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Architecture criticism blindfolded

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Abstract

The paper reports on a recent Belgian initiative targeting architectural practice through the professional press. Architecture critics were invited to revisit an exemplary public building while being blindfolded and guided by persons who are visually impaired. Afterwards, they were asked to report on this visit in an article for an architectural magazine. The initiative aimed at drawing the attention of the critics—and, by extension, the readers of their articles—to the need for accessibility, usability and comfort for the real diversity of users, but also to architecture's potential multisensory richness.

Keywords: architecture criticism, inclusive design, professional press, sensitisation.

Introduction

In architecture, initiatives to improve awareness of people's diverse capacities and limitations often focus on students. The large majority of professionals currently active in architectural practice, however, have been educated before inclusive design approaches received any attention in architectural education. One way to disseminate and support inclusive design in professional practice is by organising extra training for professional designers [1]. Another strategy to call accessibility more permanently to architects' attention is to devise and disseminate procedures and rules, prescribing what criteria to fulfil. The initiative reported here adopts a different approach. Instead of trying to reach professional architects via extra training or legislation, it calls in a mainstream channel that reaches architects already: the professional press.

Professional magazines are highly influential in architectural practice for several reasons. First, they provide a major source of inspiration and information during design [2]. In the act of designing, architects make extensive use of previous projects that are published in magazines and books. Several stages of the design process, ranging from initial programming over conceptual design to the final development of detailed working drawings, are supported and/or constrained by projects from the past. Second, architectural magazines are an important locus for the profession's evaluation of quality, which may differ from that of the actors or the public at large [3]. The primary measures in the professional assessment of architecture are building reviews and awards published in the professional press. While one article about a building is no evidence of excellence, some buildings are published in many major journals and receive multiple awards. These are the projects to which the profession attributes high design quality regardless of their appreciation by the designers or public. In view of this, we decided to target the architectural press explicitly with an initiative entitled *Buildings Revis(it)ed*.

2 Aims & set-up

In the short term, *Buildings Revis(it)ed* offers architecture critics an opportunity to catch a 'glimpse' of how persons with different capacities and limitations experience the built environment. In the long term, it aims at triggering a change in mentality; at sensitizing architecture critics—and the readers of their articles—to pay more attention to these persons' multisensory and spatial experience and, more in general, to accessibility, usability and comfort for all, when designing, describing and assessing architecture.

Central to *Buildings Revis(it)ed* is the dialogue between architecture critics and users/experts with a visual impairment in the context of a public building celebrated by the architectural press. This dialogue is expected to awaken critics to architecture's potential multisensory richness, and to the diverse ways in which this may be experienced and appreciated. Architects know, think and work primarily in a visual way [4]. They use drawings, diagrams and sketches as aids both to internal thinking and to communicating ideas and instructions to others. The absence of non-visual features in traditional architectural spatial representations indicates how these are disregarded as important elements in conceiving space [5]. This bias towards vision—and the suppression of other senses—characterises the way architecture is conceived, but also the way it is critiqued [6]. Journals that publish recent architectural work and award-winning projects rarely go beyond visual description and analysis in their discussions of the finished projects [7]. Persons with a visual impairment, however, have learned to be more attentive to non-visual sensory qualities, such as sound and touch [8]. As a result, they are able to appreciate spatial qualities or detect obstacles that most critics are not even aware of. Therefore these persons' perspective may help critics to augment their visual description and assessment of buildings with other sensory qualities.

At the same time, the dialogue with persons who are visually impaired is expected to confront critics with the reality of discrimination in the built environment, by highlighting how buildings that are celebrated in architectural magazines may disable persons with certain impairments. According to the social model of disability, persons with an impairment are not disabled per se, but may become so in situations where they interact with the (physical, digital or social) environment [9]. When the interaction between individual and physical environment leads to a handicap situation, architects are often responsible [10]. At the same time, architects have an important role to play in the elimination of such situations.

In order to set up this dialogue between critics and persons with a visual impairment, a series of afternoon workshops were organized with the support of the Flemish government. The *Flemish Architecture institute* (VAi) took care of the coordination and administration while local architecture associations assisted in announcing the initiative through their newsletters, digital flyers and posters.

Each workshop offered 20 participants—one architecture critic plus professional architects—the opportunity to discover a public building in a very unusual way: wearing a blindfold or simulation glasses, using a white cane, and being assisted by a user/expert with a visual impairment. The users/experts had been trained by an organization offering services tailored to persons with a visual impairment, which also provided glasses simulating tunnel vision, glaucoma, retinitis pigmentosa or glare.

The buildings selected for this (re)visit are all exemplary in terms of architecture and public function, offering a mix of weak and strong examples of accessibility for persons with a visual impairment. Each visit was preceded by a short introduction into the various types of visual impairments and the impact on the spatial experience. Afterwards, the participants exchanged experiences and the users/experts commented in detail on the spaces they had visited.

Upon completion of the workshop, the participating critic was asked to report on this experience in an article about the building at stake. The articles would be published as part of a dossier devoted to the *Buildings Revis(it)ed* initiative in an architectural magazine. In this way, the initiative was expected to reach the workshop participants but also the magazine's readers, extending the attention far beyond an afternoon event.

3 Three workshops and a publication

3.1 Concertgebouw in Bruges

The workshop series started in the Concertgebouw (concert building) in Bruges, designed by Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem. The building's exploration had been prepared by the personnel of the Concertgebouw to simulate the real attendance of a concert. At the time of the workshop, the exhibition *A clear view on diversity* happened to be on display in Bruges. Therefore, the Concertgebouw's exploration was preceded by a visit to the exhibition module *Meeting with the dark*. In a completely blacked out box, participants had to find their way through a simulated city and park environment. The users/experts piloted the row of shuffling architects during this radical encounter with the experience of sight loss. Subsequently, the participants and users/experts with a visual impairment jointly made the transfer to the Concertgebouw by public transport. Upon arrival, participants were blindfolded again and started their search for the right seat in the concert building.

Afterwards, critic Caroline Goossens reported in her article to be struck by the realization that the rigid frames which structure life so routinely are actually extremely thin: in the dark you meet yourself in the first place. But she was also pleasantly surprised to discover how changes in temperature, light, smell and sound reveal architecture's invisible borders, and how materials and details offer body and mind something to hold on to. At first sight, Goossens wrote, the blindfolded visit and multisensory experience of the Concertgebouw seemed to highlight the need for more inclusive design approaches, which take into account the real diversity of users throughout the entire design process. Yet, in her view, chances are that inclusive design eventually will lead to generic architecture, in which differentiation is wiped away. Instead she proposes to valorise diversity by explicitly emphasizing or even extrapolating it. Treating all users exclusively, she suggests, may not only generate a new form of inclusion, but also prevent inclusive design from ending as yet another dull architectural specialty.

3.2 Flemish Administrative Building (VAC) in Hasselt

Workshop two took place in the *Flemish Administrative Building* in Hasselt, designed by AWG architecten in collaboration with A₂O architecten. Participants explored the building

by following a predefined path. Starting from the street, they had to find the entrance, reception desk, toilets and finally another desk on the first floor. Some features in the building turned out to be downright illogical in the absence of sight; arranging the choose-floor buttons in elevators horizontally while the elevators obviously move vertically, for example, or locating the reception desk 'around the corner' instead of close to or in front of the entrance door.

In his article, critic Lars Kwakkenbos explicitly refers to these illogical elements. Taken together, he contends, people who are blind and those who are visually impaired are numerous enough to take them into account. Architecture, he points out, is after all political too: it weighs the ideals and interests of different parties. Arranging choose-floor buttons next to each other might be more beautiful, or cheaper. Yet, weighing the real needs of certain users may very well define the true beauty of architecture. On top of that, Kwakkenbos discerns in the multisensory experience of users with a visual impairment a potential leverage to emancipate architecture as discipline and as practice. In a period increasingly dominated by visual media, he feels that architects—more than ever—should be aware that they are neither artists nor publicity designers, but architects.

3.3 STUK Arts Centre in Leuven

The third workshop took place in the STUK Arts Centre in Leuven, designed by Neutelings Riedijk Architecten. After a brief introduction, participants followed a pre-defined track through the complex—from the street through the lobby and café to the auditorium and toilets—and performed an orientation exercise on the courtyard. The subsequent debate started with the exchange of impressions by the participants, followed by a discussion of the major obstacles based on pictures by the users/experts.

In his article, critic Koen Van Synghel describes the visit as a bewildering discovery of how architecture can be read through the sense of hearing, touch and smell; but also as a terrifying experience with which Hitchcock could not even compete. Without sight, he points out, a building transforms into a labyrinth; every corner is a dead-ending track, every open space an endless emptiness. In line with Kwakkenbos, Van Synghel stresses that, unlike art, architecture is a medium that should provide comfort—not in the sense of luxury or lazy relaxation, but in the sense of consolation, of solace. That is exactly what a handrail offers when you are climbing a stair with a blindfold, handed over completely to what you feel with your white stick or, even more elementary, with your hands. Since persons who are blind or visually impaired highly value their independence, the critic concludes, architects should occupy themselves more enthusiastically with ordinary handrails, with guiding lines in foot paths and floor tiles, and with contrasting materials.

3.4 Publication

Upon completion of the workshops, the critics' articles were bundled in a dossier for publication in A+ [11]. This magazine in the field of architecture, town planning, design and art is disseminated among all licensed architects and interns in Belgium.

The graphic designer of A+ proposed to illustrate the theme by playing along with the limits and conventions of printing and lay-out (Figure 1). In this way, the accessibility and readability of the text would be questioned, like that of the buildings visited. The organisers did not fully endorse the lay-out proposal, primarily because it would make the dossier inaccessible for the users/experts who had assisted in the workshops. Yet eventually, it was decided to stick to the proposal, because it seemed to raise the right questions, and thus perfectly fit the objectives of *Buildings Revis(it)ed*. Moreover, it seemed an excellent way to draw the readers' attention to the dossier.



Figure 1: Lay-out of the dossier in the architectural magazine

4 Discussion

If architects are to fully take up their social responsibility, they should become aware of and knowledgeable about the diversity of possibilities and limitations people may have, as well as of the diverse ways in which they may experience and appreciate buildings and spaces. The differences in functional use and spatial experience of the built environment are enormous, even among persons who are visually impaired.

In an attempt to sensitise architectural practice, *Buildings Revis(it)ed* chose for a rather unusual strategy: to set up a dialogue between architecture critics and persons with an (in this case visual) impairment. By preparing, publishing and reading the articles resulting from this initiative, the participating critics and their colleagues are expected to become more aware of how architecture, and in this way (continue to) point architects at their responsibility.

Whether this attempt was successful, is difficult to measure in the short term. To our knowledge, none of the participating critics received any formal reactions to their article, yet apparently it is rather rare for colleagues and readers to write. In informal conversations, professional architects spontaneously brought up the dossier and

expressed their regret about not having attended the workshops, which suggests that *Buildings Revis(it)ed* did not escape notice.

In the mid term, the initiative's success could be evaluated by the extent to which inclusion and the diverse ways of experiencing architecture are addressed in reviews of buildings that were not visited during the workshops. Another measure is the extent to which regional and local architecture associations continue to pay attention to the theme in their activities. Very promising in this respect is the fact that VAI opened a dossier on Universal Design on its website [12], and is planning to offer similar (re)visits during the 2009 edition of the Day of the Architecture, a yearly event to promote architecture.

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