

Robbrecht and Daem and the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum

Architectural interventions so that things may overlap

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For some time the museum world has been afflicted by what Stephen E. Weil once aptly described as a ‘edifice complex.’¹ During the last decades, just about every museum has drastically renovated, expanded or added to the existing building at least once. After all, building plans for museums create high expectations. Architecture, they ask us to believe, enables museums to break new ground, not just in the literal sense. In these countless plans for additions and renovations museum directors are rarely content merely to make more space available. On the contrary, almost every building project involves the explicit wish to tackle the ‘institutional’ space as well. One does not just create a new or adapted body. One uses architecture, or the making of new or additional architecture, as an opportunity to thoroughly rethink the museum on a micro as well as a macro level: not just the commissioning institute itself, but also the global concept of the museum as institute. Thus, the current renovation of the Museum of Modern Art in New York caused Glen D. Lowry to remark that the project would entail more than an expansion of the existing facilities; the museum would ‘fundamentally alter its space.’² Every time, it involves more than what in the beauty industry jargon is called a face lift, a correction or ‘enlargement’. The ‘body’ is rebuild – or made up to date – in such a way that life will instantly become much easier. Seen in this light, the commission received for the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum by the Ghent architectural firm Robbrecht and Daem from director Chris Dercon was a paradoxical one. He did ask them to reflect on the museum of the 21st century, but above all he wanted them to make the museum ‘smaller’.³ The existing infrastructure did have to be ‘expanded’, but not merely in the literal sense. In the first place, the museum had to become more clearly and conveniently laid out. For the Boijmans Van Beuningen is exemplary of the type of museum that Josep Montaner once fittingly called ‘the additive creature’.⁴ The building offers living proof of what

¹ Stephen E. Weil, *A brief meditation on museums and the metaphor of institutional growth*, in: Stephen E. Weil (ed.), *A cabinet of curiosities : inquiries into museums and their prospects*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, p. 42.

² Glenn D. Lowry, *The New Museum of Modern Art Expansion: A Process of discovery*, in: John Elderfield (ed.), *Imagining the future of the Museum of modern art*, Studies in modern art 7, New York, Museum of modern art / Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998, p. 21.

³ Paul Robbrecht, *unpublished lecture*, 28 February, Louvre, Paris, 2000.

⁴ Josep Montaner, *Museos para el nuevo siglo / Museums for the new century*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 1995, pp. 36-37.

subsequent building campaigns can lead to. Just like with many other museums the pressure of inevitable growth and innovation during the last three decades has forced the Boijmans to add several new wings to the existing 'mother body'. The result was a rather hybrid corpus, which had lost its cohesion. Paradoxically enough, in the mid-Nineties, this once again raised the question of an alteration. In the meantime the collection had grown considerably, and new demands were made in the area of public facilities. For instance, a space for remarkable pieces from the Modern Art Collection or the Print Cabinet was required, or room for important public facilities such as a library, an educational area and a restaurant. In short, to prepare the museum for the upcoming century, the building that had been transformed several times in the past, would undergo another 'operation'.

A commission like this was just the thing for architects Robbrecht and Daem. Although their achievements did not yet include a museum, they could already boast of an architectural oeuvre that showed evidence of a special sensitivity to the visual arts and exhibition architecture. Thus, for private commissions such as the Katoennatie (1992-98) or the Woning Mys (1983-93) they collaborated with artists such as Cristina Iglesias, Isa Genzken or Juan Munõz, they supplied the design for important exhibitions such as *Initiatief 86* (1986), *Fiaminghi a Roma* (1995) or *Inside the Visible* (1996), and renovated the art galleries of Meert-Rihoux (1991) and Xavier Hufkens (1992) in Brussels. With the temporary exhibition pavilions for Documenta X in Kassel (1992) Robbrecht and Daem unmistakably earned international recognition. The graceful Aue Pavilions explicitly manifested the remarkable and often fragile balance between servitude and autonomy that characterises their oeuvre. Robbrecht and Daem buildings adapt themselves to the subservient role of architecture, but in a self-aware way. And this is especially expressed in the relationship to art. Confronted with art, architecture can be nothing but subservient, according to Robbrecht and Daem. The work of art demands attention, and forces the architecture into the background. But this doesn't mean that architecture should be self-effacing, or on the other hand try to hog the spotlight. Robbrecht and Daem's oeuvre testifies to a respect for and insight in the relative autonomy of art *and* architecture. They maintain that the work of art can only manifest itself when it has visibly been placed opposite the architectural order, which in an ideal case leads to what Robbrecht calls an unforgettable place.⁵ The fact that architecture calls for attention, does not mean that it has to lose itself in grand gestures. Robbrecht and Daem's architecture always uses

⁵ Steven Jacobs, *Onvergetelijke plaatsen*, in: Steven Jacobs, *Werk in Architectuur. Paul Robbrecht & Hilde Daem*, Gent, Ludion, 1998, pp. 6-60.

a rigid analysis of the building program as its starting point, to then realise itself in a self-confident manner.

The architects have also applied this strategy to the Boijmans Van Beuningen. 'The new addition is the externalisation of the internal reorganisation', Robbrecht asserts.⁶ The crucial element of their design is the way in which the reprogramming and expansion of the museum is based on a thorough investigation into the potential of the existing building's structure. For in its jumble of architectural fragments and their respective spatial identities the Boijmans offers an intriguing overview of the developments that museology and museum architecture have gone through during the past decades. The original building and the three subsequent expansions and transformations provide a kind of sample sheet of the ways in which ideas about the museum as a program *and* as a space have been translated into architecture.

The original building from 1934, designed by city architect Van der Steur, follows the classical museum typology. The stately look of the building, the slender tower and the dignified stairwells make it clear to the visitor that he is entering an important place, a location where art is being protected, shielded off, given safety. The interior evokes a same kind of dignity. The clear routing of museum galleries and cabinets, organised around two inner courts, provide the works of art with a pleasant, almost intimate atmosphere in which to dwell and appear.

In 1972 the museum is expanded for the first time with a wing designed by the architect Bodon. The brick façade hides a stack of two large, square boxes that perfectly express the ideology of flexibility and neutrality that was prevalent in the Sixties. Compared to the rigid gallery structure of the original building the large, vast platforms with level concrete floors, diffuse overhead lighting and white walls are supremely suited to the museological desire to conduct a dynamic exhibition policy with temporary or moveable partitions. They are covered workshops, so to speak.

In its turn, the Van Beuningen-De Vriese Pavilion from 1991, by Hubert-Jan Henket, conforms to the developments that the museum world has gone through since the early Eighties. To a degree, this is in spite of its original purpose: an exhibition area for arts and crafts and design. The vast space of this glass-enclosed exhibition pavilion shows little affinity with a classical museum gallery, and rather evokes the transparent lobby of a bank or

⁶ Paul Robbrecht, in: *ibidem*, p. 129.

multinational company. In this capacity the building conforms to the dominant logic of the spectacle industry, in which phenomena like the blockbuster, the museum shop and the museum restaurant gradually defeat the classical museological set of tasks. The shop and the restaurant, incidentally, were implanted at the museum's entrance at the same time, also in a glass volume.

Unlike in many other renovation or expansion projects, Robbrecht and Daem have shown a remarkable integrity, confronted with this hybrid situation. For all too often ambitious renovation plans are made at the expense of the original architectural situation. Countless museum officials have subjected their buildings to all kinds of operations they would consider unthinkable when applied to pieces from their collections.⁷ This is not just problematical when the original building – such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim in New York – is generally regarded as an architectural masterpiece.⁸ Quite apart from its architectural quality, a building is always an important asset of a museum's 'patrimony'. With, through and within its building a museum shapes the memory that its collection is, so that this memory is inevitably connected to the building, and vice versa. Ill-considered interventions to provide more space therefore often lead to a symbolic loss. Together with the building, a part of the museum's own history is sometimes demolished. Realising this, Robbrecht and Daem have chosen to respect the existing situation within the Boijmans. They analyzed the several wings on their architectural and spatial capacity, in order to fit them within the programmatical and architectural master plan. Instead of levelling almost all the different fragments and replacing them with an entirely new structure, as Yoshio Taniguchi has done with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Robbrecht and Daem have opted for the opposite strategy, without exaggerated conservatism. Only those elements that had been 'stuck on' through the years would be removed; the existing ones were to be renovated; while new interventions were to provide the necessary breakthroughs.

In the process, the architects haven't given in to the temptation of an obtrusive design statement. On the contrary, the stamp they have put on the Boijmans Van Beuningen is contained within an amalgam of refined spatial interventions. The structure they add to the Boijmans' hybrid body, manages to stress as well as reorganise this hybridity. After all, the

⁷ See the chapter *Wings That Don't Fly (And Some That Do)* in: Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, New York, Monacelli Press, 1998, pp. 138-189.

⁸ The Guggenheim in New York was expanded in 1992 using the controversial design of the architects Gwathmey & Siegel.

radical interweaving of programmatical reorganisation and architectural intervention gives the design an ambiguous autonomy. Which, by the way, can only be understood from the inside out. Robbrecht and Daem's intervention neither falls within the category of the wing, nor within that of the extension. From the outside the intervention is hard to experience as an independent construction; and from the inside the design reveals itself as an all-encompassing architectural act.

The reform of the museum manifestly started from the inside, on an institutional level. The museum staff and the architects together rethought the mutual relationship between the different art forms within the collection: old and modern art, arts and crafts, prints and finally art in books. After all, because of their spatial singularity the different building fragments each possess their own possibilities and limitations. In view of the equally great multiformity of the Boijmans collection this already provides an extraordinary potential for presentation and routing. The small-scale cabinets of the Van der Steur building for instance offer a completely different context from the open platforms of the Bodon Wing, or the glass container of the Van Beuningen-De Vriese Pavilion. Robbrecht and Daem's new structure manages to write its way into the existing Boijmans in such a manner that the relationship between the different fragments gains in clarity, while the respective elements are valued and articulated according to their inherent worth. The architects strove towards turning the new Boijmans into 'a museum where things overlap', but not as a result of disorder and impenetrability, but of precision and commitment.⁹ The extension operation is mainly one of condensation, 'intension' or 'inlargement'. The existing elements are simultaneously illuminated, articulated and connected.

Robbrecht and Daem read the Boijmans as a system of three inner courts: the enclosed inner court of the Van der Steur Wing, the central court and the Bodon Wing as an indoor square. Around these three 'courtyards' the visitors' routing was thoroughly reorganised. To this end the rather uninteresting entrance with its restaurant and bookshop from 1991 was torn down. In future, visitors will enter the Boijmans through an entrance hall which gives on the central inner court. This inner court draws the city's public space in, within the walls of the museum, and functions as an urban sculpture garden, as an overture to the museum experience. To the right of the inner court the porch of the Van der Steur building was opened up again, which creates the possibility of open air exhibitions of smaller sculptural elements. The entrance is located on the left side, in the new addition designed by Robbrecht and Daem. It is

remarkable how it is interwoven with the respective fragments, and distinguishes itself from them at the same time. The new volume – which, by the way, at its widest measures only 12 metres – embraces the Bodon Wing on three sides and forms the connection with the Van der Steur building. It is just wide enough to house specific functions, but too narrow to work as an autonomous mass. It rather functions as a thick bark that nestles between the existing buildings, and partly gains its independence on the street side.

Robbrecht and Daem have devoted explicit attention to the places where the new structure touches the existing buildings. These places are characterised as ‘seams’, as scars almost. Thus, the brick façade of the Van der Steur building penetrates the exhibition area above the entrance hall. The caesura between the two buildings is not smoothed over, but overtly shown. That the architects have made little or no additional changes to the structure of the Van der Steur building, is hardly surprising. The inherent spatial qualities of Van der Steur’s ‘abbey’ result after all in an atmosphere that is extremely suited to the presentation of important parts of the collection.¹⁰ At the same time the building provided an ideal context for the integration of the print cabinet, which is now located above the entrance area. Within Robbrecht and Daem’s design, the Van der Steur building was ‘affected’ only in a few places. For instance, to the left of the back part, with the inner court as a mirroring axis, a new stairwell was inserted. Between these new stairs and the Old Dutch stairwell four walls in the so-called ‘clover leaf’ were opened up to form display cases for smaller presentations. This minute intervention ensures that this area will once again become a vital crossroads within the entire circulation of the building. The other interventions in the Van der Steur building remain almost invisible, as they are limited to painstaking restorations of original details or entrances.

The new addition relates to the Bodon Block in a completely different way. Because on the first floor the addition winds around the Bodon Block in a series of cabinets, the plaza-like character of this wing is being stressed. The result is an indoor version of a classical type, the inner court with cabinets. Then again, on the ground floor the front area of the Bodon merges into the new addition, so that the block is broken open, with windows on the street side. The entire lower floor of the Bodon Block, by the way, was radically dismantled as regards the interior decorating. The Spartan lighting and uncovered concrete structure once more evoke

⁹ See the book of the same name by Chris Dercon (ed.) *I would like to make a museum where things overlap*, Fascinaties 8, Rotterdam, NAI Uitgevers, 2000.

¹⁰ Paul Robbrecht, op. cit. (note 3).

the character of a workshop. The new purpose of the ground floor's back part, that of knowledge centre, restoration studio and digital depot, fits in with this perfectly.

On the other hand, the Van Beuningen-De Vriese Pavilion was not touched at all. The 'intervention' regarding this wing fits in with the general programmatical reorganisation, but is no less architectural for it. By locating the restaurant on the top floor of this vast glass pavilion, this wing is once more valued for its inherent spatial qualities. At the same time the ground floor functions as a showcase for all sorts of design objects, a marriage that clearly adapts to the logic which this wing expresses. For the design of the bar and the glass display case between both floors – informally called the 'skyscraper' at the Boijmans – the architect Hubert-Jan Henket was once more called upon.

Those functions for which a suitable place could not be found within the existing building infrastructure, are taken on by the new addition. Because the new mass stretches along the Museumstraat towards the Westersingel, the Boijmans, with its slender crosscut façade, finally gets the 'city address' it has thus far lacked, and was once Van der Steur's vain ambition: by doubling his original project the museum would acquire an urban façade front. Through one of the villas on the Westersingel the Boijmans attaches itself to the existing row of façades. The mansion serves as a service entrance and at the same time forms a link between the city and the museum.

Behind the longitudinal façade on the Museumstraat lies a variety of stacked programs. The ground floor on the Westersingel houses the slightly sunken reading room of the library, a place where the remarkable book collection of the Boijmans becomes more accessible for study and scientific research. Through large, high windows the city-dweller is afforded a view of one of the most important parts of the memory that a museum compiles, apart from its collection. The Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum not only wants to be a place where its extensive property is 'presented'. The public itself can also browse in its extraordinary collection through books, cd-roms, and all kinds of image libraries. The top floors contain the offices for the museum staff, which after years of temporary housing will finally get a niche in the museum itself.

Behind the library, against the Eastern side of the Bodon Block and behind the villas, the addition extends itself further, hidden and almost invisible. The ground floor houses the

technical workshop, once again one of the vital functions of the museum. This part of the volume, by the way, is only accessible to the public in the exhibition areas on the first floor, which span the Bodon Wing on three sides. And it is precisely in these exhibition spaces that Robbrecht and Daem's design strategy manifests itself in all its rigour. Here architecture does not efface itself, but steps back self-confidently. This does not lead to dull white cubes, but spaces that combine an elementary materialism with complex spaciousness. Because of the limited width of the volume and the emphatic tectonics of the structure, the spaces are more than the result of a 'dressed up' structure: they seem to have been carved out, as it were, of the structure, which is that of a thick bark. Moreover, variations in lighting, window openings and dimensioning lead to an fascinating exhibition routing. The patios in the areas on the Eastern side of the Bodon Block, directed towards the North, provide generous lighting and a course with unexpected vistas and an extraordinary spatiality.

The most striking characteristic of the new addition is undoubtedly the cladding of the façade. Sixty centimetres in front of the concrete plane of the façade, at regular intervals, thick glass panels have been mounted. They provide an interesting displacement in relation to the window openings, which follow an irregular pattern. Here it once again becomes clear that Robbrecht and Daem design from the inside out. This 'skin' not only gives the museum an iconic and recognisable aura, as Frank Gehry's titanium does for the Bilbao Guggenheim. The façade may provide the building with a striking and seductive appearance, its splendour can mainly be experienced inside. In the exhibition spaces, the visitor's view of the outside world is irregularly filtered by these opaque screens, a beautiful metaphor for the museum, and ultimately for museum architecture as well. After all, the museum is always in the way of experiencing art 'in the world'. Inevitably there's a building, architecture, in between.

