



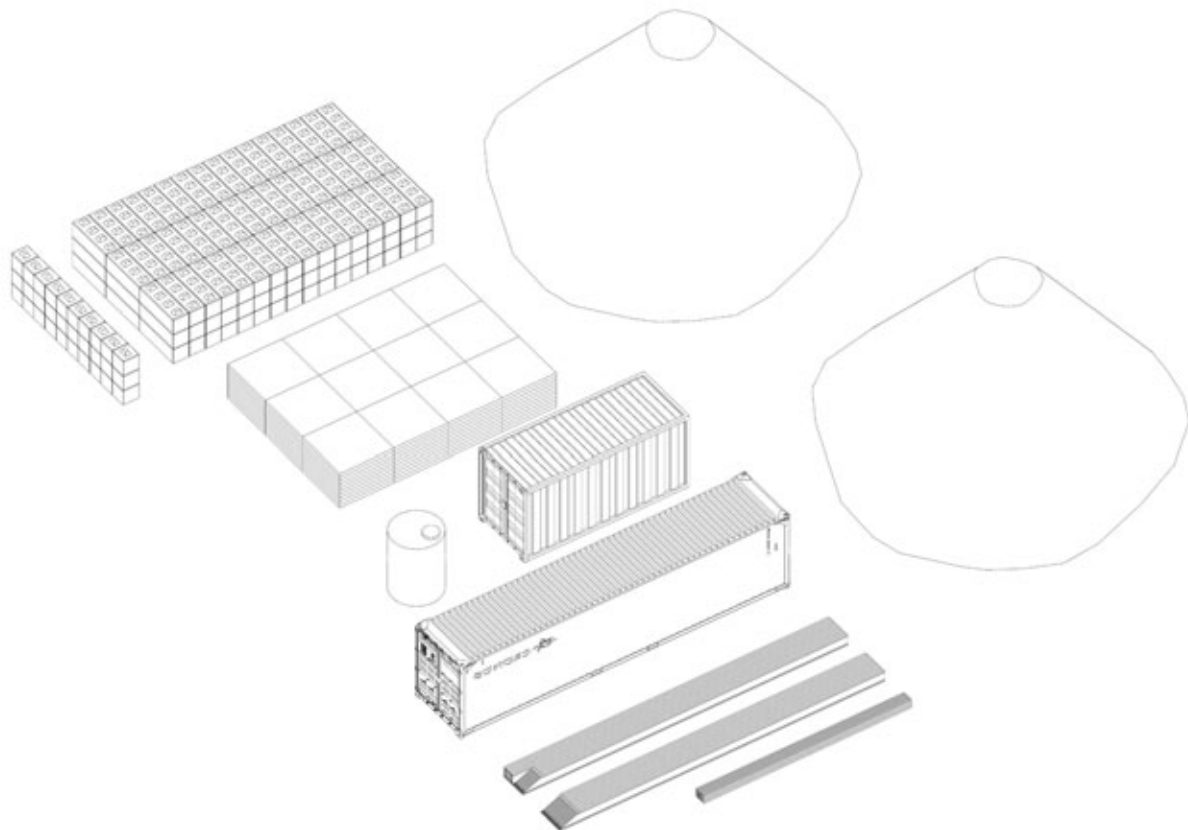
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Special Edition: Practices of Change



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Rediscovering sustainable commissioning

Michiel Van Balen – Photos Diederik Craps

The ecological and economic challenges we face today are putting both the authorities and the market – and hence also architects – increasingly under pressure. When large-scale public and private commissions are carried out, economic profit trumps social, cultural or ecological profit. Michiel Van Balen, co-founder of Miss Miyagi, proposes a different way to develop real-estate projects, away from the contradiction between market and authorities. Based on the idea of the 'commons', he presents a model in which the common good and collective management come first, with a greater social benefit as both the objective and result.



←
HAL 5 in Kessel-Lo (Leuven) is a new meeting place in the former, abandoned railway sheds of the Centrale Werkplaatsen.

- 1 Multipurpose hall
- 2 Exercise hall
- 3 Exercise landscape
- 4 Organic bakery
- 5 Coffee-roasting house
- 6 Social organizations
- 7 Social grocery
- 8 Food court

‘First we shape our buildings and then they shape us’, Winston Churchill once said. Architecture is about spatially shaping our society with a critical eye because that built environment has such a profound impact on who we are and how we live together. Architecture therefore indisputably has a direct and indirect role to play in the current transition-related challenges. Directly, through the choices made at the project level in terms of mobility, density, material choices, techniques, etc. And indirectly, but perhaps even more importantly, by steering, via the spatial context, the social, economic and political processes necessary to be able to achieve this transition. The role that the design practice can play in this respect is therefore vast, but at the same time limited. Because within the juridical triangle between the architect, the commissioner and the contractor, the impact of the designer exists by the grace of the commissioner and with the approval of the authorities.

The commercial development model

Commissioning practice has profoundly evolved in recent decades because building assignments have become increasingly complex on account of the transition-related challenges. We live and work with more and more people on less and less available space within increasingly strict quality norms. As a result, commissioning has become more and more professional, but also more commercial. This is not negative per se; those commercial interests align in part with the transition challenges; living in close proximity to one another in compact dwellings is good for both. If the right norms are imposed at the level of energy performances, mobility and spatial quality, these projects score well on the primary relation with the transition challenges.

However, the commercial development model scores particularly poorly on the secondary relation. The model often fails – the exceptions prove the rule – to create a spatial context in

which a caring, solidary society can thrive with space for strategic transition projects and space for various target groups. On the contrary. Because when the means (project development) becomes the objective, a sustainable transition is sometimes, perversely, obstructed.

The powerlessness of the authorities, the market and the designer

Across Flanders today, blue zones for community services are being bought up speculatively with the knowledge that a residential project with a fig leaf of ‘care’ will indeed be authorized. The same is happening with the latest opportunities for the weaving of green spaces and economic activities in our residential areas. And let’s not talk about the quality of our commercial assisted-living centres. Paradoxically, speculation on available locations increases in times of crisis due to an excess supply of liquid funds that cannot be invested due to a lack of profitable projects.

Today we find ourselves therefore in a rat race that even the better real-estate developer no longer wants to run. The authorities are often powerless due to a lack of adapted legal tools, but above all due to a lack of alternatives that generate enough trust to resolutely compel another approach. Also, the design practice is powerless due to a lack of mandate.





↑ HAL 5, Leuven: social grocery
↓ HAL 5, Leuven: vegetable gardens



Change is possible

The temporary adaptive reuse of HAL 5 in Leuven was developed and financed by local organizations and residents. It won the Leuven architecture prize 2016–2019. The jury let itself be guided in its judgement mainly by the question as to what project was the most exemplary to tackle the urban problems of the future. *‘Where do we want to take the city? Who belongs in the city and where is it taking place? What are we doing together? Where and how do our daily urban rituals take place?’* If we ask ourselves that question, in the light of climate change and migration, if we think about the complexity of dwelling and living in a city – which is exciting, but not always easy – if we attach value to the everydayness full of surprises which we wish to embrace as a challenge, then one project stands out above all others: it is the redevelopment of HAL 5.’ The jury saw in this project a contemporary version of the ‘commons’: a small piece of the city used communally for urban programmes (a fresh bakery, a place to pick flowers, a circus) that adds a welcome helping of well-being to our daily reality. Simplicity as luxury.



This project experimented with new forms of commissioning in which a different triangle is of interest: that of the market, the authorities and the commons. Our society is structured by two dominant organizational models: ‘the market’ on the one hand, ‘the authorities’ on the other. The contradiction between ‘more or

less market or government’ is, however, a false contradiction. Namely, a wide range of matters are not organized, or not only, by these two organizational models.

The force of a hybrid organizational model

There is a third model, that of the commons. In 2014 Michel Bauwens, pioneer of the peer-to-peer economy, described this model in his book *De commons als een nieuwe derde weg* (The commons as a new third way): ‘The common property of humankind or of concrete human communities in which a Common is organized neither by the authorities nor by the market, but is rather a method that brings important sources of survival and welfare under the sovereignty of a community and that ensures that these sources do not dry up and therefore remain permanently available.’

The strength of the third way does not lie in striving after it in an extremist manner and rejecting the market or government as organizational models. Its strength lies precisely in the exploration of hybrid organizational models, away from the (false) bipolar contradiction. This is also the case in property development.

Key in this new commissioning practice are new collaborative models, based on shared values and complementary ambitions. These collaboration models are not new; we have simply forgotten them in our neoliberal quest for individual success. The classic real-estate credo ‘Location, location, location’, founded on scarcity and competition, makes way for ‘Relation, relation, relation’, founded on abundance and reciprocity. Such collaborative models are fortunately regaining in popularity. The city of Leuven was recently chosen by the European Commission as ‘European Capital of Innovation’ with the jury claiming: *‘Leuven is a mission-driven city that excels in innovative governance models. It offers its people an opportunity to get involved in critical decision-making processes.’*

Cooperative sample projects

HAL 5, besides network organizations such as Leuven 2030 and Leuven Mindgate, was one of the Leuven sample projects. These new collaboration-based models led to renewed forms of entrepreneurship with their own business models. Because in this post-capitalist property, there is indeed room for financial profit, alongside other objectives. And these initiatives too are gradually getting the praise they deserve, because three of the ten ‘radical innovators’ of 2019 are experimenting with other forms of commissioning practice. Wooncoop, for instance, helps families acquire an affordable ‘cooperative’ dwelling. All residents become the shareholders of all the dwellings in the cooperation and rent from themselves, keeping costs down. The dwelling is free of speculation and is built and maintained sustainably. Oak Tree Projects is an organization with a new cooperation model. They help people with autism, a mental or motor limitation obtain a dwelling. They build inclusion dwellings in a broader cohousing project. Leuven 2030 aims to make the city climate-neutral and has launched small and large actions for this purpose with a unique alliance of citizens, civil society, companies and knowledge institutes. Other organizations such as Symbiosis are experimenting with new property forms (a real-estate foundation) and new added values (a caring housing environment for people in their later years).

In all these projects, investors – consciously and with great pleasure – opt for lower financial returns in exchange for a personal and social return. This is also the starting point of the cooperative financing fund of Miss Miyagi that enables citizens to invest in exemplary real-estate projects with a social added value. Cooperatives speak of target maximization as opposed to profit maximization.

Research by doing

Designers are in the privileged position of speaking the language of what connects these challenges: the physical space. And they have the imaginative ability to demonstrate how change is possible. It is therefore no coincidence that a growing number of designers are pushing back the boundaries of their mandate and ensuring innovation in terms of commissioning practice. For some time already, practices such as 5IN4E, Endeavour, AWB, Re-st and BUUR have been using their design capacities as a means to advise commissioners in their spatial development strategies. And organizations such as Stray, Entrakt, Onkruid, Toestand and Plaatsmaekers even activate underused spaces as entrepreneurs or social organizations themselves.

For Miss Miyagi, that search for alternative forms of professional commissioning is a personal quest. Miss Miyagi presents itself explicitly as an alternative developer with a ‘research by doing’ attitude that builds further on the designer’s ‘research by design’ tradition. That happens by trial and error. The redevelopments of De Hoorn and HAL 5 were awarded the Leuven architecture prize and the EU Prize for Cultural Heritage. Other experiments never saw the light of day. In addition, all good examples evoked in this text jointly represent – at least in terms of built project scope – a marginal share of the contemporary real-estate landscape. The idea that each mainstream thought was once a niche innovation inspires hope. And the multitude of relevant experiments in a society that is seeking to reinvent itself suggests that tomorrow they will be part of the new normal.

▲■●

We are at a tipping point in history. Never before have we faced so many major changes in such a short period of time: global warming, biodiversity loss, energy transition, health crisis, inequality, population growth, and so on. This special issue of A+ presents architectural practices that are driving this transition rather than adapting to it, using spatial design as a lever to accelerate change. With projects by, among others, 5IN4E, BC Architects and Studies, Dethier Architectures, Miss Miyagi, NU architectuuratelier, OUEST architecture and Rotor DC.

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