Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2019)

Heft: 34

Artikel: A conversation with An Fonteyne about vulnerability

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919381

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A conversation with An Fonteyne about vulnerability

noAa, Stadhuis Menen, 2002

It is too early in the morning for traffic jams. Only a queue in front of the bakery. As we sit down in the living room, everyone is still asleep around us. The cat is already up and snuggled up against our legs under the table. Outside the window we spot a colorful bird sitting in a tree. It seems Brussels really is a city full of surprises.

TM Whether in practice or in teaching, you regularly seem to approach your projects in a new, sometimes unconventional way. How important is this for you, knowing that this attitude, that we would like to describe as young, might often expose you to vulnerability? How consciously are you striving for new approaches in your work?

AF I would say it is not a choice. It is something you realize along the way. It takes some time—working specifically as an architect—to understand that you do that. Also, I'm not the lone head of the office, we are three partners and around fifteen people working with us. So, it is not that you say «Let's start from scratch every time», it is more something that seems to happen and after a while you begin to ask yourself: «Hey, why do we make our lives so complicated?»

The continuity in our work is to be found in the way we think, search and redefine what the occasion might require, what language we feel is appropriate. It relates to the topic we investigated at the ETH during the previous semester. Starting from the ‹Exercices de Style› of Raymond Queneau, we tried to develop different voices in architecture, different figures of speech to find out what they have to offer. Blending in while using street talk or standing out through the use of a formal, official language. The choice of expression is fundamental and informed by many factors.

In our work, there is no formal agenda. There are no dogmas and no taboos.

TM It seems that some architects have a very formally predictable identity.

AF More recognizable than predictable I would say. Obviously, there are people who develop a strong continuity of work in a formal way. Developing a fascination for certain elements, building up an own formal language, discovering it, refining it, using it.

You know, if you speak about vulnerability, this attitude of empathy, of being receptive to external issues, does make one vulnerable. Clients are often eager to understand what a project will look like even before you start. They like to see an example. But it doesn't work like that. The process of research we do does not allow that, hence both sides are forced to take a certain risk: the architects—because they always start a new adventure—not literally relying on previous work; the client—by choosing to work with you—accepting an open-ended process.

TM Do things change with age?

AF Of course. The broader your experience, the more you know, the more you can anticipate. But sometimes you may feel that you know too much. Now and then, we try to forget as much as possible and look again as if we don't know anything. I mean, you try to see things that you might overlook if you are too fast, too efficient, too experienced—I think that is important.

TM How was it when you started then?

AF When we started to work, we pretended to know more than we actually did—surely in a technical way. We had not finished any project when we won the competition of the Stadhuis Menen in 2002. There were five architects invited—and we were clearly the one young joker. But we were very interested in that building and the fact that this was a listed monument that had been treated rather badly throughout the whole twentieth century. The idea was to re-invent its history—we got very excited about that. Yet when you present amongst four others that have a lot more experience, real offices—a client has to trust you. Of course, we wanted to do that extremely well and were serious about our work, but you know sometimes you have to be a little bit ‹overconfident› to convince.

TM So how do you get trust? Is it by building things others expect?

AF Trust is extremely important. And more so, over time I learned that it is not only about being trusted, but also about being able to trust the other. The client. The contractor. The consultants. You are doing something together, after

all. We often work on public buildings. The clients are leading their organization and the building project is just a once-in-a-lifetime one, meaning they are not professional in this role. That is complicated.

Let me give you an example. For five years we have been on and off working on a project for a palliative care centre, a hospice. Because in Flanders this is a new form of care, the different governments all need to agree on the concept and the funding, meaning the process is complicated and it turned out to be extremely slow. The client's ambition was to build a hospital environment of a domestic scale: a house with thirteen guest rooms. I was fascinated because there were so many questions. How do you build a house where people go for the last three weeks of their lives? Can you talk about dwelling? Is it possible to create the feeling of belonging somewhere, if it is only for three weeks? The last three weeks. How could you allow people to make it their house? And what would they desire to bring? A very interesting architectural question, a brief where you feel that architecture should play a prominent, yet modest and nearly invisible role.

Because of missing regulations and unclear subsidies this project is taking a very long time, which is not always positive for the relationship between client and architect. Mutual trust is complex. After 5 years the possibilities with a same and fixed budget have totally changed, and not in a good way. Enough material for unsatisfactory discussions. Frustrations. Although the desire is the same: to finally realise this building.

TM So, the architect is an easy target to blame?

AF I wouldn't want to say so. People do not fully comprehend the scope of our work and in that sense, you are an easy target. A contractor builds—that's very clear. There are plenty of people on site working with big machines, you see the materials coming and being applied. You can understand that this costs money. We architects come to the client with drawings that we have been working on. Sometimes the changes are not so obvious to detect—which does not mean they cannot be very radical or extensive. People may have trouble noticing the effort.

TM How can the architect and the client work in a relationship that is best for both of them? How can both parties learn from each other without being in each other's way?

AF A client often knows how a building should perform. You enter, the reception is in front of you, there should be three people behind this reception desk, and so on.

But the first thing we like to do is to question that question. Because it is much more interesting when a building can have the required performance, but not only that one. Potentially it has different lives and possibilities. Each work in architecture should have a meaning beyond the specificity of the moment.

And then it gets interesting because you discuss together with the client not only how the building should work but also how it influences their profession while using it. Let me give you another example. We built a house for an institution of juvenile offenders—boys from twelve to eighteen years old, who committed severe crimes. The project was briefed as an institution for twelve boys living together—a kitchen, a living room, six bedrooms, a small office for the person coaching them, that's it.

Although the brief is simple, together with the client we visited some of the existing institutions. We really wanted to understand the environment, what it needs and how the building can contribute to normalise the lives of these children.

What we came across in the other institutions was that the bedroom area was always separated from the living area. Meaning that all the kids have to be at the same time in the living area or in their bedrooms since they have to be supervised by someone all the time—so either here or there. If you look at a family with teenagers, the children love to withdraw to their own bedroom and close the door. It is a question of privacy, but also intimacy. So, we wanted to investigate whether we could re-establish this freedom, although in a very secure context. This ambition, together with the sloped topography of the terrain, lead to a volume with split levels, where you enter on the level of the kitchen and go down half a floor to the living room or go up half a floor to three bedrooms there. Another half floor up you would find the other three rooms. It's an open house. A simple solution providing a balance between freedom and security, privacy and overview.

The brief asks you a question, it gives you a list of things. But only by trying to understand what kind of life could unfold in a place, you can actually activate the role of architecture. Finally, the clients are surprised to see that a building can actually have a direct impact in the way they work and can even open up new possibilities. To come back to this house

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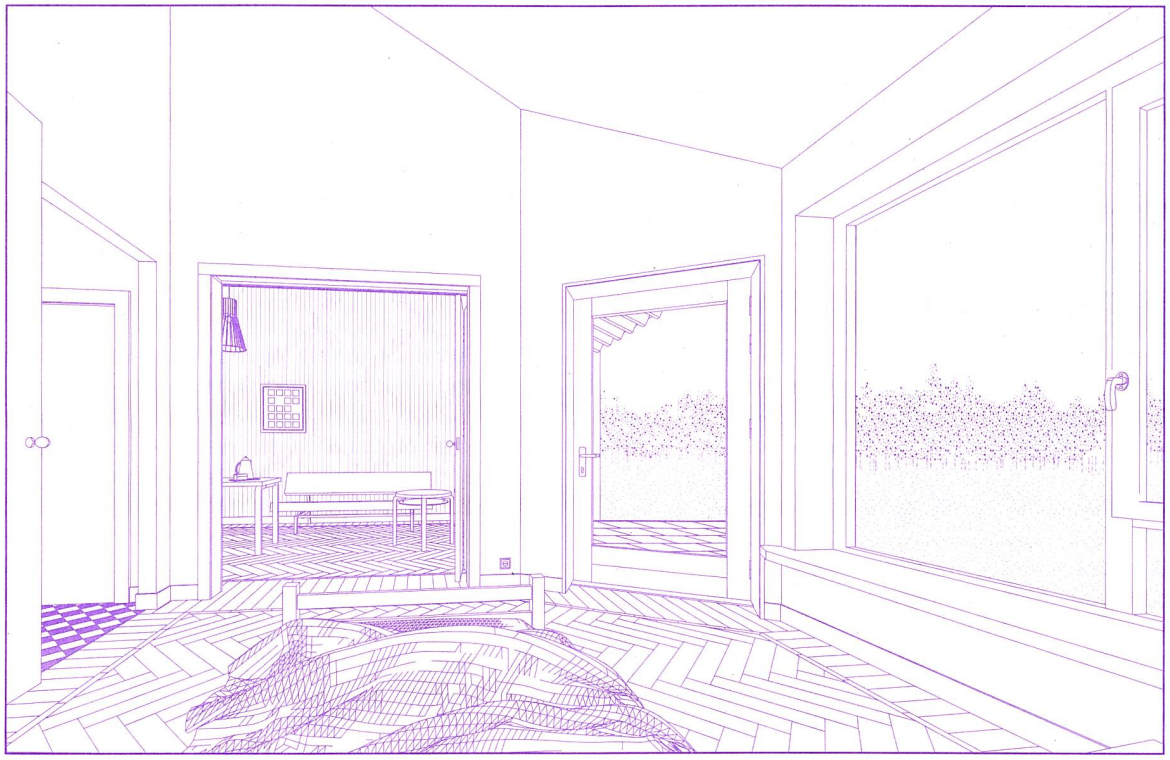

A noAa, Palliative Care Center, View from Bed

once more: the open stairs obviously became the centre of the house and walking them up and down an important activity throughout the day. For the client, it was really important that the stairs were wide enough so that the boys could pass one another without conflict. Spatially we preferred a modest stair width and tried to bring up the idea that if the stairs were narrow enough, you would have to wait for each other. An opportunity to develop patience and politeness while waiting? I like it that as an architect you're involved in very different worlds and invited to discuss the meaning of architectural elements in many different ways. Of course, in the end it became a wide staircase...

TM So basically, the tasks you are given set a context, to which you adapt. But what do you do when you have no context to refer to? For instance, in your teaching. How do you generate the topics of the brief that you then explore with your students?

AF To start with, there is always a context. Working in a vacuum, on a white sheet of paper, does not exist. Also not in a school environment. There is nearly too much information surrounding us. A lot of noise.

Now the question is what you bring along and what you want to develop in teaching. This brings about important reflections, as one can prioritize many different aspects in the architectural practice. Urgent ones, or universal ones, for example. We chose to offer a studio that explores the potential of the architectural language. Beyond form.

We strive to stimulate the students to develop their personal position in a conscious way. Each semester we define both an attitude and a topic that we can strongly relate to ourselves. Optimism about a topic that might push you towards pessimism, exactitude as an obligation to be very precise in every scale and choice you make, consistency as an attitude that seduces you to exhaust working with a simple rule. The topics we choose all have to do with the creation or representation of space. So far, they related to art, literature, language and politics. It is interesting to look into the mechanism of creation in these fields, to understand the dynamics and discover how we can use them or how we can contribute to them. Above all, I believe that the space we make has a huge impact on the perception and the appreciation of what it represents. It is important to be aware of that. As we discovered during our first semester, a different type of building for Europe will definitely lead to another perception of Europe, and maybe even to another Europe. What I was interested in from the beginning is to choose topics that one has strong feelings for, but that cannot be fully explored within the concrete architectural practice. Works or fascinations that have surrounded us for a long time, but of which it is not always clear how they influence or relate to our work.

If you feel an excitement about a specific encounter—in or outside architecture—can you do something with that excitement or does it stay exactly that: an excitement? That's what's interesting to find out.

TM So the trick is to look closely and change perspective?

AF When we create a building it is not only a functional answer to a specific question, there's a strong narrative addressing many different things: functionality, atmosphere, urban context, history of the location, architecture history, building tradition,... I strongly believe in the associative power of space. You are touching a door-handle and you're home for a second, or you walk the streets in Brussels and for a brief moment you sense Paris. That is very powerful. It only has to be discovered. Observing this and deciding which story you pick up to be revealed in your work is an important step of learning—and in this sense, we can learn a lot from other fields like literature, art, history and so on. We can broaden our view on things, not getting stuck only in architecture.

It is very important to understand that through practising architecture on all these levels, you add to the surrounding world. You define how people will experience a place. A street, a building, a room. What will they associate it with?

And although making buildings following certain architectural principles and in relation to the architectures that have been made before, it is important to acknowledge that there exists so much space that is made in a different way—not involving an architect—which has or does not have a quality. Also, if it does not have a quality at all, it's still important to understand why.

TM Isn't it a very vulnerable thing to be on a constant search for something of which you do not know the outcome of?

AF Of course, it would be useful to be more statement-like. In this searching, it is always really complicated to explain in two sentences what it really is about. It would be very comfortable to say: «Ah sure, it is precisely about that...

Wham!». It is not like that. But it must be talked about, trying to define the relations, in order to comprehend the larger whole. In that sense this interview, these questions and discussions are useful.

TM We also think this is important and it does help us as well. These interests are strongly personal and intuitive, so you have to test them out in the discussion with others.

AF I am not a huge fan of the word ‹intuition›. I believe that the interest is consciously chosen. You can be surprised by situations or the discovery of new work, but you should be selective and in control. Maybe this whole endeavour is to overcome intuition.

John Zorn, the jazz musician, once stated in an interview that he had been very much influenced by cartoon scores. Imagine, one of the great innovators in jazz being inspired by the music of cartoon clips for children! It makes us, his audience, also listen to cartoons differently and realise the quality of the accompanying music. Just to look at things outside of your field and paying attention to them, taking these observations seriously, is a wonderful source of thinking and understanding your personal acts.

After all, everything is language and broadening your vocabulary, discovering new meanings, is a most exciting endeavour.

An Fonteyne graduated from Ghent University. She worked for DKV Architekten in Rotterdam and David Chipperfield Architects in London. Together with Philippe Viérin and Jitse van den Berg she established Brussels-based noAarchitecten in 2000. Currently, the office is working on the restoration and extension of the Steen, Antwerp's oldest building and they are designing the ambitious Kanal—Centre Pompidou in Brussels—together with Sergison Bates architects and EM2N. Before joining the ETH, An Fonteyne taught at TU Delft and was professor at Hasselt University.