Architecture or Real Estate?
Bureaucracy Towards a Territory of Things
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The city is corporation

Architecture and real estate: they are confused by the general public and treat each other as a means to an end. The de facto result of both is the city, which, both claim is their most noble intention. Both deal primarily with the real – the real because both are „relating to things“. The etymology of „real“ as „relating to things“ (esp. property) and especially „Real“ estate that is „first recorded in 1666 and retains the oldest Eng. sense of the word“ reminds us of the inherent reality of the city rather the city as simply an abstract effect of the flows of humans and goods and processes and ideas. More precisely the concern of both reality and architecture is pragmatist in the sense that what is dealt with are „things in the making“2. Transformations are initiated questioning the stability of reality in which architecture and real estate are front-row agents dealing with the real rather than planners and politicians. This primordial issue is of course contaminated by ideology and intention, primarily of urban politics and of a nascent (urban) planning discipline since the 19th century as by-product of industrialisation and growth. But both architecture and reality remain more closely tied to the real effects of their acts.

The main issue at stake is the following contradiction …two contradictory desires – the city-as-womb and the city-as-machine (to defeat this contradiction is bad utopia, it needs to be given form)3. The paper’s principal concern is the effect of the office-market on the architectural form of city and territory. It explores the „recent“ history of an expanding bureaucracy encroaching on city centres and peripheries, ultimately accelerated by globalisation’s consolidation into large-scale gesellschaft-hubs. How does this affect the supposedly immutable idea of city and the transformations of its actual form? How is the growing importance of the place of work of the gesellschaft man (public or private) and with it the accommodation of corporate activity as essential a component of the post-industrial and post-metropolitan territory as the factories were in the industrial age? How are the gesellschaft-forms developed during the 20C as an intensification and diversification of the age-old bureaucratic presence in the city after first being emancipated from the ancient palace-grounds (initiated by the „Uffizi“ of the Medici and the Procuratie of San Marco) still relevant? The study investigates (first) the legitimacy of the corporation’s centrality in the city and territory and (second) the form this centrality can take.

Etymology once again reminds us that the word „corporation“ derives from the Latin corpus (body), representing a „body of people“; that is, a group of people authorized to act as an individual (Oxford English Dictionary). The word universitas also used to refer to a group of people but now refers specifically to a group of scholars (see University). In Great Britain and Ireland the term corporation was also used for the local government body in charge of a borough. This style was replaced in most cases with the term council in Britain in 1970s local government reform, and in the Republic of Ireland in the 1990s. The sole exceptions are the City of London Corporation and the rural Laugharne Corporation in Wales. The City of London corporation is both an anomaly in the general system of municipal government but is at the same time a very revealing political fact that allows for the business centre of one the most important financial capitals in the world to be a city of „work“ and „making money“ as a result of humans gathering rather than in a city-as-womb – a place for „dwelling“.

Brussels – New York

A cult of reality has installed itself early in the architectural field, preferring to leave process and ultimately procedure to off-spin disciplines as urban planning (19c) and regional planning (20c), in order to be able to focus on the solution itself instead.

Real estate contains its intimacy with the real in the word itself, actually retaining the oldest English etymological meaning: relating to things…? The reality of the city is often blurred by emphasis on the „intentions“ (investing in the future by making beautiful things and by making money), framed by quasi-empirical social, economical and cultural theories and research.

In order to shed light on issues the specific case of Brussels is taken, not so much as the urban worst-case scenario it is often documented as, but as the place where the
unique opportunity of de facto capital of Europe has produced an idiosyncratic mismatch between city and bureaucracy. I will draw a comparison with the New York area, a principal reference for the praxis of intertwining architectural production and real estate goals by some of the (formerly) largest corporations ever that dominated and set the standard for a capitalist production of territorial reality. Even the complicated balance between EU, Belgium, French-Flemish querelles and the Brussels capital region and the ideas on the New York City State in the run-up and aftermath of the disastrous 70s financial and urban crisis in nyc are not at all dissimilar points of contention. At the same time the New York area crystallizes presence of the corporation in two precise models: the dense historical and constantly reinvented concentration of capital on Manhattan island and the suburban/regional exodus of the corporation since the second world war. The „urban” presence is epitomized in the massive bulk of the xyz buildings on 6th Avenue by Wallace K. Harrison and the ex-urban model by the numerous corporate campuses in the tristate area. Both models are relevant case studies when considering Brussels again.

The parallel with nyc rather then with Brussels bureaucratic paragon Washington dc, starts with the post-1958 dreams for Brussels’ very own „Manhattan project”. Not exactly a plan for nuclear bomb, but still clearing a large tract of land in a central area, it scheduled the creation of a concentration of towers around the North station resembling midtown Manhattan’s architectural and urban experiments between 6th and 7th Avenue (xyz). But as well the proliferation of exurban office-complexes in the NY-Tristate area and Brussels’ so-called „decentralized” and peripheral zone are comparable developments relevant for our understanding that the corporation has a seductive alternative when the city becomes a hostile and crisis-ridden rather than the „creative” place it claims to be: to move out.

The often-criticized xyz buildings have been described by Cesar Pelli as good „background” buildings. These are the kind of buildings or bulk the city needs as a city with only foreground-buildings (icons) is inconceivable. Brussels needs to be discussed in function of „background” buildings as well. Architects and developers do not tend to like background, but it is their prime responsibility. The xzy-type of form can resolve the mentioned contradiction of city-as-womb and city-as-machine when attention is paid fully to the ever-evolving specific programmatic issues related to the bulk. Brussels is unfinished and instead of the vague memory of the 19c scenographic city-fabric that should thrive in areas where it is still there, the background has to be rendered economic, functional and mature again instead of investing in a belated post-modern pimp-like aesthetic that makes the average corporate architecture in tiger-economy-metropolises like Jakarta seems dignified.

As preamble to the Manhattan-plan for the Noordwijk, the post-war filo-american obsession with consumerism and wealth had produced the introduction of an important element of corporate urbanism in Brussels: a literal case of „learning form”. Not only European architects went to the US to „see” the wonders across the pond: when in 1950 in New York, the young Claude De Clercq saw for the first time in his life a parking structure, he wanted to do one back home. Eight years later he completed the first paying parking structure in Brussels. In the beginning nobody would use the large „parking 58” near the Place De Brouckère, but it became a pioneer for lasting commercial success: his firm „interparking” became the number three in Europe in the business of parking cars. In 1956 he was allowed to go ahead with his plans by a young alderman anticipating the need for parking during the 58 expo: Paul Vanden Boeynants. In 1957 the structure opened with capacity for 400 cars. Only in 1959 and not during the expo the parking started to be success. This was the start of a parking empire – De Clercq partnered up with construction-tycoon Charlie De Pauw, Armand Blaton and banker Albert Frère and American investment was attracted. The concrete parking structure was designed by engineer Abraham Lipski, inventor of the Preflex-beam, a steel/concrete combination making large spans possible without low construction-height.

Considering again the „...two contradictory desires – the-city-as-womb and the-city-as-machine (to defeat this contradiction is bad utopia, it needs to be given form)“ we have to admit that in Brussels a form has been given to the contradiction of city-as-womb vs. city-as-machine that can be the basis for a transformation and for bureaucracy not only to „land“ but also to settle where it has always belonged. Two examples in Brussels – the Noordwijk and the rac show the reality of the presence of corporation and bureaucracy in the city that allows for an analysis of the form it is taken... a form that can be an antidote to or can at least concretely balance out the good intentions of planning that developed from a revolutionary proposition into a defence-mechanism of political contingency. In Brussels form has been given to the contradiction of city-as-womb and city-as-machine, but can be the basis for a transformation and for bureaucracy not only to land but also to settle where it belongs: in the city that is corporation.
The dictum location, location, location just doesn’t quite say it all in the case of Brussels. In fact in most cities the land values do not match the astronomical quotes of London, ny and Tokyo where buildings are demolished „easily“ to be replaced by something more rewarding, automatically diminishing the long durée relevance of architectural form and producing the extremes of generic and iconic. Realty and architecture have in Brussels potentially another role – not necessarily limited to the property business buying, selling, restoring and building the bulk, leaving for architecture the „epidermic“ concerns – but one that can concretely balance out planning mistakes (sic).

The case of the Noordwijk

The Noordwijk is still often referred to as „Manhattan“ – the name of a „plan“ instead of a real place. The area is the ongoing result of an infamous master plan that in 1967 was accepted by the city of Brussels and the municipalities of Schaerbeek and Sint-Joost on which territory it would rise into existence. The Manhattan-plan was de brainchild of infamous Charly De Pauw (cdp), the quintessential Brussels real estate magnate and concrete baron and political powerbroker Paul Van den Boeynants (vdb). The plan was in tune with other similar intentions to modernise („city“-fy) along the American Central Business District-model the old European capitals of commerce. cdp and vdb wanted a coherent cdp for Brussels: well-functioning and prestigious at the crossroads of prolonged E40 and E19 axis, connected to the brand-new highway network. The area was – unlike the suburban plateau on the fringe of Paris where since 1958 an ex-novo business district gradually replaced shanties, factories and farms, and unlike Rome’s inherited centro-direzionale „Eur“ laid out to host the E42 universal exhibition that eventually never took place – an urban neighbourhood in 19th century fabric just outside the historic pentagon of Brussels. Inhabitants were simply removed and fabric was demolished. But when this was done, the oil crisis and consequent recession started having an effect on the real-estate boom, leaving except for one-and-a-half wtc tower an uninhabited desert of fallow land, described as a speculative jungle and nothing like the well functioning corporate stadtkrone it had promised to be. Mediocre development started gradually to appear: even some housing was introduced – social housing and apartment living, in the seventies still dominated by the big contractors (Amelinckx, Etrimmo, etc.) A lot of the vacated site still today is The original 1967 plan Manhattan is though still the zoning plan applicable to the Noordwijk as a whole, at least where it is not overruled by the more recent municipal zoning codes of the fragments belonging to either City, Schaerbeek or Sint Joost (respectively Helihaven, Gaucheret and Willebroekkaai). The tabula rasa was created and can be called into question in retrospect, but not consequently realising the plan Manhattan was the real disaster. The area has since suffered form the simple historical fear of making „big plans“ that the possible virtue of a concentrated and coordinated group of towers in a „modern“ part of town, instead is still a hit and run of development. The capital region is ambiguous about it, defining it both as one empowerment zone and splitting it in two for planning purposes.8

That idea of a new centrality in relationship to the Noordwijk and nearby railway station is with the „plan Manhattan“ not entirely new. The name „Helihaven“ comes from the location of a heliport that was opened near the Groene Dreef (coincidentally the location of the first-ever railway station on the continent as well!) in 1953, where sabena has scheduled service to Lille, Antwerp, Maastricht, Bonn, Eindhoven, Duisburg en Dortmund. In 1966 the heliport was closed – the flights proved to be commercially unviable. The site became one of the most contradictory parts of the Noordwijk, where until today the interests of the city, the port-of-Brussels on the canal and the developers collide: what to do with the historically significant Art nouveau Delhaize-warehouses at the Redersbrug? – Demolishing or transforming them to make an open-air swimming pool, put high-rise housing or...

In the mean-time some lots are filled with more bulk, some nice, some not. The residual urban space is landscaped, but the area remains mainly a monofunctional urban zone with some lost social housing and good intentions abound. The Manhattan-plan is alive. The commuters come and they go. The one hybrid high-rise nearby, with cinema, shops, hotel and apartments in addition the offices was demolished a few years back. The Noordwijk is a failed eur, a failed La Défense. What was interesting is destroyed, not in the sixties, but a few years ago. Housing ala Barbican, not zoning one street „housing“ for row houses on the Antwerpse Steenweg and the next street „offices“ waiting for the next construction boom. Getting rid of the binary opposed notion of working in towers and living in a rowhouse is necessary but remains a difficult proposition. The 19th fabric is almost gone there and nothing can coexist, let alone compete, with the bulk and the effect on the street of corporationville. Making any development in the zone, contingent on mix-use seems natural, but is not. And no development should be possible in the zone involving demolishing before the fallow land is developed.

8 hetboongebied (Gewestelijk Ontwikkelingsplan) and in the Bestemmingsplan there are two sperate areas of regional importance.
The case of the RAC

The RAC, acronym for Rijks administratief Centrum of CAE (Cité administrative de l’Etat) is Brussels’ version of post-war Modernist Empire. Not unlike Albany’s Empire State Plaza conceived by R. M. Schindler, that was to accommodate in one monumental location the administration of post-war Belgium. Today 13000 state employees are at work in the Empire State Plaza superstructure, its’ Brussels twin conceived for 14000 bureaucrats is vacant awaiting redevelopment after being sold to a private developer.

One of the architects of he RAC was Hugo Van Kuyck, the same that was responsible for the first postwar „highrise” in the city: the Prévôyance Sociale building, inspired by Gordon Bunshaft’s Lever House in New York.9 In 1958, riding the wave of optimism of the expo, Brussels’ worlds fair, a lot of infrastructural and modernisation works had already been carried out in city in preparation for the big event. In addition to the traffic engineering of the city with tunnels, high-rise and high-density projects were constructed in the city plugged into the accessibility facilitated by the new infrastructure, especially around the newly constructed inner ring road around the historic city-centre pentagon where previously the ring Boulevards had been. RAC is located within the central historic pentagon of Brussels, between Pachecolaan, de Congrescolon, the Botanique/Kruidtuin and the Koningslaan. In a previous incarnation the site was the first consciously designed connection of the (lowerclass) lower part of the city and the aristocratic upper part. The Chysenaarsmarkt below in combination with the stairs were designed Clyseanaar, the architect of the Galleries St. Hubert. The project including the Congress-monument was a first step in erasing the squalid Bas-Fonds fabric below.

The RAC is a modernist solution to bureaucracy in the city: it offers the state employee two levels of parking in the deck, a garden designed by public works landscape architect René Pechère (also responsible for the Kunstberg garden) and an esplanade on top, with access to a large restaurant and some commercial programme, and loads of office space on a central site located between three main roads. In the garden there are fountains, benches and a playground and the esplanade offers a giant empty space with views across the lower city, accessible twenty-four hours. The idea to concentrate the national administration dates back to 1937, but construction was started only in 1958, the year of the expo, as the last in a series of projects covering up the wound of the „jonction-nord”.10 Construction on the total project lasted 25 instead of the planned 4 years. (The tower opens only in 1984.) These modern-day „uffizi”, were to accommodate 14000 civil servants (instead of the 700 households expropriated). The number of bureaucrats eventually housed would stall at 5500 with another 3000 in the tower. This place is a monument to Belgium’s fate: it is empty, not because it is bad architecture but because the „national” state it was built for doesn’t exist anymore as such. And the regional bureaucrats preferred other less „burdened” offices.

The RAC is the site of a contested sale-lease-back operation back in 2002, when an outgoing government closed its balances by a last-minute sale of public property just before the elections. The tower was sold the breevast NV in 2002, the rest in 2003. Half of the tower is now Dexia en Immobel/C.I.B. (Compagnie immobilière de Belgique). It was retrofitted recently by architect Jaspers. Procedures have left the rest of site empty since the last federal bureaucrats left the premises in 2005. I do not know what is happening, maybe somebody does, what is important however is to understand that it is an extraordinary place: modernist heritage, panorama and potential accessibility. Before the in-between was an in-between of „institutions”: it now has to become the same in-between for other things, maybe other institutions.

Complex procedures surround the development because of the private ownership combined with the designation by the capital region as being of „regional importance”. Action groups traditionally resisting the „Bruxelisation” or destruction of the city by large-scale office-building projects, have in the case of the RAC shown on interest in preserving the reality of the site with the garden and the particular modernist architecture, in an attempt to counter yet another retrofit or demolish-rebuild operation.11 It means that after the initial destruction these kind of projects have meant to the urban fabric of in this case the Bas-Fonds, a certain acceptance and even appreciation of these bulky guests has installed itself in the collective memory of the metropolitan populace.

Two anecdotes and a conclusion

Not long after he took office in 1959, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller received a visit from Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. He was ashamed for the squalor of the area immediately adjacent to the capitol building of Richardson. Deciding Albany was not fit to receive dignitaries, he managed to have new headquarters for the state
government built. The Empire State Plaza, ten buildings in total grouped on a superstructure deck opened in 1969, during his third out of four terms. In the process 7000 people were displaced, and upstate Albany got a taste for emerald city and a vast new public space with a library, concert hall, museum and art collection, in addition to the office space for the state administration.

Another politician, much later and this time in Brussels also needed to receive foreign dignitaries once in a while. The city mayor Francois Xavier De Donnea decided to demolish or top-off all high-rise building in the centre of Brussels after a visit of the Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to the Town Hall on the Grand Place. From the balcony the mayor was shocked and embarrassed by the contrast between the historic Grand Place and the „ugliness“ of the high-rise buildings behind. As a consequence twenty towers in the centre found themselves soon on a blacklist.

Some policy constructs other policy demolishes or mutilates, always with good intentions, with beauty in mind. But the corporation is central to the idea of city that icon-buildings are too irrelevant to accommodate them. Background-buildings: well-designed and highly accessible bulk in different strategic locations better serve and better value the fact that the city is corporation.