



**ARCHITECTURE QUALITY
AS A COMMON CONCERN
EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON
ARCHITECTURAL POLICIES**

23 - 26 APRIL 2024 - BRUSSELS

After several successful efforts to survey architectural policies and policy tools in the participating countries, we intend to debate concrete examples where architectural quality was envisioned. During the roundtable sessions, a limited set of case studies will be discussed, instead of offering an overview of a myriad of policy initiatives. We examine, case by case, how the policy pursuit of a high-quality environment can lead to realizations, and how projects can inform policies in turn.

Architectural quality is here understood as the result of a collaborative search. The focus is not exclusively on procedures and tools that can be mobilized 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 be tools to reconstruct such processes. The roundtables focus on three types of interaction, and thus the set of actors gathered *in function of a project*: private parties (developers), citizens and professionals (designers) in architecture interacting with (other) public authorities. We also want to show how spatial quality emerges in these instances of interaction.

By explicitly centering on projects, the term architecture policy takes on a somewhat narrower meaning. There exists a risk that this focus on operability disregards other dimensions of architectural policy: such as the anchoring of architecture within the broader cultural field; the promotion of exemplary architectural practice through awards, exhibitions, and public debates; the understanding and impact of major shifts in the profession, in building culture, in architectural training and higher education; etc... Yet, by deepening our understanding of factual day-to-day practices we hope to strengthen the recurring plea for a High-Quality *Baukultur*.

In this introduction, we explain the motives in the conference's title 'Architectural Quality as a Common Concern', while clarifying major decisions underlying the symposium's set-up. The text points out some assumptions and limitations embedded in the choices made. After the introduction, the practical setup of roundtable sessions, key projects, and intended interactions are briefly outlined.¹

¹ This introductory text was written by Maarten Van Den Driessche and Maarten Liefoghe, while relying on input by the organizing committee of the conference: Typhaine Moogin, Eva Amelynck, Juliette Dubois, Tania Hertveld, Thomas Moor, Erik Wieërs, Nicolas Hemeleers and Florentine Sieux, and their respective organisations Cellule Archi de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Flemish Government Architect (BWMSTR), City Tools and A.C.C. (Ghent University)

1. Defining Architectural Quality?: Negotiating a multiplicity of public interests



Ding 001359, an assembly by Kobe Matthys, 2012, Atelier Bouwmeester, Brussels

Instead of putting a semantic discussion on *Architectural Quality* itself at the center of the debate, we explicitly have chosen to nurture the conference on architectural policies with practical examples aiming to realize a high-quality built environment. By doing so, we hoped to make the debate more tangible, to study ongoing policy initiatives and to raise new questions.

'Architectural Quality', a broad denominator connecting divergent policy frameworks In the most recent survey publication 'Architecture Policies in Europe' 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 constitute the built environment. Considering the broad scope of its acts across the different policy areas that affect the design quality of the built environment, such as building, urban planning, environment, cultural heritage, public works among others.'*² In recent publications and policy statements the recruiting force of terms like 'Architectural Quality' and *High-Quality Baukultur* can be noted – think of the New European Bauhaus initiative in 2020 by the president of the European Commission or the Davos Declaration in 2018. Many of these statements were prepared here, among other places, in the lap of ECAP, or have also been discussed here.³

In his study, João Bento shows the richness of the European institutional landscape on architecture policy. He enumerates the diversity of initiatives and tools for pursuing architectural policy, and thus emphasizes the strategic importance of the broad heading of 'architectural quality'. At the same time, the

² 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.

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.

study also sketches the circumstances and different governmental traditions from which policy was shaped. The author points at the different political speeds with which this pan-European narrative is implemented in European member states.⁴ By approaching the quality of the living environment holistically, the term can bring together transversal expertise, cut across different policy domains, and put the demand for a qualitative living environment on the agenda at multiple sectoral policy levels.

In the ECAP meeting in Brussels, we want to examine one sub-aspect in more detail: *the co-creation of public action*. We can ask how this pursuit of spatial quality becomes a shared concern, around which stakeholders and experts from different policy backgrounds and knowledge domains are brought together.

Architectural Quality: What's in a name? The great advantage of the term 'Architectural Quality' is that everyone has an idea of what can be understood by it. So it is easy to find agreement that we want to realize a qualitative built environment. We surely should bet on architectural quality and design excellence. Yet, there is the risk of flattening out due to the somewhat monolithic, consensual character of the umbrella term. To what exactly does architectural quality relate? Due to the term's abstract nature, definitions somehow lack concreteness, legitimising power, and argumentative force.

'Architecture Quality' refers to a range of public interests: a multiplicity of ambitions, activities, meanings, and thus also a range of possible outcomes.⁵ It concerns an extensive field in which numerous disciplines and policy sectors are active: art & culture, spatial planning and urban design, material and immaterial heritage, health and welfare, education, housing, public works, etc. - all having their concerns, instruments and tools, topical issues and knowledge traditions. It is an area for which standards and rules have been formulated, in which many private and public sector actors are present, countless interests apply, and which also involves funding and money.

The term 'Architectural Quality' may lead to multiple interpretations, while the common denominator also masks the inherent tensions that are raised when it comes to making substantial changes to our lived and built environment. The abstract term 'architectural quality' covers a layered sociopolitical battlefield, where within the confines of a specific project, temporal agreements are found between different concerns. As a result, the discussion usually shifts to the 'how': how is architectural quality *to be envisioned* and how may high-quality environments *be achieved*?

Quality, a matter of concern: What? How? For (and By) Whom? Furthermore the 'what', and 'how' but, above all, the 'for (and by) whom' cannot simply be separated from each other, as concrete projects show. Concerning built and unbuilt space all sorts of claims apply which must be weighed against each other

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.

time and again.⁶ Propositions about the quality criteria that apply to a public-private partnership written down in the competition brief for a new visitors center in an ecologically fragile habitat for example, will thoroughly differ from those applying to deprived urban neighborhoods where the carbon-free energy transition must be brought in line with energy poverty and thus social equity.

The picture above shows an assembly of Kobe Matthys and his artistic practice Agency at the BWMSTR atelier in Brussels. The work 'Ding 001359 (Chico Mendez Mural Garden)' questions the court case concerning a communal garden in Lower East Manhattan. Chico Mendez was an activist for the Amazon forest, in whose memory a communal garden in New York's Lower East Side was created. The question was whether an illegally zoned garden in a densely urbanized metropolis, and highly significant to the local community, could be protected from real-estate development. 'Ding 001359 (Chico Mendez Mural Garden)', as staged in the Flemish Government Architect's representational office and public vitrine, where also project meetings and competition juries take place, is a reminder of both the multiple concerns in spatial projects, and of the institutional support structures that can include or exclude stakeholders and concerns.

In concrete sites and projects a multiplicity of public interests become apparent, together with sets of actors and policy settings. The realization of a high-quality built environment may then be understood as the outcome of a layered negotiation between those interests.

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.

2. Toward common concerns: Interactions shaped through spatial projects



Visitation Brussels Bouwmeester - Maître Architecte (BMA), © City Tools /Architectural Workroom Brussels

Rather than mapping Architectural Policies in Europe – in which some political consensus concerning policy goals may be found, next to critical differences – we shift the focus to decentralized and inherently contingent formats of negotiation and decision-making in the light of specific projects.⁷ The 2024 ECAP conference in Brussels investigates how policy ambitions concerning high-quality living environments are implemented, shaped, or searched for within the limited scope of projects. The spatial project forms a framework and harbours the necessary room for decision-making to confront divergent and even antagonistic boundary conditions, and to let multiple ambitions regarding the built environment converge and get intertwined. By focusing on the interactions around specific spatial projects, we adopt a particular approach toward architectural policy. In project development, how can public authorities, civil servants and policy-makers interact with such diverse actors as private developers, designers, and, even more so, citizens? What role do these different actors play? When? And through what mechanisms? Above all, how can we make the question of project quality central to these interactions?

The spatial project and its key dimensions A high-quality built environment may be understood as the result of a set of negotiations absorbing various ambitions and shared interests among the participants involved in the project's process.

The term 'project' is central in architectural discourse, but it has an inherently ambivalent character. Besides the proper architectural project, the term 'spatial project' can also refer to urban and landscape design, regional plans, artistic or participatory projects, building processes and innovations regarding the building

⁷ '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 tissu 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.' Ève Chiapello, Luc Boltanski (1999) *Le nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*. Paris: Editions Minuit. p.160

process, and other related schemes. The notion of 'project' has three more general meanings: the development of *a vision*, *a plan* to accomplish the enterprise, and finally the *applied design intention* integrating a multiplicity of concerns. In our project case studies, we can recognize these dimensions in projective formulations, in timelines and tools, and in various kinds of design documents and built work.

Firstly the notion stands for a desired image, an outline, a horizon of possibilities. This first meaning refers to the recruiting power of an image that appeals to our imagination – the as-of-yet imaginary ambition to realize a fossil-free region in 2050, for example.

Secondly, the project refers to a procedural logic: a plan or the methodological approach. To get qualitative results, you need appropriate tools and proper procedures. The time required, the working method, and financial resources must be defined beforehand to make the project succeed. When the procedures are followed carefully, you anticipate the intended result. This second meaning refers to the methodologies and trajectories which may be implemented to obtain certain results. In other words, the realization of the project is embedded in the procedure. The first and second dimensions of the 'project' are clearly at odds, but 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 striving for a convincing unity within the assumed constraints. The mission evokes the expectation of the integration of several constraints, affordances and other boundary conditions that are met during the process. Skilled design work aims at a convincing and coherent outcome with given means and in given circumstances, while articulating cultural production that goes beyond mere problem-solving.

Assembling stakeholders and expertise around projects Every architectural project is the materialization of encounters between architects and clients, public authorities, experts, financiers, builders, inhabitants, citizens, and the like. In each situation, the stakeholders will raise quality concerns related to their involvement and taking aim at the specifics of a site, a programme, etc. Then, architectural quality can be understood as multiple concerns to be addressed, articulated, and integrated in light of specific projects.

Several examples can be given that call for active positioning in regard to quality concerns: access to good quality housing, the protection of meaningful places within a community, the negotiation between private and public interests in an urban development project, the assessment and re-programming of inherited building stock, the refurbishment of valuable heritage sites, the reconversion of polluted industrial sites and landscapes, the development and integration of climate adaptation projects on a regional scale, ... to name only a few of the trajectories which will be addressed during the roundtable sessions.

Each of these urgent questions may legitimize the need for *a project* and can be found in project briefs' formulations of ambitions and conditions. They will also be brought to bear on projects in quality enhancement and evaluation processes. The investigation of concrete cases not only allows to study the role of the different stakeholders and their interactions; it also allows for investigating the necessary expertise brought together in the context of a task at hand. The experts that were consulted, and the applied rules and tools also reveal the supporting

frameworks, disciplinary knowledge, and active socio-political networks that were activated in light of the 'public interests'⁸ at play.

For every intervention in the built environment, the line-up of stakeholders, the consulting and leadership, the interdependencies and power relationships are different, although the design remains a common and constant means.

Beyond (the singularity of) the project Architectural, urban or spatial planning *projects* may all have in common that design is a means through which adaptations to the built environment are (re)negotiated, they each are a-priori situated in time and space. The various projects we will be discussing in the roundtable sessions are embedded in specific policy contexts. They are always part of a local geographic reality – the existing built fabric, climatological givens, and various political and societal realities – so that the challenges and expectations that apply to the specific case may be less relevant to other places or circumstances. The concrete projects finally are realized within a specified time frame, a clear starting point and sometimes an end. Thus the lessons we can learn are never unequivocally generalizable. By looking at projects in isolation, there is a risk that we would miss the importance of the policy context and its institutional support; and ignore the initiatives through which the concrete projects took shape. Rather we want these policy contexts to be considered and made tangible through the projects discussed in the roundtable sessions.

The case studies provide an occasion to discuss the peculiarities of each project but also to learn from them as examples. Through concise project reconstructions, we can gain a better understanding of the concerns that were launched when the project was initiated or that were taken to heart only in later stages, how the intended ambitions were monitored during the project's course, but one can also evaluate the final result and ascertain which precise circumstances determined its outcome - for the better or worse.

Of course, the pursuit of a high-quality building culture is not entirely project-dependent. To a significant extent, a building culture also takes shape outside of a project context: in publications, exhibitions and city festivals, in building practice, in participatory processes, in the everyday use of the lived and built environment. This ECAP conference's approach is however much determined by a design governance approach to architectural quality, so let's be mindful of the fact that architecture/building culture policies should include but should also comprise more than policies for governing architectural projects well.

Similarly, projects can relate to plotted policy in several ways. Spatial projects are often presumed to be the materialized implementation of a policy. However, certain experiments, pilots, and design research projects can also act as catalysts, triggers even, to (re)shape policy. Finally, the project environment can also be a haven where professional positions and power relations can be dissolved in part, allowing for new connections. Here, the project environment may operate as a laboratory where new practices are developed.

⁸ We may refer to the Davos Quality System and its eight criteria: Governance, Functionality, Environment, Sense of Place, Economy, Diversity, Context, and Beauty. 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)

3. Institutional support creating circumstances for co-creation



Luxembourg in Transition, Exposition, luca - Luxembourg Center for Architecture, 2023

The pan-European network of ECAP assembles policymakers and civil servants, academics and experts, actors from the broader cultural domain, as well as design professionals. As such the conference offers a rich international environment to debate this interplay between the different stakeholders involved in a project, to understand and compare the precise circumstances – the various policy contexts - in which the actual projects were shaped.

So, we seek to re-assess the notion of the “project” by collectively reimagining the actual and necessary institutional support assisting in the project’s realization. What kind of institutions and administrative practices can bring about productive circumstances for co-creating projects, and for articulating quality as a common concern today?

The architect’s multiple roles: changes in the profession First, the case studies make clear that today’s professional field of architecture is characterized by a rapid transformation.⁹ In contrast with the dominant image of an architect as a solitary individual directing the project’s course, we see that architectural firms are organizing themselves differently; setting themselves up as collaborative players and developing projects in dialogue with other stakeholders within the design process.

The case studies show that in addition to project leaders in administrations or private development companies, also architects acts as brokers in a polymorphous sphere of societal forces. New design tools, communication devices and modelling of impacts and performances extensively affect the architect’s work. Building industries are impacted by the scarcity of resources, the emergence of the circular economy and other developments. Urban and architectural projects are increasingly redefined as complete business cases: including design, financing, construction, marketing, and maintenance during the first decades of use.

What happens when contractors surpass independent architects and the practical and economical imperatives of building practice affect the design

⁹ 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

process? What design expertise is needed when it comes to the assessment of a building stock without the ambition to immediately erect new buildings? What do architects have to offer in participatory projects when inhabitants are likely to plan, organize, and develop their living environment themselves? These changes not only continuously affect the architect's role. It evenly challenges any understanding of the architectural profession and discipline at large, and should also be taken into account in architectural policies.¹⁰

Transformation in policy-making, and its effect on government practices Similarly public authorities take alternative positions and various roles in the project's course. When architectural projects are increasingly initiated as a co-productive and collaborative endeavor involving complex interactions between private and public actors – public authorities, but also private developers, future inhabitants, and critical citizens – we should also reflect on the changing nature of public clientship.

In urban design governance literature design governance is defined as 'the intervention and processes of design and managing the built environment.'¹¹ Historically, central administrations have established systems and rules to protect 'public interests', mainly safeguarding the built outcome employing a strict regulatory framework: building standards for instance. However, with the phasing out of technical services within centralized administrations, and the increasing importance of soft governance, self-organization, empowerment, or project direction, policy-making is taking other forms.

Many of the case studies discussed in the roundtable sessions were prepared through study assignments, public tenders or project definitions by public bodies and civil servants whose work is hidden behind the scenes. The administrative labor behind a spatial project is not usually communicated or articulated in public discourse about architecture. Preparatory work, produced by the project's ghost-writers, or any other critically-constructive work from peers in/outside of administrations remains invisible. The investigation of concrete cases does not only allow us to study the project's outcome, nor the process flows, quality-enhancing elements in a procedure, or the necessary expertise brought together in the context of a task at hand; it also allows for tracing the distribution and articulation of public concerns and expertise in the light of this specific case, and to ponder how this relates to policy making.

Institutional settings sustaining ecologies of practice Against this background, the broad architectural field – architecture education, culture, as well as public administration – is urged to rethink its premises. In short, it is important to look beyond individual projects and also consider the institutional environment where these projects took shape.¹² A narrow focus on the architectural project is therefore too restrictive to reflect on architectural policies.

A fertile environment for architecture does not only arise in project governance but will depend on a finely-meshed network of institutions and activities. Various state and municipal chief architects, public utility companies and housing cooperatives, educational and research institutions, think tanks and living labs,

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ Urban Maestro (2021) *New Governance Strategies for Urban Design*. United Nations Human Settlements Program, Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte, UCL -Bartlett School of Planning.

¹² 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.

citizens' movements and society organizations, architecture periodicals and web platforms, architecture centers, and other cultural platforms. On the one hand, there are closed 'project environments' where future project assignments are prepared for, but on the other hand, we see the emergence of numerous public forums and educational settings where new concepts are articulated, made manifest, debated, and publicized.

The conference is not only meant to create room to exchange thoughts, experiences, and methodologies about interesting projects but also to look at sometimes invisible, supporting *institutional* practices and ecologies. Without powerful institutional networks, it is difficult to respond to major societal challenges.

Creating circumstances for co-creation may then be understood as a plea for rethinking institutions, practices and personnel, in support of the spatial projects and conduct they aim for. In a time when public institutions are under all kinds of pressure it is essential to continue being critical of institutions but also defend their significance and acknowledge their essential role. At the conference, we plead for rich institutional settings that allow architects and policymakers to develop and nurture high-quality projects.

What governmental strategies might be applied to encourage developers to act as publicly accountable developers? Which settings empower citizens to intervene in projects? What type of external support equips local governments to play the 'flexible' game of 'soft governance' with certainty and the necessary knowledge and capacity? What ways of administrating and organizing do we need to bring spatial projects to fruition?

In short, which institutional platforms for creating and exchanging knowledge help to produce high-quality building culture?