Dans le cadre de l’exposition Xaveer De Geyter Architects.
XDGA_160_expo au CIVA du 8.11.13 au 26.01.14

In het kader van de tentoonstelling Xaveer De Geyter Architects.
XDGA_160_expo in het CIVA van 8.11.13 tot 26.01.14
Crossing borders

Xaveer De Geyter is one of the most important names in Belgian architecture today. After a decade or so at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam, in 1988 he started his own practice, first in Antwerp and then in Brussels. His firm now employs no fewer than 50 people and he is regularly invited to enter international architecture competitions. At the moment he is working on commissions in France, around Flanders and in Brussels, with the reconstruction of Place Rogier and the recent winning design for the reconstruction of Place Schuman. Xaveer De Geyter’s lecture at the Centre for Fine Arts ties in with the exhibition devoted to his work at the Centre Internationale pour la Ville, l'Architecture et le Paysage (CIVA). It is both striking and commendable that an architectural centre that depends on the French Community (CIVA) is working a platform to an architect who mainly operates in a Flemish and international context. That’s because it is rare to find places in this country where space is created for the architectural culture on the other side of the language boundary. As such, CIVA is working on the programme that we at BOZAR ARCHITECTURE have endeavoured to deliver since 2007: offering an international platform to Belgian architecture through monographic exhibitions. The exhibition was also accompanied by a book, which Xaveer De Geyter together with Christophe Van Gerrewey conceived as an Abecedary. Each letter is the starting point for a project explanation, an excursion into architectural theory or the discussion of a term that has a meaning within the practice of XDGA. This hand-out for the lecture features four letters from the book by way of a taster.

Iwan Strauven
Coordinator A+/BOZAR ARCHITECTURE

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In the interview with Xaveer De Geyter and Lieven De Boeck, entitled ‘Dialogue Spaces’ and published in the book 12 Projects, Roemer van Toorn and Dave Wendt question ‘a kind of monumentality that, in our view, uses vagueness and size to stimulate curiosity and to intervene in perception and use’. A monument is something that continues to exist, that keeps the memory of someone or something alive, for example as a remnant of an earlier culture, art, industry, or science. Of course, this is not the sort of monumentality that Van Toorn and Wendt mean; there are also new monuments whose size, vagueness, grand, sweeping dimensions and stately style aim to look impressive. This begs the question of what these impressive buildings signify in the public domain; and what they contribute, apart from an imposing, sensual feeling of grandeur? If a monumental building does not allude to the past, what is it intended to say about the present or about the future?

In a piece about the composer Gustav Mahler, Theodor Adorno described the monumentality of his symphonies as the expression of ‘his refusal to accept an intimacy which had degenerated into mere ornament’ – something that, according to Adorno ‘may be problematic in a society built on individualism’. If people share nothing with one another, it follows that they cannot tolerate monumentality. This incompatibility of the monumental with the individual can effortlessly be translated into architecture, and into that of XDGA. This problem has continued to reappear in architectural history both implicitly and explicitly. It goes right to the heart of modern times, and also to the question ‘a kind of monumentality that, in our view, uses vagueness and size to stimulate curiosity and to intervene in perception and use’. A monument is something that continues to exist, that keeps the memory of someone or something alive. Of course, this is not the sort of monumentality that Van Toorn and Wendt mean; there are also new monuments whose size, vagueness, grand, sweeping dimensions and stately style aim to look impressive. This begs the question of what these impressive buildings signify in the public domain; and what they contribute, apart from an imposing, sensual feeling of grandeur? If a monumental building does not allude to the past, what is it intended to say about the present or about the future?

The problem with monumental architecture is thus an eternal one, and one element of an architect’s job is to partially ignore it. Only by getting round the supposed impossibility of the monument can its social meaning remain possible. It is, after all, monuments that openly allow architecture to stimulate the transformation of a space, and thus the organisation of society. The unbuilt design for the New Port House of Antwerp illustrates this well, precisely because it is meant to help determine what a city is and how a city can function. It is in the extension’s very dullness – an abstract version, identical on all four sides, of the existing Port House, but then lifted up above it – that its monumental character lies. The port and the desolate in-between area that precedes it are linked to the city of Antwerp – not by an architecture that demands attention in a sculptural or spectacular way, but by a quiet, harmonious, light and yet imposing presence on the city skyline; by a new volume that represents a program and an activity without drowning it out. The result of this design is that Antwerp grows and becomes richer and more diverse as a city, precisely because both the river and the port are going to be a part of it. The fifty-metre high Port House is almost as tall as the residential tower blocks closer to the city, and ten metres shorter than the MAS Museum by Neutelings Riedijk Architects. It rises visibly, like a massive, three-dimensional non-linguistic billboard, standing out above the so-called Lange Wapper and the Oosterweelverbinding. This five-lane viaduct that would make the wider Antwerp area easily accessible to car traffic was still on the cards at the time of the Port House competition. Since political decisions no longer coincide with the promotion of collective interests, but are torpedoed by the most extreme individual considerations, the arrival of this new infrastructure monument has become deeply uncertain. Together with the design by XDGA for the Port House, it does however show that forms of collectivity are not possible without a monumental basis in infrastructure or architecture. This has always been the case, while the criticism of new monuments is not completely new either. “I can hardly imagine,” De Geyter said on this point in an interview with Elia Zenghelis, published in 2005 in El Croquis, “that at the beginning of the Renaissance, for example, everyone completely understood [architecture] and considered it a tool for giving meaning or providing signs for a community. But at the same time I think it is essential for communication to be reinstalled or renewed and to become a perpetual task for architecture.”
Political

XDGA’s design for Brussels’ Place Schuman is one of the firm’s most overt political statements. It was subtitled ‘Democracy Amplifier’. The project’s ambitions are certainly not modest, just like the competition for which it was created. Yet the task and the context cannot be automatically described as political. Beliris (the collaboration agreement between the Belgian federal state and the Brussels Administrative Region, whose aim is ‘to improve Brussels’ image as the capital city of Belgium and Europe’) wanted a Place Schuman with a ‘strengthened symbolic resonance as the centre of the European District and as Europe’s presence in Brussels’, an ‘intermodal mobility interchange’ and a ‘harmonious meeting place’. With such a threefold objective, the result could go in any direction.

Place Schuman – named after Robert Schuman, one of the founders of the European Union – lies at the end of Rue de la Loi, right in front of Parc du Cinquantenaire. It is a huge roundabout, flanked by important institutions, such as the Berlaymont building (the headquarters of the European Commission) and the Justus Lipsius building (the headquarters of the Council of the European Union). At the same time, the Loi, Belliard and Cortenbergh tunnels run beneath the square, making the roundabout an important traffic intersection, both above and below ground. In addition, protests are regularly organised here against European or international decisions, or contentious issues, such as austerity programmes, violence in the Gaza Strip or low milk prices.

At the moment, the square is totally unfit for these different functions, and for the messages it sends out: it is hard for pedestrians to get to the heart of it, and its sandy core is hidden behind close-clipped conifers, which almost completely block the line of sight between Rue de la Loi and Parc du Cinquantenaire. It is no coincidence that the Belgian writer Geert Van Istendael recently described this place as the ugliest square in Europe. The rather perverse advantage of this situation is that Place Schuman, like a miniature desert, can be spontaneously occupied, and that it is, at least, not directly subject to any commercial or touristic logic by the mediation of architecture.

The danger of organising a competition for this place is not insignificant. XDGA’s design avoids the worst pitfalls: the square’s open space is not rendered harmless with terraces, trees or art. On the contrary: XDGA’s intention is to attract people to the square, and therefore to regularly transform it into a political space – in other words: into a place where people lose their neutrality, are obliged to have an opinion, differ from one another, disagree with the governments and powers that be, and openly dare to, and be able to, ensure that conflicts are an essential part of life.

Designing such a place would seem to be all but impossible. The architect who sees his projects realised (and XDGA is gradually becoming no longer an exception) will by definition be working for, and thanks to, the centres of power, and will thus risk helping to reinforce prevailing customs, unjust exclusion, and the concealment of differences and opinions that deviate from the norm. How can you design and construct a space where governments will continually and unpredictably be criticised, when those very governments and powers that be are commissioning the space? XDGA approaches this problem by transforming Place Schuman into a functional vacuum, where something can happen, rather than predetermining what will happen. Therefore it will not become a square that is exclusively used for demonstrations (something which could turn into a caricature of democracy), but a place for public gatherings and events. A symmetrical shell, with a diameter half that of the total Place Schuman, will be placed in the Rue de la Loi axis, restoring the symbolic vista across Brussels. Entrances to the metro and train stations (along with a number of logistical services) will be sited beneath the curled up sides of the shell, while the shell’s upper expanse will be arranged like an amphitheatre, with a hydraulic stage in the centre. Four sections will be cut away in line with the streets that branch out from the square, to open up the infrastructure as a whole.

The ambition of the project can be deduced from what it is not: it is not a building competing with existing architecture or the characteristics of the site; it is not a landmark visible on the skyline; it is not a monofunctional intervention that will further isolate the European Quarter from the rest of Brussels; nor is it an events hall which, when not in use, will be left standing like a monumental, silent sculpture. The new Place Schuman will be charged up by all the conflicting and unexpected human activities that take place there, which are drawn to it, and whose nature is concealed as little as possible. Thanks to the legible and concentrated manner in which it manages to achieve this, the design is a near-perfect symbol of XDGA’s approach.
It would seem impossible to contemplate the work of any contemporary architect without continuously resorting to the word capitalism, and without looking at how the architect and his work relate to the market. After all, as Koolhaas so succinctly put it in his text ‘Bigness & Velocity’ in 1999, we are living under the ‘Y€$-regime’: the world is ruled by the three major currencies: the Yen, the Euro and the Dollar. ‘It means’, wrote Koolhaas, ‘that we are all operating at a moment where there are two dominant phenomena: the integration of the world economy and the disappearance of all overt ideologies and the apparent domination of economic issues over almost any other values.’

This rhetorical assertion is not (or perhaps not yet) entirely correct. Firstly because there are still – especially for most architects – contextual differences (building a police station for Kortrijk or a villa in Mariaakkerke is, for example, a little different than erecting a skyscraper in Dubai); and secondly because economic considerations, to whatever extent they emerge, do not necessarily completely overshadow the values that architecture embodies. The only possible position that architecture can adopt in relation to the market, capitalism and the Y€$ regime is being good. In one of the few statements on this subject by De Geyter, published in Hunch in 2001, he writes: ‘The architect is committed in life, and he may take part in a political discourse, but architecture itself is not concerned with ideology. Globalism, durability, and market economy neither help us nor prevent us from making better architecture.’

This attitude rightly implies that there are limits to the reproaches that can be made against architecture. When XDGA was asked in 2002 to prepare a study for an extension of the city-state of Monaco in the Mediterranean – a tax paradise where the world’s excessively rich congregate in order to avoid paying tax and thus to escape from even the most minimal community life – it was logical that this project, whatever the outcome, would derive credibility from the market. Yet this help in the development of architecture is only binary, or should at least be regarded as binary. In other words: either the market says yes, or it says no. That in itself shows the relativity or even absurdity of an attitude that expects architecture to be in immediate opposition to capitalism. It would after all imply that a designer refuses a project because the demand for it comes from a market logic, while six months later that same market logic may scrap the same project. While at one point in time objection can be defined as the refusal to develop a specific project, at another it can be a critical thread setting the project in motion and wanting it to be finished.

The XDGA project for the extension of Monaco into the sea consists of four different proposals, common to each is that new public space will be created in the sea – a technological and expensive miracle that would be unthinkable without the high property prices. The first proposal is for a rectangular basin measuring 2 kilometres by 600 metres – a ‘Liquid Central Park’ full of traffic and human activities on and above water, immediately off the coast of Monaco, bounded by new districts with an orthogonal street plan. The second proposal is for a new island, connected to the old city by a bridge. The face looking towards Monaco consists of artificial rocks, like a piece of nature which has always been there; the face looking out over the sea is a dense urban development. The third proposal, following the archipelago logic, places ten islands with urban functions in the water right in front of the existing city, with boat connections between them and to the mainland. In the fourth and last proposal, two 200 hectare capes will be extended out to sea. The southern one follows the maritime borderline with France. Both capes will be bordered by a number of more impressive buildings for public use. In this way, a bay is demarcated, giving rise to a semi-open urban intimacy with the water.

The issue of good architecture, especially in such an extreme case of urban development, is fleshy out and given meaning by the way in which the basic demands of the project become visible. The first project expands the city as much as possible, and installs a number of laws – which like all laws are partially unintelligible – as spatial boundary; the second project turns the hedonistic character of Monaco (a city where money earned elsewhere is enjoyed here to its fullest possible extent) into a paradise with an ironic touch – although it can function extremely well. For the third project there are few analogies, although Venice comes closest: when a city is built on water, the water should surely be used to its maximum potential for transport! And the fourth project appasses the Arcadian-oceanic desire for a view, by not contaminating the sea with culture or architecture, and by hiding the extension behind a black blot. These proposals are made and submitted under the guidance of the market, on a small scale and for the very happy few – yet they could not exist just like that; yet they reveal something that would otherwise have remained hidden; yet the ‘yes’ that they exclaim does not coincide with affirmation of and by the Y€$ regime; yet they are confrontational, by searching for the limits of development and transcending them in a mildly astonishing manner.
Xaveer De Geyter Architects is a Brussels firm known for progressive and provocative urban concepts. This approach gives XDGA a unique and relevant position in contemporary architecture. This book offers a survey of 34 of their projects from the nineties to the present. Christophe Van Gerrewey has written 26 alphabetically arranged chapters in which he analyses the work in various ways.

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Book for sale after the lecture on 27/11 at BOZAR, at the CIVA bookshop, at the bookshop or on www.lannoo.be.
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