



Interview:

Joachim Declerck

“We need new narratives”

For almost 10 years now you and your office ‘Architecture Workroom Brussels’ have been working on European topics. First it was Brussels as a Capital City of Europe, now you are working on regional questions in the Flemish Diamond and Brabant. Where do you see Europe in terms of spatial and political agenda? What do you see as the big issues that are being discussed, where space and politics come together?

Currently there is a huge fight between the logic of countries and the logic of urban regions. Europe has installed this fight by its urban- and INTERREG-programs and the regional development program is looking for specific needs and potentials of each region.

there is a huge fight between the logic of countries and the logic of urban regions

That is a strong thing and builds experience between cities. Only it is very much oriented towards public-authorities and not towards civil society, professionals and experts. That is a weakness.

Another topic is the interpretation of the word region, especially in the neo-nationalist rhetoric. There are those that see the world as something organised around city- or urban logics and people that follow a more nationalist logic and neglecting that the world is rather spiky than flat. This is a major implicit debate, which is never verbally expressed but is always present in the committee of the regions and cities.

The situation between these two effects of globalisation is one of the major challenges for Europe. Everything is much more urban and everybody wants to retreat into something that is a whole, a world in itself. My country, my region, my neighbours, which are the same kind of people.

Is that simply a question of power shifting away from the nation states towards Brussels or do you see it actually hamper development because certain issues cannot be dealt with at that level?

The question is whether the nation states should be considered the units to talk to, or whether they should move into a facilitating role, connecting the urban situations with a greater Europe. Nation states are interesting inventions, exactly in-between where it really happens and the higher levels on which collaboration needs to be organised. The network-city is a centuries old European buzzword, from the networks of monasteries to the Hanse cities. Talking about network cities is to return to the essence of where the continent has grown from. And this is very closely connected to economy. It's the moment to get economy back into the field of our discussions. But not as a world in itself, that has its rules and principles that should be followed- which is a bit how politics looks at economy. It is an important shift in thinking that still has to be made in many countries, that you can steer and you can facilitate economy.

One hypothesis of our research concerns to the topic of ‘Core versus Periphery’. Would you agree that in recent years we have seen a shift in stimulus investments from the periphery to the core?

Well, a lot of money goes to the periphery but it's not that it only goes to the periphery. If the one gets more in cohesion funding, the other one will get more in INTERREG or URBan 1, 2, 3,- 15,- 25. Europe functions like that. The weakness is that it's a stabilising system. If it were a choice to invest in the periphery or if it were a choice to invest in the centre, that would be strong. Because it would make clear that there is thinking behind subsidies.

It is an interesting question how far can you steer economy or in how far politics is simply following the economy. Boris Gehlen described how far the private sector has taken over even urban development and raises the question how governments could be more steering, more than through tender procedures and narrow corridors that again make the world flat.

Governments can help to create climates in which things become rather feasible than not. Economy has a pretty simple logic: to make profit and to exploit. It's also a constant conflict between agglomeration and moving away from agglomeration.

Governments can help to create climates in which things become rather feasible than not

Historically this region (Flanders, the Netherlands and of parts of France and Germany) consisted of bigger cities like Gent, Brussels, Antwerp, and in between -what we have now outsourced to China -the smaller cities in which it was cheaper to produce. Now the question is, how to bring this production back.

But you have to be true to the logic of the economy. For example you can't replace the Ford factory in Flanders on which 10-15.000 jobs depend if it moves out. To invest tons of money and act as if

JOACHIM DECLERCK

Founder and partner of the Architecture Workroom Brussels; Educated as architect and urban designer; from 2008 to 2011 head of the professional development program at the Berlage Institute; Curator of the 3rd International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, in 2007; Curator of the exhibition Building for Brussels. Architecture and Urban Transformation in Europa in BOZAR (2010). He was part of the Curator Team of the 5th International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam - Making City (April 2012).

you replace it is more communication than it is a real investment in the economy. Unfortunately it is also happening in the equalising logic described above, but even with too little money (it's crisis), without conviction and without a plan. Everybody can submit a project and then everybody gets a little money. That's not stimulating the economy; it is acting as if you stimulate the economy.

Instead you could ask: How can we transform a 'Fordist' culture, a workers culture, into an entrepreneurial culture, and focus your efforts on that.

That is an interesting link to the role of our profession in this field of power and decisions. You say elsewhere about the Flemish Diamond that it exists as

a concept, but never really more than that. In result it actually economically performs quite well, but still the territorial and spatial composition is problematic.

Yes, the same with the Blue Banana. It is one thing that geographers and statisticians make and what is really happening and how you can understand it well enough. You always develop new ways of phrasing things, but the challenge is to facilitate in a certain direction.

To do so you need to be able to identify a concept not invent one. Nothing came out of the Flemish Diamond. What is happening is rather Brussels-Antwerp as an axis. This is a territory that is under such demographic pressure that is better to be viewed and studied as a whole. Mechelen is growing enormously because of being in the middle. Migrants who can't find an affordable house, all go to Mechelen. Ghent is another world. Ghent belongs more to Lille. So the reading of the Flemish diamond is in fact quite wrong, statistically it might pop up, but it's not a territorial logic.

But before you were calling for a vision, that if you give stimulus, you have to know what you want to stimulate. Are you saying the specific vision of the Flemish diamond is wrong, or that these visions are not working in general?

These types of abstract visions maybe work better in a country like Holland with a machinery that can translate abstract visions to projects. In Flanders this does not exist, a larger vision will make no difference because finally all municipal authorities come up with their own projects. That's the engine for development. It's subsidiarity to the extreme. Finally everything is the responsibility of the lower level. You end up with all kinds of wheels turning next to each other and not with each other.

It is actually a very interesting concept with a very logical origin. Everybody has his agriculture, so food is secured on the individual level. And the houses are situated between the agricultural field and the road to the city where the work is. It is a logic of resilience and it could become even ecologically resilient. With all these functions next to each other, you can actually close the circles of energy, waste, water etc. at a very small scale.

Agglomeration, concentration in the very strict sense- compact city logic- is maybe not the only form of a sustainable resilient urban organisation. That is the hypothesis we're continuing to work on.

How does that relate to Thomas Sieverts' concept of the Zwischenstadt? It is around that time that the Ruhrgebiet as a big player-pattern comes up and is read as a whole. The IBA Emscher

Park then takes this further into projects on the ground. How do you see this relation between vision and defining good projects and the role of architects and planners?

I think the traditional vision in the sense of a scheme, plan or zone that you give a name, is not strong enough. What interests me at the moment is to push away from a real drawn plan towards a narrative, which picks up sufficiently fine grained and representative logics and dynamics in a city or region, and is stimulating towards a certain direction.

We're now working with the Nature Department of Flanders and the Vlaamse Landmaatschappij on the region around Brussels.

We developed a programme of action, which is called 'Landschapsbouw', the Flemish words for construction and landscape together. How can you actually attack the suburbanisation that is running over and across riverbeds, causes flooding etc. and develop a financial logic without any big vision or plan to redevelop those areas?

The narrative we found there is quite clear: We have people who have a 70's, 80's villa with extremely bad energy performance, located in a situation where you need two cars. Young people are not very interested in buying that house, but the house is the pension of those people. So in fact they have no pension. Hence ... Suddenly this is not solely a

The traditional vision in the sense of a scheme, plan or zone that you give a name, is not strong enough.



EXPLORATION OF THE FUTURE OF FLEMISH LAND COMPANY (VLM) - Foto: Tim Van de Velde

problem of planners that thinking that, “Oh, we have gone over our flooding bed”. Trying to solve the pension problem of people and coupling that with the problem that insurance companies will no longer insure those houses because they are built in a flooding zone, suddenly makes a “real” problem that is not a planner’s problem anymore but a people’s problem. The narratives are a way to reformulate a problem. It’s a mix between reality and rhetorics. It is not vision in that sense; it’s more a logic.

And are we well enough equipped as designers to identify and read these situations, to develop these narratives? And how is that related to urgency, like a crisis, the pension for example?

No, we are not well equipped. I really think we need to develop platforms for learning in different ways and to bring together very different knowledge’s in a ‘designerly’ logic. This is not to follow the hybrid of designers that the designer will solve everything, and it needs to be a platform with real constraints.

There should be the development of another A-class league of designers, which is interested in using design as a tool to re-invent for example a new economy of territorial development. Because that is a design question. You have NO excel table that can solve it. You don’t need to learn everything the economist knows and apply it, but you have to design on a platform where the smartest economists and the smartest designer make things mix.

That is a real challenge and goes with juridical questions, ownership, lands, banks etc.. To redesign all of that is not a question you can give to either designers or engineers or lawyers. You need a new type of profession, which is much more holistic and complementary. It is another way of using design. Most often, especially the strong designers see this seen as a promiscuous behaviour, or a thing for the B-class designers. But I really think it’s not B-class. I really think it’s a way to develop the new commissions for the A-class.

What are your experiences so far with collaborations with other professions, which you need to build up that narrative and act at the right time in the right way?

That’s not easy, but the crisis helps. Because these other professions, with their consultants fees of 1.750 € per day, are suddenly faced with problems that they can’t handle for that amount of money. So people say: “Hey, hello, if you can’t help me, what’s happening?” For example in the case of Brabant with municipalities that went bankrupt because of their land development: the ones that had advised them to go further are now the ones that are advis-

ing them to do it differently. Everybody knows that maybe they lack some vision or ideas.

Historically Olympics and other big projects were also the narrative or vehicle to sometimes bypass legal constructions, to speed up processes, to get everybody on board.

Yes, what Barcelona did in the first and second edition of the Olympic games, is to misuse that completely. Some basic urban problems have been solved in a very short period of time. Because something totally different and which has no relation whatsoever with that problem, was an occasion. It is also crisis management you could say, it is in a way the same. Unique moments.

What has changed? Has the problem changed? Are our systems made to build highways and maybe dikes but something new has come up? Does planning have to ensure not only connectivity and the basic infrastructures, but add something else?

I think this question has many possible answers. On the one hand the sectoral logic of governments in which everybody governs its own responsibility or sector is simply finished. It’s meaningless to do something about mobility, while not talking about urbanisation. Or to talk about water management without talking about how housing policy is oriented.

On the other hand it is also about a move away from consumption to production and horizontal re-composition. The fact that we have very little territory - that goes for the Netherlands, but for a part of Germany as well - makes for a beginning of another way of thinking which is area specific, designing on different questions at the same time; we couple

It is meaningless to do something about mobility, while not talking about urbanisation. Or to talk about water management without talking about how housing policy is oriented.

interests of people, working on synergy. Instead of organizing program we need to find productive relations.

For the third aspect I always give the example of the Haspengouw area in south Limburg. It's a hilly territory, used for television soaps because it's so beautiful, with orchards everywhere. Who is harvesting the apples and pears? It's Polish, Indian Sikh and so on. Is that a village-like situation like we had in the Middle Ages, and, as we like to imagine it even today? Not at all. It's an urban situation. Where is for example the temporary housing for those people?

I think, this part of Europe requires another principle, another paradigm of action. That is no longer the stable sectoral organisation, facilitated by planning subdividing a territory. It's trying to move much more according to programs, according to crisis moments, of opportunities. Nearly all cities did that: planning had become a bureaucracy organisation so they formalised think-tanks next to it. The Agence d'Urbanisme in France. The Barcelona Regional in Barcelona, Design for London.

These think-tanks can actually bring together new teams according to interests. I think, that's a new way of thinking, that you need an expert platform that advises politicians and that continuously couples urgency and potential action.

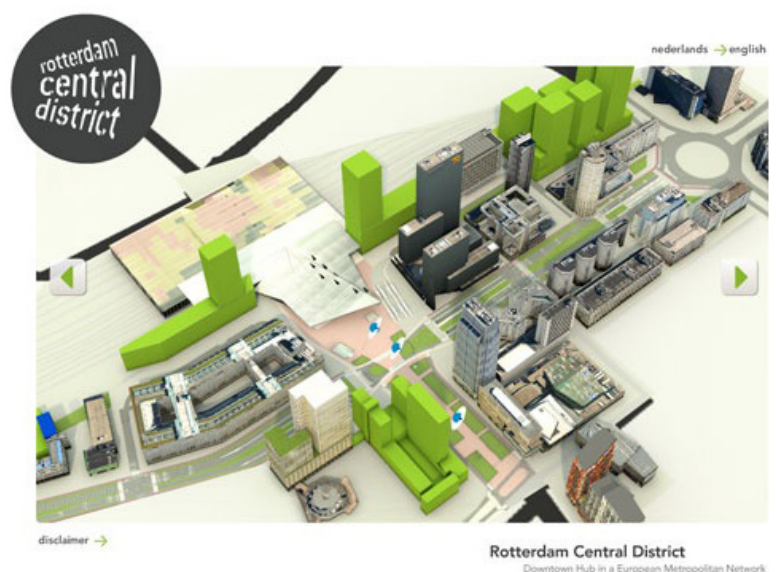
How important is the program in that respect? Because at least in my perception we are very much depending on a building program we have to spread. If you don't have a programme or a big event or 100.000 houses, it becomes much more difficult to know what to do. And in the core of Europe, you have very different situations. You have very low pressure areas and high

pressure areas and the way we have to act or build up narratives as planners is depending on reading these kinds of contexts. How do we act as planners if we don't have programme?

I think, that's the most difficult question. But even if there's no significant programme to add, there is still programme that is shifting. So even in a zero-sum economy, there is still a continuous redevelopment going on.

For example, if you look at the province of Noord Brabant there is some growth in the city and nearly shrinkage in certain villages. But that doesn't mean that there is no movement. We should shift our own question from assigning clear portions of programme to add to a given situation, to understanding the logics of what is already there and to accompany that in positive ways .

It's a completely different ball game, a different type of designing, not with big gestures or with massive things but to design with things that you can't see in a plan. It's also much less about quantitative issues in the old GDP logic.



PROMOTIONAL IMAGE FOR ROTTERDAM CENTRAL DISTRICT - Image: WEST 8

It's much more about adding value and affect living quality. How can the landscape and the living that invades it in Brabant both get better. Simply in other combinations and by upgrading the present situation in a cyclic fashion.

You are naming a lot of things that designers can do. But almost everything you describe is invisible. What role does aesthetics or does actual physical intervention play in this? Do we still need projects like Bilbao Guggenheims, Grand Axes, Olympic Stadiums?

Well, yes, if you read Bilbao in a good way, as a pearl on a wider urban strategy and organisation. We need always first urban strategy and an organisation that implements it and then a pearl. The building was important, but the metro stops of Foster are also important.

That's what also comes forward in our project research: You always need a strategy that covers different aspects.

And in that sense just calling something a blue banana or whatever is simply not enough. It helps to formalise certain principles but we need to feed that.

We always need a drama otherwise we can't design anything.

In the project for Brabant we called it 'pilots that build a narrative'. You need a clear narrative that is related to what is on-going and what you can really build, so you have to test it in pilots. That includes of course a little transgression or breakthrough; otherwise it's not a pilot.

This is just one of the ways to use design, as a tool for conversation, moderation, as an objectifying tool. To represent things so that you can overstep a situation and to visualise the crisis.

One of the major tasks of designers is to construct crisis, in order to react. We always need drama otherwise we can't design anything.

A major criticism of our discipline could be that we started to have a vocabulary of opportunities and went loose- like with the overly constructed opportunities of Central District here in Rotterdam or the South Axis in Amsterdam.- and got lost.

But I think there still is an extremely important task of designers to bridge the gap between vision,

policy narrative and action on the ground and have a societal/political role in demonstrating what words can mean.

Architects and planners can do something extremely qualitative from the phase of objectification to drawing up potentials, to testing on a plan, to building the test and to scaling it up again. The typical consultants with their solitary or unique expertise, but also the communication offices with their marketing narratives, and the posted moderators, they are completely lost. They require new content, which they don't have yet.

Interview conducted by Martin Sobota & Helmut Thöle

Rotterdam

5. February 2014