Design = Economy

A complex and contemporary question

The subject of the 2012 Brussels Masterclass «RE:WORK making place for industry, logistics, and wholesale in the city» is a complex one. Not only does it question how and where we can find space within the city for industrial activities but also how these activities can cohabit with urban programs in a productive and pleasant way. Looking at urban developments in the last century it is clear that a truly fruitful cohabitation between economy and city never fully arose. Industrial activities were simply tolerated, up until the point where they left the city center, giving way to the post-industrial model and moving towards the friendly city, ultimately leaving all attempts of cohabitation behind. But with industrial production and urban environments shifting in shape, scale and culture, the issue of cohabitation is yet again on the table.

The masterclass aims at finding ways to create a new relationship between the «friendly city» and the «machines», between the city as we now it and the industry as we need it. This will be one of the great challenges for the 21st century european city model, and Brussels is a good place to take it on.

Of course, expecting a two week masterclass to fully dissect this relationship would be as illusional as expecting a new cohabitation between city and industry to emerge without friction, the risk being to fall into simplistic and naive answers such as constant hybridization to smoothen it all. Thus, the masterclass, and the projects that are presented in this publication, do not pretend to offer the unique solution. They merely start to build a database of innovative and pragmatic proposals, ideas that can be further debated and developed by different stakeholders.

The site as a pretext

Five sites, located in and around the center of Brussels, were selected for the masterclass : Reyers, Quai Demets, Neder over Hembeek, Da Vinci and Batelage. Each site is large, complex and highly strategic for the future development of Brussels. Several sites, like Quai Demets or Batelage, have witnessed numerous projects and proposals come and go already. The five sites were chosen as relevant territories for implementing or strengthening economic activities within the city. For the masterclass, they were used as pretexts for initiating new relationships between economy and the city : instead of trying to resolve every aspect of the site, the students concentrated on exploring one type of relationship per site, allowing a maximum amount of solutions to emerge all while being site specific.

For the students to be able to focus on one issue, knowing the complexity of each site and the limited time frame that the masterclass offered, it was important to start designing immediately, not getting lost in complicated research. Previous to the masterclass a «package» was crafted for each site
containing the main information needed. The package offered detailed information on the site (situation, perimeter, study perimeter, site history, plans, aerial view, zoning), a showcase of past and ongoing projects and a reading on architectural and urbanistic references. It also contained five questions specific to each site, already hinting towards a possible exploration of an urban and economic relationship. The fact that the wifi connection offered during the masterclass only worked sporadically, turned out to be a real opportunity for the production, forcing everyone to do without much additional information, and selected information intelligently.

The importance of methodology

Following a two week masterclass is taking the risk of ending up with a range of interesting ideas but no instruction manual to read them. What we were hoping to end up with was a smart database of legible proposals that could be selectively and collectively chosen and discussed, even long after the end of the masterclass. In order to allow the maximum amount of freedom and mess necessary to be able to come up with innovative solutions (as Bruce Mau says, «never clean your desk») a clear methodology needed to be determined, offering a structure for everyone to speak the same language. We believe that a well designed method is the key to any project, since it allows a common understanding of the process while following a clear path. The method becomes increasingly important as we are dealing with complex issues.

As a practice we deal with the complex reality of the contemporary city daily in our projects. Within this context, the question of representation becomes a key issue. Design is a means to transform chaos into form and organization, whether it be on the scale of the city or that of a very small space, and drawing is a tool that helps to achieve this organization. Not as a celebration of complexity but rather a search for clarity, drawing has strong potential. We need to reserve specific attention to the link between method, process of the project and the economic reality in which we operate. Olle Eksell, a swedish graphic designer published the book «Design=Economy» in 1967, in which he explains how design and economy tend to be separated while they should be tightly linked. We strongly believe in a bringing together design and economy, and in the drawing as a vehicle for this purpose.

When discussing the way industrial logistic activities can function efficiently within the city, the choice of representation becomes crucial, because the right means of expression will allow us to explain something very complex in a simple way. It is also about finding the representation that fits into reality, expressing the essence of the issue.

1. Red and blue

For this masterclass the main challenge was to find ways to develop a cohabitation between city and economy, therefore to be able to think about both space (m3) and economy (m2). The first step taken into the methodology was to define two main colors referring to the two global programs that were to interact: Blue for economic activity and Red for the city.
This simple choice had several purposes. To start, it automatically put the focus on the main challenge of the masterclass by identifying its two main protagonist in a recognizable way. By doing so there was no way to escape the question, each design needed to contain both blue and red, the variable being in the quantity of each and the type of relationship they developed. Furthermore, this simplistic color code also helped to increase the efficiency of the working process. As several people were working together for the first time (up to 8 in the second week) it became a way to understand each others ideas within the group and to communicate them to the teaching staff.

Drawing with specific colors is a means to organize ideas collectively. Rather than an abstract or authoritarian approach it was a very concrete one that helped both the design and the communication during the masterclass.

Blue and Orange, de “Suite of Twenty-Seven Color Lithographs”, Ellsworth Kelly, 1964

2. Architecture and urbanism

Step two in the methodology was to separate the disciplines of architecture and urban planning. This separation occurred not because the two disciplines are independent but precisely because we know that they can not function without each other. Architecture alone can not create a good cohabitation between economy and city, and neither can urban planning. The separation was a way to explore the potential of each discipline, pushing their limits in order to better come together. Thus, each site was divided into a group of «architects» and a group of «urbanists».

The first week the «architects» were to stay in the perimeter, understanding and challenging the architectural program, while the «urbanists» were to play around it, understanding the city and drawing the urban story in a speculative way. Each group developed proposals arising from their understanding. The second week of the masterclass the architects and urbanists of each site united to confront their ideas and develop one common project. Together they had to define the scale of the project and its objectives, forcing them to discuss the relationship between each other. This gave birth to numerous and animated discussions within the teams.
Most important, we felt that a distinction between architecture and urbanism would help us explore other fields of possibilities than those of the in-between scale, searching for new relationships in the extremes. Two existing references help to illustrate this.

The first one, the Shinonome Canal Court residential development in Tokyo, is based on the idea of housing that is flexible enough to accommodate small offices and home offices to improve the social relations of its inhabitants as well as adjusting to their current lifestyles. When working on the building design, architect Riken Yamamoto decided to put the water section (bathrooms and kitchen) by the window instead of the core of the building, the way it is usually done, changing the whole relationship between live and work. This move leaves the vestibule free for working areas to open up to the central corridor, creating an urban environment within a private building. From housing to city, the Shinonome residential development illustrates the importance of economy at the small scale to produce a sense of urbanity.

The second project works in an opposite direction. The city of Rotterdam will launch a pilot project in 2013 destined to connect the port industry with housing developments in the city center. A symbol of the “circular economy” advocated by the authorities, the project consists of the construction of a pipeline that recovers the steam emitted by industrial companies to heat an entire area of the city. It is a complex and expensive project that requires a new economic philosophy, both from the industrial companies and the city. The pipeline will start by connecting three companies, allowing to heat 50 000 homes with 26 km of pipeline in 2013 and the operating company hopes that several other companies will join the project as it develops. From city to housing, the Rotterdam project is a good example of the added value that economy can play in the city.

3. Pin up

The last measure that was taken in the methodology was to propose a rigorous process of public display. Setting aside site visits and official presentations the masterclass offered eight days of work and every day the groups were to pin up five A5 on the wall, ending each working session with a small public presentation. There were to be five A5 per day, no less, no more. As the days went by the A5 accumulated, showing the working process of each team.

However, the main purpose of the masterclass was not to display a working process. If the process counts the results are equally important and the A5 eventually served to make these results clearer. Indeed, they forced the groups to express themselves clearly and to chose what they were to draw or represent. In terms of production it was quality, not quantity that became the defining element.

Learning from the masterclass: critical mass and balance
The results of the masterclass, which are being presented in this publication should not be regarded as five site specific projects but rather as five different approaches, proposing a wide range of urban situations that explore different potentials, such as the built structure, physical connections or immaterial links. These situations may not be immediately operational on a specific site but they all embrace a pragmatic yet optimistic and visionary idea of what coproduction between urbanity and economy can do for the city. They are truly contemporary in their understanding of the urban complexity, and its potential, and should serve not only to reflect on the future of the five chosen sites, but ultimately to nourish the reflection on the scale of Brussels, extending it even further to other European cities.

What strikes us most in all the proposals is the persistent reference to critical mass. Indeed, they show that cohabitation between economy and city is not just a question of well designed space: even though good design is crucial it can not alone be the answer. The question of reintroducing industry, logistics and activity in the city center is also a quantitative question, and, if as architects and urban planners we now how to deal with critical mass when it comes to urban programs (to a more or less successful result), we do not know how to deal with quantity when it comes to logistics or industry in the city. Speaking of the friendly city and the machines, no-one really seems to be an expert. Yet, it is crucial that architects and urban planners, be it students, practitioners or theoreticians, start to discuss this issue, because it will deeply shape our cities in the future.

During the masterclass, the issue of critical mass necessary to be able to develop a good relationship between economy and city was one of the main topics discussed with the students, and it immediately triggered another one: the question of balance.

Kickstarting the design process the first week we witnessed a lot of red and blue drawings on the wall, showing abstract intentions of coproduction. As the days went by, and the drawings became less abstract and more contextual, the blue pen tended to be left out. During the daily pin up sessions, we kept asking for the blue, Jan even dressed in the color to get the message out: that the main issue of the masterclass was to reintroduce industry, logistics and whole sale in the city and that could not be achieved without the blue. During the final presentation the blue was present but to a more or less large extent.

What this color story illustrates is the limit of mixed use when it comes to economy and the city and the inevitable problem of gentrification that cohabitation poses. It shows that the question of balance is key to a good cohabitation between city and economy, and this balance is not easy to achieve. Indeed, it isn’t only about finding the right proportions of red and blue, it is about finding the right relationship between both, understanding what each brings the other. Sometimes the only way to sustain an existing industry can be to offer a new urban condition for example.

Here is where our role as architects and urban planners becomes essential. Through our «spatial» eye we can help identify these relationships, just as the proposals of the masterclass start to do. By clearly identifying critical mass and balance as key issues, the masterclass already takes an important step into the great challenge of the friendly city and the machines.
Anthony Jammes, Susanne Eliasson

* Olle Eksell, «Design=Economy», 1967