

Explicitly humble and (un)remarkably evident
Kostuumatelier, 2015, puls architecten
Submission Academic Architecture Award 2017

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“Who, without shortcoming modern materials or programs, produces a work that always seems to have existed and that, in one word, can be called banal, should be happy about himself.”¹ - Auguste Perret

An ensemble of five houses stands quietly in line. It settles modestly in the street and arranges itself politely to its neighbours in terms of tint and cornice height. The architecture of the dwellings is decisively *ordinary*, their appearance explicitly evident. Apart from a one-dwelling wide spatial interruption, nothing else suggests the presence of a public access to the backlying area; the redevelopment of the former Military Hospital of Antwerp “Het Groen Kwartier”. The shortcut to the new residential quarter doesn’t carry the pronounced character of a ‘gate’ but takes on a humble, subdued role. Both the built and the unbuilt wear a remarkable discretion in itself, a comfortable self-evidence.

The costume workshop, where uniforms for the military rear neighbours used to be produced, has recently made way for the seventh and last access to Het Groen Kwartier. The public investor of the city of Antwerp, AG VESPA, bought the plot in order to achieve the connection between the street and the enclosed urban courtyard. The competition assignment also requested five houses, a daycare center for children and an underground car park for the residents and neighbours.



1. Lampugnani, Vittorio Magnago, "Tradition, Subtle Innovation and the Ineluctable Modern", in: *Codes en Continuities. Oase Journal for Architecture*, nr. 92, 2014, p. 23

The plot has an irregular contour and was originally 80% built. The existing has - as typically occurs within the strategy of AG VESPA - been replaced by new construction. The original collage of very different buildings was structurally unsuitable for the introduction of a new program, not mentioning the transformation to the required passive condition.

Puls architecten chose *tabula rasa* and convinced with its bright, classic principles of urban development: low building behind the completion of the street facade. A thick wall along the edge, which provides shelter for what happens at its core.

The five dwellings embody this thick wall as a plinthless mass of graybrown brick. Three central dwellings are flanked by two higher versions. A pinch of English cottage speaks from the use of external stairs to enter the haute parterre houses as well as from the verticality of the facade openings that seamlessly perforate the brick mass. The interplay of windows in thin white steel with the heavy concrete door frames gives the houses a subtle identity. The three central dwellings take a step back, announcing the public shortcut with this delicate articulation. One of the houses distances itself from the others to realize the shortcut, and nestles against the blind guard wall of his neighbour.

Behind, more deep on site, the daycare center appears between the houses as a single layer volume, that consciously 'blocks' the way through. An alley bends itself obediently around it and disappears out of sight, behind the detached house. Through this movement, the shortcut is charged with an enclosed and discreet atmosphere. It's more than an elongated alley, perpendicularly branching off the street. The architects themselves call it an *enfolded court*, or: an *urban vestibule*. The informal 'backside ambience' creates a sheltered atmosphere that is perfectly attuned to the presence of the daycare center.





The capricious plot contour sets off behind the solitary house on the left as a protected brick wall of the former Military Hospital. Behind the wall, new houses and park apartments of Het Groen Kwartier emerge. Hearing and seeing the working site in the background creates a pleasant spirit in the calm alley. The daycare center keeps a respectful distance from the untouched, authentic wall that guides the shortcut to Het Groen Kwartier over the full depth of the plot. *Bobijn*, the name of the daycare center, is showing off in yellow letters on a thick cornice above which hesitant grass suggests the presence of a roof garden. The design is not related to that of the five dwellings, apart from the application of the fine white steel that returns in the form of a screen, behind which an outside staircase climbs up to the roof and descends into the garage. The daycare program is spread out over aligned strips, organized according to function and rolled out parallel to the old protected wall. The transparent facade along the alley provides insight into the kitchen, the administrative offices and other staff areas. Three glass doors cast a deeper view into the building: the serving spaces, a lightstreet, sanitary zone and sleeping zone create a sequence that gradually filters publicity from the building. Each strip functions as a buffer for the next one, so that the children's living groups can operate in a protected environment. All the way in the back you can catch a glimpse of an elongated garden where the children can play freely and safely.



The intention of the architects to create a secure environment for the daycare center in the core of the lot, has turned out more than successful. The passage is not just a strip of vacant space, but a real place. A place that breathes urban informality, that doesn't want to adopt the status of 'gate'. The entrance to Het Groen Kwartier is not regarded the main program, where leftover space accidentally remains for a daycare center and some housing. No; although the application of a *tabula rasa* offered the opportunity to design from the void, the architects continued to treat the unbuilt as a natural residue of the built. An intimate extension of the street unfolds itself between the houses and along the daycare center with the most unsophisticated *souplesse*, carrying a *genius loci* of the kind you nowadays have to search for downtown.

2. Note: Christoph Grafe speaks of 'some kind of self-evidence in Belgian modern architecture'. "Pragmatic decisions that derive their logic from an understanding of continuing cities as they are, provide a common ground for the skills of the builders." - Grafe, Christoph, "Andere moderniteiten - Observaties over een Noordwest-Europese architectuur", in: *Codes en Continuities. Oase Journal for Architecture*, nr. 92, 2014, p. 157

3. Van Avermaete, Tom, de Bruijn, David & Floris, Job, "Editorial", in: *Codes en Continuities. Oase Journal for Architecture*, nr. 92, 2014, p. 7

4. Lampugnani, Vittorio Magnago, "Tradition, Subtle Innovation and the Ineluctable Modern", in: *Codes en Continuities. Oase Journal for Architecture*, nr. 92, 2014, p. 21

5. Note: Lampugnani launches the awareness of *appropriateness* as 'a completely different value criterion'.

The discontinuity that the *tabula rasa* entailed, didn't stop the architects to strive for continuity in their design strategy. With a proverbial *carte blanche* in hand, they were not tempted to make the new distinctly new-ish. They offered a controlled, unpretentious intervention based on conventions and tradition: low building behind the completion of the street facade. Puls had the 'guts' to empty the plot, and then traditionally fill it back up again.²

Lampugnani questions the concept of 'newness' in contemporary architectural culture³ and notes: "*Recent historiography has inculcated in us the image of an uninterrupted sequence of experiments, whose interest is directly proportional to their eye-catching visual appeal.*"⁴ Puls proves on the Kostuumatelier site that experimenting was not on the agenda. What the architects offer is pure solidity, disarming modesty, and above all striking *appropriateness*⁵. Architecture that provides a basic quality standard and isn't involved with anything else than 'just' being itself. The project does not feel the need to proclaim a loud message, except that of comfortable innocence. It demands judgment by no means, effortlessly settles into the urban fabric of Oud Berchem, while almost unnoticed being part of his surroundings, as if it has always been there. By the way, isn't that the ultimate *visual appeal*?

