The neo-Gothic Arenberg Institute in Leuven was originally a complex group of laboratory buildings, situated on a steep incline in the city centre. Neutelings Riedijk Architecten have now transformed it into a three-dimensional mosaic housing a motley assemblage of public theatres and outdoor spaces. In the rhetoric surrounding this new accommodation for the Stuk art centre one word in particular resounds: city, city, city.

City and urbanity are the concepts repeatedly cited in order to explain and justify the design choices in the Stuk. It was, for example, the express aim of Neutelings Riedijk to open the performances in the theatres to the urban surroundings as much as possible, and the diversity of the architectural character of the interior spaces around the central court is designed to ensure that the Stuk is ‘like a city with many houses’. Striking visual additions to the street facades, such as the silver-coloured shed roof on the front annex, the oversize double frames at the rear or the four enormous STUK letters, which are framed in steel, are intended as eye-catchers in the cityscape, and via the public pedestrian route that bisects the complex, ‘the city descends the incline right through the Stuk’.

That city is first and foremost Leuven. Ever since the powerful politician Louis Tobback started to play out his fin de carrière here as mayor, this modest-sized city has shown a special dynamism Leuven has been a university city from time immemorial; now it is also something of an administrative city, having won the battle to be the seat of the divided province of Flemish Brabant. This success seems to be reflected in its urban design and architecture. Now and then, Leuven – both the city and the university – sets great store by spatial quality, for which it also wins prizes. There is of course the development plan for the station area, a large-scale project predating Tobback’s arrival, but now it has been joined by transformation projects for other city districts. The university for its part has already made clear its ambitions for Naamsestraat, where not only the university halls and a large number of the historic colleges are located, but also the Arenberg Institute. With High Street in Oxford as role model, Naamsestraat is gradually being developed into one of the most prestigious university locations in Leuven’s cityscape.

The distinctive redevelopment of the Arenberg Institute by Neutelings Riedijk fits in well with this image of a quality-
conscious city, but in reality it is not particularly indebted to it. The city council was scarcely involved in the scheme, which is probably not such a bad thing. While Mayor Tobbback initially put his political weight behind the high-quality aspirations of urban planning projects in his city, he now appears to have lowered the quality hurdle for new developers. In other words, all the design effort Neutelings Riedijk devoted to reconciling the Stuk's complex programme with the equally complex limiting conditions of the context, such as the steep incline, the constricted site and the existing Arenberg buildings, appears to be not so much indebted to the city or the university, which did not play a prominent role in the realization of the building, but rather to the staff of the art centre itself who, through careful preparation and constant interaction with the architects, have guided the project to a successful conclusion. However, for precisely this reason it is remarkable that some of the intentions Neutelings Riedijk embedded in the design have not been realized now that the building is in use. The status of the new Stuk, its size and technical equipment all suggest that the art centre has been completely revamped. It is now far removed from the rather untidy haunt of culturally-minded students it used to be and has been promoted to the institutional circuit. The architects have laconically made that clear by placing a logo and a billboard on the Naamsestraat facade and in so doing given the initial impetus for the exuberant communication strategy we have come to expect from cultural temples. The current managers of the Stuk have responded with great circumspection to the new situation. So far they have held fast to ‘an underground operation in small smoky rooms’. The billboard remains empty. The lamps in the sunken entrance patio along the street are so often turned off that it is still the dark hole it always was. The furniture that theatre director Jan-Joris Lamers installed as an ‘artistic intervention’ recalls, in its rickety ‘honesty’ of untreated wood and steel, nothing so much as a melancholic cry of distress. Time will have to find a solution here.

**Filtered urbanity**

Whenever the talk turns to urbanity, concepts such as mix and diversity are soon bandied about. Thus also in the design justification for the Stuk. The building’s spatial concept is a kaleidoscopic mosaic of highly diverse spaces, both as regards programme (including theatres, rehearsal rooms, café, university activities, offices, green room) and as regards design (for example, the piazza-like character of the large theatre executed in oiled concrete, the Catholic kitsch of the ensemble theatre, wooden crates for the individual music studios). Each piece has its own colour thereby rendering visible the ordering scheme of the patchwork, in which
identity depends on radical diversity. The Stuk complex thus resembles the ‘patchwork metropolis’, were it not for the fact that in addition to the obvious disparity in scale, there is a more significant difference vis à vis Neutelings’ famous urban design model of 1989. While in the patchwork metropolis spatial coherence is scarcely made explicit, is perhaps not even sought as such and only exists because of the substratum of the traffic infrastructure, the creation of unity was a deliberate aim in the Stuk.

While the architects may have pulled out all the stops in the interior, for the exterior of this motley assemblage they opted for the opposite. Virtually the entire exterior envelope is executed in the same red colour: pigmented concrete for the floors, stairs and roof terraces, and brick for the walls. The materiality of the new-build, moreover, has been chosen to fit in with the old building sections, with the aim of creating the appearance of a self-evident whole. The expressiveness of the architecture of Neutelings Riedijk, which regularly manifests itself in striking facade designs with exuberant decoration, has been given free rein in the interior, but has been reduced to a mere sculptural massing for the exterior. Virtually all of the important spaces in the Stuk are situated on the intimate inner court. As a result, it undeniably forms the complex’s heart and orientation point, and so this, too, gives rise to a highly legible and prominent form of spatial unity. The central patio is intended as the nec plus ultra of urbanity, because this is where numerous circulation streams and visitor groups meet. It is characterized by multiplicity, diversity and mixing. However, this urbanity is confined within the walls of the art centre and is for this reason something of a protected species. The architects have, however, created a relationship with the real world outside: an informal route runs through the Stuk’s patio, bisecting the block and providing a shorter connection between the upper-lying Naamsestraat and the lower-lying city along the river Dijle. The Stuk complex looks all the more like an urban intervention in that it refines the mesh of the public pedestrian network in the city centre. However, since the route leads through the foyer and this interior space may thus be experienced as a barrier (outside opening hours at any event), this claim to urbanity needs to be qualified somewhat.

On the other hand, there are countless examples of similar, highly successful, short-cuts in Leuven, both through the historic college buildings and in reinterpretations of the latter in postwar infill projects, but also much more haphazard examples between the freestanding blocks of a campus-like arrangement. The route through the Stuk forms a thoughtful addition to this informal pedestrian network which criss-crosses Leuven’s city centre. The network is not just urbanist wishful thinking, but really is intensively used, which probably has a lot do with the micro-culture of the
university public and in particular the student population, which has its own patterns of movement and sociability.

The new Stuk is housed in a building that expresses its desire to interweave with city life as much as possible, but it cannot be denied that the focus on the patio means a focus on a filtered city life. The ultimate effect of a direct confrontation between art and world has been somewhat tempered. During a performance, the audience does not have an unmediated view of the city, but rather a view of the city as represented by the Stuk’s patrons. Doesn’t one in effect see oneself through the window: fellow culture enthusiasts in the foyer, the patio, the café? For that matter, can there be no urbanity without the ideological attributes of transparency, accessibility, permeability, visibility of the interior activities? The old city theatre in Leuven has a nineteenth-century organization, which is to say you can’t walk through it, the stage is a closed box and outsiders can’t see what is taking place inside. Does that make it an un-urban building?

Theatre ideology

In the transformation of the Arenberg Institute into an art centre, the diversity of the theatres plays a major role. Three are situated in the complex’s new wing. Not only are new theatres seldom built, it is even more rare for architects to formulate, in this case in a text by Willem-Jan Neutelings, an explicit ideology for this programme, an ideology based on its historical development. The basic premise is that the theatre evolved from the medieval marketplace entertainments, and is thus intimately connected with urban life. For Neutelings Riedijk, the market as meeting place is therefore the psychological and spatial underpinning of the theatre’s development. In the Renaissance, however, so the text continues, the theatre turned in on itself: it now represented the market only symbolically. Later, there was a second separation of city and theatre: the stage retreated behind a frame (the proscenium arch) and became a ‘different’ space. A century later, the bourgeois theatre drew an equally sharp dividing line between the foyer and urban space. From then on, hubbub in the auditorium was no longer allowed, the audience was urged to be quiet and pay attention. The flat-floor theatre or the ‘black box’ was the final stage in this development. Here, there is no longer any frame separating the actor from the audience; the ideology of the avant-garde sought to break down the barrier between art and life. The real consequence of this, however, according to Neutelings, was that the audience was ‘brazenly sucked into the frame’. ‘The semi-circle has become a classroom layout. This needs to be watched.’ Neutelings detects here a total break with the city and with architecture. The latter is only negative,
present as a bearer of technology and a shield against the interfering outside world. It seeks only extreme neutrality and flexibility. This, too, is true: there are countless ‘multifunctional’ theatres which ultimately turn out to be useless or impossibly expensive to run, unless one restricts oneself to the classic frontal arrangement. This historical sketch leads directly to the crux of the design: can this state of affairs be reversed? Neutelings Riedijk’s solution is multiple theatres, each with highly specific characteristics as regards layout, theatrical possibilities and architectural character. The central patio is the adhesive which welds this cluster of theatres into an urban space with a variety of houses.

Characteristic of this strategy is the largest theatre, the ‘Soete’. ‘Large’ is a relative notion: the theatre has a sizable stage but lacks a fly tower and has only 240 seats. It is therefore automatically destined for ‘small-theatre productions’. For large productions the Stuk will still have to use other venues. This small size was a compromise: lack of resources played a role, but also the fact that the centre has earned its reputation with small-theatre productions and large theatres are available elsewhere in the city.

Externally, the Soete fits in well as regards material with the old wings of the Arenberg building. Inside, however, it differs radically from the standard black box. As a polemical opening move, the architects have opted for a fixed auditorium layout. After all, as they rightly argue, if an arrangement other than the frontal is required, the ‘lab’ or ‘studio’ theatres can be used. However, the significance of this choice lies elsewhere: it is a rejection of flexibility as a condition sine qua non for a contemporary theatre. Equally unusual is the suspension of the stage lighting. Once again, the architects did not opt for a flexible, visible layout operated by a roller bridge, but rather fixed concrete bridges situated so close together that they effectively form a lowered ceiling which hides the technical equipment. The fact that the architects accepted the negative consequence of this illustrates the importance of the choice. The auditorium is considerably higher as a result, thereby threatening the openness of the small inner court – which is, after all, the connecting link of the entire project. But indeed, the expressive power of the theatre architecture benefits from it enormously.

The theatre has a classical beam form but instead of being hermetically closed off from the outside world, it is open on all sides. On one side, next to the stage, a gigantic window provides a view of the inner court, so that it is possible to perform to the inner court or the ‘grand café’ opposite (a possibility tested out at the opening of the complex). In the other long wall, diagonally opposite this window, a second glazed opening against the ceiling pierces the beam once
again. This glazed loggia opens onto the top landing of the stairs leading from the inner court to the theatre. When the sun is in the right position, daylight streams through the theatre from one side to the other. From this loggia, the audience can view the theatre from above, before proceeding to their seats via the auditorium steps. Here, too, what is unique about this theatre becomes clear at a glance. The distinction between the stage and the auditorium has, through a single intervention, been completely negated. A zigzag motif, embellished with polished bronze slabs, has been cut out of the concrete walls. This motif continues right round, along the auditorium, over the stage and back again. The stage floor, too, extends without interruption into the auditorium, which reads as a volume that has been slid into the pure beam form of the theatre. In short: audience and actors share the same space. That said, the stage is experience as a residual space in front of the auditorium, rather than as an autonomous area. The limited length of the theatre and the optical shortening occasioned by the pronounced wall motif reinforces this perception. On the other hand, the architecture offers many starting points and theatrical possibilities. This theatre is certainly not an easy space in which to perform. Because of the lack of a clear boundary between stage and auditorium, directors have trouble finding the right distance to the auditorium. Some also have difficulty with the emphatic presence of the theatre walls. But this is not an insurmountable problem, because with just a few curtains and some floor mats it can be transformed into a black box. As yet, however, no performances have exploited the specific qualities of this theatre.

Political projects

The question remains: does this theatre provide an answer to the separation of theatre and city and theatre and architecture? To answer this, you have to distance yourself from the rhetoric of Neutelings’ text for a moment. It then becomes clear that the thesis that actors and audience can share the same space is at odds with the essential hallmark of the theatre, namely that audience and actors are mentally always in a different space. Whether or not that is the case in reality is irrelevant. More important still in this context: there is not one type of theatre and one type of city, as Neutelings would have us believe. When one type of theatre, the court theatre, abandoned the marketplace in the Renaissance, that was a political project: its ceremonial central perspective represented a new social order, one no longer based on a divine order in which everyone has a place. Thus the theatre also became a testing ground for a new ideal city. In the eighteenth century, the theatre once again became the stage for a political project: here, the emergent
bourgeoisie discovered itself through forms derived from court life. That this project sounded the death knell of popular theatre a century later was solely the result of the drastic change in the very notion of city and people. The current call for a renewed connection between the city and the theatre is, once again, a political project, which requires an impossible legitimation of the actual and inescapable autonomy of art. The explicit iconographic programme of old theatres is part of the political project they supported. They are conventional emblems of an absolutist new order. When the bourgeoisie adopted them at the end of the nineteenth century they turned out to be already worm-eaten. They survived, however, because theatre is an art form that depends precisely on convention and empty forms in order to communicate with an audience. This proved a major stumbling block for the avant-garde when they tried to make a clean sweep here, too, in the name of artistic authenticity, for example. These conventions did survive in popular theatre and ballet, but it was at the expense of their artistic, and perhaps even social, relevance. Avant-garde theatre, however, went in search of spaces with a new symbolic value. In the case of mystical theatre makers such as Grotowski, this quest did indeed end in the black box. However, Brecht and the Dadaists, who wanted to make a genuine impact on society, had a predilection for ‘real’, clandestine rather than public, spaces – attics, basements, factories, smoky holes – locales which need at most a small scaffold for the artist to be able to do his thing. Neutelings is therefore bending the truth when he maintains that artists want the black box at all costs. The theatre director Peter Brook once observed that the atmosphere in a theatre was the essential but elusive oil of every theatre machine. The simplest solution to the problem is to refurbish an existing space, which is precisely what Brook did in his Paris ‘Bouffes du Nord’.

**Outside world**

Neutelings Riedijk’s strategy here resembles that of their other projects: you take an existing model – such as the beguinage in the case of the Hollainkazerne in Ghent – strip it of its ideological connotations and reclothe it in a new, exciting skin. To caricature it somewhat, this theatre emulates the prototype of the Elizabethan theatre, a decorated box which brings together audience and actors under one roof, but which replaces the conventional decoration with a new one. But what if the choice of historical model, even in the light of the connection between architecture, city and theatre desired by Neutelings, was the wrong one? It is in any case quite conceivable that artists in particular will reject the way in which the theatre has been ‘decorated’. Because of its newness, it is unable to represent tradition, to which
contemporary theatre relates willy-nilly. Nor does the fact that, as permanent wallpaper, it recalls a certain hominess seem to accord with the notion of a public place. Yet neither is it a simple, but lived-in and thus by no means neutral, space. A comparison with the new Rosas theatre in Vorst near Brussels by Paul van Aerschot speaks volumes in that regard. With a minimum of means, Van Aerschot created a meaningful space that is not in the least neutral. The very sobriety of the devices turned into an iconography.

What is exciting about this theatre lies not in its decoration, therefore, but rather in the fact that, like the Rosas theatre, it opens towards the outside world. An opening in a theatre, even if it is obscured, is always an indication that what takes place in the theatre does not stand outside everyday reality (the effect that both Wagner and the cinema seek to achieve by darkening the auditorium), but can and must let itself be interrupted by it. The theatre succeeds admirably in this, even if the surrounding reality is rather pallid compared to the Rosas theatre. The latter looks out via a long strip window onto Vorst’s industrial estates. Here in Leuven, the view is of the building itself and the inner court. On the other hand, the theatre’s openness is an invitation to perform in the spaces around the theatre and even the entire building. The unique areas in the circulation pattern, such as the loggia overlooking the inner court on the top floor of the front annex, show that the architects have given serious consideration to this possibility. Which again raises the question as to why the Soete has been given such an emphatic decoration. The interplay of theatres, and in particular the way in which they open outwards, is more than enough to dispel the spectre of characterless, multifunctional spaces. Another recent Brussels theatre building, the studios of the Kaai theatre by Luc Maes, takes this logic to the extreme. The success of performances which have explored these possibilities shows how right it is.

The problems are indeed less insistent in the case of the other theatres. The ensemble theatre is run by the university. Here, student music ensembles and suchlike rehearse. Not without irony, the architects play here with the image of the parish hall. The gold paint on the brick walls, the red parquet, the high, curved azure ceiling and especially the light that enters from above, allow two images to be juxtaposed: the cheaply furnished hall which is the centre of village life and the sugary symbolism of churches and chapels. With its panelling of black imitation leather coffers, the film theatre alludes to the rather clandestine atmosphere of (film buffs’) clubs. Fairly unsubtle, but also absolutely spot-on. In the ‘lab’ theatre, an existing space, extreme restraint is the order of the day. As dance studio, this theatre already had a lab-like atmosphere. The size of the theatre, the enormous windows and the clumsy columns in the
middle always inspired highly memorable works, including the best dance improvisations ever seen in Belgium. These qualities still exist in part, but for reasons not entirely clear, the theatre was reduced about a quarter in size in order to make way for an enormous technical bunker. Equally odd is the fact that (not at the instigation of the designers, let it be said) drastic means were deployed to remove [a lot of money was spent removing] a column, a decision everyone now regrets. However, the most stunning theatre in the building is the studio, situated on the roof of the front annex. This space with subdued light, which enters via shed roofs, has all the qualities necessary to become a classic theatre. Here, the effect sought with such difficulty in the Soete is effortlessly achieved. The windows on either side of the elongated space provide a unique panorama of the city. Thus it simultaneously alludes to the representation of the city, which in bygone days structured the iconography and form of the theatre, and admits the reality of this city in a carefully mediated way.