

What about after the party?

The Brussels Beursschouwburg remodelled by B-architecten and DHP-architecten

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On 5 February the Beursschouwburg [Exchange Theatre] reopened its doors to the public. After an architectural competition won by a collaboration between B-architecten and DHP-architecten, a temporary move to 'BSBbis' in the Kazernestraat and 2½ years of work, a celebration was held lasting ten days and ten nights. The non-stop programming, entitled 'Blanco', created a cultural event complete with a brass band, surprise performances, a fun fair, solemn receptions and bombastic speeches. The opening festivities ended a glorious but chaotic period and celebrated a new beginning. The opening week marked a crucial moment in the life of the Beursschouwburg, both as an institution and as a building, and had the multilayered character of a party: 'A party only differs from "daily life" because during a party the forces that gradually accumulate in – and through – "daily life", burst out.'¹ Although 'Blanco' was conceived as a cultural event, it achieved the temporal structure and structural significance of a party because of the way it turned the spotlight on the history and daily operation of the theatre.² Moreover, the exceptional situation represented by 'the event' provided the starting point for the design of the remodelling.

The history of the Beursschouwburg began in 1885, when the banqueting hall *la brasserie Flamande* was established in the Ortstraat, a stone's throw from the Grote Markt.³ The complex was constantly being remodelled, and in due course the original banquet hall was replaced by a small – lower middle class – theatre. The complicated history of building and use resulted in a conglomerate of three buildings, with a silted-up interior, half of whose rooms were unused.⁴ In the 1970s and 1980s, despite – and perhaps indeed because of – the ruinous condition of the building, the Beursschouwburg provided a base for Brussels' Dutch-speaking dance and theatre, a sanctuary for all kinds of musical subcultures, an intellectual meeting place and haunt for a heterogeneous and multicultural metropolitan public. At the beginning of the 1990s, the lamentable condition of the building made it impossible to work in. Extramural work occurred more and more frequently, and the graffiti-clad interior of the theatre increasingly took on the appearance of urban space.

In 1997, after heated debate and the rejection of a plan for a first, extremely radical, renovation (the 'Vink' plan), the then Flemish Minister of Culture held an open architectural competition. Forty-eight design teams declared interest.⁵ This was an unusual procedure in the Flanders of that time: there was hardly any general architectural policy, let alone a tradition of competitions.⁶

An event as a design strategy

The basic principle underlying the winning project by B-architecten (Crols-Engelen-Grooten) and DHP-architecten (D'Hondt-Heyninck-Parein) was a theatre that would be 'open to its public 24 hours a day'. This seemed to satisfy the client's request for a building design which would respond to 'the rhythm of the city' directly and almost literally – perhaps too literally. The notion of an 'event' served initially as a 'design concept': an imaginary scenario deployed to analyse the existing condition of the theatre building, make choices clear and encourage original design decisions.

The assumption that the theatre would operate '24 hours a day' suspended interest in the 'normal' operation of the Beursschouwburg, and increased the visibility and importance of routes, activities and places which under 'normal' circumstances would have received little attention. The event created a 'special' regime, eliminating subtle nuances, transitions and gradations such as those between artists and public, street and theatre, backstage and front of house. The designers took a simplified user's view in their analysis of the existing building and the design task. They gave all rehearsals and logistic and technical activities exactly the same value as a 'performance'. The erecting of sets, the technical preparation of the hall,

progress meetings, work in the kitchen – all these formed an integral part of the spectacle produced by the theatre.

This unusual interpretation also had the effect of shifting the attention paid by the design away from the auditorium to all the secondary rooms. Not surprisingly, the most important design decision was the drastic breaking open of the existing building to provide facilities for secondary activities.⁷ The complex jumble of back rooms and small dark halls gave way to a great hall – a ‘vestibule’ or ‘passage’ – a central interior space on a metropolitan scale, whereas in the preliminary design the architects left the bonbonnière hall, the cafe and the grand staircase undisturbed. This ambitious new space ties together a number of different functions: inside and outside, backstage, front of house and technical areas, offices, foyers and podium. It serves as a loading and unloading area, as storage space and an inside courtyard.⁸ It even functions as a space which provides a ‘setting’ for every activity. The hall is the traffic hub, which means it visually ties all activities together. Stagehands go through the hall to heave pieces of scenery onto the stage. Artists pass through the hall to get from the podium into the green room, the theatre-going public can see into the cafe from the stairs, and anyone going into the cafe can catch a glimpse of the kitchen in the cellar. Every activity is made visible and public, sometimes subtly, sometimes rather less subtly. The primary attribute of the radical application of ‘event logic’ to the design is cleverness, but it also produces interesting architecture.

But when the architects are forced to follow their concept, the strength of the design turns out also to be its weakness. The most important criticism made by the competition jury concerned security and the regulation of the entrances. The criticism was not of course about ‘security’ as such, but was concerned with the extent to which ‘daily operation’ – the fact that the theatre is never really ‘open’ night and day – raises questions about the design’s thinking on exits.

Pragmatic considerations led to the design being adjusted to deal with this criticism, so the passage which runs diagonally through the building from one street to another is now provided with glass doors, enclosed porches fitted with surveillance equipment, and three security barriers. In the second phase of the design, even the name was changed. The ‘passage’ is now referred to as a ‘three-dimensional backbone’, and the design attention which originally seemed to be concentrated on the tension between the theatre and the street has given way to an exclusive focus on the internal organisation and design of the interior. Thus, today what seemed to be such a promising hall is only used in two or three situations. When the security barrier is lowered, the hall can serve as a second entrance to the cafe. When the whole passage is open, the theatre is completely exposed to the city. When the passage is closed off, the hall will probably serve as storage space. The final entrance to the passage is itself neither a great hall with generic quality, nor a garage door with a certain theatrical quality, nor even a mixture of the two, but an ordinary double folding door. In short, the moment the concept began to be really interesting, to generate its own problem definition, design and logic, a clever interpretation seems to have been ignored by the architects.

Blanco

B-architecten have a number of projects to their name in which an important role is played by ‘event logic’. The best-known is probably the urban festival ‘Mode 2001. Landed/Geland’. The architects seized the opportunity provided by the event (which was designed with tourists in mind) to mark existing infrastructure, institutions and routes in the centre of Antwerp with areas of colour. Yet here event logic worked rather better, because effectively it was an ‘event’, not a ‘party’. ‘Mode 2001’ had after all no need to take into account sustainability, the operation of an institution or the daily functioning of a ‘building’. The operation of a building is not the same as the operation of an event, and the perception of a building is not the same as participation in an event. This became apparent from various details during the theatre's opening week, as for example when in the ‘white foyer’ the excessively bright fluorescent lighting showed up the powder and mascara on people's faces, so that what was intended as an amusing perceptual design effect turned out to be a cause of embarrassment;

but equally it was apparent from more important choices.⁹ Not surprisingly, the party in the remodelled theatre has left its traces, showing where the new architectural treatment works but also where it fails.

It is therefore significant that the 'Blanco' event had the same structure as the basic principle of the designers. After all, the programme for the opening aimed to show the ambitions – and the ideological programme – of 'De Beursschouwburg' as an institution: the programming, experimental and youthful, the intense interaction with the neighbourhood, and the strength of its roots in the Brussels metropolis.¹⁰ During the party it was possible to confirm that the design intentions closely matched the institution's expectations. The architects succeeded perfectly in translating and giving shape to the client's wishes. But as soon as the event actually took place, we saw that the way in which the (transparent) effect of the design was worked out was not per se consistent with the effective functioning of an event. For example, when after a five-day celebration visitors were no longer able to wander freely round the theatre and guided tours were organised, this was because – even during the exceptional situation of the party – certain connections had to be made, between backstage and front of house, between the institution and the street, between daily operation and the tactical. One might well wonder how the Beursschouwburg will function after the party, when 'daily operation' really takes the upper hand.

1. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne. Vol. I*, Paris, L'arche, 1954, p. 216: 'la fête se distinguait de la vie quotidienne que par l'explosion des forces lentement accumulés dans et par cette vie quotidienne elle-même.'

2. An event, like a party, is an ephemeral incident with a special character, which in normal circumstances is distinct from daily life. Unlike a party, an event is not rooted in 'daily life'. During an event an exceptional situation is created, in an unusual place, by external influences – economics, politics, city marketing or image building. A birthday party is held at home, in an 'ordinary place'. A typical event is a rock festival, taking place in a field where cows are normally grazed.

3. For a history of the Beursschouwburg, see Johan Wambacq (ed.), *Op het ritme van de stad. De verbouwing van de Beursschouwburg*, Brussels, BSB/Flemish Community, 1998.

4. See 'De Beursschouwburg', in *B-architecten*, Gent/Amsterdam, Ludion, 2004, p.35.

5. The Beursschouwburg is the main feature of the district round the exchange and Dansaertstraat. The 'Vink plan' eliminated the grand staircase and the charming 'salle bonbonnière' in favour of a 'shoebox model' better suited to the operation of a theatre.

6. See the introduction to Francis Strauven, 'Het architectuurbeleid in Frankrijk en Nederland', in: *Jaarboek Architectuur Vlaanderen. (1994-1995)*, Brussels, Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1996, p.60. Today an evaluation of policy and the existing competition tradition would seem more appropriate.

7. See *B-architecten* (v. note 4), pp. 38-44.

8. Dries Vandevelde, 'Over B-architectuur en A-stedenbouw', in *B-architecten* (see note 4), pp. 45-46.

9. I find the 'unheimliche' characteristics of the architecture produced by B-architecten somewhat less superior than Anneleen Masschelein in 'Unheimlichkeit', in *B-architecten* (see note 4), pp. 81-83.

10. The aims and rules of the game for 'Blanco', the opening programme, can be found in the 'archieff' section of the theatre's website www.beursschouwburg.be.