



Making space

By Stephen Evans

A booming service sector has been accompanied by a scramble to erect office space in Luxembourg, leaving an architectural heritage of varying quality. The government in conjunction with the Order of Architects and Engineers and the Architecture Foundation released a brochure in January entitled "For an architectural policy"; a name which implies Luxembourg doesn't have a policy. We spoke to architect Michel Petit and artist Sally Arnold about how we could view the buildings around us.

"Architecture combines serving practical needs with art," notes Michel Petit and to deepen this partnership further, he and Luxembourg-based artist Sally Arnold are looking at ways to collaborate. Petit notes that in Luxembourg as elsewhere "too often decision makers have a very functional view," with public projects in particular being susceptible to popular complaint. "Architects may seek to bypass this debate," he notes "as they feel it will make it easier to sell their ideas to the promoter." This, he feels has a lot to do with many people's suspicion and lack of knowledge about modern and contemporary art, with people being unused to welcoming challenging images.

Using the potential

"There is a lot of potential in Luxembourg," remarks Arnold, who is keen that the country should take a lead and be bold. "We need good buildings to give us orientation and this will create richness in our urban environment." Ideally, she thinks the country should aspire to charismatic projects such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Opera House in Sydney. In both cases, these interesting, attractive and hugely memorable buildings have transformed the international image of their cities. The new Salle Philharmonique by Christian de Portzamparc stands a

good chance to fill this gap in Luxembourg.

However, some would say that Luxembourg has muffed a couple of chances to create something special in recent years. The Grand Duke Jean Contemporary Art Museum occupies a dramatic, historic site overlooking the City, but as being a strong echo of I.M. Pei's Louvre Pyramid, critics feel it loses impact. More recently, the Cité Judiciaire on the St Esprit Plateau too occupies a prestige site, but the plans by Leon Krier seem to some to lack courage, mirroring as they do Luxembourg's traditional architectural style. Krier is an architect admired by Britain's Prince Charles and is the creator of Poundbury village which was built on the Prince's land. The government had sought a more daring design for the



Rehberg Water Tower, Garnich; Georges Reuter

Cité Judiciaire, but public outcry caused the Luxembourg City commune to shy away from taking a controversial decision. "We need courage and to be in touch with international discourse" notes Petit. "This is the danger of money: You can

end up not thinking but just buying your way into fashion, but then you just end up following and never leading."

Think it through

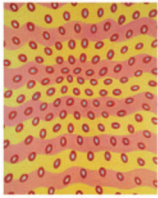
Luxembourg law states that public buildings have to ...



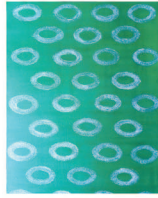
Provisional conference centre, Kirchberg; Jim Clemes



New Sports Hall, Delheicht School, Esch 2005
Architects Witry & Witry, Echternach
Steel cable net design, Sally Arnold Luxembourg
Cable net engineers Officium, Stuttgart



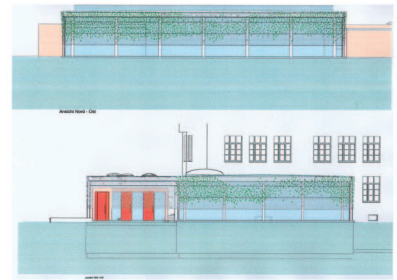
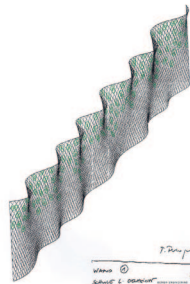
Urban Lullaby, 2000
Acrylic and glitter on canvas



Lollipop, 2000
Acrylic and glitter on canvas



Plexiglass/net simulation



From artwork, to plans, to reality. Sports Hall at Delheicht School, Esch; Sally Arnold



... devote 2% of their total cost to artistic adornment for each building project. This can mean either a separate work on a pedestal or the art can be incorporated into the architectural design. "Some people just go ahead and build and only then think about what they should buy to go with it," notes Petit. "What we are trying to do is harder as we want to put together a logical, continuous work. The task is made more difficult because many of the people in control of local projects don't understand the importance of good interesting architecture. There is a tendency to be suspicious of artists and art."

Sally Arnold agrees. "Too many people fail to realise that art is a highly skilled discipline, a craft. Too often it is dismissed as not being

relevant to practical issues and there is distrust that artists are solitary creatures who find it impossible to work in a team. This is just not the case." Integrating art is not as difficult as it would seem, she says, point out that a "skin" layer can be added to a building to redefine the conventional aspect. "A good piece of art will be a status symbol and an identification point for an urban area, but too often the easy "cut and paste" approach is used."

New heritage

So despite its drawbacks, these professionals are convinced that Luxembourg is starting to assemble an interesting architectural heritage, as witnessed by the candidates for the recent Luxembourg Architecture Prize. Arnold also praises the renovation of the Grand Theatre which left the original design in place. Although the building may not be to

everyone's taste, it is interesting and is redolent of the period when it was constructed. She is also a fan of most of the buildings and the juxtaposition of styles on the Boulevard Royal, with the least interesting constructions tending to be from the 1980s. "There was a lack of boldness at this time and commercial considerations were often paramount."

Petit also feels more attention should be given to the gaps between buildings. "We need public spaces. Buildings are one thing, but space is where people live. I support the recently launched competition to rebuild the Centre Hamilius. We need to give people the space to live to bring them back into the city." These ideas can be seen in Petit's successful design for the second European School planned for Mamer. Designed to house up to 2,000 children, Petit has

sought to create several discrete buildings to bring the school down to a more human scale. "There is a big playground with a hierarchy of areas each with their own yards too. It is not one school but six different ones, so that each age will have its own school with its own entrance and own identity." He also uses an existing water-course as a reference point for the site. "We need these points to connect us with our urban space" he remarks, pointing to the steel public sculpture landmarks on the Kirchberg by the Red Bridge and at the end of bd JFK. "If we can do this with large and small objects it creates identity and allows us to connect."

www.gouvernement.lu/dossiers/justice/cite_judiciaire/index.html

www.fondarch.lu
www.sudafricana.com
www.michelpetitarchitecte.com



European School II, Mamer; Michel Petit