

Gideon Boie (BAVO)

ARCHITECTURAL ASYMMETRIES

Three propositions about the added architectural value in the design of single-family homes in the nineteenth-century belt of Antwerp under the Land and Buildings Policy executed by the Autonomous Municipal Company for Real Estate and City Projects Antwerp (Ag Vespa)

Introduction

Questions about the existence of neoliberal architecture are generally answered by analyzing the role of emblematic architectural projects in major and highly speculative urban developments. However, admitting any direct relationship between architectural design and neoliberalism is in most cases carefully avoided. This paper argues that such hesitation results from self-protective resistance on the part of the architectural discipline. The evacuation of neoliberalism from the design field levels the path for an either opportunistic or idealistic attitude among architects. Opportunists will act as if architectural beauty were something that is indifferent to neoliberal machinations from above, while idealists immediately enter the arena of utopian speculation. In both cases, the architectural object is easily unplugged from its neoliberal other and thus detached from its production, distribution, and consumption.

The following paper is an initial, albeit incomplete, stepping stone toward the ambition of identifying neoliberalism in specific aspects of architectural production, such as practice, form, scale, material, et cetera. The production of architecture under the Land and Buildings Policy in Antwerp provides a test case for sketching a direct and complex interlinkage between architecture and neoliberalism. The design of the single-family homes in the so-called *nineteenth-century belt* of the City of Antwerp exhibits the commodification of architecture, the struggle for added architectural value, and the function of everyday architecture in city marketing. The search for neoliberal (and anti-neoliberal) architecture must start from these classic capitalist logics.

Object

The much-discussed architectural production under the Land and Buildings Policy by Ag Vespa, an acronym for the autonomous municipal company for real estate and city projects in Antwerp, is a prime example of urban regeneration in Belgium. In Antwerp's nineteenth-century urban cluster, the autonomous municipal company Ag Vespa has purchased a substantial number of dilapidated dwellings and free parcels of land in recent years to remarket them as desirable urban homes suitable for young families. The hope and the expectation is that this *pinpricking* will revive parts of the city currently plagued by negative social situations.

Over the past years, the Land and Buildings Policy has yielded more than one hundred single-family homes acclaimed by professional and mainstream publications for their "architectural intelligence."^[1] A fundamental factor is the participation of architects identified by representative bodies in the professional sector as young, highly promising talent. The objective is for dilapidated dwellings and free parcels of land—at a disadvantage in the housing market because of their troublesome physical location—to come up with innovative design solutions. Another reason for choosing young architects is their rapid employability because of their enthusiasm and idealism.

Although the production of one hundred single-family homes is modest in absolute terms, it is nevertheless unique in the context of Belgium's traditionally liberal policy. Housing production is considered a private matter with government involvement confined to regulatory matters, except for the very limited activity in social housing. The administrative passiveness is usually compensated for by launching compulsive sensitization campaigns targeted at private builders and constructing prestigious model projects in the government real-estate portfolio. Ag Vespa personifies the Antwerp city government's entrepreneurial approach to doing something about the architectural quality of the everyday living environment.

The City of Antwerp has broken with tradition in housing policy without impairing the liberal tradition of the housing market in Belgium. The autonomous municipal company is used by the City as a vehicle to correct malfunctions in the housing market—not by imposing external regulations to the market, but, ironically, by playing its very own game (i.e. the game of the market). A market operation is set up within which a revolving fund is being used to produce and distribute architecturally valuable single-family homes. The strategic, and above all recognizable, model housing projects are developed in a cost-covering

[1] Herman Boumans, ed., *Vooruitgangsrapport AgVespa 2011: realisaties in vastgoed en stadsprojecten* (Antwerp: Ag Vespa, 2012).

model within which any profits are used for new model projects and any losses are made good by subsidies available at the regional, federal, and/or European level (subsidies for housing policy, major conurbation policy, and regional development, respectively).

The ambiguous nature of the autonomous municipal company allows us to examine in greater depth the question of the existence of neoliberal (or anti-neoliberal) architecture. It is remarkable that the acclaimed production of architecture under the Land and Buildings Policy simultaneously denies and confirms the well-known recipes of capitalism—which we conveniently define as the ground stream of neoliberalism. Herein, we notice once again that it is not enough to say that capitalism has produced a homo economicus without adding that this man is inevitably confused.^[2] The same goes for neoliberalism: although it might be a more unmediated form of capitalism, it is mystifying to present neoliberalism as a system free from internal contradiction and able to stick plainly to its ideological principles.

We will now trace the zigzag path of (anti-)neoliberal architecture by analyzing the production of the single-family homes under the Land and Buildings Policy in Antwerp following its: 1) commodification; 2) struggle for profit; and 3) universalism.

First Rule: No Architectural Quality without Commodification

Neoliberalism is generally defined as being characterized by a return to the one-sided primacy of the commodification in the way society is organized to function.^[3] When applied to architectural production, commodification means that the decisive arguments in the design process are characterized by merchantability and the financial interests of the stakeholders. The motive for a design is then not so much its quality, but its return. Every design decision appears as a cost item that must be justified on the financial balance sheet. Disregarding architectural quality in an individual project would not be so bad in itself, were it not for the fact that architectural quality is part of the public interest. The fad of a client affects not only the living conditions of the person himself, but also the living quality for people living nearby and the image of the city. Former Mayor of Antwerp Patrick Janssens thus cited the architectural quality of the urban environment as a spearhead of the social reconquest of the city.^[4]

The building program for single-family homes under the Land and Buildings Policy by the autonomous municipal company Ag Vespa is an

[2] Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilisation* (1983; repr., London: Verso, 1996), p. 18.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 11ff.

[4] Alix Lorquet, ed., *Urban Development in Antwerp: Designing Antwerp* (Antwerp: City of Antwerp, 2012).



instrument to improve the architectural quality at the everyday street level. The production breaks away from the trend of mindless repetition of inappropriate housing models currently in evidence in the Flemish housing market. Ag Vespa provides the architect, within the contours of the design brief for single-family homes, with the latitude necessary for free experimentation. The Dodoensstraat Corner House (designed by URA, 2007) is perhaps one of the most striking results of the pronounced innovation agenda (→1, →2, →3). The design consists mainly of an intelligent stair solution in oriented strand board (OSB) covered with transparent plastic. The triangular spiral shape was obtained by a simple offset of the façade lines in the center of the home. The small intervention produced numerous benefits compared with the original situation of the corner house—where the stairs were positioned against the only common wall of the home. Placing the stairs in the heart of the very narrow corner house reorganizes the internal circulation and, by consequence, also the distribution of space. The most important contribution of the spiral shape lies in the reduced usage of floor space for internal circulation. The footprint of the spiral stairs is minimal and, what is more, it obviates the need for an extra system of corridors. This is because the spiral staircase offers direct access to the different rooms arranged around it. An additional quality is the value generated by experiencing the stairs. While going up and down the stairs, the user repeatedly sees the home from different perspectives, which is intensified by extra openings in the stair walls.



Interestingly, the architectural specificity and singularity of the Dodoensstraat Corner House has been made possible only through the commodification of the single-family home. The qualities of the object do not arise from a pure *not-for-profit* housing desire of an individual client. The Land and Buildings Policy is actually a real estate program organized with a revolving fund. Expenditure for purchase and alteration is treated as prefinancing that will be earned back from the sale of the buildings—possibly topped up by applicable subsidies—in order to reinvest later in a new building project. So although the design of the Dodoensstraat Corner House was not subject to a direct pursuit of profit, it was certainly subject to the accumulation necessary for the survival of the overarching investment program. Design decisions were made that weigh heaviest on the budgetary balance. Any superfluous design intervention was rejected, with the design limited to the delivery of the core. It means that the building construction was provided only with façade finishing, a useful division of space, and connecting points for technical systems (gas, water, and electricity). So it is only logical that all design effort was directed solely toward the stairs. At the same time, we see an architectural quality not based on excess in detail and ornamentation, but on a sort of ascetic formalism and contextualism. The texture of the spiral stairs derives from a rough and naked use of materials—in this instance, a compound



(1) URA, Corner House Dodoen-
straat, Antwerp, 2007
(Photo: St. Bollaert, 2007)

wood material that under normal conditions would not be used visibly. This asceticism is also evident in the use of untreated bricks as a façade material in other Ag Vespa designs, such as the three Lucky Bar houses (design by Mys-Bomans and RAUM Architects, 2009) (→5, →6). Interestingly, the Lucky Bar architect based the design on a search for what he called the basis of housing. The basis lies in creating space to meet the user's residential needs. The arrogation of the home (covering and furnishing, etc.) is a matter for the user and not the architect. For this reason, the architect considered only building material that *speaks for itself* in terms of structure, usage, view, form, and texture. It is easy to boil down the architect's motive to a rationalization of the client's financial considerations. But it is more important to recognize how the commodification of the single-family homes in Antwerp forms a design discipline generally acknowledged as a source of a unique architectural quality.^[5]

Second Rule: Added Architectural Value Is Not for Consumption

A second rule concerns the basic feature of capitalism, namely, an economic system that socializes costs and privatizes profits.^[6] Nowhere is this rule more in evidence than in real estate, where value is generally determined not so much by the inherent properties of a building, but by factors in the surroundings. The proximity of amenities, the quality of the public space, and the creative atmosphere in the neighborhood are external factors that outweigh the costs for materials and labor. By so doing, the real estate market imposes a one-sided claim on public space, while the costs are transferred to

[5] André Loeckx, "Labo Vespa," in *The Specific and the Singular: Architecture in Flanders 2008–2009*, ed. Katrien Vandermarliere (Antwerp: Flanders Architecture Institute, 2010), pp. 217–48.

[6] Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, pp. 45 ff.



(2) URA, Corner House Dodoenstraat, Antwerp, 2007, staircase
(Photo: St. Bollaert, 2007)

society. Instead of privatization, it makes more sense to speak of a parasitical relationship, because the real estate market does not even need to privatize the external factors in order to utilize it as added value.^[7] In the best-case scenario, private profits and public costs are balanced out via an indirect system of property tax.

The Land and Buildings Policy exemplifies a tendency that inverts the above-described principle and seeks responsibility of the private homeowner in the quality of public space in Antwerp. For example, we can see in the single-family house Veldstraat (design by Huiswerk, 2006) a large glazed-window area at street level that allows the parking of bicycles, prams, and other requisites of young families (→7, →8). At the same time, the façade-wide entry portal provides a view of residential functions on the front side of the building. Design decisions of this kind are diametrically opposed to housing tradition in Belgium, where everyday life—particularly the kitchen and the dining room—occurs in ancillary buildings at the rear of the home. Reducing the resident to an end user makes it easy for Ag Vespa to market homes that no

[7] See Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009), pp. 153–57.



longer turn away from public space but generously open up toward it. The result is public space with a high value of experience, according to the goal defined by the Chief City Architect of Antwerp, Kristiaan Borret.^[8] In this respect, the Land and Buildings Policy privatizes the cost item of architectural quality (the housing paid for by the consumer) and socializes its added value (which the anonymous passerby enjoys). Nevertheless, the added architectural value of the Land and Buildings Policy is still being privatized in a rather unexpected way. The upgrading of the street's liveability is maximized by selecting parcels of land and dilapidated buildings at carefully chosen places in the neighborhood. One could thus frame the privatization of added architectural value in terms of the user who is given the privilege of living in the most desirable parts of the street. However, from the consumer's perspective the profit is limited, because he or she is obliged to make alterations to the delivered core before it attains usefulness. It is symptomatic that the architectural interventions in the Dodoensstraat Corner House turned out to have no value whatsoever for the consumer.

(3) URA, Comer House Dodoensstraat, Antwerp, 2007, interior view (Photo: St. Bollaert, 2007)

(4) URA, Comer House Dodoensstraat, Antwerp, 2007, interior view after closing off the openings in the spiral stairs (Photo: St. Bollaert, 2007)

[8] Kristiaan Borret, *Beleidsnota Stadsbouwmeester 2006–2011* (Antwerp: City of Antwerp, 2007).



(5) Mys & Bomans and RAUM,
House Oudemansstraat-Keistraat
(Lucky Bar), Antwerp, 2009
(Photo: N. Donckers, 2009)



(6) Mys & Bomans and RAUM,
House Oudemansstraat-Keistraat
(Lucky Bar), Antwerp, 2009, interior
view of an apartment
(Photo: N. Donckers, 2009)

The new owner was not a family, but a single person who uses the building as a private home with bed-and-breakfast facilities. For this purpose, the owner reorganized the minimal distribution of space and closed off the openings in the spiral stairs (→4). To no avail, he even made some attempts to paint over the OSB, which failed because of the plastic treatment of the OSB. Privatization on the part of the consumer is outweighed by the double costs that he or she must bear for the purchase and the necessary alterations.

The main privatization of added architectural value in the Land and Buildings Policy is to be located at the side of the distributor, i.e., the autonomous municipal company Ag Vespa. The specific choice for targeting corner houses is not so much inspired by the privileged position as it is by the visibility of the objects. Corner houses are not favourite items in the housing market as they lack some elements that are regarded fundamental to the Belgian housing culture, such as rear windows, gardens,



(7) Bovenbouw (formerly known as Huiswerk), House Veldstraat, Antwerp, 2006
(Photo: Van Eetveldt Nyhuis Photography, 2006)

ancillary buildings, etc. However, corner houses are welcome objects because they are situated along several lines of sight and thus generate maximum impact on the local community. Within Ag Vespa's business model, the omnipresence of the single-family homes in the neighborhood has diverse benefits. Firstly, the single-family homes function as icons of the professional city management that the parent company, namely the City of Antwerp, has introduced to end the political games and corruption under the previous mayors. Secondly, the single-family homes function as a market tool to seduce young families to settle in the impoverished nineteenth-century belt of the city. Thirdly, the single-family homes function as an exemplary project in the sensitization of the local residents to take up responsibility for their living environment. In short, while the expenditure on architectural quality is billed to the housing consumer, the quality only has significance and value for the distributor of the objects. The parasitical relation continues and even intensifies after the transaction. At the moment the housing consumer moves in, the building ceases to be a mere symbol—endlessly reproduced in magazines—and effectively becomes a *living structure* that communicates with the spectator.



(8) Bovenbouw (formerly known as Huiswerk), House Veldstraat, Antwerp, 2006, interior view (Photo: Van Eetveldt Nyhuis Photography, 2006)

Third Rule: City Marketing Exploits Architecture of the Everyday

The third rule concerns the need of the neoliberal system for an ideological, universal framework that provides a place in the accumulation process for all share- and stakeholders.^[9] The concurrency between cities and urban regions functions today as a decisive framework for the production of an endless stream of emblematic architectural projects designed by a worldwide army of architects. It is universal because every city that does not engage in the urban competition lags behind inevitably. Since Frank O. Gehry's design of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, having a high-profile building developed by an architect with an equally high-profile name has become a central element in the vision of the future of any self-respecting city. Besides being a marketing product, emblematic architecture has a leveraging role for urban-development projects. A landmark architectural icon

[9] Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, pp. 73ff.

guarantees public awareness of the development area and the essential investment funds.^[10]

In Antwerp, Museum aan de Stroom or MAS (design by Neutelings Riedijk Architects, 2000, opened in 2011) functions as an object of city marketing and leverage of the development of the old port area called Eilandje (→9). Remarkably, even while it was being constructed, the reason for the existence of the museum was called into question, because it was unclear which collection would be housed in the immense building and what its financial viability would be. But the unclear use value of the building did not hamper the perspective for development of the area—just the opposite. Right from the discussion about the protracted construction, the eccentric form experiment of MAS did what it was meant to do: it functioned as a sublime and tower-high landmark for the Eilandje development area.

The difference between MAS and the production of architecture under the Land and Buildings Policy could not be greater at first sight. In the latter, there are no overheated ambitions for a disused development area. On the contrary, it is an alternative and widely supported urban renewal operation in districts of the city that have been starved of attention and investment for many years. Most projects in the Land and Buildings Policy exhibit a façade structure, building envelope, and choice of construction material that carefully simulate nearby buildings in a contemporary embodiment—such as the three-house project Gravinstraat-Gijselsstraat (design by De Smet Vermeulen architecten, 2011) (→10, →11). The limited logo value is inversely proportional to the use value of the single-family homes. First and foremost, the single-family homes meet (at least in principle) the intimate housing desires of young families and the desire among local residents for a livable street; not to forget the authentic design pleasure among the architects involved—the producers that are not usually mentioned in Ag Vespa's communications. So the single-family homes are not intended as objects of desire for the remote and restless gazes of tourists walking around the city, but as a backdrop to the day-to-day comings and goings of the local residents.

The no-logo strategy that underlies architectural production in the Land and Buildings Policy nevertheless embodies a unique and priceless value in the public relations of Antwerp. Former Mayor Patrick Janssens—who built a career for himself as a communications expert—made clear more than once that, above all, the city must win the hearts of its own residents. The central idea is that residents who identify themselves with their city will have a stronger appeal to outsiders than any public-relations campaign. The single-family homes

[10] Erik Swyngedouw, "A New Urbanity? The Ambiguous Politics of Large-Scale Urban Development Projects in European Cities," in *Amsterdam Zuidas European Space*, ed. V.V. Salet (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2005), pp. 61–79.



of Ag Vespa fit into this model of what we call internal city marketing: the single-family homes formulate small, obvious messages that, unconsciously, convince local residents of a positive city project. This has been done successfully: while MAS has been snowed under with cynical reactions and will be embraced by the citizens of Antwerp only over the course of years, the Land and Buildings Policy can bank on general appreciation and spontaneous acceptance. The immediate well-being of Antwerp residents is many times more effective as public-relations material than any kind of eye-catcher, which will often quickly lose its contemporary gloss and/or will be trumped by a rival design. Gazing into intimate, cozy interiors conveys a unique logo value: the daily presence and activity of the residents provide a scene of people who enjoy the good city life in Antwerp. The universal logic of competition based on the strategic placement of eccentric objects is thus replaced by spontaneous identification with a recognizable situation.

(9) Neutelings Riedijk Architects,
MAS, Antwerp, 2000–11
(Photo: F. Vercruijsse, 2011)

Balance

The material above examined Ag Vespa's architectural production based on three fundamental pillars of capitalism. Although the pillars have a knock-on effect in neoliberalism (and thus suggest themselves as points of departure when analyzing the relationship between architecture and neoliberalism), we recognize that we have not elaborated



(10) Henk De Smet and Paul Vermeulen, Three Houses
Gravinstraat-Gijselsstraat,
Antwerp, 2011
(Photo: B. Gosselin, 2011)



(11) Henk De Smet and Paul Vermeulen, Three Houses
Gravinstraat-Gijselsstraat,
Antwerp, 2011, interior view
(Photo: B. Gosselin, 2011)

some customary themes from the literature on neoliberalism, such as restoration of class power, unequal urban developments, and neoliberal state intervention.^[11]

We can merely remark here that Ag Vespa's pinpricking architectural production deserves further discussion based on these themes. It is difficult not to see the function of the single-family homes in Antwerp in the redistribution of urban space toward the white middle class. If there is one thing the neighborhoods in the nineteenth-century belt of Antwerp do not lack, it is the presence of families—however, a lot of them have a foreign background and/or live in overcrowded houses.

[11] See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

At the same time, the single-family homes cannot hide the disparity between the light investment scheme for the nineteenth-century belt and the massive construction works in the old port area—with the already mentioned MAS, apartment buildings (Diener & Diener and David Chipperfield, among others), Port House (Zaha Hadid), and Antwerp Port Coördination Centre (Neutelings-Riedijk). Finally, the merging of government and market initiatives in the autonomous municipal company Ag Vespa is symptomatic for the unacknowledged hand of the state in both speculative urban developments and small-scale interventions.

The question regarding (anti-)neoliberal architecture deserves an answer that disregards the leftist myth of the internally coherent totalitarian system, which exploits every human faculty to maximize financial profit. I have described here how Ag Vespa's working method places commodification, struggle for added value, and city marketing in the light of an accumulation of architectural quality in Antwerp. Ag Vespa's single-family homes are at once speculative objects in social engineering and a sincere answer to the desires of local residents. The ambiguous design brief gives the Ag Vespa project leaders—most of whom are qualified architects—and the young architects the feeling of working together on an enterprise with the noble goal of improving the quality of the living environment. This also explains the willingness among the architects to deliver quality despite the underpaid working conditions offered by Ag Vespa. It would be wrong to assert in this context that Ag Vespa's architectural production is subject to a neoliberal apparatus—as if architecture had its own subjectivity. An apparatus is an operating network of institutions, measures, knowledge bodies, and practices that shape the behavior of a human being.^[12] The architectural design is not the resulting subject, but a full-fledged part of the apparatus. Instead of subjection, we refer to a kind of self-integration; the commodification of architecture and other capitalist strategies are spontaneously applied by those involved as a condition of possibility for the thing hoped for—that is, the enjoyment of architectural quality. The resultant exclusion of the user from the design process in formal and informal public-private partnerships is seen as natural part of the professional architectural culture of Antwerp. Awaiting the further identification of neoliberal architecture within the Land and Buildings Policy, the search for anti-neoliberal architecture starts with this Gordian knot.

[12] See Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–24.