

More than Punctual Interventions.

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MORE THAN PUNCTUAL INTERVENTIONS

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Cultural Events, Competitions and Public Debate as Impetus for Architectural Culture in Flanders, 1974-2000.

1974. Belgium was in the midst of an architectural crisis. Between 1965 and 1975, according to Geert Bekaert, architecture was slowly going under. Due to the economic malaise the building industry went into serious decline after 1973, and in particular young architects found it difficult to find work. Francis Strauven diagnosed the situation in 1980: 'Once Belgian architecture had, and not without difficulty, assimilated functionalism or some derivative of it, and learned to concentrate on the production of 'functionally' expressive objects, it lost all sense of urban character and contextually, and now finds it extremely difficult to recapture those qualities'. The malaise was caused by a mix of an ineffective or non-existent architectural policy, a politicized process of commissioning, inadequate conservation of historic buildings (with only few protected monuments) and architectural education that generally was not very inspiring and that gave short shrift to the discipline's social responsibilities. Moreover, architects could not rely on a vivid architectural culture in Belgium. There were no exhibition spaces in which architecture could be shown, nor places where it could be discussed from a cultural perspective. Brussels has two architectural archival institutes since 1968 (Sint-Lukas Archives and Archives d'Architecture Moderne), but they were more concerned with the loss of Brussels' valuable heritage of art nouveau and art deco than with contemporary architecture. There were no competitions, the workings of the Association of Architects was heavily criticized and there was no critical magazine for architecture, despite the foundation of A+ in 1973. The lack of a forum for critique and the deteriorating Belgian construction climate was made painfully evident in a polemic by Geert Bekaert which, though refused by A+, was published in a special edition on Belgium in the Dutch magazine Wonen TA/BK in 1983. One of the consequences was that there was no such thing as Belgian architecture abroad. Another was that a group of orphaned young architects without commissions were forced to make their way in a professional environment that was anything but challenging. Such was the climate in which the protagonists of this book found themselves.

2015. Architects of the 1974-generation, as well as younger (particularly Flemish) Belgian architects are winning competitions abroad. They are invited to teach at highly qualified international architectural schools, to exhibit their work, to curate exhibitions and to give lectures. Foreign architectural magazines publish on architecture in Flanders. What has happened in the last four decades? How could an architectural culture develop in Flanders that is influential abroad? What characterizes this culture and who has played a leading role?

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