

Constructing

“Ah, well, that’s how you effectively abolish the architect’s profession!” At a German congress, a young architect had claimed that you had to go and ask how to build on the construction site and an established colleague felt compelled to put him on his place – rather daring in this age of unbridled listening-and-connecting.

Every year the University of Aachen organizes the Aachener Tagung under the theme *Identity of Architecture*. This year it was about the question to which extent the construction belongs to the core of the architecture. The word construction has a broad meaning in German. My father, who regarded his Dutch architectural manuals as bible books, used the word construct in the same way as the Germans, similar to the way talk about detailing today.

It proved that the peers gathered had a firm belief in the architectural construction as an all-determining expertise (there were virtually no Dutch speakers present). The way in which that faith was supported varied considerably. Roughly speaking, there were speakers who regard construction as a performative aspect of their profession: constructing serves the smooth realization of buildings. One might characterize this as the construction of the building site. On the other hand, there was the construction of the art school, in which the imaginative potential of the architectural construct is sought. The first position in Aachen led to buildability, simplicity and order, the second to trial and error, complexity and signature.

In the two different camps, concepts such as innovation and experiment were explained in opposite ways. The resulting linguistic confusion was as entertaining as it was instructive. You would wish Dutch architects to reflect on their work this seriously. In any case, I don't know many colleagues in this country who have anything noteworthy to say about construction. To me, the architecture handbooks seem more useful for architects than the Scriptures, but they are consulted just as little and seem to have become just as irrelevant to daily practice.

The S-word was barely used and yet the conversation was about nothing but sustainability. I had to think of some special constructions, designed by an architect who was missing in Aachen. A few years ago, in a tiny attic studio, I saw a bathroom floor made from a single piece of natural stone. The gutters, profiles and drains were accurately integrated. It must have been quite a hassle to lift the plate into the attic. It seemed as if the bathroom completely coincided with the intense colour and texture of the floor.

Even more convincing was the guest house by the same architect. The rooms were sparsely furnished and covered with wallpaper that tuned the spaces with heavy, saturated colours. The paperhanger had been a wizard. The motifs matched exactly. At the top, a ribbon finished the cutting edge of the wallpaper.

I found a remarkable white marble fireplace. A box-shaped beam lay on two cylinders. The two columns had spiralling veins that turned in opposite directions. In the simplest possible way, a suggestion of an architrave upon two columns was made.

The intensity of these constructions transcends the separation of Aachen. The builder of this beauty, Hans Kollhoff, again demonstrated the serious and deliberate way in which he constructs. There is something essential in between his authorship and the perfect execution by the paperhanger or the stone master: the responsible choice of material. Of course one should not abolish that craft. If we really have to extract building materials from the earth, then do so with utmost care, or so Kollhoff's constructions teach us.