

PLAY FOR REAL

Architecture as a role play: 51N4E und LAMOT™ in Mechelen

*"Ironically, [...]51N4E was to act simultaneously as scenographer, programmer, designer, advisor, and supervisor but not as architect – painfully yet succinctly illustrating the architect's role within the contemporary planning and architectural process."*¹

The building of the former 'Lamot' brewery is located on the *Dijle* river in Mechelen, a provincial centre in central Belgium². The historic city centre and the central square are situated within walking distance across the river. The industrial complex – an amalgam of warehouses, silos, former corn lofts, and the authentic brewer coppers' hall – was to be converted into a culture and convention centre with a mixed cultural and commercial program. It is within this project of conversion that the Brussels-based office of *51N4E Space Producers* played a role, or better, played several roles. It is exactly these different roles at different phases of the project that will provide us with an accurate reading of the Lamot building.

The position of 51N4E within the design and building process was a very peculiar one: the office only entered the project at a time when an architectural design already existed. They cannot claim to be the official architects of the building – this honour belongs to a local firm, *Architektenkoöperatief*, as it was this co-operative that signed for the final lay-out and execution of the Lamot building. 51N4E were asked to participate in a competition for the cultural scenography of the interiors of the planned 'Mechelen's Museum of the Twentieth Century'. While the competition brief asked for a scenographic project, 51N4E first redefined the field of operation. After having studied the proposed museum programme, they developed the winning entry starting from the conclusion that Mechelen has no collection of contemporary art that could possibly justify establishing a contemporary art museum. 51N4E convinced the client – the town council of Mechelen – to change the entire project brief and rethink the architectural project: LAMOT™.

As the winners of this competition, 51N4E were first appointed as the scenographers for the Lamot project and remained involved from that moment to this day, immediately before the final delivery of the building. The fact that they invested Lamot with a project –

¹ 51N4E space producers, Nai publishers, Rotterdam 2004, p. 23.

² Mechelen is located exactly in-between Brussels and Antwerp.

LAMOT™ – provided them with a special status within the design process: *"By not defining your position all that clearly in advance, you can make connections between the architects, the policy people, people from city marketing – to get them out of their niches and working together on a project."*³ Therefore, it is incorrect to simply call 51N4E the scenographers of the project. Sometimes because of necessity, at other times in order to force specific decisions, and at still other instances to simply protect the LAMOT™ idea, the office engaged in a "role-play". It is precisely this role-play – 'Play for Real'⁴ – that 51N4E describe as a potentially viable position or methodology for architects to engage in in this kind of project. However, their changing role is not merely a *clever strategy* or a *speculative standpoint*.⁵ It equally is a reality that has had its impact on the built project and is legible throughout Lamot.

The Doll House – the Scenographer as Principal

With their entry for the invited competition, 51N4E radically altered the image that many had of the future Lamot, both in programmatic and aesthetical terms. They dismantled the proposed programme and reassembled it in a new configuration for the different occupations of the building. By communicating this new configuration with the suggestive image of a doll house and an imaginary visit to LAMOT™ on a day in 2014, 51N4E were able to represent the potential qualities of Mechelen's most important public building. The metaphor of the doll house enabled the office to escape in the first instance from the obvious material and structural difficulties of converting a brewery into a culture and convention centre. The focus was redirected to the different programmes and types of public that would inhabit the many rooms of the building. The stereotypical image of the dollhouse – a building without a façade where one can simultaneously see the different rooms – resembles a section and, thus, an architectural drawing. But whereas a section makes an abstraction from the décor to highlight the building as a construction, the doll house suggests the many potentialities of the building through a stacking of different rooms with different names and atmospheres. The doll house summarizes the designers' intentions in one very clear image.

³ Paul Vermeulen, "Bring it on! An interview with 51N4E". in: 51N4E, 2004, p. 01.

⁴ 'Play for Real' is the title of a manifesto by 51N4E. In the text, they refer to the vanishing role of the architect by articulating their own position. The text was made in 2003, when they were involved in the design process of LAMOT™.

⁵ 51N4E, 'Play for real' (2003), in: 51N4E, 2004, p. 09.

While the city government discovered possibilities of exploitation that it had never been aware of and while the private developer could only dream of the exquisite spaces full of priceless Mechelen heritage, 51N4E installed a very clear spatial and programmatic pattern. In a first move, the building was divided into three horizontal layers. The central layer is situated on the first floor and will house the foyer or covered square that will give access to the spaces below and above: 'Mechelen Centraal'. The 'base' contains the entrances, a café, a restaurant, and other commercial zones. The upper layer will house the different programmes of the culture and convention centre and is conceived as a series of empty containers that define the 'critical mass' of the building, waiting to be colonized. At the height of 'Mechelen Centraal', 51N4E proposed to cut the façades of the entire building in order to open up the industrial relict and provide it with a clear and strong public presence. And to reinforce the impact of this unifying central foyer, the division between the two required programmes (cultural and commercial) was only made on an organizational level.

The extent to which their competition entry altered the ideas of the project's principals - both private and public - shows the lucidity of 51N4E to strategically criticize a given brief, providing them with the space to develop and communicate a clear alternative. By presenting the seductive image of the doll house and the organizational principle of the programme, 51N4E for a moment wore the jacket of the project's principal and gave a new direction to Mechelen's main urban project.

Reality Check - Space Producers

It is obvious that beyond its suggestive qualities, the doll house has shortcomings as a conceptual framework for an architectural project. It neglects the complexities of the renovation of an industrial relict to allow for many types of signification. But it also negates the *Gestalt* or appearance of the building, and the *logistics* that enable the culture and convention centre to function as such (technical spaces, stock area, corridors, and staircases). Precisely these issues that were left out of 51N4E's scenographic project become crucial in the second phase of the process though. In this phase, the office co-operated with the earlier appointed architects of the project, the 'Architektenkoöperatief', in developing a new preliminary design for LAMOT™.

The decisive aspect of this preliminary design is the addition of a new volume to the brewery complex. This volume contains the main

entrance to Lamot, a new meeting room and a daylight auditorium. In an almost natural way, it connects with the massive conglomerate of the existing buildings. The rising floor of the auditorium, its monumental concrete structure, and the crystal-clear glass that reflects the river and continues in the horizontal cut through the brick walls of the brewery ('Mechelen Centraal') express the original ideas of LAMOT™ and define the new *Gestalt* of the building. The glass volume and the continuous horizontal glass band make it legible for every citizen and visitor that the old brewery has been opened and converted into a new public building with an important impact on and presence in the city.

With regard to the logistical organization of the complex, we fail to discover this same continuity from the scenographic project to the preliminary design. Several projects of 51N4E prove the firm's interest for the 'dead mass' of a programme, a building, or an urban setting. The regular dead-end street in an allotment becomes an athletic running track; the gigantic storage room becomes part of a very small kitchen if you move the wall; the stock of the museum forms an integral part of the exhibition trajectory.⁶ In all of these projects, precisely the infrastructural or logistical aspects are at the core of the design intervention.⁷

A building that can simultaneously host around 1400 people requires an elaborate logistical project for which a doll house fails to work as a reference. The original concept schemes show that 51N4E believed the horizontal and empty public foyer of 'Mechelen Centraal' would make both the lower and the upper spaces *legible* and *accessible*. Both 'base' and 'critical mass' were conceived as homogenous entities that could be opened almost ad hoc towards the central foyer. Because of the compactness and enormous scale of the industrial complex, the new programme will never really function as a homogenous layer in relation to the central foyer though. Although the cantilevered staircase at the side of the Dijle river seems to announce a very clear vertical circulation system, access to the upper rooms heavily reduces the legibility of the building as a whole and the experience of the different atmospheres and programmes that were at the core of the doll house metaphor.

This legibility of the complex is further reduced as *scenography* and *programming* (two issues that 51N4E had stressed in their initial proposal) also seem to have been relegated to the background. The amalgam of different spaces was to become legible through the use of

⁶ We are referring to 'Allotment Athletica', a suburban planning project in Ooigem - Belgium; 'Advanced Domesticity', punctual interventions in a house in Outgaarden - Belgium; and 'Primitives in Space', the reorganization and interior renovation of the Groeninge Museum in Bruges - Belgium.

⁷ Ilka Ruby, Andreas Ruby, *Bewohnbare Atmosphären*, in: *werk, bauen + wohnen* 6-2004, p. 20 -25.

specific decors, and the management of the two different programmes (heritage and convention centre) were to find its evident unfolding in the spatial organization of the complex. In the realized project, the absence of a clear scenography combined with the lack of hierarchy between doors, corridors, and staircases make it an even bigger challenge to understand where one finds himself within the complex. Besides the four main spaces, that each have different qualities in terms of light and atmosphere, Lamot also contains many smaller and less public rooms. In the original scheme, the offices, a treasure chamber, and meeting rooms were visible to the visitor and showed the internal dynamics of the building. But in the realized building, exactly these smaller rooms are hidden behind closed doors and brick walls.

The fact that, during the real construction period, 51N4E were no longer the authors of the project but acted as external advisors and supervisors, only reinforced the lack of a clear structure beyond the central space of 'Mechelen Centraal'. Again, the office had to act strategically in order to protect a few of the most crucial aspects in the detailing and execution of the project. They chose to safeguard the impact of their own most important interventions and had to leave most of the decisions concerning materials and interiors to the real architects of the project.

How to Play for Real?

The LAMOT™ building has now taken its place within the city. The light volume of the auditorium indicates that the massive industrial complex has become a public building. When coming from the central square of Mechelen and turning around the corner of the block, the window on the first floor announces the current exhibition. We ascended to 'Mechelen Centraal' on the first floor via a monumental staircase through a bizarre hole in the floor. The red desk was where we needed to buy our tickets for the exhibition. The lady at the counter advised us to take the elevator to the highest floor, from where we would be able to walk down through the exhibition. But, we decided to search for our own way through Lamot. We chose one of the three staircases though it was not clear where each of them was leading. The staircase reminded us of mediocre convention centres. We were passing several toilets and many closed doors. A door that remained partly open showed us a rather dull white office space. We decided to continue our trip and, by coincidence, we arrived on the public roof terrace. From the roof we had a view northward towards the city, while to the south we were able to look into a meeting room, as the doll house had announced. A single

glance revealed the initial design intentions and the possibilities that had been left untouched in the realized project.

In their manifesto, 51N4E declare that the role of 'architecture' and the 'position of the architect' have changed quite significantly. As enlightened principals have become rare, as the building process has become extremely complex and as the architect's traditional authorship has dwindled to nothing in these times, 51N4E propose to move beyond this authorship towards 'role-play'. They see the role-play as a means to contribute, intervene, and control the process and quality of a project. The 'role-play' enables them to operate as 'space producers' without necessarily having the full authorship of a project.

In the process of LAMOT™, one can clearly indicate how 51N4E have played several roles. It is clear to what extent the office was able to take decisions, where they could not force decisions, and where they seem not to have taken decisions. 51N4E distinguish itself as an office through their remarkable ability to unveil potentials that are often invisible to the project's own principal(s). Especially in seemingly *non-architectural matters* – the questioning of a brief, the exploration of logistics of a building, the re-direction of the design process – 51N4E find or create the 'space' to work as author.⁸

It is clear that LAMOT™ would never have existed in its current form and with its actual impact on the city of Mechelen without such a radical and lucid alteration of the brief and without the organizational principle as proposed and developed by 51N4E. With the choice for the new glass volume and the articulated horizontal cut through the massive brick volume, the office was able to clearly represent the new public character of the former brewery. At the same time, by leaving the internal logistical organisation untouched and prioritizing on this *Gestalt* of Lamot, 51N4E did not pursue the most crucial aspects from the point of view of their own initial scheme. The fact that there is no clearly defined internal structure beyond the central foyer of 'Mechelen Centraal', has us hypothesize the orchestration of the different rooms, programmes, types of public and atmospheres as envisioned by the doll-house imagery. It seems that – precisely in the phase where these issues could have been touched – 51N4E's focus shifted from the internal composition and organization to the external presence of LAMOT™. In other words, the way the office defined its role and priorities at this point in the process did not allow them to question and rethink their own

⁸ 51N4E (2004) 'It tastes awful (but we working on it)', 27. This text is another statement by 51N4E. In an imaginary foundation text, they put three 51N4E *franchises* on the market – 51N4E 'logistics', 'space producers' and 'easy', as they say, in order to skip the ambition of traditional architectural office.

initial 'design'. The clarity with which 51N4E played the role of scenographer (or principal) and defined their own targets in the competition entry was lost in the second phase of the project. It is exactly this lack of clarity that we can now read throughout Lamot.

Maybe this very fact shows the peculiar nature of the 'role-play' itself. While not having the full 'traditional' authorship of a project, a clear and limited definition of the role and the corresponding design targets is essential to any meaningful role-play. At the same time, the Lamot project and process indicate that, in order to control specific design choices and ideas till the moment they are really built, a traditional authorship - understood as the bridge between vision and construction - is necessary. This traditional authorship remains a crucial aspect of the architects' practice; an aspect that goes beyond and questions the potentially floating state of the 'role-play' itself.

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