

in practice, the exploration of design processes: a conversation

*harold fallon, benoît burquel,
benoît vandenbulcke (agwa) with
aslı çiçek, freek dendooven,
gijs de cock (raamwerk)*

abstract Since 2019, the research group *Architecture In Practice* (KU Leuven, ULiège and ULB) started editing *In Practice*, a series of double blind peer reviewed books. In these books, architects unveil the design and construction process of one single project through the lens of the available documents, including sketches, scale models, annotated plans, construction site photographs, mail exchanges, etc. This process is explored by the architects and an invited co-author. Here, “the action that does” is worthier of interest than “the thing done” (Valery, 1957). External contributions provide complementary perspectives on the discipline, on research and pedagogy, on theory and edition. The research group’s aim is to provide a space for practicing architects to engage their work in academic research. However, in the books’ framework, the architects are not necessarily involved in academic research. For these non-academic participants, it is rather an invitation to the modalities of research. The books address an audience of architecture cognoscenti, practicing architects and the design-related academic community. On the occasion of the book festival 9000 boeken and of the DAM architecture book award obtained by *Raamwerk In Practice: Lichtervelde Youth House*,

the publisher MER B&L invited the editors to organize a talk to discuss the books on November 6th 2021 at the Kunsthall in Ghent. We invited Aslı Çiçek, a practicing architect and visiting professor at UHasselt and UGent. She is also a member of the editorial board of *OASE Journal for Architecture*. We invited Freek Dendooven and Gijs De Cock as well, architects and partners of the Raamwerk firm. During the talk, Harold Fallon represented the editorial board, including Benoît Burquel and Benoît Vandenbulcke. The talk combined the perspectives of the architecture practice, of the edition and of the theory. The discussion addressed several aspects, amongst which the role of design processes in the forming of architecture theory, the authorship in multidisciplinary contexts, the relationships between text and images, the collaboration with a photographer, the issue of distance between practice and research and the significance of the small scale and detail in contemporary architecture discourse.

harold fallon The three books begin with prefaces noting that architecture projects are often considered as ‘black boxes’, as finished designs subjected to study and interpretation. The books invite the reader to look at one project at a time, not as an object but as a process. In what way can the unravelling of a design process relate to theory and discourse?

aslı çiçek Each book has a different way of showing the process. They display the information without exaggerated reorganization, like an open archive, revealing the interests or the narratives that lead to a final project. Usually, we see pictures of the situation before and after the design and there is no platform for all that happens in between. The format of the books is flexible, it adapts to each project, and it allows to build a certain theoretical background in a simple, almost natural way. In the book about Buero Kofink Schels, for example, the architects simply explain what each image is about, they describe what you can really see in the picture. It is an effective introduction to the whole project without having to theorize it *a priori*. It gradually builds the understanding of the design and

of the ideas that relate to it. Compared to lectures, the books are a very useful format because they bring things together, they create non-linear relationships. The reader can keep on going back to it and rebuild these relationships.

gijs de cock A difference between these books and a typical coffee table book resides in the raw material it contains. They allow one to look behind the scenes in a way that is unusual for architecture books.

hf We know that teachers in several universities referred to the Raamwerk book in the framework of workshops. That is probably because, additionally to the discovery of an interesting project, this book allows reflection on the design process, on how to make it happen.

freek dendooven Another specificity of the book *Raamwerk In Practice* is that it focuses more on the development of the project during the construction itself rather than on the preceding design process.

hf You explained once that you won the competition for the Lichtervelde Youth Centre and that you almost directly started the construction works, with very little changes to the competition design. The events and constraints of the construction gave you the opportunity to develop the project further. As such, the design process happens in a kind of collective setting that involves other people like the client, the contractor, the administration, or politicians. In this context, how do you see your work as an architect and how do you approach the question of authorship?

fd We think that design results from a kind of shared endeavor. For this project we had to deal with a very limited budget, and we had to find a way to converse with numerous players to tackle a lot of parameters. Lichtervelde is a small village. There is a sort of village attitude which was very important in shaping the design and construction processes. The spatial principle

is very simple and clear: the project rests on one single idea of four interconnected rooms. This backbone allowed us to address all the inevitable contingencies of the process. Refinement could be added to the spatial and social complexity of the project by making an intelligent use of the tolerances of the very cheap bricks, for example. From the beginning, the simple setting of the four rooms allowed us to deal with politics, the contractors, and the complications of construction.

hf You could have considered these events during the process as mere issues to overcome. However, your approach was to use these problems as opportunities for additional quality, instead of trying to hide or to solve them. That is quite defining of your architectural position in this project.

gdc This was not obvious from the beginning. We knew that the clear objective of the four rooms would help us deal with such events, but then we also understood that we could orient the project without designing everything beforehand, by making use of the opportunities of construction works. That makes it more enriching and more interesting.

fd It was very explicit here because we had to deal with a restricted budget. For example, we could not just replace the unsatisfactory windows. So, we had to invent details and ways of making these 'problems' participate in the project's quality. To achieve this, we had to think together, with the contractor. It was very straightforward. We appreciated this context a lot. Similarly, it seems that Lewerentz had a deal with the contractor, for the church of St Peter in Klippan (1966). Bricks should never be cut. It was certainly one of the main elements of the architecture of the church. It is a very powerful and generous way to start a process.

hf It has a lot to do with verbal activity, but when you talk now, you make a lot of movements, as if you wanted to draw and show us what things are about. When designing, the graphic production of images, documents or scale models is

intimately related to verbal activity, such as conversations, comments, or explanations. The way they interact is very unlike the traditional hierarchy of image and text (Foucault, 1983), where the images are the servile illustrations of a text or where the text is reduced to the role of a caption or legend to the images. The *In Practice* books somehow reenact the dynamics of a more balanced relationship between verbality and visuality. How does this balance work in a reflexive editorial project about architecture?

ac The balance is not always easy to find, especially in theoretical writing. Usually, text dominates, and images illustrate. However, *In Practice* is quite focused on images too. This morning, I was talking with Mathieu Wellner about the book *Buero Kofink Schels In Practice*. They describe the documents, and like on Instagram, images and explanations become quite equal in amount, it is quite balanced. The new generations are very familiar with this. Understanding this balance is important for education and writing about architecture. To be honest, I almost never read architecture books from the first to the last page. They are probably not meant for it. They are consulted when writing, to look things up or to read specific chapters. Some other formats are exceptions, like the *In Practice* books. This is probably related to the more proportional role of image and text amongst other things.

hf The font used in the books is quite large. It confers a visual quality to the content, and it naturally balances the amount of text and images, not only in surface, but also in terms of time spent on them by the reader. Otherwise, the images would quickly become either peripheral or dominant.

ac It is as dialogue of sorts. Two weeks ago, I received the latest issue of *OASE* (109, *Modernities*). I almost read through it in one afternoon. It consists of a written dialogue, in the form of letter exchanges between practitioners and the editorial board. This kind of balanced formats works very well. Of course, they are complementary to other formats, for example more textual

ones, to expand, build up and discuss arguments, or more visual ones, which serve as documentation. But balanced formats are very rewarding, especially when it comes to practitioners discussing their work.

hf In *Buero Kofink Schels In Practice*, the architects have chosen a series of documents they judged important to represent the process. Mathieu worked as a mediator rather than as an author. As he states in the book, he systematically asked the same question to the architects: ‘What do you really see in this image?’

Consequently, the text is not an authoritative caption, it is an account of what the architects see in the various documents. In a way, it invites the reader to look closely and to learn to examine the documents. The graphic designers Orfée Grandhomme and Ismaël Benanni offered the addition visual material, and it articulates the whole book. It expands the network: it is not only a dialogue between images and texts, but images start to comment on each other too, inviting the reader to discover interconnections.

aq But certain passages are also quite vulnerable because the books contain documents which might normally not be seen. The format is very honest and transparent. The authors give direct access to the design process. The reader senses certain confrontational moments in the relationships between Raamwerk and the municipality for example, and how you turned them into assets for the project. In that sense the publication is very direct.

hf Recently we – the editors – asked all the architects and writers to identify one document they really appreciated in the book they worked on. Everybody pointed at documents related to human relationships, to the appropriation of spaces, to interactions, or to the construction site. They were showing details, not the complete picture, and certainly not the usual clean and final achievement, as if the process mattered more than the objective outcome. The book represents a significant

effort to theorize, to illustrate and phrase things, so it is significant that they all pointed out this sort of documents.

fd [Showing a drawing with hand-written annotations.] For example, this drawing is hardly publishable as a document. I do not like it as a drawing, but it represents the nature of the whole process very well. It is important to show how the architecture resulted from a collaborative debate.

aq These books have also a pedagogical responsibility. One is invited to take time to explore a single project. It shows that there is nothing wrong about unfinished, less polished documents, because one still fashions a good project and beautiful documents too. You were actually not aware that this drawing with the annotations could be part of a book! The drawing shows that there is a constructive struggle which ends up defining the architecture. If you do not take these moments and these documents into account, either you objectify the project or you theorize it.

hf I would like to show the image that was pointed out by Pierre Chabard in *Philippe Vander Maren & Richard Venlet In Practice*. It is the picture of a table after a generous dinner, with the used plates and glasses of wine. A large-scale model is prominent on the table. Pierre Chabard wrote this comment: 'This photograph was taken during a working dinner at the architect's home and would never be published in an architecture magazine. It tells us about the life of a project, about its successive material incarnations that we have sought to retrace in the book and which are all "modes of existence" of architecture, to paraphrase Latour. I like this photo because it gives the impression that the white scale model is about to be eaten for dessert, like the architectural pastries Antonin Carême made at the beginning of the nineteenth-century. The emptiness of the photo echoes the lively architectural discussions that seem to have taken place just before, leaving the table like a theatre of operations after a battle.' The image tells us about the refinement of the scale model,



1

1 Sebastian and David walking through Almería with borrowed tools, published in Buero Kofink Schels *in Practice: TIA House I+II*. Comment by Mathieu Wellner : 'An unusual photo for an architectural publication. What you see here is not a building, but the client and one of the architects borrowing tools – a snapshot from the creation of the building. Nonetheless, the photo conveys topics.'



3

3 Evening work session, published in *Philippe Vander Maren & Richard Venlet In Practice*, 2019.

about the context in which a design emerges, about friendship and the pleasure of architectural debate and about the time such a process can take, it refers to architecture as having multiple forms, and so on. Maybe it refers also to the vulnerability you were suggesting, the honesty and the exposure of giving access to the process. Now about photography. For the books, the choice of the photographer is discussed and left to the architects. In your case, Stijn Bollaert composed the pictures of the Lichtervelde Youth Centre for *Raamwerk In Practice*. You regularly work with him. The photos were taken after the first drafts of the book were assembled. The pictures are specific to the book, and part of your long-term collaboration with Stijn. The photographs are also part of his oeuvre as an independent artist. This way, the pictures offer an external point of view on the project and on the book. What do you appreciate in Stijn's work? How did you approach this specific project? What did you want to show?

gdc Stijn has a very strong sense of small details and of context. He recognizes small elements that shed a different light on the project and invites you to observe better.

fd Actually, he involves us quite strongly in the making of the pictures – regarding points of view, what to show, and so on. Each time, we need to find a balance between concertation and being surprised by his different outlook.

hf This notion perspective is interesting. When theorizing, you take some distance from the observed object in some way. In *Buero Kofink Schels In Practice*, Tadeja Zupančič who is professor in Ljubljana, writes that the essay addresses the process with a close-to-zero distance: the authors ambition to stay inside the realm of the practice during its observation. At the other end of the spectrum, the book comes with an introduction text on the notion of observation and with three additional contributions. One proposes a philosophical reflection about the use of images, the second relates to research methodologies and the last one relates to reuse strategies in

architecture. Here the distance is very large. At *OASE*, according to the journal's statement, the practice is central, but embedded in a broader cultural or theoretical context, which also induces a reflection about distance.

ac As an author or editor you can be confronted with a wide range of situations. In a museum too, you need this distance to see a large painting as a whole, and to come very close to see details. As a writer I play with these changing distances.

hf Distance is often considered in a static way. I note that you rather talk about the movement of stepping back and closer to the subject in a dynamic way. It is about the complementarity and value of both perspectives.

gdc In the making of the book, we were very close to the process, which we described in a very factual way. However, this was a very clear step back from the practice because it allowed us to become conscious of how the process unfolded and of our actions. During the design and the construction, the proceedings are very intuitive and pragmatic, it was very chaotic and related to details. By making this book, we filtered and represented this reality with text and images. Now we have an overview, we know what we did and how we did it.

hf In *Buero Kofink Schels In Practice* the idea was to select and comment images to retrace the process in a very straightforward way. In your case, you detected what you called anecdotes, moments, or elements which you judged pivotal in the project's development. Four of these anecdotes illustrate mechanisms making use of the contingencies of construction to refine the architecture. It may look very close to the practice, almost like a journalistic description, in the very choice of what you show and what you say about it. There is a clear step backwards.

gdc When we started writing, we did not know where to go. We displayed many images on the wall. There is a picture of this

in the book. This was the starting point, we put everything we had on this wall, and together with Bart Decroos, we started to shift documents and regroup them. In the end, we focused on four topics.

ac It looks like a crime wall, an evidence board.

hf It is physical. When you put the documents on the wall, there is no distance. Then you step back and consider how to organize the material, you detect relationships and differences.

ac *Buero Kofink Schels In Practice* is quite different. It rather works like a diary. Unlike an evidence board, it is very difficult to edit a diary. You cannot edit time: it is just every day. You write things because somehow you think it matters at this moment, and 10 years later you may smile because of its subjectivity. Perhaps *Buero Kofink Schels In Practice* is about the importance of subjectivity and of all moments in the design endeavor. Even if they do not appear as crucial they participate to the result, they create an environment. Whereas in *Raamwerk In Practice*, you reorganize the material of the process in order to structure a narration and to define a perspective.

hf The diary and the investigation wall refer to the possible importance of details. There is a kind of naivety, a willingness 'not to know' at the beginning, to rediscover things without prejudice. So, you must include everything, even details that may seem anecdotal at first sight. The *In Practice* books are all, by coincidence, about rather small buildings: two houses and one rural youth center. It was not intentional. Probably, it has to do with the fact that we addressed rather young offices and that the projects needed to be built at the time of publishing. It relates also to the emerging of many smaller practices, whose members started quite young and did not undergo a long training at a master's office. Could there be an architecture theory in the making, which would take distance from the usual seminal texts and authoritative architects, and which would be interested in a smaller scale, in the unpolished aspect of reality?



4

4 Photograph of In Practice preparation (February 2020), Raamwerk, Published in Raamwerk in Practice: Lichtervelde Youth Centre.

This question is probably of particular interest for Flemish architects, whose sense of small scale, detail and construction are appreciated internationally. How do we go from these specifics to a more general framework?

gdc Our office started with smaller private commissions, like most offices do, I guess. When working now on larger projects, we use what we learnt from smaller ones, so in a way they are similar.

fd At the time, it was a big project for us. Scale is relative.

gdc It is a relatively small project, and we gave it an incredible intensity and attention at the time. At the office, there was only the two of us and we gave it everything. Every joint, every brick... Maybe it was too much! For four years, I literally went twice a week to the construction site.

hf The process of the house in *Philippe Vander Maren & Richard Venlet In Practice* lasted for seven years, from the first sketches to the completion of the works. It is a complete economical nonsense. For Buero Kofink Schels, the house in Almeria is the smallest commission ever for the architects, but also the longest one, as it still goes on. There was no real contract, they had to travel to Spain all the time and they were also working on the construction site together with the client. Why do all of you want to show these project that are so small and take so much time and effort?

fd This project addresses some kind of social sustainability. It is small but it has a very big impact on this context and in this village. It is important to give these small things attention. We wanted to try to make a very clear and good building within our means. We will not solve all the problems of the world, but there in Lichtervelde, we did believe and we hoped that we could achieve something that was more than only a nice building.

ac I am not sure that this is about scale only, in the sense that it is about an attitude where you try to make a good building so that it will be kept for a long time. Well-thought and well-designed buildings, regardless their cost, allow to be appropriated by the user, whether it be a family or society. That is also part of sustainability. It is also about a certain well-being, which we should not underestimate. Beauty justifies a details-focused approach, whichever the context.

hf That is exactly why these secondary commissions, like smaller equipment or houses are relevant. If you are willing to make the effort to care for these projects and to allocate them their needed time, if you see that the impact of the construction is real and important, even on these small projects, then it will certainly apply to more important ones. Some sense of slowness is involved too, a will to take the time things need. This is significant in today's context of speed and immediacy.

fd I am not sure that the people in Lichtervelde think that the Youth Center is beautiful. It is not about being pleasant or nice. It is about the fact that we made the effort to respect the place, the users, and the construction materials. When they use the building, whatever they do, they will feel this work. If we had not put all this effort into the project, it would just be another building with the cheapest stones available. But now, it is still a building with the cheapest materials, but it goes beyond that, it is more, it is something different.

hf Thank you.

www.iuav.it/villardjournal