The University Building as a Landscape of Opportunities

Herman Hertzberger, Laurens Jan ten Kate

Due to its diversity of facilities and its complexity, the modern university or college is increasingly becoming a place of social activity and exchange, and less and less an agglomeration of separate units, like the rational educational factories that you still see everywhere, generally outside the urban centres. The traditional Anglo-Saxon campus model, where separate buildings underline the independence of faculties, albeit in a more relaxed manner, can really no longer function in our world (although the scene of a group of students under a tree, in the grass, in fine weather, does have considerable charm). Nowadays we are concerned with more than the acquisition of specialized professional knowledge, and attention is shifting to the issue of what one discipline may mean in relation to another and, as such, to exchange. Infrastructure must take such matters into account.

The first spatial concept that attempted to provide an answer to the condition of growing, shrinking and overlapping domains of knowledge was the seat of the Freie Universität in Berlin, for which Candilis, Josic and Woods produced a revolutionary design as far back as 1963. Instead of detached buildings for the various components, they designed a network of spatial units that was accessed by means of a system of parallel connecting passageways. The structure of this network greatly resembled a roofed-over city. By means of a far-reaching disposition for coping with change, this "educational city" could be regarded as an "architectural model" for a major educational institution that would be able to accommodate the intrinsic uncertainty resulting from the rapid changes that were deregulating the world and, with it, the university. The model even went as far as postulating that components of the building ought to be capable of being dismantled and thus of being relocated or replaced. Ignoring the technical problems for the moment, this was possible by a system of unalterable main-connection passageways, which ran like main streets through the building. This network of main streets formed the structure of the building to which the various institutes with their educational spaces and offices could be "attached" and again "detached."

Our aim is to create a spatial climate that could stimulate consultation, co-operation, perception of one another's work, use of one another's presence and thus formulation of ideas, in which the confrontation with one another's situation and standpoints would be increasingly influential and would consequently promote social discussion.

The architecture of a building can encourage such activities by creating conditions which are inviting and which know how to attract attention by offering a reason to accept certain hold-ups—ensuring that paths cross, instead of allowing people to simply walk past one another. This demands, above all, great emphasis on public space; in other words, the space outside the closed spatial units that have been assigned to specific functions. This public space must be converted from pure traffic-flow space to social space.

Students are increasingly working independently, alone or in groups, and, in doing so, they are continually seeking places where they can concentrate, separated from others without being excluded. For this purpose, so-

called "learning landscapes" have been created as open hollows, inviting and divided into compartments in such a way that you can find your own spot without losing sight of others.

Science Faculty, Utrecht

In the building for the Science Faculty of the University of Utrecht, we had the opportunity to install learning landscapes around a central atrium in such a way that they jointly formed the centre of the building and could serve as balconies for any collective events; it was as if a temporary theatre had been created, as it were (this building was officially opened in January 2011).

By allowing these learning landscapes to mount step by step in the NHL, rising one to three storeys and thus extending beyond the normal floors, they form an informal, inviting connection between the storeys where everyone comes past. Instead of deliberately having to go there, you simply find yourself there as a matter of course, available for contact with everyone.

1. Herman Hertzberger, Laurens Jan ten Kate, Harm Freymuth, Jutta Groosman, Francine van Loon, Heleen Reedijk, Steven Reisinger, Faculty of Science David de Wied, Utrecht University, Utrecht, 2011. Foto Laurens Jan ten Kate. Courtesy AHH.

If an architect has to anticipate changes that are bound to come at some point, it means that he cannot aim at a final image and thus actually loses control over the architecture. In a large organization such as a university, this is further reinforced by idiosyncratic actions by the technical services that are responsible for the maintenance of the living environment with all its trend-sensitive ex-

2. Faculty of Science David de Wied. Atrio centrale. Foto Herman van Doorn. Courtesy AHH.

cesses that threaten to dominate perhaps not the total image but nevertheless the general atmosphere. What the architect regards as his product in a static situation changes into a dynamic process of development in which his leading role is continually a topic of discussion. The dilemma here is that one cannot really object to—in fact, one should really celebrate—the situation that the responsibility for a well-functioning and attractive building eventually lies with the users themselves. That would be fine if it were indeed the case, but in actual practice it is more common that organizations working autonomously simply impose systems without consulting the users, and it is doubtful whether people feel at ease with that. Actually, it is also dubious whether there is any form of recognisability when an architect has imposed a diktat in the form of a total concept in which he has determined everything right down to the last chair, plant and colour. And even then, how long would a total concept like this manage to sustain itself immaculately amid the furious developments that are persistently occurring? Moreover, it is not self-evident that, with a serious alteration or extension, the same architect would again be selected for the task. As their size increases, buildings tend to become more hybrid.

3. Herman Hertzberger, Geert Mol, Cor Kruter, Laurens Cobben, Joeri Apontoweil, Ruben Groot, Heleen Reedijk, Tjeerd van de Sandt, NHL University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, 2010. Foto AeroLin. Courtesy AHH.

4. NHL University of Applied Sciences. Schemi del concept. © AHH.

Flux, Eindhoven

We see the same development taking place at the campus of the Eindhoven University of Technology. If we look at the Faculty Flux (2014) we see that it is a completely different building than, for example, the original main building. The main building was designed by architect S.J. van Emden in 1954. There were no computers and the complete process of the faculty took place within the building. One can say that the function was an established fact and that the type was leading. Now, 60 years later, we live in a completely different world. The process of a faculty is now largely not dependent on the building and can take place everywhere. Only specific research is still connected to the building. This causes the use of the building to change entirely and human interaction, the encounter, to become increasingly important. That is what we must design. The classical scientist in a closed room surrounded by stacked files disappears. Sci-

5. NHL University of Applied Sciences. Gli spazi a gradoni per gli studenti realizzano anche una connessione informale tra i livelli. Foto Herman van Doorn. Courtesy AHH.

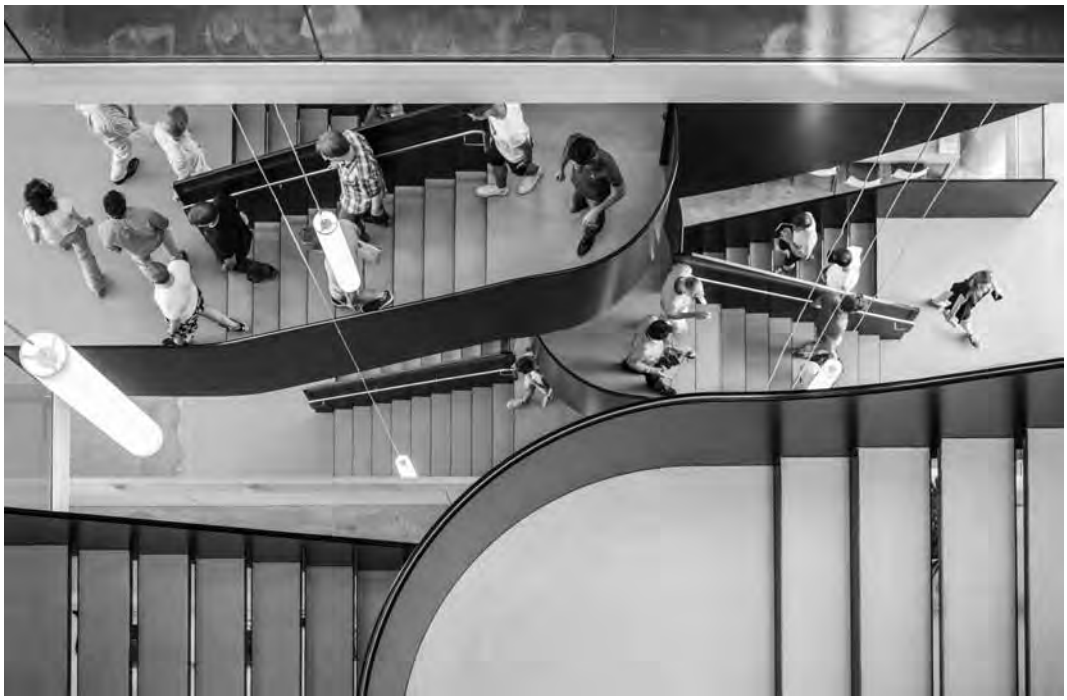
6. Herman Hertzberger, Laurens Jan ten Kate, Harm Freymuth, Maartje Nuy, Paul van Dijk, Oscar Backus, Faculty of Applied Physics and Electrical Engineering, Flux, Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, 2014. Dettaglio del fronte d'ingresso a ovest. Foto Norbert van Onna. Courtesy AHH.

ence can take place anywhere, even outside the building. The transfer of knowledge remains. The classical faculty with hallways and rooms becomes an open structure. The well-defined, unambiguous faculty has become an open and free faculty.

Faculty of Architecture Delft after the fire

On May 13, 2008, a fire devastated the premises of the Faculty of Architecture at Delft University of Technology. This meant the end of an exemplary and meticulously designed building by the Rotterdam architecture firm of Van den Broek & Bakema.

Unlike most other architecture faculties found on technological university campuses, this modern, functional building was fully equipped for training architects and reflected this on all fronts. The search of new (temporary) accommodation ended at a vacant brick colossus from 1923. Built to house a Chemistry Faculty, it served for a time as the main administration building, where as a first-year student I gazed in astonishment at the tall unused rooms. This traditionalist pile of bricks with its tangle of wings and



7. Faculty of Applied Physics and Electrical Engineering. Dettaglio del sistema dei collegamenti verticali. Foto Norbert van Onna. Courtesy AHH.

remarkably tall storeys was the absolute antithesis of the destroyed premises and at first sight seemed utterly unsuitable for its new duty, temporary though that might be. Just that impermanence became an alibi for the crude cut-throughs and the quick-fire operation of sealing off the semi-courtyards and transforming them with lightweight steel constructions into enormous production halls. Nothing was rounded off neatly, the whole giving the impression of unfinished business. All the interventions then made in great haste and for the lowest costs emanate the irresolution and incompleteness of a building under construction, which at the same time lifts the gloom from the original brick monster. It all looks temporary, a permanent temporariness, undefined, more like a factory, which confirms the feeling that it could just as easily be done differently.

The students and staff populating this fairly chaotic labyrinth are hardly likely to feel that the building they occupy is meant to be exemplary but are instead constantly reminded that "it could be done differently." The feeling persists that you could add something to it yourself. The old building, as a work in progress, is liberating thanks to the room it leaves, room more for questions than for answers, as is to be expected of a university.

Conclusion

The concept of University where students are just listening in classrooms to be educated or to research is outdated. Today, exchange of experience and ideas is going to be the most important condition to consider. We are inspired by the big reading room of the old Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris by Labrouste, seeing so many people, all of them individually at work and concentrated, but in an atmosphere of togetherness, almost like in a church, in this churchlike space. And no trace of being disturbed by each other.

Our approach is all about conditions. We try to create "places," increase the capacity to appropriate the space without singling out components with expressive design. This is what I (HH) called polyvalence. Polyvalence proceeds from deliberately endorsing everything with "incentives" as opportunities for application and therefore interpretation. I am convinced that the way people interpret places is based on association with images of their memory.