

**From *Penser la Ville* to *Faire la Ville*:
Brussels' and Architecture's Engagement with the Real.**

A few reading instructions.

[To read, preferably, right after the *Ouverture*]

Dear reader,

You are about to plunge into this dissertation. I figure you might benefit from a few reading instructions. As a genealogy of Brussels' architectural and urban harshness, this dissertation will take you on a journey across themes, discourses, and actors that may, when put together, appear as quite remote from one another. Choosing as travel companion an entire architecture movement next to popular notions such as *Bruxellisation* or *architek!*, banal community products such as a public *urinoir*, or socio-cultural activism, may indeed seem arbitrary, to say the least.

Indeed, the protagonists of each chapter are quite different in scale, effect, complexity, shape or behaviour. And yet they all contribute to the core interests of this dissertation: why architecture and urban production are so harsh in Brussels, and along that question, how architecture theory could be concerned more realistically and effectively with architecture's being-in-the-world. This dissertation will guide you across some very detailed workings of Brussels as much as it will, even if to a much lesser extent, immerse us in the workings of theory. The different chapters, each bringing together a different set of agencies, will moreover be studied at different speeds: in some chapters we'll have to slow down more drastically than in others.

I'd like, gently yet insistently, to 'warn' you that you might find it a quite harsh endeavour to follow this colourful parade of actors along their journeys across muddy fields, joyful moments, grand ideas and heroic events. It may be a tough endeavour to drag oneself through that thick mud of experiences, observations, concepts, theories, surprises and Brussels caprice, especially when those worlds are not neatly distinguishable. To put it bluntly, we will have to accept that, what we are about to dissect, is not a clear *Bouillon* where one can easily separate liquid from solid, the soup from the meat, fish or vegetables; but that we are about to explore the taste, the characteristics and specificities of a dense, troubled *potage*. Not only seems the whole separation business - according to which the soup

is ‘meaty’ or ‘watery’ – inadequate; precisely the very categories allowing to *trancher les choses*, is what’s at stake. This journey will thus, rather than granting you some peace of mind, confront you with the excitements and anxieties that tend to accompany such muddling through. And yet there is no short-cut we could take: the relief it could give us, would only be short-lived.

But let’s not worry too much. Who said a *potage* should be less tasty than a *bouillon*? Also, along the journey, there will be moments of relief. Rather than introducing each chapter and each world of inquiry right here, I will instead organise short breaks – tea time at the front as it were – between the chapters, in the form of *entr’actes*. These will serve as recaps, so you’ll get the chance to sit back and relax, get yourself repositioned on the map, to then, refreshed, move on to the next chapter. These *entr’actes* are meant to facilitate reading and to guide you through the Brussels Saga you are about to enter.

Just one last thing. When the mud of Brussels gets just too sticky on your boots, and makes it hard to move forward, then think about the very final chapter (chapter 5), which will bring relief, perhaps even amusement, for it will lead us to the very core of Brussels’ legends, dialects and everyday knowledges. And oh, yes indeed, here it can get quite amusing when it comes to architecture! It is in this final chapter that we will also get to know our - I dare to say - *entertaining* mystery guest: the *Architek!* He’s my bait to pull you through to the very end of this story. Now warmed-up and prepared, I can only hope you’ll bear with me.

I wish you an enjoyable read.

Isabelle Doucet

Manchester, January 2010.