

Denkraum #5

Empathy – Building double

Empathy is the ability to project oneself into someone else's position and take their perspective for a while. An understanding based on the temporary weakening of the limit between oneself and 'the other'. The English term was translated from the German *Einfühlung*, a concept coined in the 19th century by philosopher Robert Vischer, in his doctoral thesis *On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics*. From the beginning, empathy was closely related to the way something looks, and to how this allows a viewer to engage with it and ultimately to develop an understanding of it. A crucial skill for the architect, always in need of tuning into new clients and contexts.

The Belgian Coast has been a destination since the late 19th century, and was first populated by villas or hotels, with their grand presence and interiors, celebrating the coastal way of life. From the 1950s on, they were largely replaced by the so-called 'Atlantic Wall' — a 60-kilometer-long strip of high-rises facing the coveted sea view. How to find a new relevance for these buildings, in this dune context turned urban, relying solely on tourism? Public money has run out, so teaming up with private partners appears to be the only way to rescue those few waning monuments of sea side architecture.

'**Building Double**' is contemplated by developers as a potentially viable strategy and a pragmatic way to make the survival of those old hotels economically feasible, and to answer the ever increasing demand for sea side apartments. The semester will focus on three sites, three declining hotels buildings from the early 20th century, which students, in groups of two, will be asked to double, and to open up to new public programs geared toward permanent residents. Like Trojan horses, those programs will inaugurate new positive dynamics and improve social conditions for sea side towns at large, giving them something back beyond touristic accommodation.

But how to elaborate on the work of another architect; how to understand the subtleties and logics of those structures to extend them? How to tune into the expectations of a client you might not agree with, and how to meet their ambitions while defending a building's 'best interests'? How to find a position towards the harsh urban and landscape condition created by the democratization of coastal tourism in Belgium? This semester, the potential of an empathic attitude in navigating such questions will be collectively explored.

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Making architecture demands a constant and dynamic reading of given contexts under the angle of specific briefs and questions, allowing to unveil explicit and implicit relationships stemming from past actions and present dynamics. We will investigate different ways to read, and from there we will proceed to place findings in a framework, to structure them and create our own hierarchies, to situate ourselves in relationship to it. Within the studio, the multiplicity of individual tracks will be united under the common theme, in a common space of thinking: a Denkraum.

The Denkraum is a space of presence. A place where the work is on constant display and grows organically in time, concentrating questions, tensions and proposed solutions, developing a common design endeavour and discourse, a joined output based on associative thinking and reflection by analogy. A place where reading and writing reality happens all at once. A place to discuss together and with guests coming from different backgrounds, regions and disciplines, guests who will talk to us and think along.

Introduction 17 September 2019, 9:30am, HIP C1

Site visit to the Belgian Coast (*mandatory*) – 23-25 February / studio cost max. CHF200

Professor An Fonteyne – Assistants Pablo Donet, Serafina Eipert, Thomas Klement, Galaad Van Daele

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