Singular objects of architecture. The Belgian architecture scene

Since the turn of the century it seems no longer possible to think, speak or write about Belgian architecture in Belgium itself. It has become very hard to use the epithet ‘Belgian’ – in the case of architecture, but in all other instances as well. Cultural departments, divisions and institutions go to great lengths in order to see to it that not a single word or euro is spent to a cultural product that is not entirely ‘Flemish’. In each case, both adjectives are so tainted with connotations and implications, that they are – and will remain for quite a long time – almost too hot to handle. The extreme consequence of this absurd situation is most clearly illustrated by the fact that Belgium does no longer seem to exist inside of its own boundaries. Belgium has no ‘interior’; it is only visible as an exterior from a distance (or, one could argue, from the heart of the matter – Brussels). That is why, whoever wants to consider contemporary architecture in Belgium, needs to go abroad. One can think of the issues the renowned Japanese architecture magazine *A+U* devoted to Belgian architecture in 2003, and more recently in 2010. The exhibition *West Arch* in Aachen, Germany, offers another possibility to rationally, without conservative, progressive or heated arguments, consider the existence of Belgian architecture, starting from the work of the architect itself.

From the outset, one thing should be clear: there is no such thing as Belgian architecture – as there is no such thing as a contemporary ‘national’ form of architecture. Architecture is a discipline that has no need for a country – be it Belgium, Flanders, Wallonia or Europe. This does not mean that there have been no attempts to reduce all the architectural fractions in Belgium to the same national or regional denominator. The search for difference will go on forever. Most recently, in the aforementioned issue of *A+U* from 2010, architecture critic Koen Van Synghel, writes that ‘Flanders is more influenced by experimental Dutch architecture, whereas in Wallonia, important architects like Charles Vandenhove keep traditional architecture alive, fertilized with contemporary art.’ This distinction neglects many ‘traditional’ young Flemish practices, who were clearly influenced by, on the one hand, the robust and intentionally ‘unspectacular’ work of Bob van Reeth, or, on the other hand, the more classically modernist work of Stéphane Beel. And there are quite some offices from Brussels or Wallonia that do work in the vein of the ‘Superdutch’-tradition, and that remain far away from the almost archaic and severe tradition of Vandenhove.

In 2008, the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* published a series of books entitled ‘1000 years of architecture in Belgium’ . Architectural historian Francis Strauven recycled on this occasion the notion of the ‘New Simplicity’, which he introduced already in 1996 on the occasion of an exhibition of Flemish architecture. According to Strauven, a generation of architects emerged in the eighties, in Belgium but also elsewhere, in reaction to the excesses of postmodernism. ‘The young people from the eighties,’ he writes, ‘recommenced with simple certainties, they rediscovered and redefined the fundamental components of architecture.’ One could question, however, the simplicity or the fundamentality of the work of for example Xaveer De Geyter: his influential practice borders on the surrealist, the metropolitan and the eclectic, and he participated in many of the key projects of OMA/Rem Koolhaas. The architecture of another so-called disciple of this ‘New Simplicity’, Paul Robbrecht, is intertwined with logics and structures from the visual arts to such a degree, that these buildings are laden with an extraordinary aura that is very rare in contemporary architecture.
Some critics or theoreticians have searched for local difference and sameness in cultural rather than architectural circumstances. Pieter Uyttenhove wrote in 1997 a much debated and contested article on the ‘Belgian back room’ – nota bene in the Dutch magazine *Archis*. Belgian architecture, he argues, is defined by a strange mixture of dirty tricks and conformism, by the bending of rules and prescriptions and the multicoloured talk and whispering that takes place – hidden and secretively – in the back room of the typical Belgian house. Geert Bekaert, arguably the most important and certainly the most productive Belgian architecture critic since World War II – reacted by saying: if only there were a Belgian back room! In that case the definitions and the subdivisions would not be so hard to find. Bekaert himself wrote about Belgian architecture as ‘the poetry of the commonplace’, first in 1987, and later on, in 1995, in his book *Contemporary architecture in Belgium* – an overview that, to this day, remains without succession. This notion is partly cultural as well: the architecture that is poetical but boring and clichéd at the same time, can flourish very good in a country that firstly, is hard to define or that does not seem to exist, and that, secondly, has no architectural tradition or architectural culture whatsoever to speak of. And this is, indeed, the paradox: exactly because it is impossible to define Belgian architecture, because it has no schools or dogmas or movements, its existence and its appearance become valuable and exemplary for a more general and global approach to architecture. The singular object of architecture has to do all the work in order to create meaning, distinction and difference.

The aforementioned theories are all written around the turn of the century, in the nineties or in the past decade. Quite some things have changed in Belgium. As described above, the national or regional adjectives already were quite unusable in an architectural sense (as there was no real general Belgian or Flemish architecture), but now they are unusable in a political sense as well (as Belgium or Flanders are, for the moment, undefinable notions in difficult discussions).

What is more important, however, is that the architecture that is build or produced on the Belgian territory, is no longer as marginal or peripheral as it used to be. Belgian or Flemish architecture does not exist but it is – another paradox – successful. Everybody wants it, not only the policymakers who think they can use it as sales talk for their region or their city, but the general public has a longing for architecture as well. In a very segregated and for a long time catholic country like Belgium, modernization – be it politically or culturally – has installed itself very slowly. In the field of architecture and urbanism, a generation of architects and theoreticians that became active in the sixties and the seventies, succeeded since the eighties in developing a discipline that yielded results as qualitative as the work made by colleagues abroad. Not only individual freestanding houses – indeed the main cells of the Belgian spatial fabric – were built by ‘good’ architects; but these realisations instantly got the attention they deserved, and, from the nineties on, resulted in the construction of the public architecture of libraries, courthouses, museums, town halls, and so on. The government finally accepted that architecture was not something that should be left over to bureaucratic planning departments or to local and traditional architects. In 1999, both the Vlaams Bouwmeester (the Flemish ‘Building Master’) and the VAi (the Flemish Architecture Institute) were installed. These institutions were based on existing Dutch models, although they started with more modest ambitions. Ideally, the Vlaams Bouwmeester is responsible for guaranteeing the quality of the architecture every time the government commissions a building – be it at a municipal, federal or regional scale. His main instrument is the so-called ‘Open Oproep’, a design
competition for public commissions, for which each time five architects are selected. This has certainly led to an improvement of the general quality of the architecture, but on the other hand the really inspiring or daring projects get rejected, because in the end it is still the government that decides. The VAi, as its mission statement reads, ‘sensibilizes professionals, researchers, media and governments as well as a wider audience on architecture.’ In order to do so, its main activities are the publication of a yearbook and the organisation of a biennial ‘architecture day’. Here also, in trying to please the entire population (who is often not even interested), these initiatives avoid difficult or progressive projects. Next to this, a Brussels Bouwmeester is installed, while the architectural initiatives in Wallonia do not (yet) seem to be entirely visible. In the entirety of Belgium, however, many local organisations and architecture clubs are active, and the press (both audiovisual and written) gives a lot of attention to every form of architecture. A good example of this, is the architectural magazine \( A^+ \), that is still working on a Belgian scale, and that appears six times a year in a Dutch and French version.

In a certain sense, and because of the aforementioned developments, the situation of the architectural scene in Belgium has reversed since the eighties and the nineties. Whereas in the previous century architecture was left alone and could simply do whatever it wanted, nowadays everybody wants architecture and architecture seems to want everything. Back then, architecture was tolerated without much enthusiasm as long as it did not stand in the way. That is why it could excel in finding poetry in the ordinary and in the commonplace. Nowadays the poetry of architecture has become a commonplace in itself, that is expected and respected by everyone – which means, finally, that also in Belgium architecture has become a part of the cultural industry, just like the theatre, the literature and the visual arts.

The young and emerging architectural practices that are shown in \( West \, Arch \) do no longer need to fight for their own recognition, as their ancestors did. On the contrary: what young architects need to fear the most, is the general and cultural success of architecture, because it entails conformism, consensus and a ‘bourgeois’ installation and acceptance of architectural style and taste. Architecture can only really flourish when there is something to be distinguished from.

Enlightening remarks on these matters can be found in an important and elongated discussion that took place between Jean Nouvel and Jean Baudrillard at the end of the century, and that was published in 2002 as \( The \, singular \, objects \, of \, architecture \). The philosopher and the architect are looking for difference, for classifications in the immense whole of the architecture production, without reverting to national or superseded categories. ‘Today,’ says Baudrillard, ‘it is very difficult to identify, in a given building, what belongs to this secret, this singularity that hasn’t really disappeared. I think that as a form it is indestructible, but it is increasingly consumed by culture.’ The Belgian situation might still be the ideal test plot to view how architecture is doing under – and often in reaction to – the current cultural conditions. The fresh and individual oeuvres of the young architecture practices on show in \( West \, Arch \), can then be like exploratory drillings. ‘A work of art or architecture,’ says Baudrillard, ‘is a singularity, and all these singularities can create holes, interstices and voids in the metastatic fullness of culture.’

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