Belgium, 1976: the jury of the annual Robert Maskens architecture prize decided not to award a first prize, not due to a lack of quality but because the jury members could not agree on the criteria by which to evaluate architecture. A number of problematic postwar modernist projects had resulted in a raised awareness of architecture’s societal complexity and during the 1960s gradually put into question the vocabulary used to discuss the discipline. As this was an internationally wide phenomenon, the jury’s choice was symptomatic not only of a bleak Belgian situation, where a shared basis for discussing architecture had been eroded, but also, more generally, of a 1970s architecture culture in search of its own terms. Paradigmatic in this regard was that Belgium’s main architecture journal changed its title in 1970 from La Maison to Environnement, as the concerns of the journal shifted from notions of plan and composition to a more context-driven approach (Fig. 1).

This 1970s situation can be characterized as driven by a search for an adequate knowledge to better architecture’s role in society. This knowledge could come from many directions, and indeed many voices offered different ways in which to reach a “societally relevant” form of knowledge, containing the promise to go beyond the perceived flaws of postwar modernist architecture. I would argue that the intellectual malaise was so profound that more than ever these different voices did not only differ in content but might even be found to differ on the fundamental level as to what knowledge about architecture actually is or should be. In other words, different views occurred based on different takes on how architectural knowledge itself stands vis-à-vis society, and hence their legitimacy was drawn from this self-postulated societal merit. This is why this essay points to the epistemological, since these different voices implicitly entail a conception on the nature of knowledge, to the extent that
arguments alone won’t provide the way out of the malaise. The anecdote on the 1976 Maskens prize is emblematic for the stifling effects of such conflicting views, not necessarily of architecture but of knowledge, of how to talk about architecture, and even of what terms are deemed adequate to establish a dialogue. In a time when the need for discussion and conversation was at its height, the art of dialogue stood at an all-time low and more than ever voices claimed their own right independently of each other.

**Carrefour de l’Europe being thought**

Though emblematic, the Maskens prize debate constituted only a minor point in Belgian history. But the idea of a troubled dialogue due to epistemological differences can be expanded by drawing on the more significant debates surrounding a major episode of Belgian architectural history: the Carrefour de l’Europe, or Europakruispunt (Europe’s Crossroads). Long a triangular void in the heart of Belgium’s capital, this site was left open after the working-class district La Putterie, or De Putterij, was demolished to establish a north-south railway connection (inaugurated in 1952). Located between the newer, upper part and the historical, fine-grained, lower part of the city, the site was desperately in search of an articulation...
to mediate between these two separate worlds. This process was at the time strongly colored by the increasing challenges that automotive mobility was posing to the city; for example, a 1962 masterplan saw the site’s future as an infrastructural node of inner-city motorways, hence its name, Europe’s Crossroads. By 1967 its fate seemed definitively sealed as it was leased for ninety-nine years with the intention to build a car park.

These developments embodied the harsh side of postwar modernism: in the name of progress and modernization, local authorities endorsed large-scale projects drastically transforming the existing built environment, driven by a stringent
economic logic and powerful business interests. As the 1960s waned, the critique on such projects was widespread, and hence the future of the triangular site, left empty at the heart of the capital, was intrinsically entwined with a heightened awareness of the need for public debate on the built environment.\(^5\) Thus, at the dawn of the 1970s, the void turned into a vacuum, absorbing all topical challenges modernity was posing to architecture; as a subject of discussion and proposed solutions, the site intensified into something of an intellectual Petri dish, a test case of different views on how architecture could cope with those challenges.

In short, the capital was harboring a parking lot right in front of its Central Station, so devoid of any imagination that any serious intellectual in Belgium had to engage with the topic (Fig. 2). And even if the Carrefour de l’Europe’s history spurred many interesting design proposals worth a discussion in their own right, in this essay I mobilize its history only to focus on the debate it triggered, the arguments about architecture that were raised, and the ways in which the different voices framed the societal relevance of their understanding of the site. As such, Europe’s Crossroads can be read as a crossroads of Belgian architecture intellectuality.

Dealing as it does with a well-documented case in urban and design history,\(^6\) this essay briefly revisits three important 1970s-1980s voices in the Carrefour de l’Europe discussion, bringing into focus the contours of intellectuality surrounding them. These include an activist-historicist voice (ARAU), a participatory sociologist’s (Sieg Vlaeminck), and one with “anti-nominalist” tendencies, pointing to “the real” as a way of reinvigorating architectural criticism (Mil De Kooning). Far from covering the whole range of noteworthy perspectives on the Carrefour de l’Europe (missing out not in the least on those of the involved architects), the three voices under consideration here demonstrate how profound the disagreement could be between the different paths offered in thinking architecture’s place in society.

**Power**

By the fifties, the car heightened the pressure on the inner city, and the default tabula rasa approach towards urban interventions foreclosed the city’s future. Against this context, the *Atelier de Recherche et d’Action Urbaines* (ARAU, Workshop of Urban Research and Action) was formed in 1969 by architect and historian Maurice Culot (b. 1937), sociologist René Schoonbrodt (b. 1935), and parish priest of the Marolettes neighborhood, Jacques Vander Biest (1929-2016). As an urban activist movement, they set themselves and their students at the Brussels architecture school La Cambre the task of developing counterprojects for each proposal issued by the authorities and developers. These counterprojects were represented in easily understandable and reproducible drawings and had functional mixing (against modernist
zoning) as their most basic guideline, in an attempt to counter the tendency of barring residences from the city.

ARAU’s first action in 1969 was directed at the symbolic site of the Carrefour de l’Europe. By a specific site-driven instigated polemic on the inclusion of residences, and counter to a prevalent fatalism regarding the imposed projects among the neighborhood’s inhabitants, ARAU managed to initiate a discussion ultimately centered on social imagination: what do we, as a society, choose to plan for?

As Isabelle Doucet has argued, ARAU’s counterprojects were consciously drawn to function as discussion objects and should be considered as objects of knowledge in their own right. As such, we may note their radical but clear-cut take on how and what “kind” of knowledge architects should invest in to serve society best: the knowledge that there are other options possible than the urban interventions proposed by the authorities. But more than merely providing an alternative, their “epistemic strategy” consisted of providing alternatives in order to shift the discussion to a societal level. In their counteractive role, ARAU’s counterprojects crucially raised the question of what urban life we would like to foster. By relying on abstract volumes in their early drawings, rather than fully detailed projects, ARAU rendered programmatic heterogeneity legible as being the requisite for a valuable urbanity.

In an issue of the Dutch journal *wonen-TA/BK* devoted to ARAU, the historian Francis Strauven (b. 1942) – one of the chroniclers and an early advocate of ARAU – gave a clarifying interpretation of the organization’s actions. These did not involve simply opposing certain policies and ventilating protest voices and calls for participation: they were also framed as part of a wider plea for a renewed intellectuality in architecture, in an attempt to better incorporate “the social” in architecture thought: “The criticism [of protest and participation movements] was not only directed against the procedures of town planning, but just as much against the concepts of Modern Architecture, and so against architects. (…) The architects did not discuss the (social) contents of their profession but limited themselves as usual to organizational and formal problems. (…) Apart from one or two private initiatives the formation of theories remained nonexistent in Belgium, and it still remains so.”

For ARAU, a crucial factor in this rethinking of architecture’s social dimension was its sister organization *Archives d’Architecture Moderne* (AAM, Archives of Modern Architecture), which, through its impressive publication and exhibition activities, was investing in the historical reflection required to formulate a sound critique. Part of this reflection was to reappropriate the modernist legacy, by uncovering an obscured romantic and more artisanal form of modernism, in an attempt to reinvest modern forms with the ideological ideas and societal values they originally contained.

Strongly informed by Marxism, for ARAU – and indirectly for AAM – the political dimension was the ultimate referent in their approach: the process of building is
of a political strategic nature, taking part in an understanding of history as a stage of struggle. René Schoonbrodt was unambiguous in this regard, stating that “all actions by ARAU are aimed at one single goal: to create the possibilities for the birth of a society in which every individual can assert as much power as possible on social life as a whole.”

Hence the sort of understanding they aimed for in their counterprojects had two goals: on the one hand, exposing by means of a counterexample the existing project’s underlying logics (where modernist urban planning was gradually cast on the side of speculation and unbridled capitalism); and on the other, providing an alternative with a clear, different form of urbanity to be used as a tool in a newly instigated debate, to arm the local inhabitants in their struggle to shape their environment.

Thus, the renewed intellectuality ARAU hoped to invigorate was deeply entangled with issues of power. Instead of opting for some form of neutrality when mobilizing their architectural expertise in their actions, they pleaded wholeheartedly for partisanship, never hiding their socialist-communist sympathies. For ARAU, society was in the first place structured by power relations and hence the form of knowledge that could serve society best was one that could serve as a basis for power strategies. In other words, the point at which social relevance is attributed to this specific figure of knowledge lies entirely within the realm of power relations. Only knowledge that renders power accessible to the inhabitants is deemed relevant.
here—hence their attention to public media and populist strategies. What came to be known as ARAU’s architectural hallmarks—their emphasis on historically grown urban tissue and, in a later stage their reliance on a historicist architectural form (Fig. 3)—both subscribed to this logic.

Thus, for ARAU, architecture knowledge became more and more a matter of tactics, rejecting any idea of an essence being worthy of consideration in its own right: everything is brought back to its tactical dimension in the overarching mission to empower the neighborhood’s inhabitants, to shift the production of the built environment more in their direction.

Science

Many of the themes raised by ARAU—participation, revitalizing inner cities, no architecture without ideology—were shared by several of their peers but nevertheless led to differing perspectives on how architecture ought to serve society, and hence what figure of knowledge could best fulfill those aims. The increasing role the social sciences came to play in architecture is a case in point. In Belgium, for example, the sociologist-urbanist Sieg Vlaeminck (1933–2011) came to the fore as an architecture critic in the 1970s, advocating an enlarged role of the social sciences in architecture. Though he joined ARAU in their critique on modernist architecture, he remained committed to a rather modernist conception of knowledge: one that implicitly claimed that society is progressing because the various sciences—including the rising social sciences—are increasingly able to understand the mechanisms of the world.

In this worldview, the way out of the impasse posed by postwar modernism and the ensuing intellectual malaise was entirely within science’s reach, and Vlaeminck continually called upon the social sciences throughout the 1970s (and well into the 1980s) to scientifically take into account inhabitants’ less tangible needs—those of a psychological and social kind. Towards this aim he continuously pleaded for an “ecology of dwelling,” woonecologie—a local articulation of the rising field of Environment-Behavior Studies, inspired by the works of William Michelson and Alexander Mitscherlich.

At the same time, accompanying his faith in the potential of a more scientific approach—and arguably taking the upper hand in his writings—was the fierce call for transparency and accessibility of knowledge. In the same spirit, much of his writings in public media were driven by the aim to translate scientific expertise to a wider public, to emancipate the latter by making expertise accessible and understandable.

Notably, Vlaeminck played a role in the unawarded 1976 Robert Maskens prize mentioned in the introduction. Being part of the editorial staff of Belgium’s main architecture journal A+, he moderated an extensively covered panel discussion
between the jury members, in an attempt to delve into the aporias responsible for the troubled debate among them. What the ensuing dialogue between, most notably, architects Jean Barthelemy (1932-2016), Georges Baines (1925-2013), Jan Tanghe (1929-2003), and bOb Van Reeth (b. 1943) made clear was that the jury members were more than ever aware about the complexity of architecture’s societal role. What stifled the dialogue was an inability to come to an agreement on how to articulate this societal aspect. In his concluding remarks Vlaeminck points to this inevitable, yet elusive thing called “the social” and ends by stressing “the need for a clear voice and unconcealed analyses of the architectural reality.”

Only a few months after the report of this discussion, Vlaeminck shared his understanding of the discussions surrounding the Carrefour de l’Europe, in a way that echoes his earlier concluding remark. He explicitly aimed to address and evaluate the “true meaning” behind the contemporary developments concerning the Carrefour site. The troubled dialogue of the Maskens competition fresh in mind, with “thinking the social” emerging as its most stifling factor, it is hard to read this article otherwise than as an attempt to provide “a clear voice and unconcealed analysis” of one of the most symbolic sites in Belgium.

By then, a whole series of design proposals had emerged for the site, most notably ARAU’s so-called “aesthetic alternative,” which marked the start of their concern with aesthetics (but formulated in social terms). Remarkably, given this wealth of projects and Vlaeminck’s often repeated faith in an objective scientific approach to guide us to a better living environment, he chose not to rely on the social sciences to evaluate the merits of the proposals, choosing instead to uncover the ideologies underlying them. Despite his scientific ideals, he suspended his judgment in order to strip the already existing voices to their ideological basis in terms of how they stand vis-à-vis the existing political order, be it in a conformist, conflictual, or consensual manner (Fig. 4).

The absence of the trust in the social sciences so prevalent in his other writings is striking, but it seems he ventured upon this rare piece of ideology critique as an attempt – fruitful or not – to isolate the discussion on the social in its most essential form from the discussion on this specific site.

“The social” here was not tied to an inherent quality of an envisioned way of life, as in ARAU’s drawings, but rather to a mode of political progress. The question to be resolved was how we as a society envision change to be possible within an existing political constellation and more specifically how we want the built environment to be produced. Vlaeminck’s refusal to evaluate the projects on their own merits indicates his view that at least a substantial part of “the social” escapes architecture and that he could not articulate important aspects of “the social” innate and specific to architecture. Like many other intellectuals of the decade, his calls for a scientific approach explicitly framed architecture as part of a wider environment at the risk of dissolving architecture’s specificity.
In terms of epistemology, Vlaeminck’s writings clearly indicate that knowledge’s societal relevance lies within the realm of objective science, wherein the scientific approach is seen as a relatively unproblematic form of grasping specific qualities of the human environment. But the shift to his small piece of ideology critique indicates that the societal relevance of such scientific knowledge more specifically relies on the notion of transparency. The plea for more science came with the demand of transparency: making science accessible to a wider public and making political positions of design proposals explicit. Thus, his work was framed by the aim for and belief in an increasing transparency between world and the knowledge thereof. And hence the societal value of knowledge was claimed within a logic of representation rather than within a power field (in contrast to ARAU).

The real

By the 1980s, a whole series of proposals were generated for the Carrefour de l’Europe, one bolder than the next. But what they had in common was a depiction of the site as a void desperately in need of architecture. Many architects sought to “fill” this void, often by resorting to a typo-morphologically inspired method of carefully knitting the surrounding urban fabric together. A number of architects
and critics, however, deemed this to be an all too easy and insufficient diagnosis of the site. Architecture critic Mil De Kooning (b. 1955), for instance, wrote that “the problem with this site is the rupture caused by the traffic between the upper and lower parts of the city and not some traumatizing lack of architecture.” In contrast, he provocatively stressed that the existing car park had more metropolitan qualities than most of the proposals drawn for the site. The major exception, in his view, was the OMA-influenced design entry by Team Hoogpoort – consisting of Stéphane Beel (b. 1955), Xaveer de Geyter (b. 1957), Arjan Karssenberg (b. 1955), and Willem Jan Neutelings (b. 1959) – which instead of seeking to repair the urban tissue opted for a radical gesture of nourishing the urban void and introducing recreative functions via interventions at the site’s borders. Thus the design introduced an “urban fact” that generated new potential, which existing typologies would never be able to deliver. For De Kooning, it was the only design capable of articulating this metropolitan sensibility and allowing to experience the qualities of

Fig. 5. Impression for the Team Hoogpoort design. Source: Mil De Kooning, “Quand on n’a pas ce qu’on aime on aime ce qu’on a,” *Vlees en Beton*, no. 4 (1985): n.p.
the site (Fig. 5). Thus he gave voice to a new generation that embraced the potential metropolitan qualities of large and radical urban gestures. In later years, the Team Hoogpoort entry, together with its early advocates, was designated by some as the birth of a new architectural culture in Belgium.23

Central to De Kooning’s view was an argument about intellectuality. For him, seeing and recognizing the potential metropolitan qualities – overlooked by most proposals – was an act of intellectuality, an active engagement with reality that was all too often skipped over in design. Indeed, in the journal and book series he founded, *Vlees en Beton* (Flesh and Concrete), De Kooning showed himself a fierce (and polemical) defendant of a renewed intellectuality. His writings of the early 1980s bore witness to an emerging more self-aware architecture culture and contain lucid reflections upon the shifting role of the intellectual in this fledgling culture. Against those who speak with preconceived ideas (i.e., ARAU’s political views and Vlaeminck’s social sciences), and perhaps characteristic of a more nuanced younger generation, De Kooning placed those who simply cherish and disclose “that which is.”24 Hence he put architect Bob Van Reeth and even more his mentor, critic Geert Bekaert (1928-2016), on a pedestal in his publications, both of them thinking along similar lines – for instance in the inspiration they took from the Flemish vernacular.

As Christophe Van Gerrewey has noted, central to the ideas of this new architecture culture, was the willful and strategic mobilization of the category of “the real,”25 as the basis for a relevant intellectuality was seen in its permanent engagement with the latter.26 Again the arguments over the Carrefour site evidence a shift on the level of epistemology: the debate shifts on where the fundaments of a potentially socially relevant knowledge are seen to be lying. Though De Kooning’s and his colleagues’ commitment to try and let reality speak for itself has a ring of neutrality to it, their notion of “the real” implies a perspective on what is deemed societally valuable.27 This is for instance clear in Bekaert’s 1970s collaborations with filmmaker Jef Cornelis (b. 1941). In his scenarios, lower class dwellings, such as the pigeon fancier’s self-fashioned living environment, were staged as part of a fierce critique on bourgeois architecture’s representational aspect, which concealed reality more than doing justice to it.28

As the ideal was seen in reality speaking for itself, this embrace of “the real” inevitably came with a solid dose of anti-nominalism, a critique of language and representation. As Van Reeth worded the maxim of this line of thought: “As one speaks, one harms reality.”29 Since words, concepts, and knowledge in general did not coincide with “the real,” a continuous caution towards the former was necessary to stay in tune with the latter. It is this continuous caution that was portrayed as the way out of the intellectual malaise of the 1970s by De Kooning and his colleagues. In line with the idea of autonomy,30 references external to architecture
were rendered suspicious, in favor of looking for the criteria that architecture raises by itself. Only in this way a desired form of immediacy could be reached: more than abstract ideals, it is the reality of building that offers the material to constitute its own rules.\textsuperscript{31}

This intellectual mobilization of “the real” contained two challenges in terms of knowledge: first of all, how was the critic expected to get in touch with “the real,” and second, how was a dialogue possible when words were suspicious from the very start? The first challenge meant a revaluation of the intellectual labor of the critic. The critic’s task was redefined as a perennial attempt to put the “unwordable” into words, which, arguably, only the most eloquent managed to do. The plea for a continuous engagement with “the real” follows the structure of the Greek notion of \textit{poiesis}, the creative act of bringing something into being. The intellectual labor of the critic came to be seen as that of a “poet” in that sense, standing eye to eye with bare reality, unmediated by the existing norms and forms we normally resort to in understanding that reality. Thus, the critic’s work became that of Heidegger’s measure-bestowing poet: gathering a measure of all things from the things showing themselves.\textsuperscript{32}

The capacity of the poet-critic to articulate an aspect of reality that a work of architecture managed to put forward was deemed almost of equal importance as the work of the architect itself. Hence it is not surprising that just as architecture intellectualty was promoting “the real” as its unattainable ideal, the figure of the critic entered the limelight, was put on a par with the architect, and became a topic of interest in itself (Fig. 6). In this regard, Bekaert did not simply write for De Kooning’s \textit{Vlees en Beton} as an expert writing on architecture but also figured as its subject. The journal staged Bekaert-as-critic in a long interview that discussed his way of writing, his manuscripts being cherished and used as illustrations to the interview; moreover, it was around the same time that De Kooning and others initiated the anthologization process of Bekaert’s writings.\textsuperscript{33}

The second challenge – how to come to a dialogue when words were suspicious from the start – translated itself into the need for permanent debate. Postulating “the real” as the horizon of intellectuality, always out of reach, equaled the necessity of unceasing deliberation. Accordingly, De Kooning greatly encouraged polemics and was convinced that a strongly articulated position forces others to define their own. Thus, articulated opinions replaced power strategies or a faith in science, and the necessity of debate, rather than power or science, was where societal relevance found its base. Or, as Bekaert formulated it during his editorship of the Dutch journal \textit{Archis}: “Building never escapes the curse of thinking. It needs its story to societally exist. There is no choice, unless the one between lazy thinking, if it can be called thinking, or an exigent thinking that critically questions itself and its world.”\textsuperscript{34}
Conclusion

The argument that surfaces by staging these three voices in a dialogue on the Carrefour de l’Europe is that the troubled debate that characterized the 1970s and 1980s has less to do with argumentative disagreements than with differing, rather implicit, epistemic positions. These latter contain an implicit view on how architectural understanding should relate to practice and could contribute to the social. In other words, they can be considered to contain a conception of what architecture theory ought and can aspire to be. How theory is conditioned by this more pragmatic, epistemological dimension concerning the “status” or “standing” of architecture knowledge within reality – a dimension that somehow precedes

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Fig. 6. Architect Rem Koolhaas and critic Geert Bekaert on a par. Cover of Vlees en Beton, no. 4 (1985).
the arguments actually made36 – is often overlooked in architecture theory’s historiography and allows us to diagnose more accurately the troubled dialogue so characteristic of the 1970s. Thus, we might recognize in it and in the various ways these different figures of knowledge claimed their relevance for society, the places “where the uncomfortable questions of form and program with respect to society and its political formation were asked; where irresolution rather than resolution was assumed” – to quote from Anthony Vidler’s Histories of the Immediate Present.37 As Vidler argues, it are “disruptive moments” such as these that allow us to reassess the process of modernity in architecture culture. Surely these epistemic positions reoccur at different moments in history, but it seems as if when a certain paradigm came to crisis, the stifling effect of these different positions was felt the most and led to the questioning of the established conditions of dialogue.

Notes

2. In a broader cultural historical perspective, Zygmunt Bauman identifies this self-postulated nature as characteristic of intellectuality in a postmodern condition (and most radically articulated by Richard Rorty): “The intellectual activity draws its legitimacy from the intellectuals’ own moral conviction as to the value of their work and as to the worthiness of the discourse they are keeping alive and guarding against being stifled or numbed in the cacophony of communal traditions. With such a strategy adopted, the fact that others do not care for the legitimations we offer is no longer a problem. We simply do not offer legitimations.” Zygmunt Bauman, Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 198.


17. Ibid., 36, author’s translation.


27. Elsewhere in this volume, Andrew Toland discusses how these various appeals to “the real” are essentially a restructuring of the relationship between discipline-specific knowledge and our constructions of the world.


30. For some of the protagonists in the Flemish context, see Caroline Voet et al., eds., *Autonomous Architecture in Flanders: The Early Works of Marie-José van Hee, Christian Kieckens, Marc Dubois, Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem* (Leuven University Press, 2016).


