

Vittorio Romieri – RESEARCH PLAN

– URBAN ARCHITECTURE

“*Third landscape*” is how Gilles Clément refers to all the **spaces** abandoned by human beings. Parks and natural reserves, the largely uninhabited areas of the planet, but also smaller and more widespread, almost invisible, like the abandoned industrial buildings where brambles and scrubs grow.¹ Different factors contribute to the abandonment of these areas, most of all the urbanisation of land with its spreading of buildings and infrastructures. That’s the case of the Boschstraatkwartier in Maastricht. Nothing remains of the 13th century monastery that once stood a short distance from the old city centre, along the river Maas. The industrial expansion of the area led to the construction of new infrastructures and the consequent destruction of the sacred building ruins. Just before World War II an influential agricultural cooperative called Landbouwbelang erected a large industrial complex on the site, yet this was already abandoned by the 70s. The growing lack of control on already existing *spaces* and their possible future development(s) opens a field of reflection to social and political implications.

One of the first modern architects considering the term space as part of the architectural domain instead of what is left around, is Aldo Rossi. The Italian architect approached the analogue situations of the Céramique District in the city of Maastricht, a previous industrial area that underwent an urban re-development in the mid 90s. In 1982 in his masterpiece “The Architecture of The City”, Rossi criticised the emphasis on the functionality of urban artefacts, in which form and function are seen as intertwined. This classification avoids *alternatives* rather than considering all urban artefacts as *created to serve particular functions*. Instead, Rossi believes that during its construction overtime, city’s functions change more rapidly than its structures. “*The city is something that persists through its transformations, and that the complex of simple transformations of functions that it gradually undergoes are moments in the reality of its structure.*”² As a man-made object, the city represents the progress of human reason and as human reason, it acquires consciousness and memory. Therefore, in order to understand urban artefacts it is necessary to look beyond them to the present-day (human) actions that modify them. Some resist change (structurally and functionally), others *exhaust themselves*, becoming available residues where only the permanence of their physical form remains. After a long period of vacancy, the grain storage of the Landbouwbelang cooperative was partially squatted (occupied) in 2002. The LBB community took advantage of the sizeable industrial *spaces* for the development of public events, exhibitions, ateliers and living units, too. Over time various private spaces were created in the main building’s concrete structure through the construction of hand crafted walls, emphasising the value of the place itself. Permanence gains, therefore, a new meaning. The permanent character of the LBB not only refers to its original form but to its availability to host a function, even if its different from the original one, conditioning the surrounding urban area.

– CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE CRISIS

As previously mentioned, society (and) politics are implied in the control and management of the built environment, leading to different – legally and spatially – solutions. The case of the Landbouwbelang in Maastricht is one of the many. Squatting as a political act privileges direct *action* to oppose the privatisation of land for speculation and individual gain.³ Why? In the last century, architecture has been labelled with the general sense of mainstream architectural practice appropriated into the commodity exchange of the marketplace, not engaging enough with ‘local’ political and social contexts⁴. “*Progressive*”, “*innovative*”, “*efficient*”, “*iconic*” and “*landmark*” buildings promote a vocabulary to legitimise architecture as a medium and exchange value, thus producing normalising tendencies of mainstream architectural production: “*the conforming city of office and apartment blocks, the city of sameness, indifference and of non-engagement, therefore of conflict*”.⁵ Conflicts like the global environmental crisis and the accompanying social divisions need reactions to excessive actions. In 2004, the municipality of Maastricht agreed on the Belvedere master plan. This public-private partnership set up by the municipality and private developers defined the future program of the site. The demolition of the LBB and part of the industrial area will provide space for a massive urban re-development with new living and commercial buildings and public infrastructures.

¹ CLEMENT, Gilles – The Third Landscape Manifesto, 2005.

² ROSSI, Aldo – Architecture of The City, 1982.

³ AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

⁴ AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

⁵ AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

From this time on, the squatters decide to make the necessary adjustments themselves and set up a foundation to organise the process and develop their future proposal to contrast this 'threat'. *"Public buildings are the cardinal points of the urban fabric, and their role can be key in the redefinition of the meaning of architecture. Collective buildings in particular – especially the ones used for performances and artistic and cultural production – are expressions of specific methodologies picking up contradictions and complexities linked to time. Bringing functional programmes into question aims to make them more appropriate and far-sighted"*.⁶ In fact, within ten years, the Landbouwbelang has become an artistic playground for individual initiative and experimentation, and it has developed into a cultural free-zone⁷, unique in the whole Limburg region. In a time of (architectural) crisis where the talking points are usually sustainability, self-reliance and *empowerment*, the Landbouwbelang has been at the forefront of these discussions for years. With the use of recycling, labour, networking and a large dose of goodwill, the LBB proves that success can be achieved with limited resources. The space to experiment remains; it is in this way that the building develops itself organically. In the past, present and future. "Mainstream" architecture norms shut down (these) other ways of thinking and operating. Present architecture is required to be flexible, economical, environmentally friendly, smart, resilient, and regenerative at the same time. There is an urgent duty of approaching the architectural project as a "device" that allows responding to the more complex requirements in the contemporary city.

On the 2nd of March, 2013, squatting was officially made illegal. However, LBB countless projects extend beyond their borders, with great success, growing as one of the most important hubs for alternative culture in Maastricht. For this reason, the municipality published a new vision for the redevelopment of the area. Landbouwbelang has a more central role, meant as a *"provisional zone for art experiments and the creative industry, which 'will have to be redeveloped in the long term."*⁸

– ALTERNATIVES

The Landbouwbelang model – squatting – is an *alternative way of doing architecture*. Appropriation consists of the taking of another's property for one's purposes (either legally or illegally, short-term or long-term), or through highlighting abandoned or unoccupied *spaces*. The LBB is defined in the broadest sense as the occupation and transformation of land and buildings that are unused or underused. It is based on the assumption that occupation and use constitutes a right in itself above and beyond legal – and especially private – ownership. It is a way of reclaiming social space. Social *space* is a dynamic *space*, and its production and transformation continue over time and it doesn't aim to reach a final moment of completion (as stated by Rossi). This dynamic shifts the focus of spatial attention away from the static objects (building as a medium) and moves it onto the continuous cycle of spatial production (building as a device), and to all the people and **alternatives** that go into it.⁹ As previously stated, this alternative has been recognised by the Dutch authorities as illegal in 2013, therefore, not applicable. What does this lead to? A suitable alternative for the alternative itself. Originally, the compromise reached between the LBB community and the municipality of Maastricht was that the squatter users could take advantage of the building until a definitive development for that area was found. They felt the duty of participating in this proposal, too. An ambitious (almost utopian) plan was designed with the help of different external actors, such as the Architecture Faculty of Eindhoven, and included not only an architectural renewal of the building but also solutions for self-management and investments. However, this wasn't enough for convincing the local government, developers and investors of the real potential that the building and its current program have for the city of Maastricht. Present/near future architecture has to put alternatives back at the *centre*, aiming to create quality spaces through the proper means of design, forward-looking rather than self-referential. This doesn't avoid the use of traditional architectural skills of design and spatial intelligence, but instead looks for different ways and contexts of exploiting.¹⁰ The alternative is, therefore, reactive to the previously mentioned 'established' norms. Lefebvre's consideration of the shared enterprise provides an alternative to the architect's role, too. The standard definition of an architect is someone who designs buildings. This definition brings with it certain limitations, such as the suppression of the more volatile aspects of buildings: the processes of their **production**, their **occupation**, their **temporality**, and their **relations to society and nature**.

⁶ GANDOLFI, Carlo – After the star-architect era, Studies, Abitare magazine, May 2018.

⁷ BOER, Ren , OTERO VERZIER, Marina and TRUIJEN Katia – ARCHITECTURE OF APPROPRIATION. On squatting as spatial practice.

⁸ BOER, Ren , OTERO VERZIER, Marina and TRUIJEN Katia – ARCHITECTURE OF APPROPRIATION. On squatting as spatial practice.

⁹ AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

¹⁰ AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

Bruno Latour, too, moves the attention from architecture as a matter of fact – where buildings are intended as objects subjected to rules and methods - to architecture as a matter of concern – where buildings are part of socially embedded networks, where more significance is given to the consequences of architecture.

"Nothing that takes place here was done for the purpose of self-enrichment: we received the building from the society, and we're happy to give something back in return."

– THE ARCHITECT AS AN AGENT (method)

Therefore, the architect is not involved in the final architectural production, rather participates in the whole transformative process. The present-day city requires the architect to become a true activist with the role of a promoter of social and cultural innovation. WHY? It is clear that spatial production belongs to a much wider group of actors – from artists to users, from politicians to builders.¹¹ Architects and non-architects have to collaborate, architects have to become **spatial agents** characterised by a much more collaborative approach in which they act with, and on behalf of, others. ¹² *'This transformative intent to make the status quo better'* is the alternative plan for the LBB future. In Spatial Agency, Jeremy Till properly listed the different passages of this successful transformative (re)development. The means are very varied, from activism to pedagogy, publications to networking, making stuff to making policy - all done in the name of empowering others.

In this interplay between the spatial and the social, this research aims to **investigate** the LBB squatting case as an experiment on this collaborative approach between architect (now spatial agent) and other professions. Starting from the awareness that the Landbouwbelang needs several experts for making the ambitious plan possible and concrete, it is the architect purpose to delineate the whole transformative process. Regardless Spatial Agency stages of transformation are listed with a specific orders, they are influencing each other at the same time. The LBB model is a unique situation: no previously occupied buildings in the Netherlands have survived in this Limbo position for almost 20 years. Therefore, the research will approach specific case studies for each of the stage required, allowing the architect (in this case, the student) to process and translate the knowledges acquired in a final subversive project.

Appropriation – the agent-architect will enter in an already started process. The challenge is, therefore, not the appropriation of the building itself, rather using the following stages to...

Dissemination – the way knowledge is distributed, how it is spread and to whom, as well as the opening up of discussions for a wider debate. In this stage, the architect has to divide the means of dissemination in two sub-groups: social and architectural dissemination. This two groups will follow two different case studies, respectively the CLUI model and KSa intervention at the Dutch Photograph Museum in Rotterdam.

CLUI – Centre for Land Use Interpretation

Mechtield Stuhlmacher – Parasite Architecture/Las Palmas

Empowerment – allowing others to 'take control' over their environment, being participative without being opportunistic; something that is pro-active instead of re-active.

Design Corps – Expanding Architecture. Designing as Activism

Networking – This can be a way of working where a core group of people expands according to each project and the expertise it requires, or a core group that builds its projects around its networks; these are hardly ever static groups and they are highly interdisciplinary and collaborative in nature.

00:/ – Architecture office, London

AAA – Atelier Architecture Autogérée

Subversion – The final architectural production

Lacaton & Vassal – Architecture office, Paris

¹¹ AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

¹² AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

Next phase references

- ROMIERI, Vittorio – SESCeffect
- GARUTTI, Francesco, CCA (Canadian Centre of Architecture – The Things Around Us: 51N4E and Rural Urban Framework (RUF)
- AtelierArchitectureAutogeree – RHYZOM, cultural local production and trans- local diffusion
- GROTH, Jacqueline, CORIJN, Eric – Reclaiming Urbanity: Indeterminate Spaces, Informal Actors and Urban Agenda Setting
- BRAAE, Ellen – Beauty Redeemed, Recycling post-industrial landscapes
- BERGER, Alan – Drosscape: Wasting Land In Urban America
- SMITHSON, Allison and Peter – As Found
- DESIGN CORPS – Expanding Architecture. Designing as Activism.

