Public Debate: Public Interior: Circular Economy: Forms of Exchange: Approaching the Reconversion of An Iconic 1966 Office Tower in Brussels

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Introduction

In December 2017, the MULTI project, the reconversion of an iconic 1966 office tower in the historical centre of Brussels, was awarded with the BE EXEMPLARY 2017. This award commends architectural projects in the Brussels Region for their exemplary approach on different aspects of sustainability. The jury report mentioned the cross-disciplinary approach with clearly defined ambitions that were integrated from the start of the project as one of the reasons why it granted the award. (Fig. 1)

Research

The present paper will show how the multi-disciplinary team was formed, how the collaboration evolved together with the evolution of the design and how it evolved from a multi-disciplinary team into a cross-disciplinary collaboration. The evolution of the collaboration will be explored and marked through a close reading of the artefacts and prototypes that were produced during the design stages. The paper will also reflect on the different ways the discourse was stimulated from practice based research and how the discourse inside the team and outwards was facilitated. Since the core ambitions of the project are: the public debate, the public interior and the circular economy, the close reading of the artefacts and prototypes will focus on the moments in the design process that turned out to be pivotal in the design process with relation to these three scopes.

The goal of the paper is to showcase the project as an example from practice, but with a foot (or two) in practice based research, hoping it can serve as an inspiration. But at the same time the paper aims at gaining a better insight into the workings of the team and the type of artefacts and prototypes that were produced to ease the collaboration and that propelled the project forward.

Through this paper, we would like to address and contribute to at least the following questions proposed in the call: How can sustainability Bring Disciplines tighter? Which kind of representations can help to visualise the design methods in architecture? How does practice benefit from architectural research?

The presentation will take the materiality and technical and constructive features of the existing building as a starting point and will place these in relation to: the ambitions of the project, the role the edifice plays in the public sphere and in relation to the cross-disciplinary team. These interdependencies are explored on the base of a close reading of the artefacts (drawings, models, sketches, prototypes....) that drove the design process.

The existing building exists out of a H-shaped tower of 16 levels on top of a three-story plinth. There is a four-level underground parking with the access ramps taking up a lot of the public space on the ground floor. Designed and built in the sixties as a Philips headquarters, the edifice has a low floor to floor height, making the integration of contemporary techniques extremely difficult. The facades are in need of an update regarding their performances of light, insulation and enabling views on the city. They also, like other parts of the building contain asbestos...

The plinth is of a robust arrogance (but that gets under your skin as soon as you spent some time on it...) and the building has real 'backside', reducing its relation to the surrounding urban spaces to a pure functional one. The overall impression is dark and intruding.

Through a kind of contemporary archeology and with the production of different architectural artefacts on inquiry, the MULTI-team explored ways of working 'with' the building.

There is for instance the expressive architecture of the general composition: tower and plinth. There is an underused potential for creating collective space that would stitch the building to its surrounding. Through a re-design of the parking incorporating the ramps inside the building there is a potential for creating new public spaces. Through some selected intervention, the relation of the interior with the exterior could be improved a lot, making it a more permeable and accessible public interior that would be continued throughout the building. At the way to the top were a new feature, the winter garden, is proposed....

The building is considered as a source for harvesting materials for re-use. In-site re-use and off-site re-use. But it is equally proposed as a receiver of recuperated materials from other tertiary buildings in Brussels under reconstruction (or demolition) ... (Fig.2)

In the core, it is a very democratic building: due to the H-shape, once you step out of the elevators you have a double view over the city center of Brussels. In the spirit of this democratic character, the MULTI team recognized and valorized the need for an emblematic and exemplary approach. From the very start of the feasibility study and design, the debate was made in the public sphere, fueling the public debate on the topic of private real-estate development and the issue of what to do with these large-scale office structures of the 60's... (Fig. 3 and 4)

The author of the current paper is doing in Ph.D. in practice based research. He is also the lead architect for the discussed project. This perspective (how practice based research influences actual architectural projects and vice versa) will also be one of the topics addressed in the paper.

Conclusion

Reflecting on this has led to two new lines of inquiry: On the one hand, there is integration of BIM in the design process and what kind of artefacts can be produced to accelerate BIM modelling. Second line would be an interpretation and integration of the conceptual thinking behind the circular economy within the architectural design process.

The present paper would like to explore the working and evolution of the cross-disciplinary collaboration through a close reading of architectural artefacts and prototypes in the context of the design process of the reconversion of an iconic office tower in Brussels. The Venn diagram of 'practice based research x project x team' will form the backbone of this exploration.

Fig. 1: Reconversion of a 1966 office tower in the historical center of Brussels: axonometric view of the proposed intervention

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Fig. 2: Atlas of possible in situ re-use

Fig. 3: Public debate: a team at work

Fig. 4: Detail to whole: a fractal?

Keywords

architectural project, public debate, public interior, circular economy, evolving team, materiality and constructive features, best practice

Biography

Tomas Ooms studied *Architecture* (1995), *Literature* (1996), *Research Methods* (2009) and *Music* (2016). He is founding partner of a&t architects (Antwerp, BE) and is academic promotor of the Master Dissertation Design Studio at the Master of Science in Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture at the KU Leuven. His research 'Yard and World: to Draw a Distinction: on the Form of Re-Entry: A Practice Between: Yard and World' is a practice based architectural Inquiry into the liminal and investigates space as relationships. Besides being a practicing architect he is a composer and performing musician. Recently he founded the Studio Tuin en Wereld, a Micro Public Gallery in Antwerp. The MULTI Team is: Whitewood Capital, CONIX RDBM architects, ROTOR DC, 3E, CES, SGI, ECOWORKS, BOPRO.