



106

COLBOC FRANZEN BROUGHT A FRANCO-GERMAN MIX OF SENSITIVITIES TO ITS DESIGN FOR A SOCIAL CENTRE IN A NEGLECTED SUBURB. ROWAN MORRICE FOUND A GEM AT THE HEART OF WHAT IS DESTINED TO BECOME A RENEWED COMMUNITY

LILLE STAR

Above: The Nouveau Centre Social de L'Arbrisseau, by Colboc Franzen is built on isolated wasteland

BLUEPRINT OCTOBER 2011



107

Sitting at the intersection of high speed rail linking the capital cities of France, Britain and Belgium, Lille is a city of ambition. The growth of Rem Koolhaas' imposing 'Euralille' business district over the last 15 years is a conspicuous reminder of this city's new found place in Europe and the heady days before the global economic downturn. Now a less obvious, though equally ambitious project, is under way in districts right across the city, which involves investment in small and medium scale regeneration projects in some of Lille's most neglected areas. This Grand Projet Urbain is led by Lille's

forward-facing Socialist mayor, Martine Aubry, who recently announced her presidential candidacy and readiness to challenge Nicolas Sarkozy.

One area receiving investment under this plan is Arbrisseau in South Lille. Isolated from the city centre by a major motorway, it has a disparate mix of pre-war housing, Sixties social housing and industrial buildings scattered across a wasteland. Hidden underground, a series of bottle-shaped chalk quarries from the 18th century, known as catiches, are a forgotten reminder of the area's industrial importance to the historical development of the city. >

BLUEPRINT OCTOBER 2011

108

The Nouveau Centre Social de l'Arbrisseau, by Colboe Franzen Associés represents the beginnings of the regeneration of this particular neighbourhood. Its crystalline form sits on the surface of the derelict landscape as if the architect scraped just below the surface to unearth a gem of potential within the site. Though currently sitting in isolation, it represents the city's commitment to the people of Arbrisseau and is in itself evidence of the fact that the surrounding area will soon be filled with new housing and roads connecting the existing isolated pockets of housing across the landscape. The social centre will form the focal point of this newly unified neighbourhood, its non-hierarchical facades addressing residents in every direction.

It was the first major public commission of the young practice when it won the competition back in 2007 at just two years old, after completing a number of successful private projects. Not subscribing to any particular school of thought, founding associate Manuela Franzen describes the practitioners' skills as

complementary. Also a qualified engineer, Franzen's German architectural education placed emphasis on the technical, practical side of construction before others, whereas fellow founder Benjamin Colboe's Paris education was more geared towards the emotional side of architecture. What results is a young practice of three associates and a dozen architects striking a confident balance between the artistic and the scientific, producing an architecture of both emotion and technology. The Nouveau Centre Social de l'Arbrisseau is an embodiment of that symbiotic relationship.

Colboe Franzen won the commission for the Arbrisseau project by sticking rigorously to the brief, which required various social and educational spaces for all the demographic groups in the



BLUEPRINT OCTOBER 2011



109

surrounding community. These included everything from nurseries and teaching support spaces for children, to bookable function rooms and cookery schools for teenagers and adults. Each set of users also had to have direct access to the external landscape – not an easy task given both the relatively large programme and the fact that a significant portion of the site was unsuitable for construction due to the existence of the catiches.

The response was to simply stack the functions upon one another on the only usable land on the site. With parking concealed underground, the youngest children are accommodated on the ground floor, with the programme ascending up through the first floor for primary school aged children, to teenagers and adults on the second floor. Finally, on the third floor there is an apartment for the building's caretaker, as well as admin spaces and an IT suite. A series of external terraces linked by a helical staircase are then carved into the solid volume, connecting these different user groups to the ground plane. Full-height

glazing behind this carved-out stair offers a tantalising glimpse of the building's use internally, which is otherwise concealed behind the aluminium facade. This aluminium cladding extends over the windows where it is perforated to allow the light to filter through, save for a few carefully selected fully transparent windows framing views out of the building. The effect is a building of privacy and solidity by day, but with the facade dissolving by night to reveal both the hidden structural trusses and the spaces behind.

Though the building's client hopes the centre will rejuvenate a neglected area, the location creates some unavoidable problems. The hostile character of the site has led to the most disappointing part of the building, a 2m-high steel and glass fence and gate system around the site. Though the fence is visually unobtrusive, its alignment with the edge of the overhanging building above leads to a slightly unsettling feeling in the narrow area between the fence and the building's main entrance, as if one were trapped >>

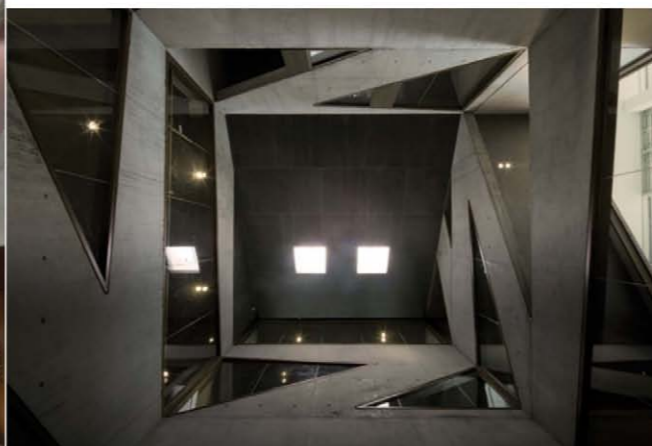
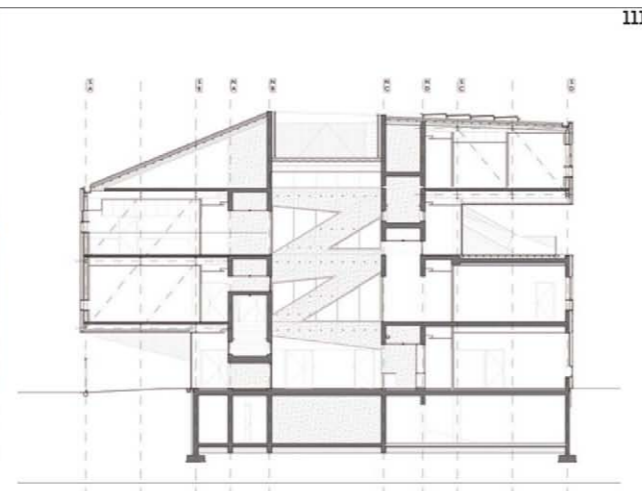
Left (top): The building's aluminium cladding is pierced to let light into the window spaces

Left (portraits, L-R): Colboe Franzen's three associates: Arnaud Sachet, Manuela Franzen and Benjamin Colboe

Left (below): The helical staircase that slices through the exterior form of the building is intended to make it less 'hierarchical'

Below: At night, the building signals a welcome but also reveals its structure

BLUEPRINT OCTOBER 2011



under an overhanging coastal rock, fearing the rising tide. Ideally, the fence could have been set back further from the building though if the architecture of the overall regeneration has the desired social impact, such security features may be removed in future, in line with the architect's initial vision.

Any concerns with access are immediately forgotten after passing through a discreet entrance beneath an overhang, where visitors emerge into an atrium space the entire height of the building, creating a hollow core. The top of the space is roofed over so that the shadowy volume [an allusion to the catiches?] is punctuated only by the shafts of light that slice through openings in the concrete walls creating the illusion of an unknown force blasting its way out of the building's core. These openings in the beautifully smooth blue-grey concrete walls are lined with a deep, rich timber, reflecting the practice's penchant for 'authenticity'. This refined

Above left: The full-height atrium creates a void at the core of the building

Top, right: The height of the building is partly dictated by the need to avoid subsidence

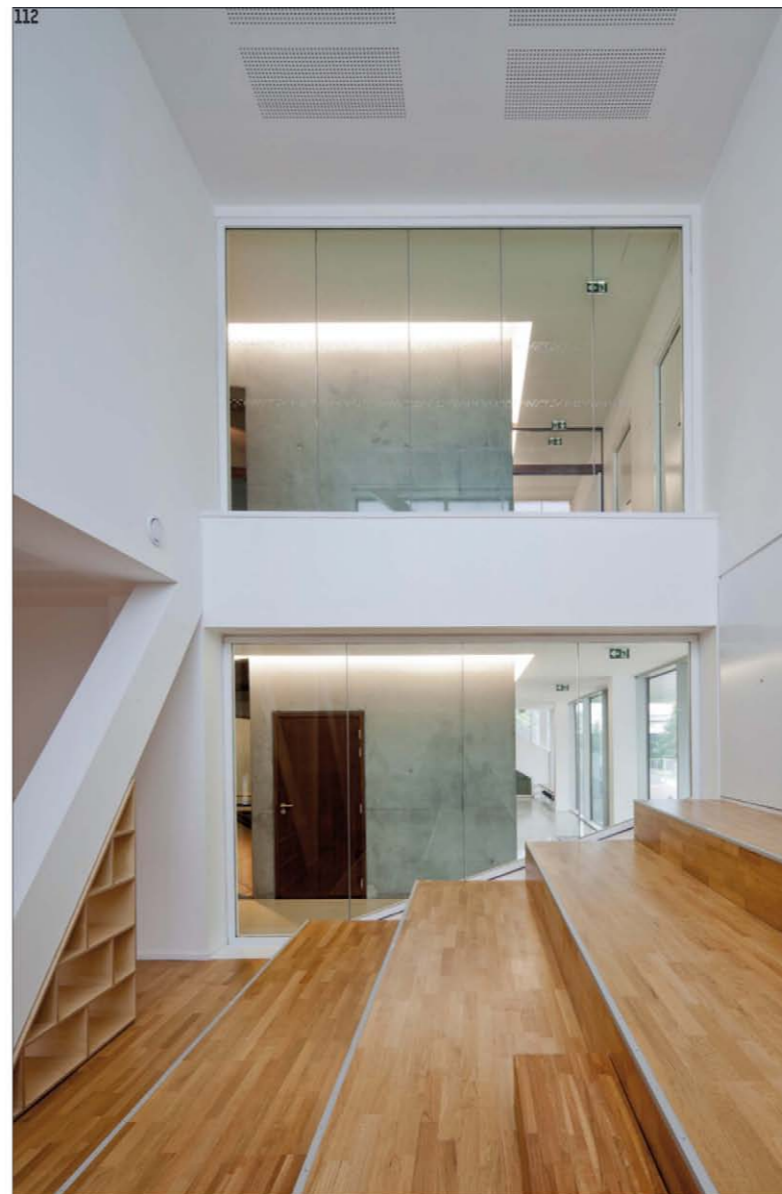
Above right: Light enters from above

pallet of rich materials, combined with the complex interplay between light and shade in the towering volume of the space, evokes an almost spiritual feeling redolent of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp chapel.

The openings in the core are not arbitrary, but a reflection of the balance between technology and art that the practice embodies. The driving force behind the shape and location of the cuts is structural, with concrete being removed from the parts of the core that bear no stress, reflecting the authentic architecture for which the office strives. This approach is further evident where the steel trusses supporting the building are selectively exposed to the users, both in the libraries and behind the perforated facade at night. In most cases, this authenticity does not come at the expense of practicality, for instance, use of acoustic panels allowed the practice to keep the exposed, smooth, hard concrete finish of the core without compromising functionality. Another »

//THE SHADOWY VOLUME IS PUNCTUATED ONLY BY SHAFTS OF LIGHT THAT SLICE THROUGH OPENINGS IN THE CONCRETE WALLS, CREATING THE ILLUSION OF AN UNKNOWN FORCE//

BLUEPRINT OCTOBER 2011



Left: A step too far? The design squeezes an extra auditorium into left-over space

Below: The building makes use of 'authentic' materials

slightly less successful 'authentic' move is the provision of auditoriums supplementary to the brief, which expand the libraries by using the slopes in the floor above the external stairs. Though these are an interesting, honest and efficient use of the leftover spaces in the cross-section of the building, in the largest amphitheatre it is difficult to imagine how easily anyone could actually deliver a lecture from the tight floor space between the exposed truss and the amphitheatre steps. Dramatic hand gestures and floor pacing might have to be ruled out.

The rest of the building is defined by a simple diagram anchored by the core. Users can ascend the building via an internal staircase sandwiched within the double walls of the concrete hollow core, spiralling up in the opposite direction to the outer staircase. On each level services are also accommodated between the core walls, along with breakout spaces from the adjacent circulation route, some of which open up into double height adding drama to the space. Beyond the circulation routes lie the functional spaces themselves, as well as the external terraces.

Despite this simple diagram, there is a quite beautiful complexity that emerges within, from the auditoriums nestled above the external staircase, to the way toddlers sleeping in the ground floor nap rooms can be checked on by staff in the level above. Most excitingly, the structurally authentic cuts in the core walls allow for visual connections between the different parts of the building across the hollow core, leading to joyful encounters where users in one part of the building can see, wave and gesture to friends in another, but cannot hear them.

This is a great deal of skill in the way that this young practice has integrated the key elements of architecture, structure, function and aesthetics. Right across the building, its comprehensive and complementary understanding of these areas and, most importantly, the relationship between them has created a piece of quality architecture, greater than the sum of its parts. If the Grand Projet Urbain progresses with the same ambition and skill, the various developments might unite to do the same for the city ■

BLUEPRINT OCTOBER 2011