

TASTING ARCHITECTURE. A marvellous ruin

De Standaard, Saturday 14th June 2003

Every architect thinks up a definition of architecture at some stage in his life. It's not surprising, since every time a simple building problem initiates the metamorphosis of a pile of inert building materials, it seems as if mythical powers are involved. As a consequence, any dry definition of architecture or building is inadequate to the task of capturing the subtleties of space, light and rhythm, and the complex effects of time and the seasons. The studio of the sculptor Philippe Van Isacker in Ghent, for example, leaves one a little drunk, because this relatively small space relates intriguingly to the existing terraced house and the garden. The architect Kristoffel Boghaert designed a concrete room which, while rudimentary, is also complex.

The windows, sparse but carefully positioned, create an introverted space that focuses on the act of working, while skylights twice as high catch the sun and give the space a natural gleam. The austere and somewhat Spartan nature of this concrete room is counteracted by the view of the garden and the passing clouds. What is more, one window offers a view of one of the garden windows of the house. It immediately becomes clear that this studio was not simply shoved up against the existing house. An intriguing space between old and new is created by setting the upper floor and the skylights about half a metre from the rear wall of the house.

Kristoffel Boghaert has carefully shaped the relationship between the interior of the studio, the garden and the back of the old house. By completely concealing the wooden window frames behind the concrete supporting walls, the architect gives the impression that there is no glass between the inside and the outside and therefore that holes were simply cut out of the supporting walls. This ingenious vanishing trick gives the studio the atmosphere of a primitive cave. Despite the perfect geometry of the square ground plan and the cube-like stacking of space, the rough, rather clumsily cast concrete makes it seem a marvellous ruin. The room is halfway between indoors and outdoors, finished and unfinished, or what is and what is still to come.

The windows and the use of bare concrete are undeniably reminiscent of the recent building work done at the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. Kristoffel Boghaert worked on that museum for years in the employ of the architects Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem. But it would detract from the quality of this studio to accuse Boghaert of simply being an epigone. The character of this workshop and the subtle reshaping of the garden and the house are original contributions to architecture.

It is fascinating to see how, by the meticulously positioned skylights in the studio, the interior becomes a succession of rooms as seen in classic middle-class houses. The views and sightlines through the house to the garden, straight through or sideways past the studio

extension, the elegant wooden cladding and the seemingly floating garden steps, these are all elements that make this construction into pure and highly individual architecture. What is more, Boghaert is able to introduce a physicality and contemporary classicism into the architecture of this studio that echo the client's sculptures.

One of the greatest merits of this studio is that its light and space bring the promise of a new style of living. Because whenever this space ceases to be used as a studio, it will quite simply be a generous room between the garden and the townhouse, between boot and slipper. More than this, it is actually a challenge to its occupant. In the same way as a child makes a treehouse into a palace in his imagination, Kristoffel Boghaert makes this studio not only into a workspace for art but also a place to live with art. The art of building is an art of being.

Koen Van Synghel