



Out now: Flanders Architecture Institute presents the latest Flanders Architectural Review: Responses in Responsibility

In light of today’s societal and environmental challenges, it is clear that architecture is no longer just an aesthetic or functional discipline, but increasingly plays a role in shaping a more sustainable, more inclusive future. The latest Flanders Architectural Review, comprising 22 inspiring projects, 11 critical essays and 6 photo series, shows that caring, responsibility and collaboration are the core values of contemporary architecture. Release date November 8, 2024.

The publication was preceded by a call for projects. Issued in June 2023, it highlighted architectural responses that critically address pressing themes such as social inclusion and today’s environmental issues. The editors explicitly sought out projects that not only meet regulations and economic constraints, but also proactively tackle ecological challenges, such as reducing construction waste and supporting biodiversity. From the more than 300 submissions, some 100 projects were selected which the editorial team visited on-site and carefully assessed. From these, the editorial board then chose 22 projects that provide ‘responses in responsibility’; they are complemented by projects that appear in the 11 essays.

A caring attitude

One of the most striking trends to surface is a common attitude of caring – for existing buildings and the environment, but also for the users of today and tomorrow. ‘The term “caring architecture”, developed by feminist thinkers in the 1990s, describes architecture that takes responsibility for the planet. This approach seems more relevant today than ever’, according to Sofie De Caigny and Dennis Pohl, the book’s editors-in-chief.

In this context, ‘shadow clients’ come into focus, stakeholders who are not directly involved in the decision-making but who experience the consequences of architectural decisions. This highlights the broader ethical responsibility of architects to look beyond the immediate clients and also take into account communities, local residents and even non-human organisms.

Collaboration and shared responsibility

Architecture is never the work of one person, but always a collective process. Both within the design teams and in the dialogue with clients, officials, tradesmen and -women, and future users, collaboration plays a crucial role. This realization that architecture is always a collaborative project receives special attention in this publication. The selected projects show how architects often take on different roles – from director to activist, from product developer to bridge builder. Many of these projects were started by public or private clients who wanted to do things differently. They dared to think outside the traditional box and adopt a more inclusive and sustainable approach. They were often supported in this by forward-thinking officials or municipal development companies. These clients embrace a broader vision of what architecture can be, not only for the physical space, but also for the social fabric and in terms of its ecological impact.

In her essay, urban planner Els Nulens discusses the role of good commissioning. The repurposed Church of St Cornelius and community centre in Aalbeke (urban architectencollectief), the Deelfabriek in the former fire station of Kortrijk (ATAMA), the Anapneusis community house for formerly homeless people in Schoten (Bruno Spaas Architectuur) and the M127 office building with public plinth in Berchem (ono architectuur and Universal Design Studio in collaboration with artist Philip Aguirre y Otegui and garden architect Ludovic Devriendt). They are examples of how participation is deployed, not as a trend or compulsory number, but as a genuine and effective collaborative process. Nulens: ‘Architecture is the work of people, behind which complex processes are hidden with fascinating and often entangled collaborations.’

Challenges today

The published projects reflect the challenges of contemporary architecture, including the need to use space more efficiently through densification and multiple use. This urgency is reinforced by the scarcity of building materials and rising costs, caused in part by international conflicts, which were clearly tangible this year. The

hybrid forms of living and working created by the pandemic also call for new solutions in architecture. The population growth in Flanders and Brussels, combined with the need to preserve open space, means that now more than ever, designers are called upon to provide innovative, sustainable solutions. Circular construction, reducing paving and working with energy-efficient materials are just some of the challenges that architects have to face.

The architect as multidisciplinary editor

'The role of the architect is shifting to that of an editor, who works with existing materials and conditions and finds new solutions in them', says architect and researcher Carlo Menon in his essay. Architects, he argues, must be able to go beyond false dilemmas, such as the apparent contradiction between affordable housing and the preservation of open space, or between the appreciation of heritage and the creation of climate-robust buildings. This requires social and intellectual agility and often a multidisciplinary approach. Menon: 'Acting as an editor means accepting that the final result will not have your name on it in capital letters, as the result depends on many circumstances that you as an architect do not try to bend to your own idiom.' Menon refers, among others, to the greenhouses in the Botanic Garden in Meise (NU architectuurstudio in collaboration with Archipelago) and the Cordonnier factory in Wetteren (De Smet Vermeulen architecten). In both projects, the architects edited the existing situation and added as little as possible. The result is buildings and spaces which, because of their continuity, are supported by their environment and users.

Towards a more inclusive, equitable architecture sector

This book argues for the greater involvement of different voices from our society in the design process. It also looks at the state of gender equality, diversity and the economic position of the profession. Architectural engineer Evelien Pieters, the founder of PAF (platform for architecture & feminism), notes that there is still a lot of work to be done: 'More women than men are leaving the design profession. People with migrant roots are underrepresented.' In her essay, she argues for greater awareness, more equal representation, more room for a diversity of voices, improved remuneration, and changes in training and the work culture. Regarding that remuneration, the position of young architects especially is particularly precarious, according to architect-researcher-artist Vjera Sleutel. As a young architect who has just completed her internship, she has mapped out the low pay and long working hours of beginning architects. Sleutel: 'The fixed wages of beginning architects are often lower than the legally guaranteed income of €1,954.99 gross per month. Young architects therefore work long hours to be able to bill sufficiently at the end of the month.'

The political significance of architecture

The final essay, by Hülya Ertas, explores the political significance of architecture in today's society. She calls on architects to have the courage to radically choose care, generosity and beauty in architectural design. Ertas: 'The role of architecture goes beyond creating physical spaces; it is a means of addressing the major societal challenges of our time, from climate change to social justice.' Architecture today can be a powerful signal of hope. This book shows that a redefinition of values is possible and that architects play a crucial role in making this change happen, not only for the current generation, but also for future inhabitants of our planet.

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