenging. For example, while detaching the blue limestone from the former Philips tower. After cutting the joint between the different slabs, the limestone is taken away by a grapple. Despite this careful procedure, only 70% of the limestone slabs can be reused, while the rest is too damaged for reuse.

10. In an interview with a Technical Director of the municipality of Brussels (Stad Brussel), November 2019. As Technical Director he was involved in the decision-making process of the Brucity project.

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