

[] ORBAN SPACE:
LUC DELEU – T.O.P.
OFFICE []

[] FOUR DECADES
OF PROPOSALS
AND RECOMMEN-
DATIONS FOR
PUBLIC SPACE ON
THE SCALE OF THE
EARTH. []

15 - 09 - 2013

[ENGLISH] 17 - 11 - 2013

Orban Space: Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office
Curated by Wouter Davidts & Stefaan
Vervoort in dialogue with T.O.P. office

September 15 – November 17 2013
Opening: September 14, 6:30 pm
Location: Eikelstraat 31, 2600 Berchem

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Thanks to
The City of Antwerp, District of Berchem,
Sara Weyns, Bart de Baere, Stroom Den
Haag, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen,
Frederic Vandoninck Wouter Willems
Architecten, the lenders to the Luc
Deleu exhibition, Win Van den Abbeele,
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Lena Daems, Greet Vlegels, LLS 387,
Établissement d'en Face, deBuren, Valiz
Publishers, Milo Profi.



ORBAN SPACE INTRODUCTION

'Less is Less', according to the Belgian architect and artist Luc Deleu, in a subtle play on the well-known motto of Mies van der Rohe. Because of the increasing world population, the available land surface decreases proportionally, which means less space per inhabitant of the globe. In the eyes of Luc Deleu, 'less' also means consuming less, building, polluting and producing less. The implications of this attitude for the architecture and design of our cities and public space will be presented in the exhibition *Orban Space*.

When the Belgian architect and artist Luc Deleu (1944) founded T.O.P. office in 1970, the name he chose resonated as an admonition: Turn On Planning! The letter O in the center symbolizes the earth. Inside the O, the globe is depicted as an upside-down mirror image. In short, the world takes center stage.

Centered on contemporary concerns about vertiginous population growth, uneven food production, raging environmental pollution, and the frictions between individual and mass society, Deleu developed an ecocentric and global urbanism, operatively recast as Orbanism.

The world also takes center stage in this exhibition, that links the most recent research project, *Orban Space*, to a more 40 years dedicated to looking at, and engaging the world around us in every way made possible by the architectural discipline. It thus becomes apparent that *Orban Space* is not an isolated project, but is firmly rooted in a working method and a mindset that has been unfolded over the years.

The exhibition is developed around five thematic clusters. Each of these zooms in on an *Orban Space* production. In and out of display cases, new connections are drawn between various works, documents, and projects from the period 1969–2013.

This guide introduces the five themes and central works. The curators Wouter Davidts and Stefaan Vervoort explain how they came to choose these specific themes. An image of a model made by T.O.P. office and a list of works, inserted in this guide, give a further illustration of the layout and contents of the exhibition. Additional leaflets display the contents of the various display cases, using colours that refer to the five themes.

In addition to a short summary of the research work of T.O.P. office and a group portrait of the studio, this guide also presents the full and original text of the *Orban Planning Manifesto*, and the Archined review of Luc Deleu's lecture at Stroom Den Haag in 2011.

ORBAN SPACE CURATOR STATEMENT

The exhibition *Orban Space: Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office* centres upon *Orban Space*, the latest research project initiated by T.O.P. office in 2006. *Orban Space* brings to full circle the ambition of T.O.P. office to develop a theoretical framework and a practical methodology to think about public space on a global scale, and ultimately to develop suitable strategies to design it.

The exhibition intends to provide unforeseen perspectives and to unveil new ensembles within the oeuvre of Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office. To this end, the exhibition advances five thematic clusters: *devices*, *media*, *dimensions*, *movements*, and *realities*. Neither conclusive nor exhaustive, the respective clusters retrace the many recurrent operations, actions and strategies that mark the work and practice of Deleu – T.O.P. office over the past decades.

In a unique scenography devised by T.O.P. office, the exhibition distributes a selection of previous works and projects around recent results of *Orban Space*. Newly produced work is put into an historical perspective by means of older works and projects, as well as through a distinct selection of sketches, models, design tools and archival documents from 1969 to 2013, many of which have never been shown to the public to this date.

Below you will find introductions to the five themes and descriptions of each central *Orban Space* work.

Devices

From the very founding of T.O.P. office in 1970, Luc Deleu and his collaborators have selected or even invented the necessary tools to embark on projects in the diverging regimes of architecture, urban planning and art.

Over the past few years Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office have worked on *Orban Space: Terminology* (2006-ongoing), an index of public space on a world-wide scale, counting over 1000 pages. Terminology aims to map and describe the various connections, hierarchies and priorities of global public space on all possible scale levels. It combines abstract terms with photographs sourced from the archives of T.O.P. office and from publicly available encyclopedias or websites like Wikipedia. The result is a design tool that operates as a dictionary, atlas, thesaurus, catalogue, and manual for architecture and urban planning all at once.

Media

T.O.P. office sought and appropriated a vast range of modalities to mediate the design process in the studio as well as to make the resulting work public.

The terminology of global public space provided the onset for the vast poster *Orban Space: Analysis* (2006-ongoing). Composed of the sections Forum, Network and Nodes, Urbanized Public Space, Setting & Location and Scales & Degrees of Urbanization, the scheme proposes a refined and complex world-image modeled from different layers of urbanity, infrastructure, and technology. Set against a starry sky, the panels function within T.O.P. office both as an

organizational system and a design manual for contemporary global society.

Dimensions

T.O.P. office never failed to measure developments in society as well as their own activities against the scale of the globe.

Orban Space: The Voyage (2006-2013) documents a sailing trajectory around the world, enacted by Deleu in person. The journey served as a performative climax in Deleu's lasting research into Planet Earth's surface, by means of which contemporary globalization is not only mapped but also enacted, or embodied. Negotiating between cartographic calculation and an adventurous expedition, research here ambivalently appears as both abstract and concrete. 'I want to make the journey to get a grip on and a real feeling of the scale of the world,' Deleu stated in 1994, 'and for the orbanist that's what it's all about.'

Movements

T.O.P. office explored imaginative proposals and thought up visionary plans to challenge the immobile nature of building.

Orban Space: Travel Pictures (2006-2013) consists of a grid-like sequence of photographs shot by Deleu during a journey around the world in 45 days in 2006. A visual record of the actual travel experience, it documents the orbanist's land-, air- and sea-bound movement. The pictures not only represent the physical voyage but also reveal the different political, cultural, and historical spheres that were crossed through – a global realm marked by ongoing internationalization and cultural cross-influences between West, East,

North and South, that is, by the present-day aftermath of the modernist age.

Realities

T.O.P office adheres to the design rule that all schemes – from the conceptual to the quixotic, from small to extra-large – are grounded in the real and contribute to a future understanding of our dwelling on planet Earth.

The model *Sector X* (2010) analyses an urban territory in the immediate vicinity of T.O.P. office's Antwerp studio. The mapping and superimposition of the assorted traffic flows generates an architecture in and of itself, detached from the objects, bodies and buildings that populate the original site. The intricate pairing of detailed attention to a local environment with an abstract and scaleless materialization tentatively convey public space as a multilayered force field.

Wouter Davidts and Stefaan Vervoort, January 2013

CURATOR STATEMENT

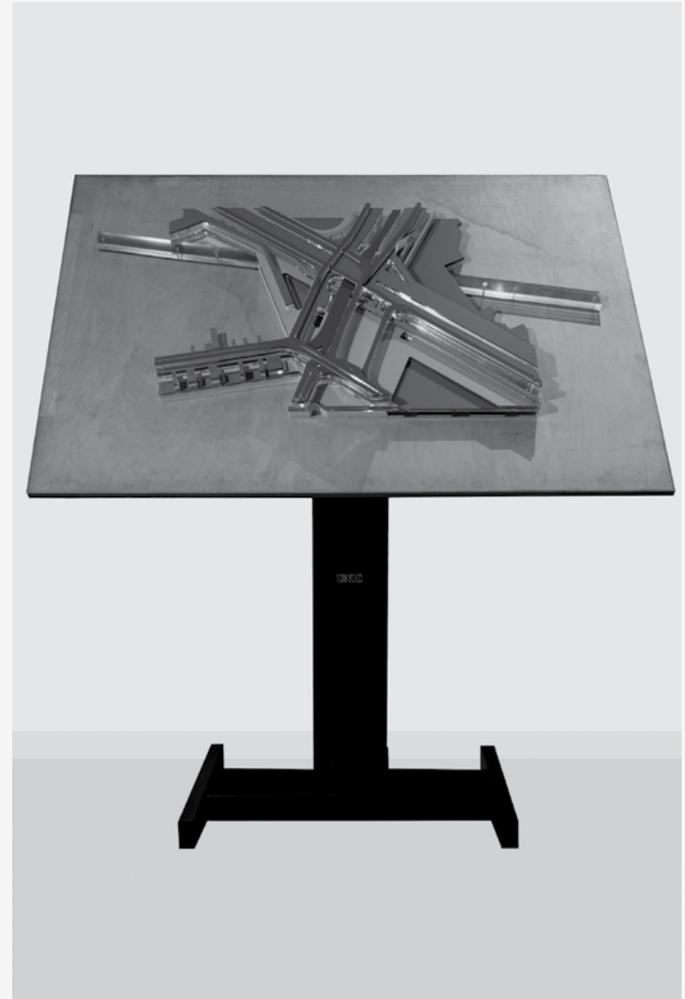


Image: Sector X
© Luc Delieu – T.O.P. Office

EXTRA CITY KUNSTHAL – ORBAN SPACE

FUTURE PROSPECTS EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW WITH T.O.P. OFFICE

Steven Van den Bergh: Actually, *Orban Space* is a continuation of *The Unadapted City*, or, more specifically, a further exploration of urban space. T.U.C. also began as a continuation of the *Usiebenpole* design. The starting point is that not houses but facilities make up a city, and *Brikabrak* is a literal expression of that proposition. During the next phase, *Dinkytown*, we started to realize that in fact the space between the facilities, in other words the public space, is even more important. So we wrote arrangements and scores that unconsciously shaped the public space. With *Dinkytown* the approach was rather formal, as we were still mainly focused on manipulating the facilities. With *Vipcity*, by contrast, we started designing the public space itself, so it was no longer the formal end result of the positioning of the facilities. The arrangement and scores in this case were largely written for the public space. *Orban Space* is the continuation of this process. With *Orban Space*, the study of public space goes much further than formal analysis. We are trying to register the acts and networks that define public space, along with all that they entail.

CURATOR STATEMENT



Image: Vipcity, Brussel Biennale, 2008
© Luc Detlev – T.O.P. Office

Hans De Wolf: Could one say that, with *Orban Space*, a temporal dimension has been added to the study of public space? Are you now trying to map movement and displacement, in particular the dynamics controlling public space?

Steven Van den Bergh: Yes, I think one could certainly say that.

Excerpt from: "Future Prospects. An interview with Isabelle De Smet and Steven Van den Bergh", by Wouter Davidts and Hans De Wolf, in: *Luc Deleu - T.O.P. office: Orban Space* (Valiz, 2012), 388-89.



Image: Vpacity. The nautical mile transit photomontage
© Luc Deleu – T.O.P. Office

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW WITH T.O.P. OFFICE

ORBAN SPACE DESIGN BY RESEARCH

Orban Space was initiated in spring 2006. The project sprung from *The Unadapted City* (1995-2006), the urbanist, spatial and theoretical research into urban facilities and infrastructure in relation to the ever-growing world population. *Orban Space* extends the understanding and expertise that were gained during this decade-long study and attains another scale level.

Orban Space has the ambition to develop a contemporary theory and a new paradigm for public world space on planet earth, i.e. orban space, in both word and image. With this study, T.O.P. office aims to map the wide array of public spaces, ranging from the street, to the internet and to the seas. While the reflection about public space within the design of *The Unadapted City* was driven by a mathematics of the anonymous number, public space is being analysed in *Orban Space* by means of a nomenclature of abstract terms.

Parallel to the denomination and cataloguing of different types of public space on a planetary scale, T.O.P. office explores the connections, priorities and hierarchies between assorted spaces of commonality. The resulting taxonomy of public space is complemented with a detailed study of the use and shape of the latter spaces.

T.O.P. office wishes to determine whether the design of public world space and its infrastructures can be used as an instrument to organize city and world. Public space is no longer treated as a mere residue of the built environment, but as the prime challenge of urban design. *Orban*

ORBAN PLANNING MANIFESTO T.O.P. OFFICE, 1980

Until we can start evacuating our planet on a massive scale, or importing goods from space, we will need to fulfill all our needs with what is found here on Earth – apart from the (required) solar energy and possibly other (unacknowledged, but equally vital) space energy.

One-third of the world population is undernourished. This implies that we would have to expand our existing arable land by over 30% to satisfy our actual needs. Besides intensifying food production per square metre, we could make a huge effort to transform deserts, steppes and wastelands into arable land. But we will also need to utilise as much 'free space' in our conurbations as possible for food production. All the more so because, if anything, we should strive to save our jungles, forests, woodlands and other natural areas, and even expand them into spare areas.

If we choose to accept these priorities, in theory this means there are hardly any opportunities left to expand our conurbations in terms of surface area. This in turn puts considerable pressure on our living conditions. If we wish to guarantee maximum residential comfort for all, we will need to create far greater efficiency in the organisation of our living environments than has been achieved up to this point. We will need to focus more on the polyvalent use of urban spaces. In this critical phase, the best solution would be for everyone to organise his or her living situation on an individual basis, according to personal preferences, resources, options and limits. This can be seen as analogous to the entirely decentralised organisation of a plant community (phytocoenosis), in which every specimen bears full

DESIGN BY RESEARCH

Space is fuelled by the conviction that the present-day crisis of public space can be deployed as an opportunity to redevelop that very shared space. As common interests prevail over private concerns in public space, governments are faced with a crucial task to establish themselves by means of thoughtful management and a genuine plan for public world space.

T.O.P. office (Luc Deleu, Laurette Gillemot, Isabel De Smet en Steven Van den Bergh), January 2013



Beld: OrbanSpace: The Voyage (2006-2007)
© Luc Deleu – T.O.P. Office

It is my modest hope that the picture of 'momentous times' that I have outlined above brings home the importance of adopting a new "urbanist" perspective to town planning and architecture. In 'momentous times', town planning and architecture work according to urbanist priorities. The aesthetic priorities and stylistic elements of 'non-momentous times' are no longer relevant in a situation of do-it-yourself architecture and self-made cities, in which the built environment is codetermined by each individual citizen.

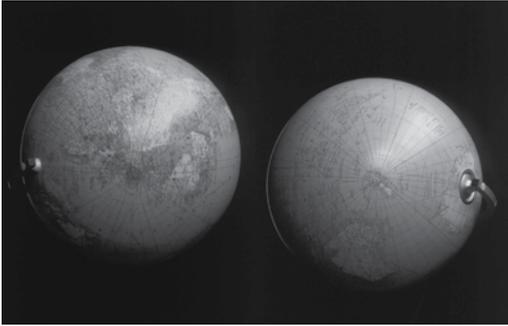


Image: Journey Around the world in 80 days@ Luc Deleu – TOP: Office

Indeed, in 'momentous times', the urbanist architect (urbanist) fulfils an entirely different role altogether. Just as the (pictorial) function of painting (in Western art) changed profoundly after the invention of photography, town planning and architecture (urbanism) have presently undergone a change of function and meaning. A key aspect of the 'momentous' urbanist's current profession is providing "information" (reduction of uncertainty). The urbanist is a medium, a trendsetter and/ or the town jester, etc... He designs, publishes, performs, exhibits, realises or plays around, and so on.

His new ideal is 'free space'. Instead of focusing on infrastructures that define the Earth's space and make it more one-dimensional, the urbanist now utilises ultrastructures that increase this space without limiting its wide range of potential uses.

Today's urbanist is a theorist first and foremost – one who in rare cases is able to realise his visionary models that outline how to structure our planet's spaces. Although it is a dynamic and evolving planet, as home to a constantly self-realising urbanism that is influenced by the actions of all its individual inhabitants, the Earth can be considered as completed in the 'momentous times'.

Translation: Willem Kramer

T.O.P. OFFICE PORTRET

T.O.P. office is an architecture and urban planning firm with many faces and multiple personalities. It was founded by Luc Deleu and his wife Laurette Gillemot in 1970 in their house Les Nénuphars in the stately Cogels Osylei street in Antwerp, one year after Deleu's graduation as an architect from the Hoger Instituut Sint Lucas in Brussels. Based on the recognition that 'it takes a team to deal with the complexities of architecture,' Deleu conceived both the mode and the environment of his early work as collaborative and dialogical.¹ The logo of T.O.P. office further underscored the ethical stance taken by Deleu: a globe upside-down and in reverse, the emblem represented the willful shift from local preoccupations towards a global consciousness. With the concept of Urban Planning, Deleu further developed an architecture and urban planning practice that took the earth as its yardstick. T.O.P. office made an imaginative plea for a tolerant urbanism for a tolerant society, an ecological perspective, true citizen participation, and, *avant la lettre*, sustainability. The profound changes in the organization of public space, transport and dwelling, combined with the steady increase of the world population, Deleu wrote in his *Urban Planning Manifesto* of 1980, forced the architect-town-planner to define new priorities.

T.O.P. office was set up based on two distinct convictions: first, that it would be better to reduce the spatial impact of building and hence to build less, and second, that future developments in communication media would enable new modes of nomadic life. The ensuing early works

1. Luc Deleu, *The Ethics of Architecture*, April 1989, p. 1.

emphasized mobility versus the immobilism of real estate and questioned the exclusive privilege of buildings as living and working accommodation. The assertion that '[t]he urban planner has become primarily a theorist, who in rare cases realizes his visionary views on space of the planet earth,' has constituted the core of T.O.P. office's mission ever since. By means of a consistent formal research and multi-layered design strategies it investigated such dichotomies as order and chaos, or new and old.

Partly due to his many friendships with local artists, Deleu primarily gained visibility in the art world in the 1970s and early 1980s with performances, sculptures and installations of large-scale objects that shifted the scale and perspective of both urban and natural settings. Rather than being acknowledged as an architect and urban planner in charge of an office, Deleu built up an international reputation as an artist. However, Deleu's claim that 'building' is not the only available mode to express ideas on architecture and urban planning should by no means be regarded as grounds to portray him as a mere visionary or even utopian architect. To Deleu, the sphere of the arts just served as an additional platform to make his work public, or as he formulated it in a short unpublished statement on scale and perspective in 1986, 'to put his ideas up for discussion.'² His ambitions, Deleu has never failed to stress, have always been situated squarely in the realm of architecture and urban planning.

Even though Deleu engaged in several collaborative projects during the 1970s, both artistic and architectural, it was the various studies for High Speed Rail (HST) lines in

2. Luc Deleu, *Schaal & Perspectief*. [Switzerland] 1986 (unpublished). This position is echoed by Deleu's aphoristic statement that 'I am an artist because I am an architect.'

Brussels (1986–89), Utrecht (1989–90), Antwerp (1989–93), and Rotterdam (1990–91), the Housing (&) the City public housing contest (1989), the design for the conversion of the 'De Hef' bridge in Rotterdam into a sky plaza and civil offices (1989–90), or the cruise terminal for Antwerp (1998), that marked a new phase in the structure and activities of T.O.P. office. These large-scale and elaborate architectural and infrastructural design projects required a collective mode of research and a novel degree of shared efforts. In this period the office grew considerably and employed a varying number of collaborators. The shift in the late 1980s to the design of large-scale urban projects encouraged the office in the mid-1990s to add a bottom-up approach to the conventional top-down method. *The Unadapted City*, an ample study for the development and organization of urban infrastructure and amenities initiated by T.O.P. office in 1995, was a new pinnacle in this development. Idiosyncratically labeling it as 'design by research', T.O.P. office invested in a long-term mode of research and in the development of more sophisticated concepts. This new development moved into a higher gear in 1997, when Isabelle De Smet and Steven Van den Bergh joined T.O.P. office and soon after became permanent staff members. In little less than a decade, the new team developed a unique model of collaborative practice centered upon aleatoric techniques and engaging stochastic processes that led to autopiloted design. As they worked together, and often simultaneously, on one single computer drawing for *The Unadapted City*, all the while combining high technology and chance principles, T.O.P. office diffused authorship to a large degree. Parallel to an adherence to strict rationality, T.O.P. office tried more and more to get hold of the synchronicity of things in the processes of creation.

ABOUT AN OFFICE THAT DOESN'T WANT TO BUILD —REVIEW

T.O.P. OFFICE

T.O.P. office has always cherished its position as an independent research team that develops an autonomous format for urban research by design. On many occasions T.O.P. office has participated in debates on the present state and the future of architecture and urban planning. Yet the drive behind the work and practice of T.O.P. office has never been merely theoretical. The many and varied activities of the past four decades have resulted in a distinct understanding of the design challenges of very large and complex programs and meanings, this from a planetary point of view and bearing the earth's scale in mind. They have developed a unique sensibility for oversized monumentalism and advanced the strategy of imaging concepts. Yet the conceptual vocation of T.O.P. office has always been coupled with the sincere desire to consolidate the built-up expertise and the acquired knowledge in the very practical realm of building. The claim to build less is all too often mistaken for a refusal to build.

This is an abridged version of the portrait written for the publication Luc Deleu - T.O.P. office: Orban Space (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012).

The images of the earth floating in space and the poetic name that Buckminster Fuller coined for our planet, 'space-ship earth', inspired Deleu to come up with his so-called orbanism – a form of urbanism and architecture that takes the human scale, as well as its significance for the whole world, into account with every intervention, no matter how small. Or as he writes: 'Orbanism aims for an integrated practice of urbanism and architecture at a planetary scale and tries to view the earth as the spatial and social context for cities and architecture. Orbanisme therefore aims for a balanced organisation of the earth's space.'

Deleu is not only an orbanist but also a big relativist; his way of talking about his ideas, projects and orbanism is almost cursory. He sprinkled his presentation with that characteristic humour with which Belgians so unerringly expose the absurdity of our world. Deleu flicked nonchalantly through a number of projects from the early years of his office, including the *Mobile Medium University*, his proposal for a new university in Antwerp located on three ships. Once these students have completed their studies, they not only possess academic knowledge, they are also trained in the ways of the world.

But despite the numerous jokes, he's serious. He made that clear not just by racing through his Orbanist Manifesto (1980). This manifesto, he concluded contentedly, still summarises his vision well. With his work he has also compiled the consistent oeuvre that he aspired to when he graduated and contemplated the question what an architecture office

should look like that isn't going to build, or rather, doesn't want to build! Deleu devoted the largest part of his lecture to *The Unadapted City* (D.O.S), an urban study into the alternative use of urban space, which the office worked on from 1995 to 2004.

Deleu's urbanism is a logical elaboration of three critical premises, namely: that urbanism limits itself to determining the necessary volumes, infrastructure and services; that urbanism does not interfere in private lives; and that urbanism imposes limitations on multinationals and institutes, limitations that are to everyone's advantage. That makes this form of urbanism a direct reflection of Deleu's own critical view of society and urbanism.

He himself expresses it thus: 'The central theme is the search for an original form and organisation of what makes a city a city, for what makes everyday life pleasant and gives meaning to public space: an autonomous, three-dimensional and monumental (infra)structure, an example of contemporary collaboration between the private and public sector; attractive public transport and pleasant public space that display the identity of the community in symbolic fashion; a controlled urban space that is controlled and controllable from inside to outside and under the urban roofs, and is provided with a system of public transport that is conceived as a horizontal lift; a space-park/ park-space for pedestrians in symbiosis with the peripheral space for vehicular traffic; attractions and amenities for car drivers, intermediate stations for drivers and pedestrians; a public space in open space.' (*La Ville Inadaptée*, p.62).

The research into *The Unadapted City* started with a proposal for a linear city called Usiebenpole on the island

in the River Danube near Vienna. On this 22-km-long strip he initially planned 1000 Unité d'Habitation buildings – 'the best apartment building there is, of course' – and then asked himself how he should charge the public space. How many cafes, how many social functions, which medical facilities, where to play sports? These questions signaled the start of an endless data study that he then represented wonderfully – 'because I simply have to sell my drawings to get by as a non-building architect'. Over the years this unadapted city has grown, and complete districts with names like Brikabrak and Dinkytown have been added. The project ended with a 1850-cm long model – 1/100th of a nautical mile – of *Vipcity*, which was presented in 2004 at the MuHKA museum in Antwerp.

The meta-studies result in wonderful images, comparable with his artworks in public space. In terms of content, however, the images are much more difficult to digest. The theory and the data cloud that lie hidden behind the images are not to be comprehended in just one evening.

Just how difficult it is to fathom his work became clear when it was the audience's turn to pose questions. Even though the majority of them were professional colleagues, scarcely any critical questions were put concerning the content of the work. Instead, they revealed the classical lack of understanding for the paper architect and his choice not to want to build. For example, he was asked: 'What do you leave behind as an architect/urbanist if you do not build?' A remarkable turnaround. Deleu hit the ball back by saying: 'I am an architect who wants nothing'. The question from urbanists and architects should be 'What can I do, or do I want to do, with the work of Deleu as an architect/urbanist?' His logical and full consideration of the Orbanist Manifesto,

which focuses on mankind and the Spaceship Earth, has not lost any validity, and is worthy of study now more than ever.

Marieke Hillen

The Knight's Move lecture, March 30, 2011
Published on Archined: <http://www.archined.nl>

ABOUT AN OFFICE THAT DOESN'T WANT TO BUILD

EXTRA CITY KUNSTHAL – ORBAN SPACE