

Preface

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The faculty building of Architecture and Arts at Hasselt University is an elaborate exercise in collectivity. As Bie Plevoets explains in her introductory essay, it was designed by a former director of the school, Dolf Nivelte, and inspired by the structuralist ideas of architect Herman Hertzberger. A modular floorplan expands itself from a spacious central atrium, connecting three floors which are filled with student, teaching and research activities. Like an active hive for our scholastic community, the building forms a testimonial for the pedagogic and social ambitions of the school, past and present.

The faculty building in Diepenbeek was built in the 1980s and has since been thoroughly used. Punctual adaptations were made during the years, but the open and inclusive core of its design still stands. It has served as a model for a common learning process, spatially organising the different courses and design ateliers of our academic degree programme, put also orchestrating the small conflicts and mutual understandings of a busy and engaged educational society. It is the built legacy of our faculty, that after all these years still serves as a reference and an inspiration.

As Koenraad van Cleempoel explains in his contribution to this cahier, an important part of our faculty will move to the old beguinage in the city centre of Hasselt. The ensemble of historic row houses, church ruin and walled gardens is currently being refurbished by Bovenbouw and David Kohn Architects, with the landscape architects of Landinzicht. Soon, we will trade a building that thoroughly represents the way we behave as a faculty, for a new but old place that is rooted in the stateliness and solemnity of a late medieval religious community.

The prospect of moving to the Hasselt Beguinage makes one ponder the essential aspects of our shared collectivity. How do we operate as a collective? What do we mean to each other? What do we represent as a group of teachers and researchers? More so, moving to the beguinage makes us reconsider our relationship with the city and its social fabric, reflecting on our public role and responsibility. As an educational and cultural institution, we are appropriating a part of the city and using it as a means of engaging with its inhabitants.

Our heritage is a collective responsibility. It is also an externalization of our common consciousness. Publicly used buildings are models that reveal our conception of community. They reveal how we want to behave as a collective, either deterring or including the other. Our buildings depict the society we aspire to, as teachers, civil servants, citizens, monks or beguines... And monuments do this with extra gravitas. Often perceived as fundamental cornerstones of a city's public identity, they are duly appreciated as long as they remain impassive. For change is something that for most is not befitting heritage.

In Flanders, two new projects for old buildings recently caused a public uproar. The ruckus demonstrates that people prefer monuments to stay put, providing a comforting authenticity through the presumed stability of the past. As is the case for the Beguinage of Hasselt, the Gravensteen in Ghent and Het Steen in Antwerp are currently being refurbished after an Open Call competition organised by the Flemish Government Architect. But despite their inventiveness and sensitivity, both architectural projects were met with fierce public protests. Even if they are almost entirely a romantic reconstruction, the historical strongholds are considered a sacred battle ground where the values and codes of the local community are fought over and confirmed.

When a new possible future stirs the past, the reuse of heritage essentially questions the way we imagine our society. The act of reusing buildings transcends the knowledge and practice of conservation and design. It interferes with our collective history as a representation of common ideals of today. Through generating dissonance, discussion and reflection, but also by opening new perspectives and insights, it unfolds the broad scope of the academic and professional field of adaptive reuse, and the many societal topics it touches. I invite you to discover a glimpse of this diversity on the following pages.