Architecture Quality as a Common Concern

European Conference on Architectural Policies

23–26 April 2024
Brussels

Foreword

Architecture Unit &
Team Flemish Government Architect

"How do public-sector project leaders interact with the players involved, particularly private developers, designers, and citizens? How can the notion of quality be central to these interactions?" These were the ambitious questions that the Architecture Unit of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and the Flemish Government Architect wanted to address by jointly organising a European Conference on Architectural Policies (ECAP). The event, held from 23 to 26 April 2024, as part of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, continued a 20-year-old tradition of sharing, at the international level, key concerns regarding the quality of our built and non-built environment, and its continuing evolution.

Architectural policies have evolved considerably at both European and national levels over the past twenty years. As climate transition enters the political agenda, declarations and initiatives stress the importance of approaching this transition from a cultural rather than a technical-economic perspective, founded on the development of a shared, high-quality "Baukultur". This collective approach was the focus of the conference, which aimed to identify the levers for the successful "co-construction of public action" in terms of the ability to mobilise the various actors involved in an architectural project.

The challenge is clearly pressing. While many public authorities are being asked to rethink their practices, they remain at a loss when it comes to finding the right way to implement this renewed approach with the various players in construction and the end beneficiaries. In this regard, events like ECAP represent a wonderful opportunity to exchange opinions and share expertise. Contrary to traditional arrangements, the Brussels 2024 event did not only take the form of plenary sessions but also involved a series of roundtables organised in small groups. Taking specific case studies as a starting point, participants were invited to actively contribute to the discussions. Each group brought together different sociocultural backgrounds, professional expertise, interests, and concerns. Two teams with radically different profiles were responsible for steering the workshops. CityTools, which specialises in supporting public project owners, brought its practical experience to the table, while the research group Architecture Culture and the Contemporary (ACC) of Ghent University, contributed its academic expertise. CityTools and ACC prepared and held a series of fruitful discussions, summarised in this publication. Rather than an exhaustive account, the purpose here is to compile some testimonies from the event: to keep a record of the reflective interlude that the ECAP offered amid the intense flow of our practices.

Together, the Flemish Government Architect and the Architecture Unit of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation are very proud to have been able to achieve this together. So, beyond an international exchange, the ECAP allowed collaboration among our different entities, highlighting their uniqueness and, more importantly, what they share: ensuring that architectural quality is a common concern.


ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY
AS A COMMON CONCERN
European conference on
architectural policies
CityTools
A.C.C.
Architecture
Culture & the
Contemporary

ECAP 2024: Key Figures

4
Days of conferences

2
Plenary sessions

27
European states represented

17
Projects visited

18
Working groups

36
Hours of discussions

1
Meeting of the *New European Bauhaus National Contact Points*

130
Participants including:

65
International

65
National

75
Public sector participants

55
Private market and non-profit sector participants

3
Parallel workshop sessions

1
Meeting of the *European Directors on Architectural Policies*

Opening Speech

Thomas Moor,
Director of the Architecture Unit

Erik Wieërs,
Flemish Government Architect

We are delighted to welcome you to this European Conference on Architectural Policies, organized as part of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. As with the last session held in Belgium in 2010, this one is co-organized by the Flemish Government Architect Team and the Architecture Unit of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

This event is of particular importance to us, as Belgium, at the heart of Europe, is one of the founding members of this informal network of experts in the field of architectural policies in Europe, initiated in 1997 in Rotterdam under the Dutch Presidency and formalized since 2000. Proof of its longevity and interest for our respective countries, the ECAP still includes today the three pillars it brought together at the time of its creation: representatives of ministries in charge of architecture, cultural institutions promoting and disseminating architecture, and professional organizations of architects in the broadest sense of the term.

Over the past 25 years, the situation on the European architectural policy front has improved considerably, and the ECAP network has made a significant contribution to this: from the adoption of the European Union 'Council Resolution of 12 February 2001 on Architectural Quality in Urban and Rural Environments', to the Council's Conclusions of 20 November 2008 on Architecture and 'Culture's Contribution to Sustainable Development', to the recent 'Conclusions on Culture and Quality Architecture and the Built Environment as Key Elements of the New European Bauhaus Initiative' of 30 November 2021.

These latest conclusions, which follow on from the Open Method of Coordination 2020–2021 (Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022), are of particular interest in the context of the debates we'll be holding over the next few days. Through this text, the Council of the EU invites member states to 'create favourable frameworks for high-quality architecture to underpin public procurement rules, regulatory simplification and innovative procedures that foster a high-quality-based approach over a solely cost-based one by following the best practices for conducting public architecture, landscape architecture and spatial planning competitions. In this text, the "Belgian model" of Government or City architects is indirectly recognized as a relevant tool for meeting these qualitative objectives. The Council of the EU invites member states 'to set up and support, at the appropriate governance levels, advisory expert groups composed of architects and other relevant professionals, such as the State and City Architect Teams, as well as quality-driven procedures to ensure or strengthen the inclusion of required professional competences and skills in decision-making processes in order to achieve high-quality outcomes'.

We are delighted by the convergence of ECAP's dynamics with the Swiss initiative of the Davos Declaration for Building Culture 2018, of which Belgium is one of the signatories (followed by the Davos Alliance in 2023), as well as the European Commission's initiative with the New European Bauhaus, which share the same stakes.

The Davos Declaration and the thematization of *Baukultur* by the New European Bauhaus also point to an important shift. They point to the recognition, in a European context, of the fact that architecture can not only provide qualitative aesthetic and technical added value to a given environment but can have a broad social

and cultural impact. Qualitative interventions in built and unbuilt space can provide a better living environment and promote the well-being of a community. Therefore, architectural quality should no longer be defined merely among specialists. The creation of a *Baukultur* requires a broader social approach. The obvious question is, then, what the role of all the different parties involved in quality improvement can be.

Architecture Quality as a Common Concern

A Framework for the Roundtables

Maarten Van Den Driessche & Maarten Liefooghe[1]

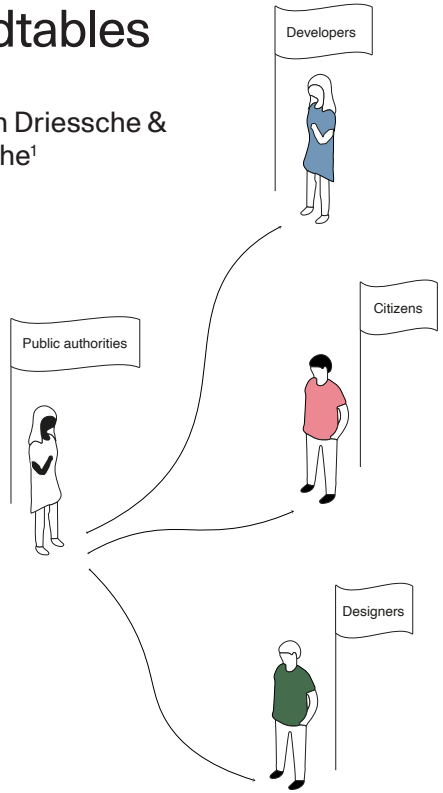

fig.1 The 3 actors of a project interacting with public authorities, 2024, CityTools

After several successful efforts to survey architectural policies and policy tools in the participating countries, the aim of the current ECAP edition is to explore concrete examples where architectural quality was intentionally envisioned. Rather than offering an overview of a myriad of policy initiatives, we are focusing on a limited set of case studies that is discussed during the roundtable sessions. We are examining, case by case, how the policy pursuit of a high-quality environment can lead to tangible outcomes, and how these projects, in turn, can inform policy.

Here, architectural quality is understood as the result of a collaborative search. The focus is not exclusively on the procedures and tools that can be mobilised to implement policies. Architectural quality, we believe, is the outcome of a layered process of negotiation and knowledge exchange between the various parties involved in spatial projects. Timelines can serve as tools to reconstruct such processes. The roundtables focus on three types of interactions, with a set of actors gathered according to the project: private parties (developers), citizens, and professionals (designers) in architecture, interacting with (other) public authorities. We also aim to explore how spatial quality emerges through these instances of interactions.

In this context, *architecture policy* takes on a somewhat narrower meaning, explicitly centring on projects. There is a risk that this focus on operationality could overshadow other dimensions of architectural policy, such as the integration of architecture within the broader cultural field, the promotion of exemplary architectural practice through awards, exhibitions, and public debates; as well as the understanding and impact of significant shifts in the profession, building culture, architectural training, and higher education. Nevertheless, by deepening our understanding of day-to-day practices, we hope to strengthen the recurring call for a High-Quality Baukultur.

This introduction outlines the motives behind the conference's title, *Architectural Quality as a Common Concern*, while clarifying the key decisions that have shaped the symposium's structure. The text also highlights some assumptions and limitations inherent in the choices made.

DEFINING ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY? NEGOTIATING A MULTIPLICITY OF PUBLIC INTERESTS

Instead of centring the debate around a semantic discussion of *Architectural Quality*, we have explicitly chosen to focus the conference on architectural policies, using practical examples to explore how a high-quality built environment can be achieved. By doing so, we aim to make the debate more tangible, examine ongoing policy initiatives, and raise new questions.

'ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY': A BROAD TERM CONNECTING DIVERGENT POLICY FRAMEWORKS

In the most recent publication *Architecture Policies in Europe* by João Bento, architectural policy was tentatively defined as: 'a public policy promoting the quality of architecture and the built environment, which includes the design of buildings, public squares, infrastructure, and all the elements that make up the built environment. Given its broad scope across various policy areas that impact the design quality of the built environment – such as building regulations, urban planning, the environment, cultural heritage, and public works, among others.'[2]

In recent publications and policy statements, the growing influence of terms like *architectural quality* and *high-quality Baukultur* is evident. Examples include the *New European Bauhaus* initiative launched in 2020 by the President of the European Commission, and the *Davos Declaration* in 2018. Many of these statements have been prepared here, among other places, within the framework of ECAP or have been discussed here.[3]

In his study, João Bento highlights the richness of the European institutional landscape of architecture policy. He outlines the diversity of initiatives and tools available for pursuing architectural policy, emphasising the strategic importance of the broad concept of "architectural quality". At the same time, the study also examines the different governmental traditions and circumstances that have shaped policy across Europe. The author points out the varying political speeds with which this pan-European narrative is implemented in EU member states.[4]

By approaching the quality of the living environment holistically, the term *architectural quality* can unite cross-disciplinary expertise, cut across different policy domains, and bring the demand for a qualitative living environment to the agenda at multiple policy levels.

At the ECAP meeting in Brussels, we aim to examine one specific aspect in more detail: the co-creation of public action. We explore how the pursuit of spatial quality can become a shared concern, bringing together stakeholders and experts from various policy backgrounds and fields of expertise.

ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The great advantage of the term *architectural quality* is its inherent flexibility – everyone has their own interpretation of what it means. This makes it easy to agree that we want to achieve a high-quality built environment. We undoubtedly should prioritise architectural quality and design excellence. However, there is also a risk of oversimplification due to the umbrella term's somewhat monolithic and consensual nature. To what exactly does *architectural quality* refer? Because of its abstract nature, the term lacks concrete definitions, legitimacy, and argumentative force.

Architectural quality encompasses a broad range of public interests, ambitions, activities, and meanings, which in turn lead to a variety of possible outcomes.[5] It spans an extensive field in which numerous disciplines and policy sectors are engaged: art and culture, spatial planning and urban design, material and immaterial heritage, health and welfare, education, housing, public works, and more – all of which have their own concerns, instruments, tools, topical issues, and knowledge traditions. It is an area where standards and regulations have been established, and in which both private and public actors play a role. It is also an area where countless interests converge, and where funding and financial considerations are involved.

The term *architectural quality* invites multiple interpretations. At the same time, this common denominator often conceals the inherent tensions that arise when making significant changes to our built and lived environments. The abstract nature of *architectural quality* covers a layered sociopolitical landscape, where temporary agreements are reached between various concerns within the

fig. 2 *Agency, Assembly (Going Public), about Thing 001359 (Chico Mendez Mural Garden)*, Atelier Bouwmeester, Brussels, 2012 © Filip Dujardin

confines of specific projects. As a result, the discussion often shifts to the "how": how architectural quality can be envisioned, and how high-quality environments can be achieved.

QUALITY: A MATTER OF CONCERN – WHAT? HOW? FOR (AND BY) WHOM?

The "what" and "how" of architectural quality, but – most importantly – the "for (and by) whom," cannot be separated from each other, as concrete projects demonstrate. In both built and unbuilt spaces, various claims must be weighed against one another continuously.[6] For instance, the quality criteria set out in a competition brief for a new visitors' centre in an ecologically sensitive habitat will differ significantly from those applied to deprived urban neighbourhoods, where the challenge is to balance a carbon-free energy transition with the realities of energy poverty and social equity.

Concrete projects clearly show that these dimensions are interconnected. Different interests and concerns come into play when shaping both built and unbuilt environments, and they must be carefully negotiated. For example, the quality criteria for a public-private partnership in an ecologically fragile area will inevitably differ from those that apply in urban areas facing socio-economic challenges.

The image in fig. 2 shows a work by Kobe Matthys and his artistic practice, *Agency*, presented at the BWMSTR atelier in Brussels.[7] The piece *Thing 001359 (Chico Mendez Mural Garden)* examines a legal case involving a communal garden in Lower East Manhattan. The garden, created in memory of Chico Mendes, an activist for the Amazon rainforest, became the focal point of a dispute over whether an illegally zoned community garden in a densely urbanized area could be protected from real-estate development.

As presented in the Flemish Government Architects' representational office and public vitrine – where project meetings and competition juries also take place – *Thing 001359* serves as a reminder of the diverse concerns that arise in spatial projects. It also highlights the role of institutional support structures that can either include or exclude stakeholders and concerns.

In specific sites and projects, a multiplicity of public interests, actors, and policy settings come into play. Achieving a high-quality built environment can be seen as the result of a complex, layered negotiation between these diverse interests.

TOWARD COMMON CONCERNS: INTERACTIONS SHAPED THROUGH SPATIAL PROJECTS

Rather than mapping architectural policies across Europe – where political consensus on policy goals may coexist with significant differences – we shift the focus to decentralised and inherently contingent processes of negotiation and decision-making, driven by specific projects.[8] The 2024 ECAP conference in Brussels explores how policy ambitions for high-quality living environments are implemented, shaped, or pursued within the context of individual projects.

A spatial project serves as both a framework and a space for decision-making, allowing diverse, sometimes conflicting, boundary conditions to be confronted. It provides the room for multiple ambitions regarding the built environment to converge and interact. Our approach to architectural policy centres on the interactions surrounding specific spatial projects. In project development, how can public authorities, civil servants, and policymakers engage with diverse actors such as private developers, designers, and – most importantly – citizens? What roles do these actors play? When do they engage, and through what mechanisms? Above all, how can we ensure that project quality remains central to these interactions?

THE SPATIAL PROJECT AND ITS KEY DIMENSIONS

A high-quality built environment can be understood as the result of a series of negotiations that integrate various ambitions and shared interests among the project participants. The term "project" is central in architectural discourse but has an inherently ambivalent character. Beyond the traditional architectural project, the term "spatial project" can also encompass urban and landscape design, regional plans, artistic or participatory projects, building processes, innovations in the building process, and other related schemes. The concept of "project" holds three broader meanings: the development of a vision, the creation of a plan to achieve the goal, and, finally, the applied design intention that integrates a multiplicity of concerns. In our project case studies, we can recognise these dimensions through projective formulations, timelines, tools, and various types of design documents and built works.

Firstly, the notion of a project represents a desired image, an outline, and a horizon of possibilities. This first meaning refers to the inspiring power of an image that appeals to our imagination – such as the yet-to-be realised ambition of achieving a fossil-free region by 2050, for example.

Secondly, the project refers to a procedural logic: a plan or a methodological approach. To

achieve qualitative results, appropriate tools and procedures are needed. The time required, the working strategy, and financial resources must be defined in advance to ensure the project's success. When the procedures are followed carefully, the intended result can be anticipated. This second meaning refers to the methodologies and trajectories implemented to achieve specific outcomes. In other words, the realisation of the project is embedded in the procedure. While the first and second dimensions of the "project" are clearly at odds, the inherent tension between a sense of possibility and a sense of reality drives every project.

Ultimately, the term "project" also refers to a practice articulated through a design intention: the project's aspiration to achieve a convincing unity within the assumed constraints. The mission evokes the expectation of integrating multiple constraints, affordances, and other boundary conditions encountered during the process. Skilled design work aims to produce a coherent outcome, given the means and circumstances, while articulating cultural production beyond mere problem-solving.

ASSEMBLING STAKEHOLDERS AND EXPERTISE AROUND PROJECTS

Every architectural project involves encounters between architects, clients, public authorities, experts, financiers, builders, inhabitants, citizens, and others. In each situation, the stakeholders raise quality concerns related to their involvement and address the specifics of a site, a programme, and so on. Architectural quality can, therefore, be understood as multiple concerns to be addressed, articulated, and integrated in light of specific projects. Numerous examples illustrate the need

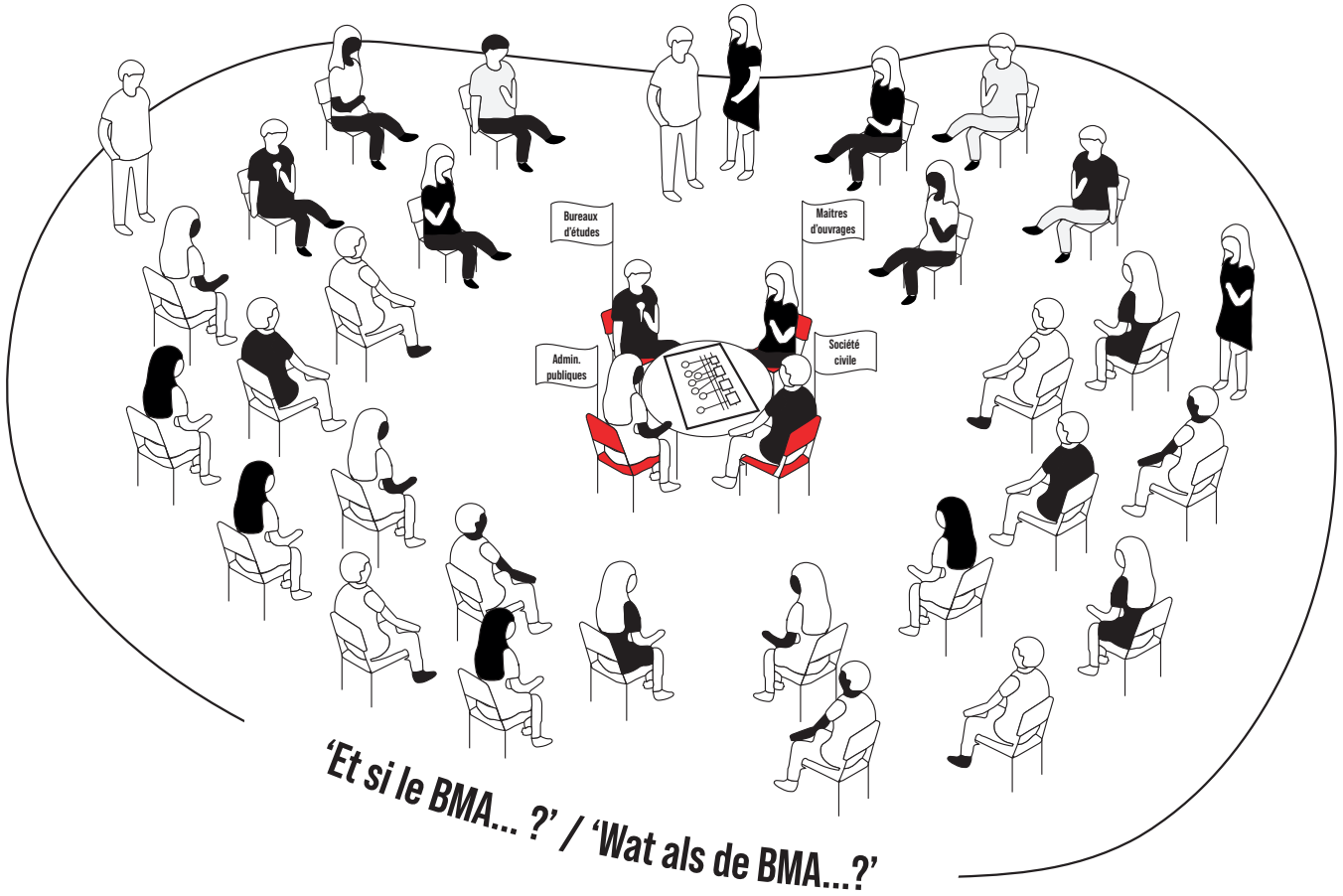

fig. 3 Visitation Brussels bouwmeester maître architecte (BMA) © City Tools /AWB Architectural Workroom Brussels

for active positioning on quality concerns: access to good-quality housing, the protection of meaningful places within a community, the negotiation between private and public interests in urban development projects, the assessment and re-programming of inherited building stock, the refurbishment of valuable heritage sites, the reconversion of polluted industrial sites and landscapes, and the development and integration of climate adaptation projects at a regional scale... to name just a few of the trajectories that are explored during the roundtable sessions. Active positioning on quality concerns refers to the proactive stance that stakeholders can take to ensure the project meets the highest standards of quality and addresses the concerns of all parties involved.

These urgent questions may legitimise the need for a project and are often reflected in the formulations of ambitions and conditions within project briefs. They will also be brought to bear on projects related to quality enhancement and evaluation processes. The investigation of concrete cases not only enables the study of the roles of different stakeholders and their interactions but also provides insight into the necessary expertise brought together for the task. The experts consulted, as well as the rules and tools applied, reveal the supporting frameworks, disciplinary knowledge, and active socio-political networks mobilised in light of the "public interests" at play.[9]

The line-up of stakeholders, consultation processes, leadership, interdependencies, and power relationships vary with each intervention in the built environment. However, design remains a common and constant means of navigating these complexities.

BEYOND (THE SINGULARITY OF) THE PROJECT

Architectural, urban, or spatial planning projects share one fundamental characteristic: design is the means through which adaptations to the built environment are (re)negotiated. Each project is, a priori, situated in both time and space. The projects discussed in the roundtable sessions are all embedded in specific policy contexts. They are always part of a local geographical reality – comprising the existing built fabric, climatic conditions, and various political and societal factors. As a result, the challenges and expectations that apply to one specific case may not be relevant in other places or circumstances.

These concrete projects are ultimately realised within a specified timeframe, often with a clear starting point and, sometimes, an endpoint. The lessons we can learn from them are therefore never unequivocally generalised. By considering projects in isolation, there is a risk that we may overlook the importance of the policy and institutional contexts; we would also miss the initiatives through which these concrete projects took shape. Instead, we want these policy contexts to be considered and made tangible through the projects discussed in the roundtable sessions.

The case studies offer an opportunity to examine the peculiarities of each project, while also enabling us to learn from them as examples. Through concise project reconstructions, we can better understand the concerns that were raised when the project was initiated, or which emerged later, and how the intended ambitions were monitored throughout the course of the project. Moreover, we can assess the final result and determine which specific circumstances influenced its outcome – whether for better or worse.

Naturally, the pursuit of a high-quality building culture is not solely dependent on individual projects. To a significant extent, building culture also takes shape outside the context of specific projects: in publications, exhibitions, city festivals, building practices, participatory processes, and the everyday use of the built and lived environment. However, this ECAP conference's approach is heavily influenced by a design governance perspective on architectural quality. We must therefore be mindful that architecture and building culture policies should include, but also go beyond, policies for governing architectural projects effectively.

Projects can relate to policy in several ways. Spatial projects are often seen as the materialisation of policy. However, specific experiments, pilot schemes, and design research projects can also act as catalysts that help to (re)shape policy. Ultimately, the project environment can serve as a space where professional positions and power dynamics can be partially dissolved, creating opportunities for new connections. In this sense, the project environment can function as a laboratory for developing new practices.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT CREATING CIRCUMSTANCES FOR CO-CREATION

The pan-European ECAP network brings together policymakers, civil servants, academics, experts, cultural actors, and design professionals. The conference provides a dynamic international platform to debate the interplay between these diverse stakeholders involved in projects, enabling a deeper understanding of the specific circumstances and policy contexts in which these projects were shaped.

Our aim is to re-assess the notion of the "project" by collectively reimagining the institutional

support necessary for its realisation. What kinds of institutions and administrative practices can foster productive conditions for co-creating projects and articulating quality as a shared goal today?

THE ARCHITECT'S CHANGING ROLE: TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE PROFESSION

The case studies reveal that the field of architecture is undergoing rapid transformation.[10] Contrary to the traditional image of the architect as a solitary figure directing a project, architectural firms are increasingly organising themselves as collaborative entities. They are developing projects in dialogue with a wider range of stakeholders throughout the design process.

The case studies demonstrate that architects now function as brokers within a complex web of societal forces, in addition to serving as project leaders within public administrations or private development firms. New design tools, communication platforms, and models for assessing impacts and performance are profoundly influencing architects' work. The building industry is also being shaped by resource scarcity, the rise of the circular economy, and other evolving factors. Urban and architectural projects are increasingly framed as comprehensive business cases, encompassing design, finance, construction, marketing, and long-term maintenance.

What happens when contractors surpass independent architects in influence, and practical and economic imperatives dominate the design process? What design expertise is required when assessing existing buildings without the immediate intention to construct new ones? How do architects contribute to participatory projects, where inhabitants themselves plan, organise, and develop their living environment?

These shifts not only reshape the architect's role but also challenge traditional understandings of the profession and discipline. Such changes should be reflected in architectural policies.[11]

fig. 4 *Luxembourg in Transition*, Exposition, luca – Luxembourg Centre for Architecture, 2023 © Pancake! Photographie

TRANSFORMATION IN POLICYMAKING AND ITS IMPACT ON GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Public authorities are increasingly adopting alternative positions and roles in the course of architectural projects. As projects become more co-productive and collaborative, involving complex interactions between public and private actors – such as public authorities, private developers, future inhabitants, and engaged citizens – there is a growing need to reflect on the evolving nature of public clientship.

In urban design governance, *design governance* is defined as "the processes involved in shaping and managing the built environment".[12] Historically, central administrations have created systems and rules to safeguard "public interests", primarily through strict regulatory frameworks like building standards. However, policymaking is now evolving. Centralised technical services are being phased out in favour of softer governance approaches, including self-organisation, empowerment, and project-led direction.

Many of the case studies discussed in the roundtable sessions were initiated through study assignments, public tenders, or project definitions by public bodies and civil servants. These preparatory efforts, though essential, often remain behind the scenes and are seldom acknowledged in public discourse on architecture. The administrative work

– the “ghost-writing” of a project – often stays invisible, even though it is critical in shaping the project. Examining these concrete cases allows us not only to assess the project outcomes and process flows but also to explore the distribution and articulation of public concerns and expertise. This in turn raises important questions about the relationship between these practices and policymaking.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS SUPPORTING ECOLOGIES OF PRACTICE

In this context, the broader architectural field – including education, culture, and public administration – must reassess its foundational principles.[13] Focusing solely on individual projects is too narrow to fully understand architectural policies.

A thriving architectural environment depends on a well-connected network of institutions and activities. This includes various state and municipal chief architects, public utility companies, housing cooperatives, educational and research institutions, think tanks, living labs, citizens’ movements, architecture periodicals, web platforms, architecture centres, and other cultural platforms. On one hand, there are closed “project environments” where future assignments are developed; on the other, public forums and educational settings are emerging, where new concepts are articulated, debated, and disseminated.

The conference aims to provide a space for exchanging ideas, experiences, and methodologies related to exciting projects, while also exploring the often-invisible supporting institutional practices and ecologies. Without robust institutional networks, responding to major societal challenges becomes significantly more difficult.

Creating conducive conditions for co-creation requires rethinking the institutions, practices, and personnel that support spatial projects and their intended outcomes. In a time when public institutions face increasing pressures, it is crucial to remain critical of them, defend their importance, and recognise their essential role. At the conference, we advocate for rich institutional settings that enable architects and policymakers to develop and sustain high-quality projects.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

What governmental strategies can encourage developers to act as publicly accountable actors?

Which institutional settings empower citizens to intervene in projects?

What type of external support equips local governments to engage in “soft governance” with certainty, knowledge, and capacity?

How should we organise and administer projects to ensure they come to fruition?

Ultimately, which institutional platforms are essential for creating and exchanging knowledge to foster a high-quality building culture?

1 The authors thank the organizing committee of the conference for their contribution in writing this introductory text.

2 See: João Bento (2024) *Architecture Policies in Europe. A panorama of the actors, policies and tools promoting high-quality Architecture and Baukultur as the new political ethos in Europe*. ACE, Architects' Council of Europe.

3 See for instance: EFAP (2005) *European Survey*. European Forum for Architectural Policies. EFAP (2013) *Conclusions on architecture: Taking Stock 2013. Preliminary Report on the implementation of the Council Conclusions on Architecture: Culture's Contribution to Sustainable Development*. European Forum for Architectural Policies. Carmona, M., Bento, J., & Gabrieli, T. (2023) *Urban design governance. Soft powers and the European experience*. UCL Press. João Bento (2024) *Architecture Policies in Europe. A panorama of the actors, policies and tools promoting high-quality Architecture and Baukultur as the new political ethos in Europe*. ACE, Architect's Council of Europe.

4 Besides the aforementioned publications we want to point also to the older survey by: Filip ten Cate, Nico Nelissen (2009) *Mooi Europa. Ruimtelijke Kwaliteitszorg in Europa*. Nijmegen: SUN.

5 Matthew Carmona lists a wide range of 'public interests' which vary both in their scope and relative prioritization from place to place, depending on local circumstances. He distinguishes nine primary motivations: preventive measures related to health and welfare, functional considerations, economic motivations, heritage protection, societal goals, environmental imperatives, aesthetic pursuits, and finally identitarian profiling. See: Carmona, M., Bento, J., & Gabrieli, T. (2023) *Urban design governance. Soft powers and the European experience*. London: UCL Press.

6 See Chantal Mouffe's definition of Agonistics and the Democratic paradox. Chantal Mouffe (2013) *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically*. London: Verso. See also: Markus Miessen (2024) (ed.) *Agonistic Assemblies. On the Spatial Politics of Horizontality*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

7 See: (2011) *Cahier #3 Going Public*. Brussels: Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, p. 21 ff. Available online via https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/mediatheek/cahier-3-openbaarheid (Dutch and English).

8 Our interpretation of the project is therefore similar to that of Eve Chiappello and Luc Boltanski: "The notion of 'project', as we understand it here, can therefore be understood as formed by compromises between requirements that appear contradictory at first sight: those arising from the representation of the network, and those inherent in the design of a form that enables judgments to be made and justified orders to be generated. On the seamless fabric of the network, the projects draw a multitude of mini-computing spaces, within which orders can be generated and justified?" personal translation from Ève Chiapello, Luc Boltanski (1999) *Le nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*. Paris: Editions Minuit. p. 160 « La notion de "projet", au sens où nous l'entendons ici, peut donc être comprise comme une formation de compromis entre des exigences qui se présentent a priori comme antagonistes: celles découlant de la représentation en réseau et celles inhérentes au dessein de se doter d'une forme permettant de porter des jugements et de générer des ordres justifiés. Sur le tissue sans couture du réseau, les projets dessinent en effet une multitude de mini-espaces de calcul, à l'intérieur desquels des ordres peuvent être engendrés et justifiés. »

9 We may refer to the Davos Quality System and its eight criteria: Governance, Functionality, Environment, Sense of Place, Economy, Diversity, Context, and Beauty. See: Swiss Federal Office of Culture (2021b) 'Davos Baukultur Quality System: eight criteria for a high-quality Baukultur – the whole story'. Eight criteria for a high-quality Baukultur – the whole story (davosdeclaration2018.ch) (last accessed on 9.4.2024).

10 See: Flora Samuel (2018) *Why architects matter. Evidencing and Communicating the Value of Architects*. London: Routledge, pp. 51–68; see also: ACE/CAE (2023) *La profession d'architecte en Europe. Une etude de Secteur*. ACE

11 We refer to the idea of the 'Other Architect' as the CCA-exhibition and corresponding catalogue has put to the fore: Giovanni Borasi (ed.) (2016) *The Other Architect*. Stuttgart: Spector Books.

12 See: Urban Maestro (2021) *New Governance Strategies for Urban Design*. United Nations Human Settlements Program, Brussels bouwmeester maître architecte, UCL - Bartlett School of Planning.

13 See: Maarten Van Den Driessche 'Architecture in Flanders: a quick scan. Three portraits reveal a finely-meshed institutional ecology.' In: Sofie De Caigny (ed.) *Flanders Architectural Review N°14 – When attitudes take Form*. Antwerp: Flanders Architecture Institute, pp. 9–28.


HDMI 2
câble connecté


1. Relations of power:
Identifying those moments where public authorities have a leverage.
• sale of the land
• zoning
• permit (building authorisation)
2. Build a common ground : dialogue
Preparation phase. Set the project on the right track
• Objective Framework vs flexibility
• Tools: research by design, design review, quality chambers
3. Citizens
Include the citizens in the dialogue


Austrian case : Collaborative Housing Cluis 21
ThinkPad


Questions
be
EU
belgium24.eu

Exploring Practices

Discussing Through Case Studies

What follows is an illustration of the method developed by CityTools and the ACC research group to nourish the debates and discussions during the three-day conference.

APPROACHING INTERACTIONS FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Starting with the three stakeholders, several types of interactions were identified as sub-themes, each of which would be the subject of one roundtable. The aim of this division was to look at interactions from different angles and in different contexts, considering the unique relationship dynamics that may be at play. The sub-themes were introduced by a short text, and key questions were formulated to guide the roundtables (fig. 1). For each of these themes, a Belgian and a European case study were selected, documented, and shared with participants. Drawn up based on research carried out by CityTools and ACC, the list of cases below reflects a desire to 'echo' different contexts, different choices – in short, different project cultures.

A TIMELINE AS A COMMON LANGUAGE

To enable this echo between different contexts, a common framework that can be understood by all must be established. It was decided to structure this approach around what is inherent in the notion of a project: time. For each roundtable, a 'timeline' was proposed as a support for the discussions. This timeline is, of course, theoretical. Based on key steps, it aims to create a common language to better identify the crucial moments in a project process when the issue of architectural quality is at stake, and the role that the various

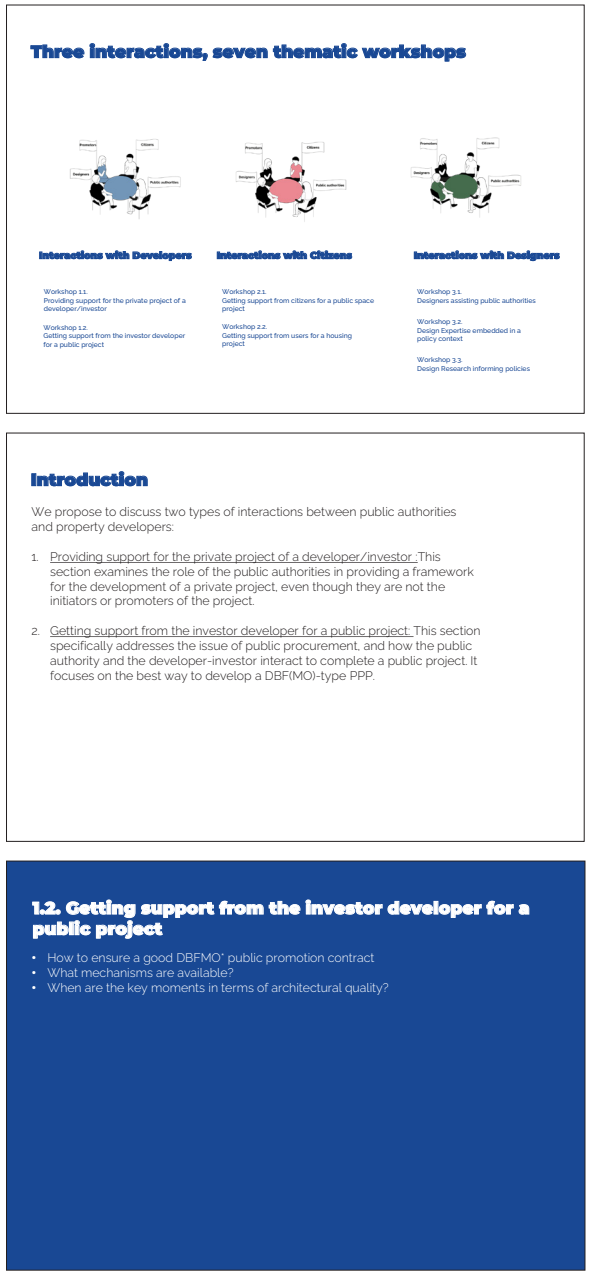

fig. 1 Examples of the Preparatory Documentation for the Roundtables

actors play, or could play. Four phases have been identified:

Preparation: all the stages preceding the launch of a project. This phase covers several key stages, such as drawing up regulatory or strategic plans, purchasing land, carrying out technical studies to gain a better understanding of the site, launching project definition or programming studies to determine requirements, etc.

Procedure: Once the framework has been established and the project idea defined, the second phase consists of selecting the design team that will develop the project. This phase includes drawing up the specifications, analysing the offers and bids, and then awarding the design contract.

Project development: Once the design team has been appointed, the project development phase begins. This includes preparing a preliminary design, applying for planning permission, drawing up specifications for contractors and, finally, supervising the construction work.

Use: Once the project has been delivered, the phase of appropriation by the users follows, with choices relating to day-to-day management and maintenance that can influence the lifespan and evolution of a project that has become a reality.

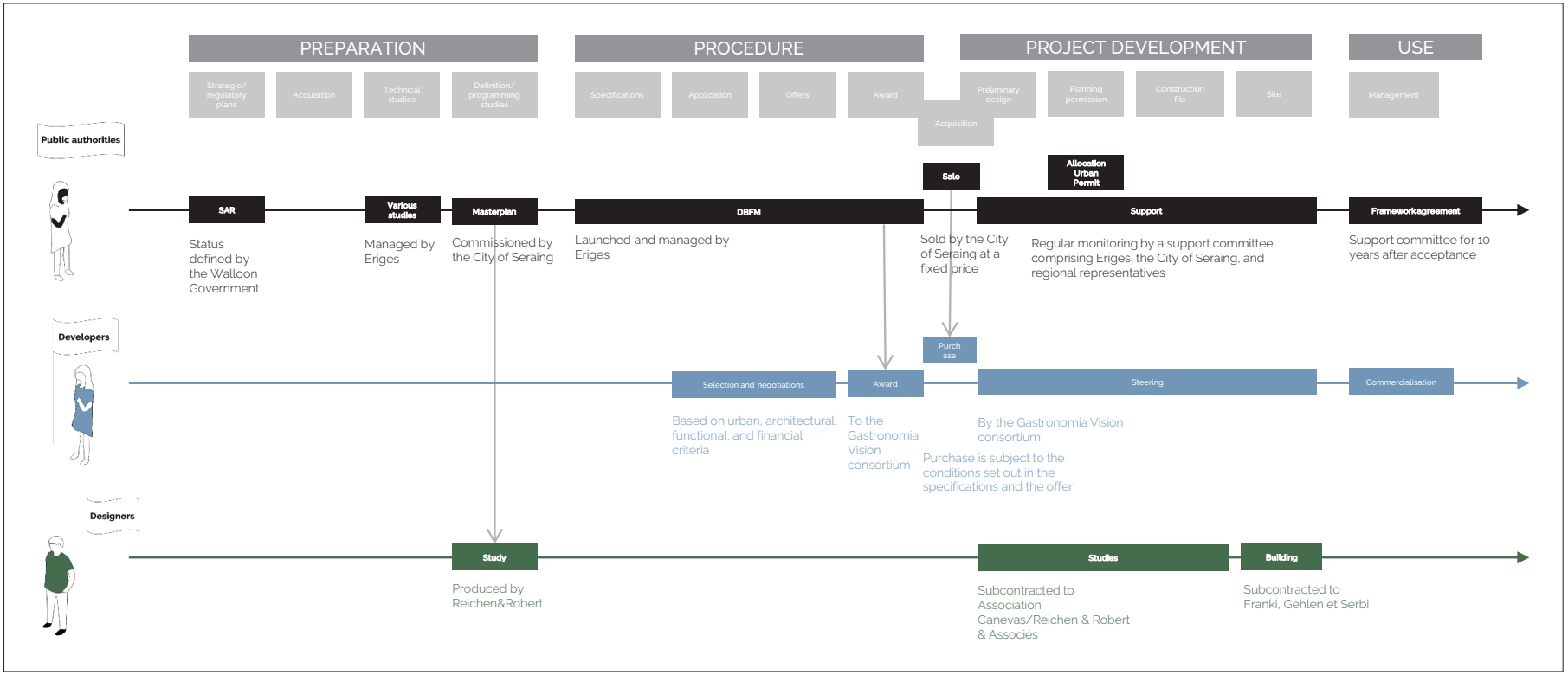

fig. 2 The Timeline of Gastronomia – Belgian Case for Roundtable 1.2 © CityTools

fig.3 Gastronomia Project, Seraing (Belgium) – Belgian Case for Roundtable 1.2 © Gastronomia Vision

fig.4 Participants in a lively exchange

GIVING THE CASE STUDIES A NARRATIVE

For each project, a summary of its history was provided and the key turning points of its process were identified. A glossary was also drawn up to provide a better understanding of the mechanisms and other legal frameworks that were implemented. Documented in this way, the various cases helped raise the questions to be debated at the round-tables. Participants were able to discuss and reflect while remaining connected to the concrete experience of a project.

Belgian case: Gastronomia

- Narrative

In response to the devastating impact of the steel crisis on the town of Seraing and its residents, a comprehensive response on an unprecedented scale at the Belgian level was initiated in Seraing at the dawn of the 2000s. The town adopted an action plan for urban regeneration, to rebuild an attractive post-industrial town and create new jobs. Drawn up in 2006 by Reichen & Robert, the Seraing Valley Masterplan[1] is the main thread linking all the redevelopment and renovation works being carried out on the 800 hectares of heavy industry, shops, offices, and housing in the industrial valley.

The Seraing town centre is undergoing a revival with the completion of the Gastronomia project. Through its independent local authority (Regie Communale Autonome[2]) Eriges, the town is seeking to rehabilitate the heritage of a former industrial hall to transform and develop it into a commercial space primarily dedicated to food.
The site was completely decontaminated with the aid of Walloon funding. Subsequently, the site was recognised as a site to be redeveloped[3] (SAR) by the Walloon Government, opening up the area, which until then had been industrial, to other uses, including shops, offices, and housing. Seraing secured an additional €9.3 million in European ERDF[4] funding for the heritage renovation of the halles.

Eriges decided to enlist the help of a private partner to complete the overall project. An agreement from the Walloon government will allow the private partner to receive the European subsidy directly, enabling it to undertake the appropriate renovation of the former industrial building, in direct link with the final project that will be implemented there.

Belgian case: Gastronomia

- Glossary

DBMF type contract: Design, build, finance, maintain (DBFM) is a project delivery method that allows private sector consortium design, construction, financing, regular maintenance, and rehabilitation of the infrastructure asset over the term of the contract to meet predefined performance specifications.
Régie Communale Autonome (autonomous commune-controlled company): The autonomous commune-controlled company is unilaterally established by the local authority and tasked with managing one or more industrial or commercial activities in the interests of the local authority.
SAR (Site to be redeveloped): Site to be redeveloped: a property or group of properties intended or previously intended to be used for an activity other than housing, the maintenance of which in its present state is contrary to the proper development of the site or constitutes a threat to the urban fabric.
ERDF: European Regional Development Fund
Delegated official: Regional administration official appointed by the Government to carry out various town planning tasks, notably giving opinions on communal permits or granting regional permits.
CSC: specifications

fig.5 The Narrative & Glossary of Gastronomia – Belgian Case for Roundtable 1.2

Case studies

INTERACTIONS WITH DEVELOPERS

Roundtable 1.1
Providing Support for the Private Project of a Developer/Investor

Belgian Case: Tour & Taxis
- Conversion of a former railway site into an inspirational new sustainable district by a private developer with the guidance of the Brussels-Capital Region Government Architect

→ Tour & Taxis, Brussels – Belgium

Czech Case: Gallery Vaňkovka
- Construction of a shopping mall in collaboration between public sector and developer to preserve portions of the original industrial structure

→ South of the main railway station in Brno – Czech Republic

Roundtable 1.2
Getting Support from the Investor Developer for a Public Project

Belgian Case: Gastronomia
- Renovation of the industrial estate and construction of a building complex commissioned by the city to be designed, built, financed and maintained by a private developer

→ Seraing – Belgium

Lithuanian Case: Tower Square Bokšto skveras
- Conversion of the derelict complex of a hospital to a multifunctional site with a public square designed, built, financed and maintained by a private developer

→ Old Town, Vilnius – Lithuania

INTERACTIONS WITH CITIZENS

Roundtable 2.1
Getting Support from Citizens for a Public Space

Belgian Case: Saint-Hubert
- Redevelopment of public spaces in the town city centre with citizen consultation

→ Saint-Hubert – Belgium

Czech Case: Litomysl – Embankment and Park
- Redevelopment and reconnection of the river waterfront to the city following a citizen initiative

→ Litomysl – Czech Republic

Roundtable 2.2
Getting support from Users for a Housing Project

Belgian Case: Transvaal
- Construction of a housing building, a communal garden and community facilities on derelict land using a participatory process with the future residents

→ Anderlecht, Brussels – Belgium

Austrian case: Collaborative Housing Gleis 21
- Housing project using the Viennese model of collaborative housing projects that involves the future residents themselves in the developing and planning phases of the project

→ SonnwendviertelOst, Vienna – Austria

INTERACTIONS WITH DESIGNERS

Roundtable 3.1
Designers Assisting Public Authorities

Belgian Case: Urban Development of Torhout
- Preparatory Process raising quality ambitions in the transformation of the city centre

→ Torhout – Belgium

Swedish Case: Visions in the North
- Project to conceptualise visions for sustainable living environments in the Northern provinces of Sweden, involving multidisciplinary creative teams

→ Municipalities of Kiruna, Gällivare, Boden, Luleå, Skellefteå and the city of Umeå – Sweden

Roundtable 3.2
Design Expertise Embedded in a Policy Context

Belgian Case: Ghent City Architect
- Development of a policy vision for Ghent's historic centre, a heritage site under the initiative of the Ghent City Architect's Team, with the in-house expertise of the city's departments and an appointed team of outside experts.

→ Ghent – Belgium

Latvian Case: Riga City Architect's Service
- Neighbourhood Centre Masterplans by the Riga City Architect's Team to draft urban development and design visions, before tendering design projects

→ Riga – Latvia

Roundtable 3.3
Design Research Informing Policies

Belgian Case: The Dry Delta – Labo Ruimte
- Mapping and Design research in the context of long-term climate adaptation project

→ Moervaart Valley, Dender Valley, Kleine Nete Valley – Belgium

Luxembourg Case: Luxembourg in Transition
- An international urban, architecture and landscape consultation, aiming to develop zero-carbon transition scenarios for the Grand Duchy

→ Luxembourg and its cross-border regions – Luxembourg

The Path to Common Concern

Exploring One Case Study in Greater Depth

Maarten Van Den Driessche

During the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the spring of 2024, Brussels hosted the ECAP, centred on the theme of Architectural Quality as a Common Concern. Fourteen architectural and urban projects were showcased and dissected across three parallel roundtable sessions. These discussions delved into the dynamics of collaboration during the project lifecycle, examining the interplay between government departments, funding bodies and (the market of) private developers, between the government, civil society and its citizens and between different designers working for public administrations or independently. A comparative approach was adopted for each roundtable, pairing a Belgian case study with a counterpart from another European country. Detailed reconstructions of project processes served as a foundation for debates among conference participants.

In this text, I would like to present a compelling example: the participatory and design process for the heritage of the Ghent Kuip. The Kuip refers to historic core of Ghent, one of Belgium's major cities. The approach taken demonstrates how the Ghent city architect has worked to foster dialogue among various city departments and stakeholders. The city architect first commissioned a 'city map', detailing the historic centre's wealth of monuments and public buildings in relation to public spaces. Subsequently, the City Department of Urban Archaeology and Heritage Conservation, at the city architect's initiative, launched a design study aiming to craft a cohesive policy vision for the city's heritage assets within the Kuip. Between September 2023 and September 2024, three design firms collaborated on the study. The findings will now serve as an inspirational framework, guiding the involved city departments in shaping Ghent's spatial policies moving forward.

The following text offers a reconstruction of a research, design and participation process, highlighting the various key players involved based on several documents. The development of the plan for the Ghent Kuip emerges as a multi-layered negotiation process that was shaped by interactions among numerous stakeholders, making it possible to identify these dynamics in various forms. The example serves as a basis for reflecting on the interplay between the different actors involved.

This account has three objectives. First, it aims to recall the many lively debates and discussions that took place during the conference, although the text does not serve as a comprehensive summary of those conversations. The Ghent Kuip was a focal point at one of the roundtables, presented as an example of the interactions between public administrations and designers. However, it is important to recognise that this case, like most discussed at the roundtables, also involved other actors.

At the same time, we remain mindful of the uniqueness and precarity of this specific case and the constraints of relying on an overly case-based research approach. While the description underscores the significance of the co-creation process, identifying pivotal moments in quality assurance, key policy levers or procedural shortcomings for learning and achieving a deeper understanding requires more rigorous analysis. We are aware of the unique administrative constellation and the instrumental role of Ghent's city architect in bringing this project to fruition, as the discussions at the symposium also showed. Just as with the other projects discussed, the administrative context in which the Kuip plan was developed is inherently unique. Thus, the exploratory analysis presented here resists easy generalisation. For us as researchers, the comparative transnational perspectives explored during the conference underscored the differences in administrative practices while

revealing a rich diversity of approaches across European governmental traditions, regions, and countries. To effectively derive lessons from these examples and broaden the repertoire of policy initiatives, more extensive research and sustained dialogue are essential. The guiding questions posed at the beginning of each section offer a preliminary framework for pursuing this aim.

Finally, the case of the Ghent Kuip, like other examples discussed at the symposium, highlights the critical role of a fertile institutional ecology in transforming our urban landscapes. The hallmarks of a *high-quality Baukultur* are most evident in the realised projects, the visionary work of architects and urban planners and in the adoption of innovative building and design practices. Yet, the indispensable contributions of policymakers, administrative bodies, educational and research institutions, specialised media, and critics are equally vital components of this cultural fabric. Good practices do not emerge in isolation, nor can they be imposed from above. Instead, they rely on preparatory work often conducted out of the public eye. Architectural innovation flourishes in a nurturing environment – a rich "humus layer" – where ideas can mature and take root. It is, therefore, essential to consider not just the outcomes of high-quality built environments but also the conditions that enable their creation, both now and in the past.

A vibrant culture of dialogue appears to be a prerequisite for fostering support for an evolving *Baukultur*. Institutionally embedded conversations are crucial for improving the quality of our living environments and driving the necessary transitions in broader building practices. These dialogues occur across various levels: locally, within the urban services of cities like Ghent, and transnationally, at gatherings such as the de *European Conference on Architectural Policies*.

I PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN URBAN SPACE AND HISTORICAL PATRIMONY, PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN ARCHITECTURAL POLICY

Like many architectural landscapes, the Ghent Kuip stands as an essential collective space, both physically and mentally. Visitors, central city residents and those living on the outskirts feel a connection to this historic area and rely on it as a gathering place. However, the Kuip is subject to often conflicting demands and concerns. Issues such as road safety, mobility, parking, air quality and noise pollution coexist with the need to preserve cultural heritage and respect the deep emotional ties residents have to their city.

This raises a critical question: how can these diverse concerns be captured and effectively addressed in the creation of urban projects? Indeed, the citizens' and city dwellers' involvement in policy processes prompts further questions: *What role should the participation process play in shaping projects? At what stage is input from citizens and stakeholders most valuable? Considering specific urban projects, how can stakeholders and interested parties be adequately represented within the political decision-making process? How can the emotional attachment people have to a place be harnessed constructively, moving beyond mere sentiment? What strategies can authorities use to capture local sensitivities and insights effectively? How can broader policy ambitions be harmoniously intertwined with local involvement and knowledge?*

Spanning an area of approximately 80 hectares, the Ghent Kuip is a site steeped in history. Once encircled by fortresses and a water belt, it now serves as the city's repository of built heritage. Over the centuries, this central area has been the focus of numerous large-scale urban development

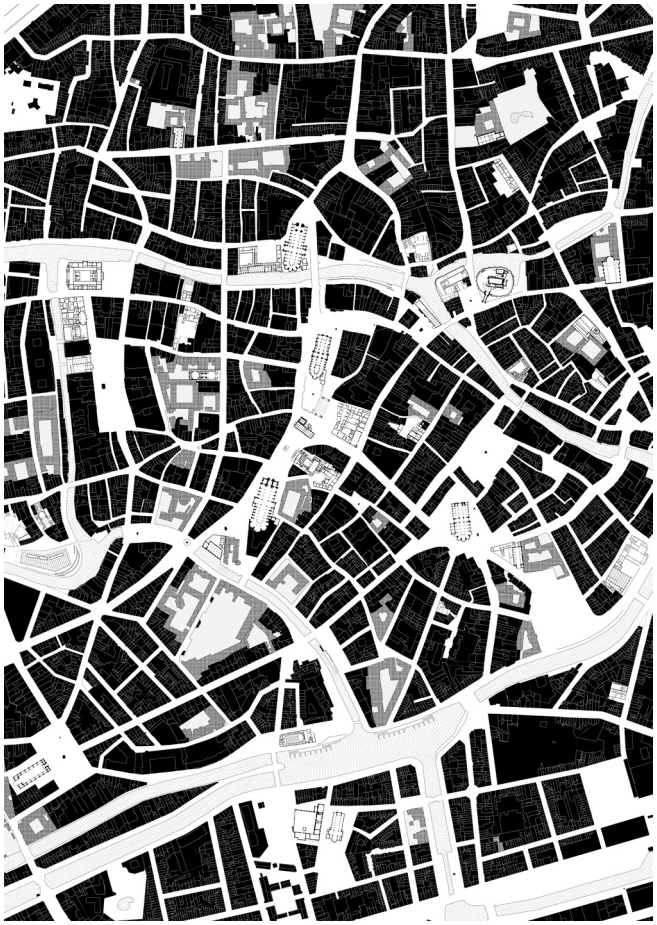

fig. 1 The Ghent Kuip: a monumental urban space. © Stad Gent, cartography Ellen Verbiest

fig. 2 City Hall in construction, Robbrecht en Daem / Marie-José Van Hee architecten © Marc De Blieck

projects, the most recent being the redesign of the central squares and the construction of the City pavilion between 1996 and 2012. The Kuip resonates deeply with many stakeholders and user groups, functioning as a significant meeting point and symbolically charged landmark. It serves as a transport hub for residents and visitors, a cluster of public facilities and institutions, a residential neighbourhood, a shopping district, a tourist magnet, as well as a venue for events and celebrations. These diverse roles often overlap and sometimes conflict.

In the late 20th century, Ghent's city council unveiled innovative mobility plans that sparked spirited public debates. The most contentious aspect was the proposed city centre car park, which polarised opinion into fervent supporters and vocal opponents of a car-free city centre. In response, a competition was launched to redevelop the central area. However, following a wide-reaching public referendum, the winning proposal – including a substantial underground car park – was ultimately rejected. The design team of Robbrecht and Daem, along with Marie José Van Hee, had initially stubbornly proposed an alternative plan without parking. Yet, they were tasked with developing their vision further. The city council eventually embraced a bold decision: to ban traffic from the historic centre and prioritise space for public transport and cycling.

The resulting urban redevelopment project for the central squares created a high-quality environment that balanced diverse interests. Policy choices were thoughtfully informed by the area's rich history and the supporting capacity of its urban space. Architects and planners successfully distilled the *genius loci* into a transformative architectural intervention. The residents of Ghent quickly embraced the redesigned city centre squares and the newly constructed City pavilion.

Focusing on specific places like Ghent Kuip provides a clear framework for discussing architectural quality and renders our emotional connection to the city, public spaces, and built heritage more tangible. Heritage serves as the material record of a city's history, embodying collective memory alongside hopes and aspirations for the future. In many architectural, landscape, and urban projects, residents demonstrate a strong emotional attachment to the conservation and transformation of their surroundings, even when they do not directly own or manage these initiatives. Such sites represent more than physical spaces, they intertwine various sectoral competences and policy domains, including housing, economy, culture, tourism, green spaces management, and mobility. These places also stand as physical manifestations of the numerous organisations and institutions that have shaped the city's history. A focus on the site highlights the need to establish priorities based on its experiential value and liveability. For example, in the Kuip, this has meant decisions to reduce car access and create more space for greenery.

II A REAL ESTATE STRATEGY FOR, AND THE CONTROL OF, REDEVELOPMENT PROJECTS: WEIGHING UP (SOMETIMES CONFLICTING) INTERESTS

Across countless locations in Ghent's Kuip, heritage assets are being restored, expanded, adapted, temporarily repurposed, or given new life. However, authorities often lack the capacity to shoulder the maintenance and management of monuments alone. To secure the necessary investments for preserving historical landmarks, funding sources must be identified, and responsible parties appointed to oversee these projects. Much like heritage restoration, the creation of public spaces, infrastructure works, and landscaping also demands attention and necessary investments. To achieve these goals, authorities frequently establish partnerships with public and private entities to develop projects. Yet, the public sector bears the crucial responsibility of safeguarding the public interest, ensuring spatial quality, and delivering social value. Key decisions about project management, financial arrangements – such as allocating subsidies, making investments and spending maintenance budgets – often precede each specific project. These choices significantly shape the framework within which the projects evolve. However, not all legal structures or agreements are equally suited to (re)development efforts.

The reconstructions of these projects bring not just the final outcomes but also the preliminary processes and policy mechanisms into focus: *How are architectural and urban projects shaped procedurally, legally, and financially? Who finances and directs the project, and how does this influence the quality goals? What motivates the project, and are its interventions necessary, appropriate, and desirable? Do new uses or temporary installations honour the building's character and what impact do they have on the surroundings? For whom are these interventions intended: tourists, private partners, consumers or residents, visitors to the city or neighbourhood dwellers?*

Between 2014 and 2020, architectural competitions were held for several prominent building complexes in Ghent Kuip. These included the Design Museum's new wing and the refurbishment of the 18th-century period rooms at Hotel De Coninck. Another significant project involved the conversion and expansion of the 19th-century Opera House, both made possible with support from the Flemish government. The iconic St Anne's

fig. 3 Great Butchers Hall in scaffolding © City of Ghent, photo: Rosan Steenbrugge

Church was leased to a supermarket chain through a public tender to fund its upkeep, a move met with widespread protests and jeering. Then again, plans for a temporary light sculpture directed at St Nicholas Church faced rejection by licensing authorities.

The conversion of the medieval Great Butchers Hall into a bicycle shed, and a range of spatial interventions at the Castle of the Counts are contrasting initiatives that underscore how management strategies and financial arrangements heavily influence the stakes and outcomes of heritage projects in this historically rich area.

The Great Butcher's Hall is situated on the Groentenmarkt (Vegetable Market) just outside Ghent's central squares project area. After the closure of its meat market in 1883, the 15th-century structure found new purposes as a covered market, post office, and even a car park. Most recently, it housed a provincial promotion centre for regional products, with a minimalist pavilion installed inside as a box-in-box structure, preserving the medieval building's integrity. By 2021, however, the Great Butchers Hall was deemed structurally unsound, declared inoperable and propped up to prevent collapse. The provincial pavilion was removed. The building was left behind with yellow palisades that now scar the cityscape. The city's allocated budgets for building management proved inadequate to carry out urgent repairs to the building. In response, the city's competent alderman proposed a solution to the urgent problem: the Great Butchers Hall was to be converted into a bicycle shed, financed through the Mobiliteitsbedrijf (Mobility Company), an independent city entity. However, this decision sparked public outrage. Media commentary by the Flemish Heritage Minister intensified the debate, prompting city council interpellations and even a Flemish Parliament hearing. This episode underscores the complexities cities like Ghent face in managing heritage sites.

Meanwhile, with financial support from the government agency VISITFLANDERS, a competition was held to design architectural interventions to the Castle of the Counts, the fortress with its keep, once guarding the city against invasions, now drawing tourists on the edge of Ghent's Kuip. A new lift should make the Castle of the Counts fully accessible but also allow a maximum number of visitors to be guided through the historical monument. However, public backlash to a competition image of the winning design, which featured clearly a visible attached lift, delayed the project. Protests led to public consultations and involvement of concerned citizen groups, resulting in design adjustments. Work on the renovation quietly continues today.

Ghent's Kuip is more than the sum of its individual projects. They reveal shortcomings in how the city approaches heritage management. For example, the Castle of the Counts renovation lacked sufficient public engagement, while plans for the Great Butchers Hall were negotiated solely between aldermen without input from city departments or external experts like historians and archaeologists. These examples highlight the necessity of a comprehensive vision for heritage policy that incorporates citizen participation, specialist consultation, and attention to the interrelationship of projects. The term *architectural quality* aims to ensure urban and architectural projects consider not just technical or economic factors but also heritage value, aesthetics, cultural meaning, experiential aspects and social or ecological impacts. Yet debates surrounding the Castle of the Counts and the Great Butchers Hall show how pragmatic considerations, including budget limitations and sector-driven managerial decisions still play a key role in the realisation of many building and urban projects.

III THE CITY ARCHITECT AS BROKER, THE DESIGN PROCESS AS MORATORIUM

At the turn of the century, following the appointment of the first Flemish Government Architect, Belgium saw a revival of the city architect role in numerous central cities, including Ghent. In the 19th century, Adolphe Pauli, Louis Cloquet, and Louis Roelandt shaped the city's architectural legacy in this role, designing public buildings that remain central to Ghent's urban identity and the focus of contemporary research. These civil servants not only delivered key projects for public institutions but also safeguarded the coherence of the cityscape. A century later, in 2017, the city of Ghent reinstated this historic role.

In administrative terms, the Ghent city architect holds a position within the city's management team, enabling the office to engage across various policy areas and leverage expertise from city departments for its projects. Its positive impact and catalytic role are particularly evident in the study of the Ghent Kuip, where the city architect collaborates closely with other departments. This approach contrasts with that of Riga's city architect for instance, which was also discussed during the roundtables. In Riga, the city architect and his team operate under the spatial planning department and adopt a more directive role in the city's spatial policy: they design master plans for specific areas, initiatie pilot projects, and establish design guidelines for the construction of public spaces.

This comparison raises a number of questions: *What roles do designers play within government departments and administrations? How can competent institutions or bodies ensure architectural quality? What models – such as city architect, expert boards, quality chambers or design review panels – best serve this goal? What are the modi*

operandi, the advantages and drawbacks of different administrative configurations? What resources and tools departments have at their disposal to implement architecture policies effectively? What expertise is needed within administrations and what expertise can be hired? What is the appropriate mix of soft power *(advice, inspiration, outreach) versus* hard power *(regulation, licensing, financial levers like subsidies or budgets, and enforcement mechanisms like taxes and fines)?*

The drafting of an integrated vision for the Kuip began in 2022. Under the impetus of the Ghent city architect, the Department of Urban Archaeology and Heritage Conservation joined forces with the Urban Planning Department to prepare a tender. In parallel, the city architect initiated the process by commissioning a city map, seeking partners among the city departments and launching a broad call to develop an integrated vision for the Kuip.

Needless to say, the role of the city architect has evolved significantly. No longer an executive architect, the position is now a temporary advisory mandate. Appointments last six years, with a possibility for a one-off renewal. The current Ghent city architect began his second term in 2024. Operating with a small team and limited budget, the architect relies on other city department specialists for individual projects. In the vision note 'Samen Stad Bouwen' [Building City Together], published at the start of his first term (2017–2023), city architect Peter Vanden Abeele described his role in four capacities: inspirer, catalyst, organiser and advisor. A key responsibility is chairing the Quality Chamber, where he leads a panel of experts to oversee major projects and provide (non-binding) advice on image-defining initiatives during standard permit processes. In the Ghent Kuip dossier, however, the city architect's role is broader. As an inspirer, he develops a forward-looking vision for the city, grounded in previous plans. As a catalyst, he encourages stakeholders to tackle future challenges collaboratively. In the Kuip project, he acts as an organiser. As a mediator, he brings together diverse parties. Through his mandate, the city architect drives the study process and orchestrates the public debate.

For the redesign of the Kuip, the city architect will not only seek internal support from the relevant city departments but also engage external design expertise through a tendering process. Within the city administration, a task force will be established, incorporating multiple departments and autonomous city companies. The Department of Urban Archaeology and Heritage Conservation, as the lead client, will oversee the study, while the Urban Planning Department and other city departments responsible for management, maintenance and usage will apply the findings once the study is complete.

The three departments have collaborated to produce the pamphlet *Mo(nu)mentum voor de Kuip*, which provides an initial diagnosis of the area. Reflecting on the redevelopment of the city centre squares at the start of the century, the report suggests that the earlier projects may have overly prioritised mobility and public space design, to the detriment of a more holistic approach to the surrounding built heritage. Moving forward, it is essential to deepen the exploration of the interplay between built heritage and public space. The focus should not only be on individual projects but also on the connections between buildings and the broader urban fabric. To aid this effort, a list of building ensembles requiring a future strategy has been compiled. Additionally, a city map has been created to visualise the links between monumental public interiors and the public spaces that surround them.

fig. 4 Ghent city architect in collaboration with the Department of Urban Archaeology and Heritage, and the Urban Planning Department, City map – Een Mo(nu) mentum voor de Kuip. January 2022 © Stad Gent, photo Olmo Peeters

fig. 5 Tender file, organigram of the research © Stad Gent

The pamphlet serves as the foundation for the tender request and the subsequent commissioning of a study to be conducted by an external multidisciplinary design team. The pamphlet establishes the agenda and outlines the challenges. At the same time, the proposed study, design, and participation process act as a moratorium. During the study period, routine decision-making processes are paused, and political decisions are temporarily deferred. This suspension allows for the exploration of potential development scenarios and avenues in a relatively unconstrained environment.

IV THE NEED FOR A MULTIDISCIPLINARY DESIGN APPROACH: URBAN DESIGN, PARTICIPATION, HERITAGE CONSERVATION, AND PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT COMBINED

Design and construction practices have become increasingly intricate, compelling governments to rely more on consortia of specialised consultancies, design firms and external experts. Each brings distinct expertise, experience, and methodologies to public projects. *What kind of design practices and design expertise are best suited to specific assignments? What role does external design expertise play in shaping policy? How should design research be defined and utilised? How is the scope of the design brief determined? Which expertise should remain in-house to be embedded within government departments? Which assignments can be outsourced to independent teams? How much autonomy and authority should be granted to external designers and consultants? At what stage do policymakers intervene? How do individual studies relate to a cohesive whole, and who ensures the synthesis?*

For the Kuip study project, a multidisciplinary team of three design and consultancy firms with complementary expertise was appointed. While Maat-ontwerpers specialises in master planning, urbanism, and participatory processes, aNNo architects focus on heritage conservation and Orientes brings expertise in finance and real estate. Each design team will undertake specific responsibilities within the study, but their collective expertise will be woven into a unified dossier. The task is multi-faceted. In the tender request, the client outlined three ambitions, reflecting three distinct layers: the layer of individual buildings; that of the various sites, contextualising each building within its immediate surroundings; and lastly a broader urban planning vision encompassing the Kuip as a whole.

First, the patrimony is being evaluated. aNNo architects have prepared a dossier for a select group of buildings. Each dossier includes elementary visual documentation, an architectural and historical description, as well as key data, valuations, and a proposed real estate strategy. The valuation is conducted using five distinct frameworks, each rooted in a different knowledge-based paradigm. Heritage valuation addresses the historical significance of the patrimony. Use value considers metrics like usable floor space and energy efficiency, weighed against potential uses and market rents. Locus valuation evaluates the monument's importance to the cityscape. Imagination value assesses the monument's emotional resonance and symbolic meaning. Lastly, artistic value examines the artistic potential of the patrimony. These frameworks represent various ways to interpret 'architectural quality'.

Orientes supplements these valuations with a preliminary financial estimate and corresponding real estate strategy. After all, even financial constraints necessitate policymaking, as public

funds are often insufficient to maintain and manage the entire patrimonial inventory. However, selling properties or relinquishing land positions was never considered in this study. Instead, Orientes provided a rough estimate of the investment required to make the buildings available for public use and to keep them accessible. This clarified what contributions, if any, could reasonably be expected from users.

In urban development terms, Maatontwerpers places individual buildings within a wider urban vision. The project area has been subject to diverse urban strategies from various city departments, including mobility and climate plans. Agencies like the corporatised Historische Huizen (Historic Houses) Agency manage much of the patrimony, while departments such as Tourism, Housing, and Parks & Gardens have developed their own visions for the city centre. Bringing these plans together reveals both the potential and the conflicts inherent in the area. What sets Maatontwerpers apart is their methodical approach to the study itself. Their strategy is underpinned by a broad online survey conducted via the city's participation services, garnering responses from over 700 residents. They also organised a "sponge day," during which the design team engaged in dialogue with city departments, property owners, stakeholders, and civil society to absorb diverse input. Two well-publicised public participation events were also held. Additionally, the process was reviewed by a heritage advisory board, serving as a sounding board of heritage experts. This approach ensured that the study and design process seamlessly incorporated the three key interactions that were central to the conference.

As a final step, the study examines various development scenarios for building ensembles within the Ghent Kuip. These scenarios are presented through visual tableaux, which will also be made publicly available. The study now offers not only a comprehensive understanding of the patrimony's financial and operational aspects, its structural condition, and the necessary maintenance work, but also insights into ownership and real estate strategies. The visualisations and accumulated data offer a basis for ensuring coherence between existing projects and evaluating new proposals. Given that the city owns a substantial portion of these historic monuments, the study provides practical tools to shape policy and take an active directing role.

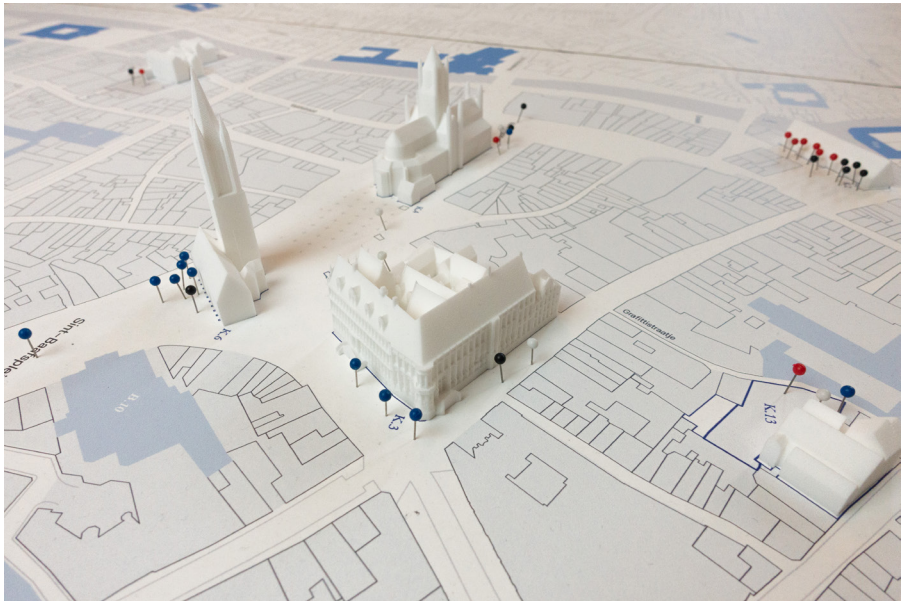

fig. 6 Mock-up Masterplan historical patrimony Kuip commissioned by the City of Ghent. Team: aNNo architecten, Maatontwerpers, Orientes

V FROM GOOD PRACTICES TO A COMPREHENSIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

By reconstructing the chronological processes behind the cases highlighted during the conference, we have shed light on the "role-playing" and interactions between policymaking government agencies and other stakeholders involved in shaping our living environments. These reconstructions illustrate who takes the lead at different stages and what instruments are available to enforce architectural quality.

The study, participation, and design process of the Ghent Kuip, however, extends beyond the typical time frame of a regular architectural project. Consequently, this extended process raises several new questions. The example illustrates how individual projects contribute to a broader narrative about the history of a place. It also highlights the need to reconcile historical insights with future ambitions. Finally, it exposes the conflicting expectations that can arise in the pursuit of quality living environments.

By organising roundtables around several very concrete projects, our aim was to make the conversation about *high-quality Baukultur* more tangible. The cases discussed reveal not only the barriers and challenges encountered on the ground but also the complexities of implementing high-quality design principles in practice. Beyond providing explanations of each project, the process reconstructions were intended to emphasise the dynamics between various stakeholders and policymakers. Deeper analyses will prove essential, as will transnational comparative research and synthesised frameworks based on inspiring examples, to further advance the development of a *high-quality Baukultur*.

1 For a comprehensive list of the case studies discussed, please refer to the publication (see pp. 23–24).
2 At the time of writing, local elections were underway, which addressed a range of policies including mobility, economic and urban development, housing rights, and cultural and identity issues. Many of these broader concerns are mirrored in urban development projects like the one for Ghent's Kuip. While the city council can retain its policy trajectory with the same coalition, new priorities are likely to emerge. The effectiveness of the study programme will need to be assessed within this evolving political context.
3 City Architect Team, Department of Urban Archaeology and Heritage Conservation, Urban Planning Department (2022) *Mo(nu)Mentum voor de Kuip*. Ghent: Stad Gent.
4 Maarten Van Den Driessche (2017) *Robbrecht en Daem Architecten. An Architectural Anthology*. Brussels: Mercatorfonds, pp. 500-515.
5 Peter Vanden Abeele, Stadsbouwmeester Gent (2018) *Samen Stad Bouwen.* Ghent: Stad Gent.


3.2
1) HOW EMBEDDED?
2) WHICH EXPERTISE
IN / OUT?


ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY AS A COMMON CONCERN

Visit of the Charleroi Great Palace, renovation designed by architecten de vylder vinck taillieu in association with AgwA, appointed in the framework of the assistance provided by the Charleroi Bouwmeester.

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

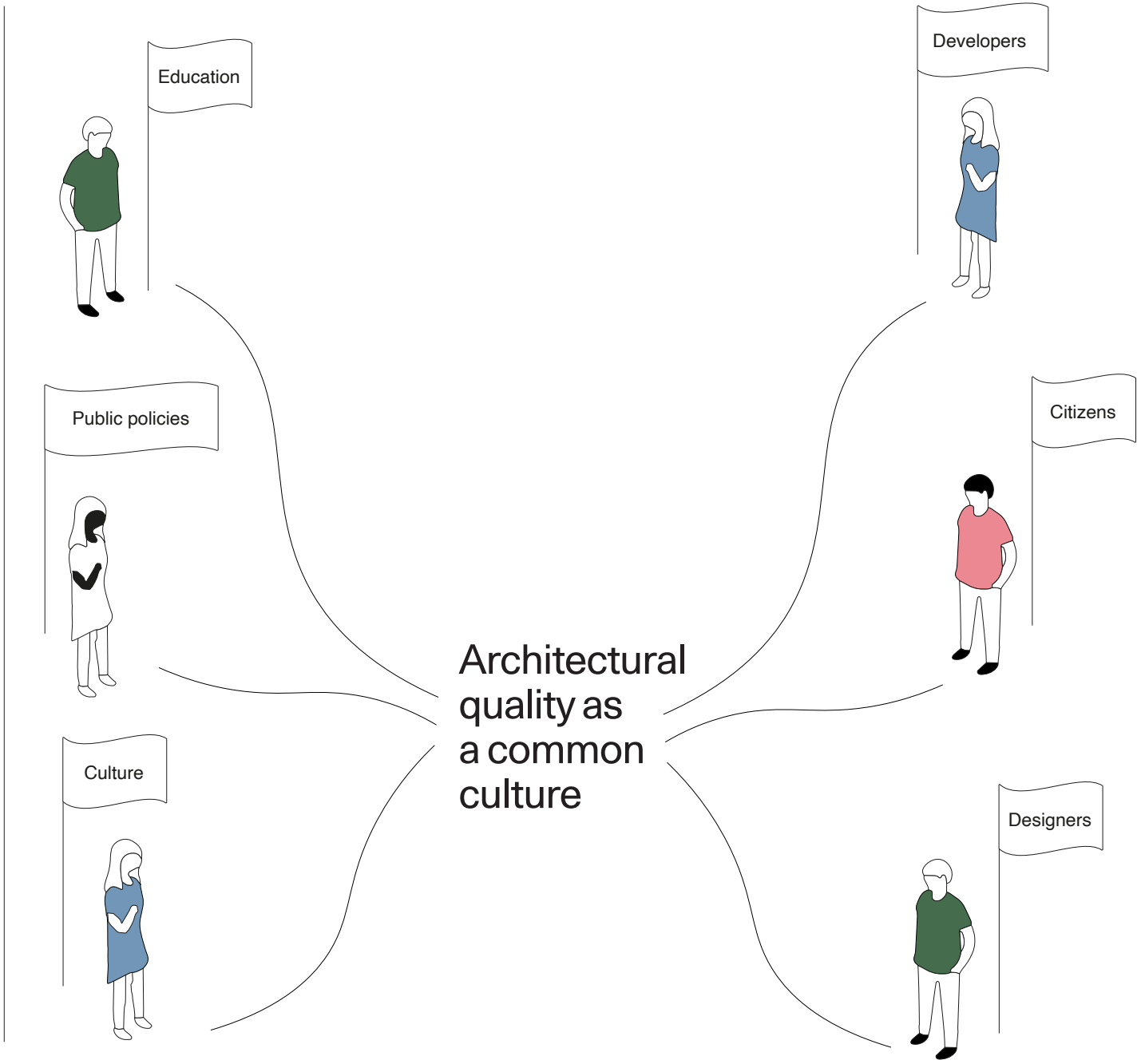

fig. 2 Proposal for expanding CityTools' scheme by Audrey Contesse and Stefan Devoldere

Colophon

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.

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

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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.

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Visit of the Antwerp Provincial Government Building, designed by Xaveer De Geyter Architecten, appointed through in the framework of the Open Call of the Team Flemish Government Architect.

Visit of the Charleroi Great Palace, renovation designed by architecten de vylder vinck taillieu in association with AgwA, appointed in the framework of the assistance provided by the Charleroi Bouwmeester.