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## **Do we really have to build something new?**

**An interview with Jo Taillieu on reusing existing buildings and the aesthetic and practical implications of the fragmentary on his design process.**

**On a sunny day in November, we met Jo Taillieu at his recently completed Café Paddenbroek near Brussels. A group of students from RWTH Aachen University had travelled Flanders to visit some of the projects by the acclaimed practice De Vylder Vinck Taillieu as part of a design studio on adaptive reuse taught by Tim Scheuer, Anke Naujokat, and Felix Martin.**

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The Belgian architect and professor at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Jo Taillieu, is known for his refreshingly unconventional adaptive reuse projects. After a successful decade of architecten de vylder vinck taillieu, Jo Taillieu established his own office in Gent in 2019. The buildings designed with dvvt as well as his own seem improvised and are sometimes described as unfinished. He and his colleagues often embraced the aesthetics of the construction site by presenting everyday objects and common goods from the hardware store in new contexts. Through the realisation of various projects, such as the redesign of the Caritas Psy-

chiatric Hospital in Melle, the office managed to win awards such as the Silver Lion for Young Promising Participants and became one of the five finalists for the Mies van der Rohe Award in 2019.

In 2020, one of Jo Taillieu's best-known projects, Café Paddenbroek, was realised in the municipality of Gooik, about thirty kilometers southwest of Brussels. In the autumn of 2021, archimaera's Felix Martin and a group of students from RWTH Aachen University followed the traces of Jo Taillieu and dvvt in Flanders and eventually had the opportunity to meet and interview Jo Taillieu for archimaera's tenth issue.

Fig. 1 Café Paddenbroek, Gooik (2020). View of the southwest facade.

Photograph by Filip Dujardin.



Fig. 2 Café Paddenbroek, Gooik (2020). Interior with existing farm building.

Photograph by Filip Dujardin.



Fig. 3-4 Twiggy, Gent (2012). Views of the double-height room and entrance to the apartments above the shop Twigg.

Photographs by Filip Dujardin.



**In the last two days we have seen several of your projects, for instance PC Caritas near Gent and Tangram in Kortrijk. Many of your buildings are adaptive reuse projects. What appeals to you about building in existing and often fragmentary structures?**

That is a very good question. I really believe you can be so lazy when you work with existing buildings and fragments. But let me elaborate on this — I use the word 'lazy' in a very positive sense, I mean you get so much for free. There are so many unique situations, details, and materials in existing structures to which you can easily respond with your own design. In addition, I think we must be cautious when consuming our planet's resources. So we as architects, have always challenged our profession's practice: Do we really have to build something new? Sometimes the client comes to you and says, 'I want to make an extension to my house.' But if you look at their building and situation closely enough, you might respond, 'You don't need an extension, you need to learn to appreciate what is already there and to reorganise it.' I believe that we really need to do this with any existing structure. Before adding something to the built environment, we must become more aware and arrive at a better understanding of the existing world around us. I really believe we have to think before we act. And certainly, as I said, it is so nice to work with the existing elements and fragments of a building. Let's say,

you need to design a window for that building [points at one of the remaining original parts of Café Paddenbroek]. These windows were already there, and you begin to respond to its form, material, or construction. It's a matter of action and reaction. You do something and the building responds, and you do something else again. I much prefer working with something as found rather than beginning a project with an empty sheet of paper in front of me. The latter is so much more difficult! That's why I say you can be lazier when you work with existing buildings. But of course, it is a kind of gimmick to describe the process like that. But still, the reality is that the existing structures give you so much for free.

**In your opinion, what is a good way to treat existing structures in architectural projects?**

In this building [Café Paddenbroek], for instance, you could have demolished everything and start from scratch. But isn't it a nice space to walk into, to bake the bread in the old farmhouse [points at an old oven in the Café Paddenbroek]? I think there is nothing wrong with this, maybe it has a little nostalgic connotation since it is an historical building. For example, if you take a look at another project, Twiggy, you can comprehend the pleasures of working with an existing building. This moment, when you enter and you have the open space to your left, emerged from a coincidence; initially the client wanted to welcome

Fig. 5 Famous, Brussels (2013). Remodelling of a former abbey. Hallway.

Photograph by Filip Dujardin.



customers in a large entrance hall allowing disabled people to use a ramp to reach the main floor of the shop. However, when we took out the ceiling of this double height, we were so enchanted by the resulting space that we decided to keep it. Therefore, you now have the tallest space sitting in the basement and together with the convoluted stairs in the back of the house we really challenged the idea of the levels as found with minor interventions.

**Your subtraction at Twiggy really defines the whole project. I don't know if it is a cultural thing that architecture students (at least in Germany) used to be trained with the dogma to protect existing structures, sometimes even if they are**

**not even protected by the state. And this often makes it harder for students to acquire a critical distance to a historical building. How do you free yourself from that premise of protection?**

Firstly, many structures in our project are not listed. And secondly, taking in account that I am so enthusiastic about existing buildings, there are also limits to it. For example, those existing extensions of the farm house here at Café Paddenbroek — if you would have seen them! — I mean if there would have been a slightly stronger gale at some point, the extensions would have collapsed entirely. You don't have to celebrate useless things. And then you have to dare to take a stance and make

Fig. 6 Famous, Brussels (2013). Remodelling of a former abbey. Detail of passage between the new offices.

Photograph by Filip Dujardin.



a decision. Paris would not look like it does today, had Haussmann never been born... Meaning not all old is good, and a critical attitude is what is always necessary.

**Did you encounter problems when you were working on protected buildings, to the degree that you couldn't continue with your design proposal?**

Yes, sometimes we are confronted with the task to maintain building parts, which, in our opinion, should not have to be kept for future generations. You know I am the first to do it if it is thoughtfully considered. But I am also the first to be realistic. I mean we don't have to be in a kind of mode where there is nothing we can do. But sometimes you are confronted with issues to keep fragments of buildings despite they have no value at all.

**Yesterday, we visited the marketing agency Famous Grey — a client of yours — in the old Wivina Abbey. There is quite a sudden change when one walks through the building. In the office wing you added these enchanting coloured columns that replaced an existing brick wall and the offices were left in a sort of ruinous state adding quite a romantic tone to the atmosphere of the whole wing. But then you go into the next section of the abbey**

**was changed and everything was maintained entirely. In this particular project, would you have liked to work in the protected rooms as well? For instance, the staircase, the library, or the church space?**

I remember that in the whole project, we had to be very precise about the interventions in the protected areas. So yes, there were more limits than in the other projects, that's true. However I strongly believe that restrictions often bring you to precision, and that is what happened in Famous.

**Your style is often described as improvised. Sometimes the various building parts seem to be thrown together. Your buildings are said to have a 'patchwork character'. How does this fascinating improvisation come about in your design process?**

This, again, is a very good question, because there is a lot of misunderstanding that our or any buildings are 'not finished or fragmentary'. It is not about finishing buildings; it is about knowing when to stop. For example you can ask yourself: Did you intend to finish these concrete blocks [points at bare concrete blocks at Café Paddenbroek]? If you finish them, they will probably be less resistant to use and wear. And it's not about the gimmick of a fragmentary or unfinished building. This is, in my opinion, a complete misunderstanding. You only reach that level of an unfinished aesthetics by first making a full design that is thought through entirely. Thus, improvisation is only possible with a lot of knowledge about your project. You must do a lot of research beforehand. Improvisation is only acceptable at that moment in your project history when you know what the immediate result of, or response to your improvisation will be. That means you need to be aware of all possible ramifications, if you, for instance, decide to leave out an entire floor. Again, you must know the project incredibly well. Otherwise, you run danger to encounter issues you cannot solve anymore. At the same time, in literally any second, while you are working on a project, you must be open-minded towards potential changes of plan and new ideas. And that is the reality. It is never about in-

creasing the complexity of a project by forming a 'patchwork' or fragmentary aesthetics. This is not in my interest. In fact, the aesthetical outcome is not fundamental in this process.

**And how do you make decisions in the design process? Is there also a kind of intuition that helps you designing?**

When I give desk crits to students at the EPFL in Lausanne, I always tell the students to be themselves. I don't want to give them the idea that my favorite architecture is the only example of what is good. Everybody has their own personality and that means you aspire to great heights with your own tools. The moment you explore your own possibilities and faculties, you can reach incredible things. I am certain that if you are being told to do this or that then you are going in the wrong direction. When I look at my students' work, it is often only when they lack rigour that they are not good. If you would like to fashion yourself a modernist or postmodernist, I don't care. But you have to be consequent. I explain that because there must be also freedom in interpreting things without any reasoning. This yellow color of the railing [points at the railing on a flight of stairs at Café Paddenbroek] — I cannot explain that. Is there something wrong with it because I cannot explain it? I don't think so. Maybe there is a certain kind of feeling that you get, you just think that is has to be this or that, but sometimes you simply cannot explain that. I also believe in the reinterpretation of convention. We must be open in architecture. In my opinion, research begins when you challenge your idea of, for instance, what a door is. It is a connection between something, but a door does not have to meet everyone's expectations of how a door should look like.

**There is another interesting aspect in your work that we would like to address. The Belgian people seem to have a particularly dear relationship with building. Of course, there is the Ugly Belgian Houses Blog that epitomises a national predilection for the self-made. How does this self-made approach influence your relationship to your clients? Is there an ap-**

**preciation of design and authorship in addition to the self-made?**

Firstly, there is one aspect that is not different in Belgium than in Germany: we as architects have almost no influence on the built environment. Because, even in Belgium, most of the projects are regulated by economical processes. And in some cases, these economical processes use existing buildings to market the development even better. So I think that the conditions here are not that much better than in other European countries. Maybe, what we have is something like an unstructured context that allows for a greater architectural freedom. If I look at the built environment in Switzerland for example, I think Belgian architecture has a greater variety than Swiss architecture. I think, despite globalisation, every country has its own architecture. And because we are so bad in urban design, we have a more flexible and heterogenous cityscape. For example, surrealism was an important movement in Belgium. And I think a certain surrealism can also be found in the urban fabric — a result of our lack of homogeneous streetscapes and combination of unrelated elements. But this environment probably allows for a greater variety than in other, more regulated countries. I think there is a lot of attention to Belgian architecture today. In my opinion, such attention can be also a dangerous thing. It is important to always reinvent yourself and not stick with solutions that once attracted the interest of the international architecture community.

**Was there a point in your career at which you wanted to reinvent your work in architecture?**

Three years ago, we decided to end the collaboration at de vylder vinck taillieu architecten. We did fantastic things together, we enjoyed ourselves, but reinventing yourself is also a good thing. It would have been very easy to continue like this, but I think it is also refreshing to recalibrate, and to cultivate this as an attitude for your whole life.

**We have noted that in some of your projects, like Tangram, you have intensified the fragmentary nature**

Fig. 7 Tangram, Kortrijk (2016). View of Courtyard.

Photograph by Filip Dujardin.



**of existing structures by removing parts and cutting openings. The results are always compelling and probably better than the actual ruins you found on site. Where does this interest in the ruinous and fragmentary come from? Historically speaking, do you consider your ruins as a memento mori, as a sign of human transiency and futility?**

As regards the first part of your question, this fiddling with the existing structure is maybe the most disputable aspect of some of our projects — at least in my opinion. That's why I think you must renew yourself at some point. However, it was sometimes more a 'let things happen' instead of an 'extension' of a ruin. For instance, the project PC Caritas was quite an experiment in this field. And of course, there are limits to such experiments, I think.

Like with the mirrors in our projects: the moment a beholder recognises a mirror as a mirror put up on a wall, we failed its implementation into our design scheme. I would like to point out that our projects are very different to each other. What fascinates me is the human aspect in a project, as it was the case with Kapelleveld, for example, which was also short listed for the Mies van der Rohe award. To work with a simple program and add value through architecture, that is what I probably like best. And, for instance, the client of twiggy, together with the client of the round house, invited me to have dinner with them. And when I hear them saying, 'I still like to live here. It's so nice to be in that house.' — that I consider the highest reward. That is why I like to explain the whole process of making architecture to students — for the past seventeen years

Fig. 8 PC Caritas, Gent (2016). Gathering space inside a ruinous building of a psychiatric centre.

Photograph by Filip Dujardin.



already. I like to explain things, when somebody asks me about a project featured in a magazine or on Instagram. I like to explain what is behind those pictures everybody can see.

**You also mentioned that people often call you a surrealist. Is that something which is true? Do you have some interests in the art movement from the early twentieth century or is it merely an external view on your work?**

Well, there is an interest. I am very interested in, for example, Duchamp. I learned about surrealist art from quite a young age onwards. However, what seems like a very strange situation or design choice, is often the result of an incredibly rational approach; an approach that is fostered by an open-mindedness and a certain independence from conventions. As I have said, sometimes you need to forget that the door has to be a door, simply make a connection between two spaces. The moment you dare to do that prevents you from being assailed by doubts such as, 'does this situation comply with standards and conventions, with the common notion of what it has to be? Will all architects accept it? Will it be a nice building?' The moment you forget that, you are likely to arrive at another kind of architecture — although the resulting building may also look a

little strange. For me, it is not the research of the strangeness, but it is the research of the openness. To keep your answer much more open and unbiased. It is not your design research on its own, this is only a device to ensure the freedom of letting things happen. In the end, people seem inclined to describe the result as surrealistic.

**Also, during our discussions over the past days, we were wondering if there is an element of criticism in your work. The raw materials or the exposed construction in your projects are often identified as elements of your 'style'. Is your embracing of these construction site aesthetics, perhaps, a sort of criticism directed towards the building industry and other architects?**

Yes, but in a positive sense. Getting older and older I have the feeling it does not make any sense to be critical without providing an answer at the same time. If there is a critical provocation, it is not for the sake of criticism alone, but about how you can possibly do something differently. To try to answer it in a better way. For me it is rather about that because criticism, without a solid base, does not really matter. But there is another aspect in your question. It is important to me, and this is also one aspect of my teaching, that you can fail. I always accept

myself making mistakes because that means that I try to explore new possibilities. Of course, you never want to fail entirely. However, this is not going to happen if you have enough control over your project. But even keeping that chance of making a failure enables you to encounter new approaches. For instance, with building the Café Paddenbroek, the neighbourhood initially thought that the community was spoiling money. And after explaining the project better to them, they began liking it. And now I only hear positive feedback about the building. So, you have to take risks in architecture. If you really believe in something, go for it. It is so much easier to follow the mainstream, but I encourage you young architects to be critical, in the sense of following your own personality. And please somehow do not agree to all the things I say.

**Is there something that has particularly shaped you? For example, your studies, an office where you worked, another architect or a certain period in your life?**

More than 20 years ago, I was working on a project in the office of Stéphane Beel, together with Xaveer de Geyter. It was a fantastic experience, but the best is to work on your own oeuvre; to take your own position, that's what I really encourage. It is a long way, but it is a fantastic experience. I often say 'folks, be yourselves' And it's not about being different. Being different is not a quality. Instead you should be personal. And I think that is incredibly important.

**In your opinion, what is the best method to convince a client of your personal approach to a project, which seems different and may lead to unexpected results? How do you convince them to embark with you on a journey?**

Of course, you don't explain the full journey in the beginning [... everyone laughing]. That is maybe the best method. And to build up a story with the client. Also, this helps you as an architect as well! You are not ready from the first day onwards. Sometimes you present something and then one month later you change everything. And then

the client comes and says, 'We were just convinced of that and now you come up with something completely different?' And I say, 'yes but it was not good.' And yes, it is hard work to convince them of your own thoughts, but clients can envision an entirely different project based on the thoughts you articulated. Images, however, transport your story from the first instance onwards. An image your clients will like, or hate. But for me, it is not about reducing a building to an image. When you leave Paddenbroek today, I hope you remember why the building was designed in this way and not the mere image of it. Because if you transplant this image to another building, it is almost certain that it will become a gimmick. But the thought or the story behind the building could be, in other conditions, completely reused.

**So, would you even say that you sometimes approach new clients with thoughts before you even show them plans and pictures?**

Yes, of course, honestly. Look, we are right now invited to a competition, where the competition's brief forbids the submission of a model. We do not make models as presentation methodology, but rather to learn from ourselves, to see, to rework. And the joke was, 'You can bring it with you, but we are not allowed to consider it part of your submission.' [laughing].

**What is your personal favorite project from the oeuvre of de vylder vinck taillieu and your own practice?**

[laughing ...] It is just like having children, you cannot pick a favorite, and you always try to do better for the next time. I always wanted to find a rigorous approach to the pre-existing conditions of a project. The most important thing is to respond in a precise manner to the circumstantial influences on a project. And that is why I do not believe in an architectural style of the fragmentary or unfinished, or in any style. Because then one would answer those question always with the same vocabulary. The recipe would always have the same ingredients, so the dish would always taste the same. It would be quite boring, don't you agree? [laughing]