Anamnesis of a school

Like many schools, 't Klein Atheneum in Tienen has a complicated building history. Its city centre location meant its development had to adapt to the possibilities that presented themselves. The primary school was established around 1930, and was housed in a large private house to which a kindergarten extension was added. Over time it grew into a labyrinthine agglomeration of disparate buildings. An expansion, not fully carried out, aggravated the problem in the late 1970s. The primary school lacks a clear circulation system and is inaccessible to emergency services. The only ordering principle that has remained constant is its grouping along a closed street front. The institution stretches along a 75-metre façade on the Oude Vestenstraat. Yet the school derives little visibility from this considerable façade. It remains concealed behind a string of building fronts of varying size and quality.

The primary school never had to suffer from a lack of space. Its complaint was of a different sort. The unfulfilled promises of the building operation of the 1970s muddied the waters. The situation seemed temporary and did not occasion much attention and care to the maintenance of its patrimony. Parts of the school were exploited to their limits and then abandoned or used as storage for obsolete equipment. Eventually decay and ruin made the situation untenable. The school's point of origin, the stately townhouse on the west side, was no longer in use. The carriage entrance that had long been the main entrance into the school domain was closed off for security reasons.

For several years, all users – kindergarteners, pupils, teachers, staff and delivery people – would enter the school through the entrance of the 1970s building, creating a traffic bottleneck for the entire school.

The brief of the 2002 design competition for 't Klein Atheneum was not to realise a new or supplementary programme, but to cure the ailing body of the school. The project definition, laid out and approved by the governing board of the school district, described in detail which parts were to be demolished, what positions, dimensions and functions the new sections were to have, which superfluous elements of the school complex were to be divested and sold off. Only the office of the Flemish Government Architect, which in the meantime had become involved in this dicey project, emphasised the need to consider the complex as a whole and provide a 'strategic interpretation’ of the commission.

We saw this as an incentive to expand the scope of the project. A purely architectural 'solution’ might well bring about a renewal of the infrastructure, but it would not resolve the dispersion it was suffering from. We would focus our attention on the school’s spatial structure – first strive for coherence and thereby ensure a secure access, clear up the internal circulation, facilitate evacuation routes and accessibility for emergency services, optimise the use of the outside space and make the school identifiable as a public institution and as an entity. Such ambitions required a painstaking evaluation of all the components of the complex and a decision on the way they might be used for the organisation and image of the school. The entire site had to be included in the challenge. An analysis of what was left over once all the obsolete sections were removed from the equation enabled us to identify the north corner of the wing built in the 1970s as the potential point of convergence for the school. Its central position on the site, at the intersection of the lines imposed by the structure of the original parcels, allowed us to use it as a starting point from which to construct a structural coherence.

This ‘node’ is the connection point of the buildings that remain after the clear-out. It is linked to an existing stairwell and equipped with toilet facilities. A modest renovation can link it to the two courtyards and the gymnasium wing.¹ It can be developed into the complex’s principal traffic exchange, separating access to the school buildings from access to the grounds. The design reorganises the complex around the two courtyards, conceptualising them as the forecourts of the school. Their direct connection to the street

¹ For budgetary reasons, this link has been provisionally eliminated.
assures a smooth and secure access. Kindergarteners, pupils and staff can use separate, designated entrances, relocating congestion from around the school gate to the centre of the school grounds. The traffic flow converges at the circulation node before splitting up toward the various buildings.

From the node, a new classroom wing is to be built, taking advantage of the opportunity to cut through alongside the existing stairwell and stretching in an east-west direction along the entire length of the high retaining wall that bounds the school grounds. The ground floor will be occupied by kindergarten classrooms. The upper storey, which is connected to the courtyard of the adjacent Atheneum, consists of a nave of classrooms that can be used, as needed, by the kindergarten, the primary school or the secondary school.

In the competition design, we applied a strategy of shifting and pushing out functions, continuing this transaction until the heterogeneous programme could be replaced by a uniform series of classrooms. This made it possible to concentrate the entire operation of new construction within this single, unitary wing. In the transition to the definitive design the programme was expanded, but the implantation of the new classroom wing on the dividing line between the primary and secondary schools remains the foundation of the restructuring. The design strives to clarify the building configuration. Starting at the anchoring point of the node, a cross formation is laid out on the site, its outstretched arms demarcating and orienting the courtyards.

To resolve the separate issue of surplus space, the project definition called for selling two dilapidated terraced houses on the east side of the grounds. Instead, we proposed releasing the town house on the west side. This building, after all, entails conservation issues that are difficult to reconcile with the current requirements of a school. Tearing down an added, ragged bay would restore the original proportions of the neo-classical façade, as well as creating a breach in the row of façades. This will become the entrance for the pupils and cyclists. The aim of servicing the buildings from the courtyards is reinforced by an open access to the street.

In the competition, we concentrated the entire replacement programme on the construction of the new classroom wing. We proposed using the gap that would be created by tearing down the two terraced houses to build a large porch topped by an open-air sports court. The expansion of the programme now allows us to construct a new building there as well. This front building will serve as a gateway for the kindergarteners and their parents, as well as providing space for an access drive into the car park. The new parking facility is to be built on an incline, providing access to the underground garage – a remarkable leftover from the 1970s building operation – which has been inaccessible up to this point. The roof surface will be developed as a unique component of the playground: a sloping surface occupying a large section of the east courtyard. At the top it connects to a sky bridge that crosses the school domain on a diagonal. This corridor is the final element in a route running from the node to the front building and bridges the school’s different elevations. The sequence of stepped floor slabs, a hallway in sloping segments, the inclined corridor, slanted and staggered surfaces, gaps and through-views, floor-to-ceiling light shafts blurs the traditional stratification of the storeys, dispensing with the street level as a reference. The outside space on the east side is not defined as a plaza – it is configured as a landscape of structures.

We seek out this kind of shifts in our work. A project operates on a given circumstance. It redraws a situation. Within this we look for clues, engineer harmonies. Architecture, after all, must be ‘installed’. The design lays out a structure in which form and substance rely on each other to come through. The structure is prescribed by intention. It is set out

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1 The houses are the property of the school but were never used as school facilities.
2 The building is part of the original construction of the street and its façade has a specific historical value. Adapting to the present-day security and functional requirements of a school, however, would require significant renovation. In addition, the building is difficult to incorporate in the organisational structure we propose.
3 The ground floor accommodates the medical facilities of the CLB (the school’s counselling and healthcare service); the upper storey will house a new multi-function room (the existing room will become a refectory and kitchen).
on a conceptual grid and thereby creates a bridge between ideas and facts. It constructs the field upon which meanings are developed. Architecture imposes a perspective. It arranges things along a horizon and identifies their vanishing point. Structure, form and image are involved jointly and simultaneously in the meaning of a design. The design adjusts the circumstance. It operates as a shift in the situation and remains visible as a distortion. Congruence and distortion are the operators of a design strategy we aim to employ in the production of meaning.

This implies that one can accept existing structures without undermining the claims of the architecture; that we can be confident that the outline of the design emerges from the surrounding static. In the design for 't Klein Atheneum the available infrastructure is incorporated in the superstructure of the design. The caesura on the west side of the row of façades is repeated on the east side, enabling us to bring coherence to the disparate conglomeration formed by the façades of the school building. The front is modelled into a free-standing structure. Breaching the row enables us to express the public character of the school, creating depth perspectives into the interior space. The typical internal structure of a building block in which sizable publicly oriented entities are positioned alongside one another becomes legible from the street. The name of the institution will be engraved in the slate cladding at the extremities of the rearmost façades and along the edges of the common walls that have been freed up. The typographic ornamentation is a stamp for the character of the building complex spread across this domain.

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