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Architecture Quality as a Common Concern

European Conference on
Architectural Policies

23–26 April 2024
Brussels

Closing Observations

Audrey Contesse, Director of the Institut Culturel d'Architecture Wallonie-Bruxelles

Stefan Devoldere, Dean of the Faculty of Architecture & Arts UHasselt

At the conclusion of the European Conference on Architectural Policy, we were invited – each as informed observers from the cultural and academic spheres respectively – to offer preliminary reflections on the fascinating case studies that were presented and debates they initiated during the event. These discussions, centred on exploring levers to enhance quality within architectural policy and urban projects, inspired us to pose two key questions. In this article, we aim to share those questions and provide tentative answers, drawing on insights and quotes gathered during the conference.

WHAT CONSTITUTES ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY?

The first question we posed centres on the concept of architectural quality itself – a topic deliberately sidelined by Maarten Van Den Driessche in his opening lecture. He remarked “Rather than anchoring the debate in a semantic discussion on architectural quality, we chose to focus the conference on architectural policies underpinned by practical examples, aiming to achieve a high-quality built environment.” Despite this pragmatic approach, we believe revisiting the question is worthwhile – not as a semantic exercise, but to derive broader insights from the cases presented. So, what do we mean when we talk about architectural quality?

Architectural quality is ALREADY HERE

An urban project rarely begins with a blank slate. A good trajectory takes the qualities that are present, latent or otherwise, as its starting point. By doing so, the qualities of the new project become rooted in the unique characteristics and uses of its place. Even seemingly unremarkable sites can hold pivotal significance within the dynamic of the urban fabric, offering unexpected opportunities when carefully explored. The reuse of existing structures is also always worth considering. Heritage, as a strong collective value, can imbue a site with cultural meaning within a community, anchoring it firmly within the broader urban context.

Architectural quality is an AMBITION

Achieving architectural quality begins with a clear vision and a well-defined framework, ensuring that the ambitions of a project are articulated from the outset. This vision should be embedded in a robust project brief, forming the cornerstone of both a high-quality process and outcome. When shared and maintained by all stakeholders throughout a project, such ambitions create coherence

and drive excellence. For local authorities, a strong vision provides leverage from the start, and not just at the final stages when environmental permits are applied for. Ultimately, architectural quality stems from knowing what one seeks to achieve and communicating this effectively – not through rigid plans or quantitative checklists, but through a clear and adaptable strategy.

Architectural quality is A WAY OF DOING THINGS

Quality is not the automatic result of rules and regulations; these ensure legal certainty but do not inherently create value. Instead, architectural quality is born from a thoughtful and dynamic approach. Co-creation sessions and design workshops, for example, establish the right conditions for excellence within spatial development processes. Design can play an active role at every stage – whether determining programmes or fostering support. Tools for selecting, evaluating and guiding designs are crucial, but they must be deployed thoughtfully to maximise their potential.

Architectural quality is A FLEXIBLE PROCESS

A strong, ambitious framework provides stability to a development process, but true architectural quality demands flexibility – room to adapt to evolving conditions while preserving the initial vision. Flexibility does not equate to compromise but sustaining ambition within a changing context. This requires a well-conceived process, underpinned by robust methodology and informed by the realities of the project's journey. It involves engaging stakeholders, addressing challenges and creating detailed roadmaps ... A successful process must be both flexible and patient, allowing time for change and a good memory of its foundations.

Architectural quality is A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

Architectural quality transcends the spatial dimension, integrating historical, social and economic dimensions. It acts as a bridge between policy, heritage, culture, sustainability, civil society, etc. Achieving this requires a co-creative process involving not only citizens, but also various government departments. Initiatives like a 'sponge day' can connect designers with

public administrations, revealing unexpected synergies and fostering broad support that extend beyond the spatial aspects of a project. Involving citizens early is equally vital. Temporary site uses, for instance, can help test ideas and build public enthusiasm for the final outcome.

Architectural quality is AN ONGOING CONVERSATION

At its core, architectural quality is the product of ongoing, open conversation. These discussions, built on trust and collaboration, must engage experts, policymakers, developers, users and the broader public. Setting the right tone and using the right vocabulary is key to ensuring inclusivity and understanding. Creating safe spaces for dialogue – such as 'quality chambers' – enables vision and design to evolve collaboratively, ensuring alignment across stakeholders and laying a strong foundation for quality.

Architectural quality is A STRONG NARRATIVE

Architectural quality is not an objective fact. A compelling narrative can unify diverse stakeholders and build momentum for high standards. Designers craft narratives that underpin architectural quality and inspire architectural policy. Those narratives can be systematically built up by vision documents, essays, architectural competitions entries and awards, rallying public and political support. Effective storytelling requires a skilled narrator. A city or government architect can advocate for quality and help set the agenda on the basis of a clear mandate. They can inspire and give advice. Policymakers, however, must reinforce this vision with tangible backing and authority.

Architectural quality is IMAGINATION

Design is a tool for collective imagination, connecting stakeholders and users through visual storytelling. Drawings and visual aids not only clarify ideas but also make shared values tangible. They help discussing what's at stake. Compelling images are also crucial for clear communication about the project. However, caution is essential, as such

images can sometimes create misleading or politically sensitive expectations. A design process should provide enough room for imagination, even allowing to question the original brief and adapt to emerging insights, both for designers and clients.

Architectural quality is SHARED OWNERSHIP

Shared ownership underpins sustainable architectural quality. Independent designers, city or government architects can foster this ownership by bridging gaps between governmental departments and ensuring alignment. A government architect is a personification of architectural quality, administrations are anonymous. This visibility can be used as a leverage for the (architectural quality of a) project. Structured platforms, procedures, and occasions where people can meet can further enable collaboration among clients, policymakers, and designers, ensuring thoughtful selection processes and fostering partnerships that prioritise quality. Involving the broader community in the design process ensures that projects resonate with individual citizens, creating a sense of collective investment.

Architectural quality is CAPACITY BUILDING

Embedding design as a tool for policymaking in public administrations is critical to fostering architectural quality. Capacity building involves harnessing both local expertise and external perspectives while creating structures that promote collaboration within and beyond public administrations. Independent designers can invigorate public-sector projects, while a design team built within its own administration can have a strong influence on the overall attention to architectural quality. The correct position of a quality chamber or city architect within the administrative apparatus is crucial, as is its direct relationship with the city council. Designers can do more than design: they can play a critical role in administrations and quality committees. Capacity can also be built at an overarching level, by actively supporting smaller municipalities on spatial issues or developing a regional or thematic vision, combined with financial resources to ensure its implementation at local level.

Architectural quality hinges on ultimate

USE

Long-term use is a sustainable ambition. The ultimate user resides in the future and may drastically change profile during a project's development process. Governments have a right to speak as democratically elected representatives of the population, but private developers also have a mandate as economic actors responding to the desires of potential buyers. They each defend specific interests, which have their own weight in the balance sheet of a development project. Initiatives such as the Open Call prioritise selecting designers rather than fully defined projects, recognising that a design is never truly complete as long as the user is not (yet) involved.

AND HOW TO TRANSLATE ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY INTO A COMMON CONCERN?

In the previous paragraphs, we explored factors shaping the quality of processes and outcomes in urban and architectural projects. Our insights draw from the experiences of exemplary clients, dedicated designers, and skilled project directors. Here, we turn to the second question posed by this conference: how can architectural quality become a common concern?

Three pillars emerge as essential to this endeavour: engagement, evaluation and sharing values.

Engagement begins with fostering active participation among citizens, establishing strong relationships between stakeholders, and ensuring transparency throughout the process. Citizen involvement must have a clear purpose, operating within a structured framework for dialogue and targeting a well-defined audience. Inclusivity is paramount, guard against exclusivity or particularism, and always uphold democratic principles. Encourage real estate developers to collaborate with architects who are committed to prioritising architectural quality. Ensure that their efforts, especially in public-private partnerships, are properly recognised and rewarded. Competition frameworks should emphasise design excellence, opening the market to diverse candidates to ignite architectural creativity and innovation within projects.

The second pillar is the systematic evaluation of completed projects. Quality control should be embedded across the four key phases of development: preparation, procedure, project development, and use. A critical review of each stage fosters better coordination, streamlines processes, and ensures clarity in decision-making. Transparency and regular feedback loops at every

step help illuminate the rationale behind decisions and agreements. This approach not only enhances accountability but also creates a repository of best practices and lessons learned that can inform future projects.

The third crucial pillar is the dissemination of accumulated knowledge. The added value of architectural quality should be communicated widely to all relevant actors, from local authorities to national policymakers. Familiarise stakeholders across various levels of government with existing procedures and practices, ensuring they have the tools to champion quality. Utilise diverse channels – digital platforms, publications, exhibitions, and events – to amplify these messages. Create accessible platforms where resources, insights, and best practices can be shared openly, fostering collaboration and inspiring others to prioritise architectural quality.

SPEAKING, LEARNING AND THINKING TOGETHER ABOUT ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY

Creating a deeply rooted culture of architectural quality demands more than just widespread awareness. It requires a shared language – one that is rooted in daily actions and is enriched by design processes. Design, after all, is a powerful and valued language in complex public-private partnership (PPP) projects, fundamental and applied research, or public participation. As an iterative and collaborative process, it brings people together, sparks imagination, and addresses pressing social issues.

This shared language is further cultivated through cultural initiatives and education. Increasingly, universities are embracing their social responsibilities, partnering with local governments via city academies or socio-spatial think tanks to spotlight critical challenges. Architecture institutes are engaging citizens in dialogues around social issues such as housing and shared spaces, launching action-oriented design research in

collaboration with educational institutions, and bridging exemplary urban projects with grassroots initiatives through public outreach.

To build on the discussions from this conference, we propose expanding the illustration of its four key protagonists. The conference examined how government collaboration with developers, designers, and citizens can lead to better, high quality architectural and urban projects. Based on our expertise, two additional actors should be included in this interesting and fruitful framework: the cultural and education sectors. As a prompt for further reflection, and as a potential theme for the next European Conference on Architectural Policies, we suggest exploring how these elements can further enrich and amplify the collective conversation.



fig.1 Wallonia-
Brussels Architecture
Inventories # 4
2020-2023

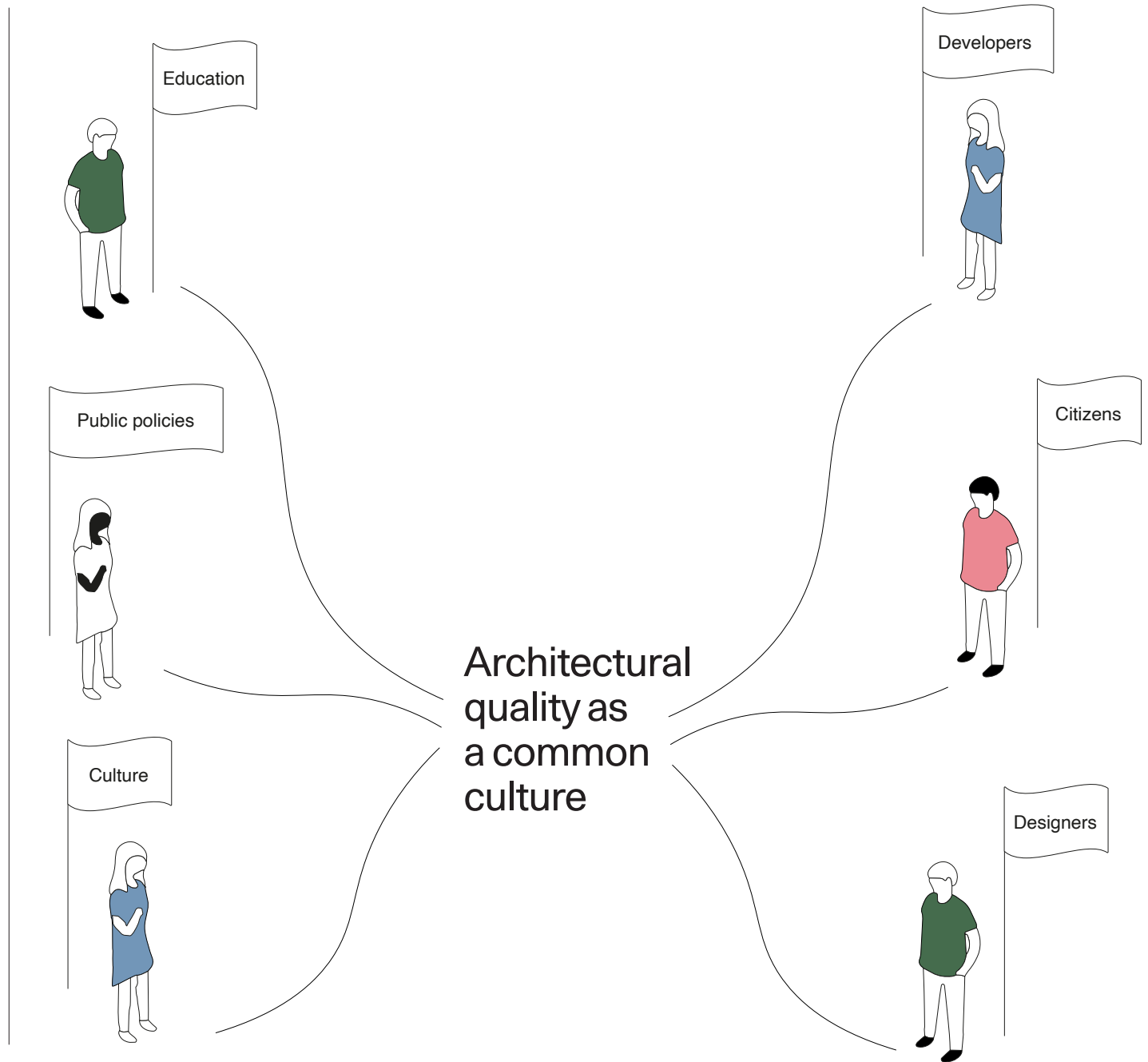


fig.2 Proposal for expanding CityTools' scheme by Audrey Contesse and Stefan Devoldere

Organised in the framework of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2024, the *European Conference on Architectural Policies: Architectural Quality as a Common Concern* is an initiative under the *Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026*. It consisted of two meetings: The meeting of the National Contact Points of the *New European Bauhaus* and The meeting of the *European Directors for Architectural Policies*. The conference took place from 23–26 April 2024 in La Tricoterie, Brussels.



Organisers
Architecture Unit – Wallonia-Brussels Federation
Flemish Government Architect – Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office

Research Teams
The conference was put together with the collaboration with the CityTools office and the ACC research group at Ghent University, who each shaped part of the programme. They jointly conducted the preparatory research and moderated the debates.
ACC Team:
Maarten Van Den Driessche, Maarten Liefoghe, Loïc de Béthune and Inigo Custers
CityTools Team:
Nicolas Hemeleers, Florentine Sieux, Antoine Crahay, Sigrid Kellens, Daniele Ceragno and Laura Wipler

Partners
Brussels Government Architect (BMA), Brussels international, Charleroi Bouwmeester City Architect, Flanders Department of Environment and Spatial Development.

Publication
Editorial direction:
Eva Amelynck, Juliette Dubois, Tania Hertveld, Typhaine Moogin, Cateau Robberechts
Writing:
Audrey Contesse, Stefan Devoldere, Maarten Liefoghe, Thomas Moor, Maarten Van Den Driessche, Erik Wieërs
Graphic design:
ruttens-wille
Translation:
Taal Advisie
Photography:
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