

# Guarantee architectural

Olivier Bastin has been the 'Master Architect' for the Brussels Region for three years, and his mandate is drawing to a close in 2014. An ideal time to ask him about progress and in particular about the impact of the new passive standard.

## How has the role of the Master Architect evolved over these past three years?

On the one hand very well, in the sense that all of the institutions with which we have learned to work – the housing association, the port, the development company, the transport company and so on – have developed very substantial projects with us. And on top of this we have developed a relationship with the federal bodies and in particular for a complex project, the new prison at Haren. And then over the past 3 years the communes have become interested in how we work. In short, therefore, we have twice as much work that which was envisaged at the outset. This is all very positive, and we are certainly not short of work! We have worked on more than 140 projects and they resemble a sort of 'acupuncture' on Brussels.

On the other hand, less positively, we still lack some political support. It seems to me that some political offices sometimes do not understand what we are for and they tend to keep us away from certain strategic decisions or just bring us in at the last minute which is obviously a problem. We would like them to put this situation right for the next Master Architect, the following mandate. Our mandate is finished at the end of next year. It has sometimes been a 'struggle for life' with some politicians.

## What does your work involve on a daily basis?

This is essentially assisting the project owner, our role being to guarantee the architectural quality of the project. We have noted that in public projects the quality of the procedure enables us to achieve good results or not. It is essentially our job to modify the procedures that the project owner has put in place to ensure good results.

We have invented three tools to help us do this: good programmes, good procedures and good committees. The 'good programmes' part consists of enabling us to anticipate all the problems which the project may come up against during its lifetime – permits, technical problems, administrative problems. This helps the project owner to resolve these issues at the beginning and not expect the architects to resolve them afterwards. **Good procedures:** this means selecting the best process

for the project in question; a 600 m<sup>2</sup> building does not require the same procedure as the Haren prison which represents an investment of 300 million Euros! Sometimes the same procedures may apply, but everything has to be analysed. And finally, 'good committees' means 'who decides what'. We organise committees which are just for advice – they do not make the actual decision – that is for the project owner. But a committee with a wide range of skills and experience can really give good advice. If the project owner follows the advice, we are in a continuous process of quality. If he doesn't, he has to answer for this himself, but up to now we have not had a problem in this respect.

## Passive legislation is now with us. How does this impact on your work?

This has a fairly large impact in the sense that I would say we are currently only at the very early stages of 'passive'. This is the case for the objectives, the legislation and the means made available, along with the capacity for analysis. Everybody is very new to this, including those who make the regulations, the administrations, the major players such as the architects, and finally the users of the buildings. We don't yet know very well how they are going to behave in passive buildings. So we are really in a period of experimentation which I believe requires a great deal of caution. I understand that the Minister wished to impose the 'totally passive' standard in order to ensure that everyone makes an effort. And it has the benefit of being a clear objective. But now that we have several years of experience I believe it is time to put things into perspective, to bring the obligations more into line with the circumstances.

For example, the passive standard is not imposed for renovated buildings, and I believe this to be an intelligent measure. Aiming for low energy and for other types of sustainable development is really to be applauded. I think it is possible to gain at least 30 or 40% in terms of energy use globally. It implies an effort from everybody, and I think the politicians are thinking in this direction too. Good insulation, good closures, simple things like this already constitute a good and fundamental base. For new constructions and in particular for social housing I think that we should start to ask

# quality of projects

ourselves questions again about the imposition of the passive standard.

## **Have you observed enthusiasm or reticence from the major players for the passive standard?**

We have observed both. There is an enthusiasm for experimenting with and experiencing new techniques which can have positive repercussions on architecture. This can represent a sort of challenge for architecture to surpass technical constraints. An example of this is the outer shell of buildings, which have become extremely thick – up to 30 centimetres of insulation at least, whereas we were at seven or eight or ten centimetres before. This has resulted in a depth of facades which used to be seen in old buildings made of natural stone with deep window bays...

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This enables us to rediscover this typology, which has many advantages. When it occurs in a crèche, for example, or a public facility, each bay, each window, represents an opportunity to create a little niche, a special little place for the children to sit and play in. So each technical constraint imposed by the passive standard provides an architectural opportunity. And each architect is trying to break away from the traditional solutions – the sun-canopy to the south, no openings to the north... Everyone is being creative in this respect. But the standard also throws up some technical problems such as all the ventilation systems which need to be maintained. If we could create totally passive ventilation systems without any mechanical devices, we would gain a lot. There are areas where we are still in need of more experience – the way we orient the buildings, the way in which the windows open and so on.

We may gain inspiration from the way things were done in the past, and also develop new ideas.

## **You will be completing your mandate this year – what advice do you have for your successor?**

Establish better dialogue with the government and not just with their attachés. In particular establish better dialogue with the office of the Minister-President. Obtain better follow-up of the fundamentals of missions, not just the way they are conducted, by having follow-up committees. I would advise my successor to prolong positive contacts with those involved in mobility in Brussels (public transport company, the relevant administration...) in order to create quality public areas. Make sure the question of housing is handled at government level, not just by one or other of the ministries. And finally, be strong, engage in dialogue, and be patient.

Tim HARRUP ■

