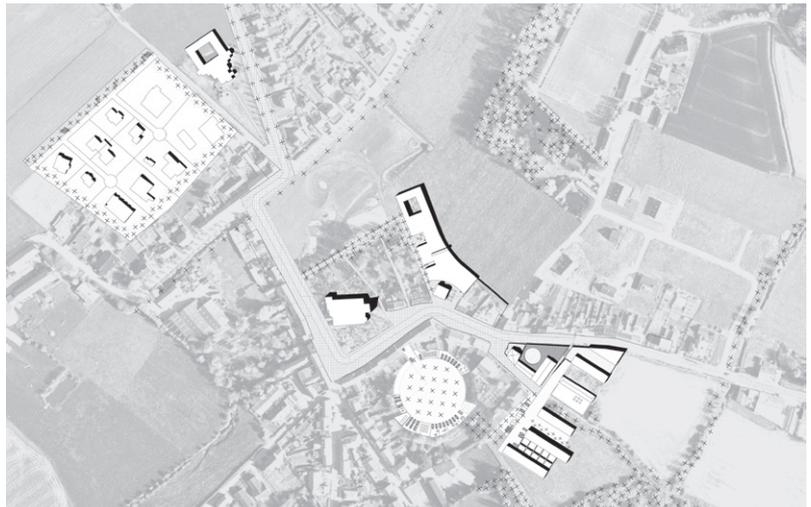


Labo S/09 Reconstruction architecture in the front zone of '14-'18: Design based research on Westouter

Commissioned by: Province of West
Flanders
2009

Collaborators: P. Uyttenhove, T. Bulckaen
In collaboration with: Maat-ontwerpers



Aerial photograph of the village of Westouter, indicating the final design proposal on several strategic sites.

In the aftermath of the Labo S studies on reconstruction architecture in the front zone of '14-18 (Labo S / 04), and as a reaction to the ambition of the municipality of Westouter to create a spatial policy document for the town centre, Labo S got assigned to put the framework, formulated in the previous studies, to the test. MAAT-designers, an architecture and urban design office based in Ghent, was responsible for the design based research.

Problem definition

The reconstruction architecture of the post-WWI time is iconic for the Westhoek, a Belgian region generally covering the WWI front zone. This characteristic architecture occurs in the Westhoek cities as well as villages and open spaces. Nonetheless, this patrimony is increasingly under strain because of changing user needs and living standards. Considering the development dynamics of reconstruction municipalities, such as Westouter, two incongruous attitudes can be distinguished.

On the scale of the individual building, this discord is translated in the option of complete preservation versus drastic conversion or even demolition, due to the need for a functional adaptation or increase in comfort. On the scale of a village one can notice a comparable reflex. On one hand, the local authorities generally wish to invest in the town centre in order to preserve the authentic townscape. On the other hand, large allotments at the fringe interfere with the original village layout, usually steered by the individual user or developer.

The tension between these seemingly incompatible notions often surfaces in the course of granting a building or allotment permit, or when working out a spatial policy document. On that account, this research starts from the premise that when aspiring a well-considered spatial policy,

an effective method of heritage valuation seems indispensable.

Methodology

The methodology to evaluate built heritage by means of the value analysis, serves as the starting point to reveal and comprehend the qualities and deficiencies of the reconstruction of Westouter. The study emphasises on spatial and design based research of potential developments in the centre of Westouter, in relation to the heritage value of the reconstruction architecture. The report aspires to stimulate and support the municipality in formulating a vision and proposed several development perspectives as well as guidelines to manage current projects, building applications and landscape interventions.

Step 1: elaborating the question

Typical for the front zone is a striking homogeneity of the reconstruction architecture, that is preserved until today. In order to maintain this quality, an heritage approach solely aimed at specific objects will not suffice. It will be crucial to consider the homogeneity and internal structure of the reconstruction landscape as well. Apart from the morphology of the village centre and the configuration and architectural value of buildings, the structure of the landscape can be a lead to maximize existing qualities. Based on the framework, various positions can be taken regarding the relation between reconstruction heritage and new developments: strict preservation, renovation, expanding, reinterpretation, or in some cases even substitution.

By means of design based research these diverse strategies are tested on concrete sites, relating to specific spatial issues that nowadays characterise Westouter.

Cultural value

The main road traverses the village and defines the cultural value of the built fabric. The value is determined by articulated and historical or architectural valuable buildings that align the road and mark the core, complemented by a secondary structure of residences that form a continuous strip.

Locus value

In the north, as a ribbon the main road transects an open plateau with scattered farms, while centrally in the village it follows the valley of a French creek. South, the road traverses an enclosed landscape of carved out streams, hollow roads and landscape chambers or bocages. The relation of the ribbon towards these three dissimilar landscape typologies, seems to shape the identity of Westouter.

Practical value

When regarding the practical value of Westouter, one can discern two zones: small-scale commercial, community and service programs residing in the town centre and recreational, touristic functions or large-scale agriculture at the margin. Mainly the latter put a considerable pressure on the landscape surrounding the village.

Step 2: a vision for a future development

A superposition of all three values sheds light on the primary spatial structure of Westouter. Future additional developments should by any means articulate and consolidate this structure.

The design based research focuses on four strategic sites alongside the main road. The design is initiated by several questions regarding two contrasting spatial conditions: "add or extract program?", "integrate or confront landscape?", "transform or preserve heritage?" and



Waardekaart Westouter als synthese van de historische (1), locus- (2) en gebruikswaarde (3)

^ Map of Westouter, indicating the historical locus and practical value.

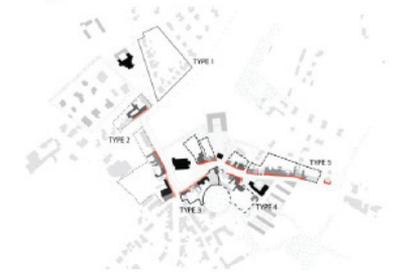
1. Landschap



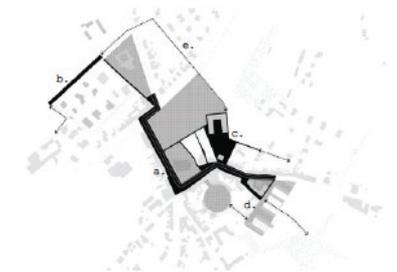
2. Programma



3. Erfgoed



4. Buitenruimte



^ Diagrams depicting the key questions: "integrate or confront landscape?" "add or extract program?" "transform or preserve heritage?" "manage outdoor spaces publicly or privately?"

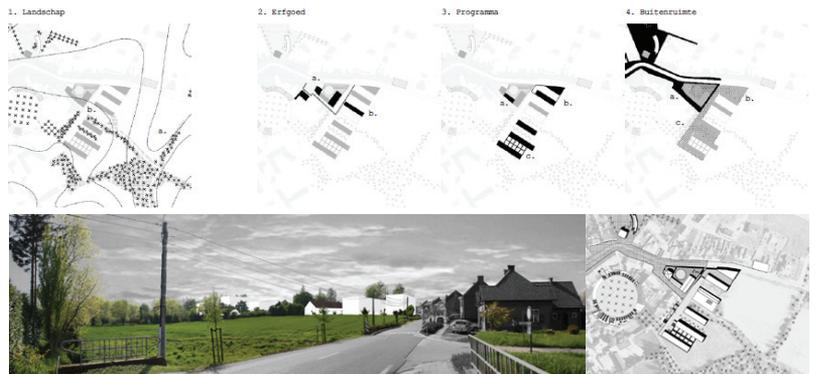
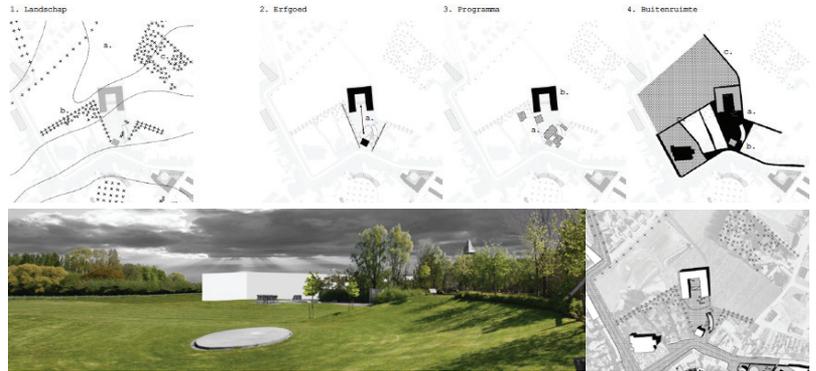
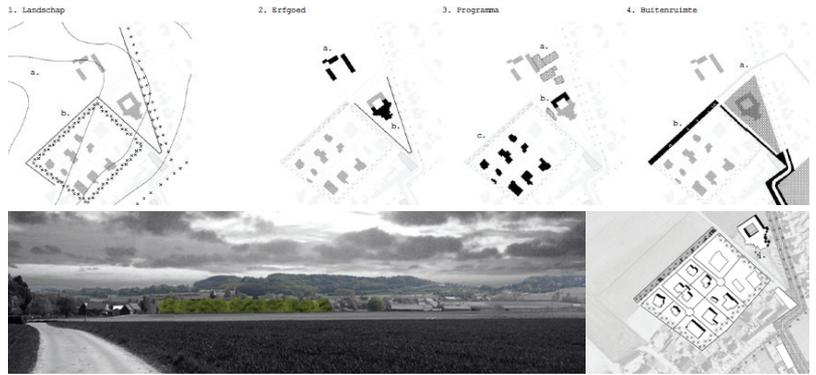
"manage outdoor spaces publicly or privately?"

Subsequently, several scenarios are proposed for each site. The morphology of the sites consists of ribbons and solitary landmarks. The scenarios are based on these two elements and one additional element: the large entity or ensemble on the scale of the landscape. The scenarios investigate in which way the strategic sites could accommodate additional program (practical value), how it should relate to the existing heritage (cultural value) and to the surrounding landscape structure (locus value).

Step 3: putting into practice

The research elucidated the importance of certain sites for the future development of Westouter and the image value of the village landscape. Therefore, the final design aspect attempts to advise the municipality in setting up a spatial policy document, that will capture building volumes, connections and zoning in a set of rules as well as additional documents guarding the image and space quality.

Within the course of the research, a number of spatial questions arose that prove to be generic for the front zone. Therefore, it is advisable to investigate if certain guidelines can be worked out transcending jurisdictional borders and addressing a larger ensemble of villages. However, this lies beyond the scope of this research.



^ Proposal for the strategic sites (from top to bottom):

i) On the plateau, new functions for living and small-scale businesses are made possible by inserting an additional spatial entity: the 'fitting room'.

ii) In the valley, a 'monolith', relating to the scale of the surrounding landscape, accommodates new public program close by the existing facilities.

iii) At the fringe of the village, the bocage landscape is completed with a 'ribbon' made of elongated volumes containing recreational facilities. The existing strip, aligning the main street, is subject to certain dynamics and is expanded by additional ribbons.