

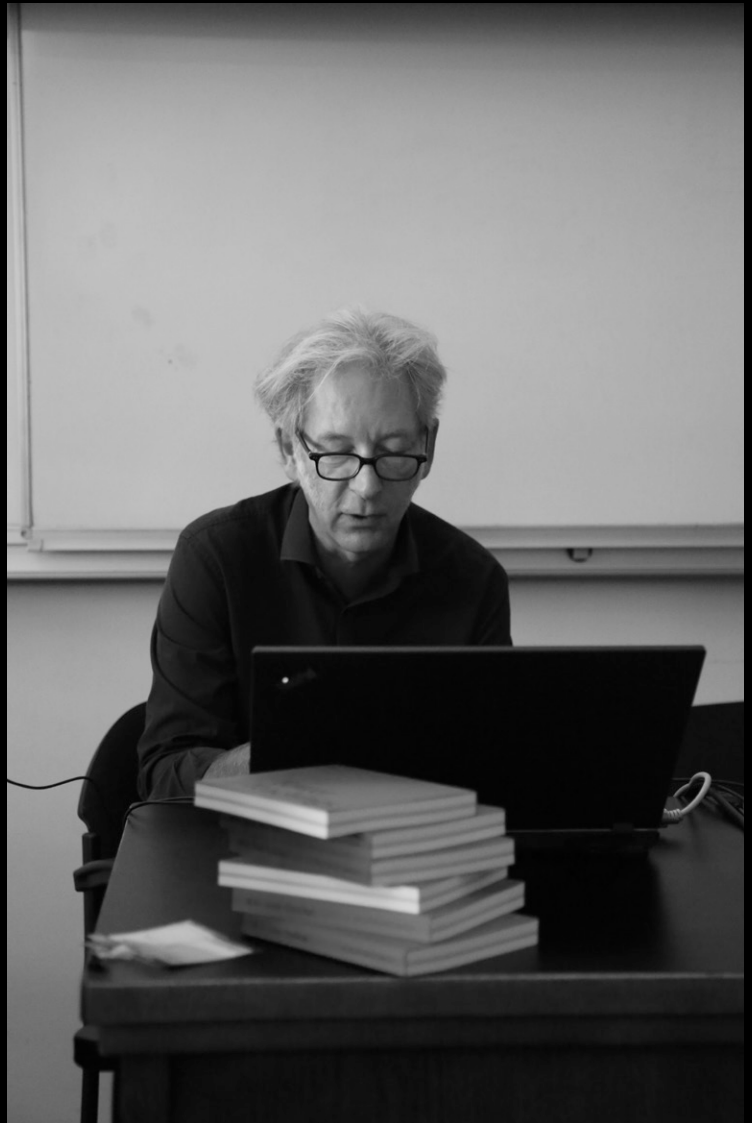
# Problematic Flexibility as an Asset for a Thorough Reflection on Architectural Education

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## KEYWORDS

experimental teaching, (de-)schooling, playing field,  
nomadic school, shared space

This paper is exploring the benefits and assets of an educational experiment without clear ownership. More specifically, it is about a form of democracy of doing in almost all the phases of a continuous exercise in the WTC1-tower in Brussels. An unintended lack of control over the different event processes led to a curious form of critical thinking about the “context” for architectural ‘schooling’, which is generally understood as necessary. The very special experiment contains many more elements than anyone could have foreseen.



For one and a half years, the 24<sup>th</sup> floor of the WTC tower 1 in Brussels functioned as the spectacular spatial setting for architectural education. The KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, Campus Sint-Lucas Brussels, partially moved to the WTC complex in the nearby North Quarter.

This paper is exploring the benefits and assets of an educational experiment without clear ownership. More specifically, it is about a form of *democracy of doing* in almost all the phases of a continuous exercise in the WTC1-tower in Brussels. An unintended lack of control over the different event processes led to a curious form of critical thinking about the “context” for architectural ‘schooling’, which is generally understood as necessary. The very special experiment contains many more elements than anyone could have foreseen. The lack of control was, as it turns out, probably intended and in fact a condition for the success of the experiment and its numerous outcomes. Therefore, the book *‘WTC Tower Teachings’* that was produced after the end of the trajectory as a rich compilation of perspectives can in itself give rise to a new momentum to carry out another reflection. This article literally (passages from the book in Agency FB) and figuratively refers to the reports in the book. However, the circle is not simply closed in this



Fig. 1: WTC 1 Tower

way. The article also aims at explaining how this experiment fits in more general theoretical understandings of education and the use of space.

## A RATHER BANAL REASON FOR THE START OF AN ADVENTURE: THE NEED FOR SPACE

### Pragmatism

It was at the start of the academic year 2017–2018, that the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, campus Sint-Lucas Brussels, partly moved to the 24th floor of the WTC 1 Tower. After being empty for years, the WTC complex was now welcoming temporary occupants to take over some floors. Design studios, theory classes and elective courses were installed at the bare floor of 1100 square meter, having no partitions and provisions whatsoever and being equipped with basic facilities only.

According to Carl Bourgeois, vice-dean of the Faculty of Architecture, “*the point of departure was the limitations of the faculty’s accommodation on Paleizenstraat, the so-called Meurop Building, named after the former furniture shop at that location. In the background, there was a year-long search*



Fig. 2: Campus Paleizenstraat

for a specific identity, in terms of school infrastructure and pedagogy, that could grant Campus Brussels a defined place between Campus Ghent and Campus Brussels. The overnight decision to seize the opportunity to organize a temporary school dépendance at the WTC Tower formed a blueprint for what later became known as WTC24. It was basically a copy-paste of the school programme at Paleizenstraat.” (Boie, G. (2019). *WTC Tower Teachings*. Brussels, KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture)

## Intuition

At the same time, and as a kind of opposition to this rather pragmatic background, another angle prevailed over the functional necessity: the intuitive feeling that this experiment could surpass all other previous experiments and lead to profound forms of critical sense among all participants and far beyond.

After all, this move made it possible to “break in” into the real city of Brussels from the ivory tower that is the Meurop. The lion’s share of the campus residents are white Flemish people although the campus is situated in one of the most multicultural parts of the big city. The fact that the WTC-tower itself, certainly on the higher floors, was a safe haven in the midst of a tumultuous environment would not be a disadvantage. The decision to move was not democratically taken or widely supported due to time constraints and the steps to manage the move could hardly be prepared. This try-out therefore certainly caused ‘productive conflicts’, as planning and the making of plans, core business of a faculty of architecture, were deliberately left out. Careless policy entailed risks. And unforeseen expenses.

## Faculty’s DNA

However, this try-out is obviously linked to the Faculty’s mission and vision on *Educating Tomorrow’s Architect* as described in ‘Doing it the Belgian Way’, a publication that featured as a supplement to Volume 50: Beyond Beyond. In today’s society, the search of practitioners, researchers and all possible cross-breeds to add a dimension to space and make sense of it, is no longer an individual endeavor but a collective process, where authorship in design and research become plural, where scales are blurred, disciplinary fields coexist, and different forms of synchronism rule.

In other words, investing in openness on an open WTC-floor seemed at the start of the experiment to be an adequate way

of adding dimensions. Richard Sennett speaks about qualities such as synchronicity, incompleteness and porosity in contemporary space production. Design processes are more than ever part of an uncertain and incomplete process, where the spaces left blank become the most interesting ones.

Moreover, the constant search for possible answers in the international quest for the most appropriate application of research within and through a faculty that values design expertise often leads to an improved ‘construction of subjectivity’. According to Catharina Dyrssen, we can accept that through art most research problems are not ‘pure’, but often contradictory and vague, impossible to regulate, open for interaction, and where logical thinking is naturally intertwined with associative and intuitive conceptualization. (Dyrssen, C. (2011). *Navigating in heterogeneity: Architectural thinking and art-based research*. Routledge), then for sure an open landscape for open-minded thinking about urbanism and architecture would lead to similar characteristics.

The described faculty vision and current international research paradigm in the discipline of architecture were an important addition to the pragmatic starting point solely based on the space limitations in the Paleizenstraat. The deliberately ‘open-ended’ mission and the unanswered research question are naturally embedded in the transition period of the so-called *academization* of the architectural education within the university context (generally referred to as the “Bologna process”). Put differently, a rather classic and well-defined school-concept has been avoided for the sake of a widest possible range of positions on architecture.

In sum, the faculty thus entered an unpaved path in full compliance with its DNA. Policy decisions based on intuition form part of this DNA. The question whether the move was going to be ever justified, could be ignored at that time.

## **AN INTERNAL REFLECTION ON ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION: INFLUENCE OF SPACE**

### **‘You are here’**

The WTC tower buildings, standing idle for years, came to symbolize the hollowing out of urban life by corporate real-estate interests in the Belgium and European capital. Awaiting intervention, a few floors were opened for temporary use, to which the faculty responded. This pragmatic starting point — as explained above — unintendedly gave birth to the more fundamental questions this paper tries to answer, being: What is the importance of the space in which education

takes place? How does the space of a school influence the educational process and outcomes? Do the social or cultural contexts in which the school is placed make a difference in the inner and outer perception of a school, or the subject matter? What are the differences between so-called remote islands, i.e. schools that are isolated, and schools directly embedded into the surroundings, or even extrapolated and scattered into them?

### **An educational experiment obviously hidden in between**

As such, there are a number of elements that came together on that floor. First of all, there is that exciting experience of an open floor in a dilapidated “skyscraper”, as a remnant of a utopian capitalist “robbery project”. Namely, the Manhattan project as “urbicide” of one of Brussels’ most lively, popular neighborhoods, the Noordwijk, with the Antwerpse Steenweg as the central axis of popular entertainment. Nowadays, and this is the second elements to be lighted out, the office district is becoming empty and is in urgent need of a radical renewal by breaking through the monofunctional setting in which it currently thrives. In addition, there is the Maximilian Park at the back of the tower. This place became widely known in Belgium over the last years, as it was turned into an improvised urban refugee camp for asylum seekers, therefore symbolizing the problematic dimensions of this issue and, even more so, the way it is handled within Belgian politics and society. All of this thus formed a rich and at the same time always debatable context, which directly or indirectly determined the conversation in almost every discussion.

Then there also was the constellation of hip activities that have ‘occupied’ the tower with all sorts of temporary use, creating a sort of buzz or hype: Jubilee and other artists on floor 25, the architectural office 51N4E on the 16th floor, then AWB (Architecture Workroom Brussels) that also brought a Rotterdam architecture biennial to Brussels with ‘You are here’, an exciting exhibition about the urbanism of the transition. We were able to seamlessly plug in with our ethics lessons.

The quote explains how this process of “plugging in” was to be felt by all those who were part of this experiment.

Some design studios organized themselves as an ‘authentic’ design agency. Some of the students claimed a dedicated workplace. The education went far beyond the abstract study of the social drama unfolding in the North Quarter, it was right in the thick of it. There could not have been a better settling-in period. Moreover, the education became part of the reconquest of the North Quarter.



Fig. 3: Debate



Fig. 4: 360° panorama



The 360° panorama functioned as an attraction, certainly when organizing open classes and public events. The commuting students got to know Brussels from a great height. It was much easier to invite guests up to the eagle's nest of the WTC. An empty floor for education: it appealed to the imagination. The all-encompassing view did astonish visitors. The meaning of 'Brusselisation' could be felt in each person's body, could be explained by looking in any direction and it charged every design transaction with meaning. Going to school at WTC 24 became an element of pride rather than shame.

### **Craftsmanship and intellectual sharpness**

As described in 'Doing it the Belgian Way', the faculty substantiates its pedagogical principles from three concerns: EMBRACING (complexity), EMBEDDING (in the local), and LEARNING (cyclical relearning and unlearning).

Related to the first concern, the faculty says that *embracing complexity* is definitely about the difficulty of making things easier, thereby considering that intellectual sharpness and creative craftsmanship are two necessary ingredients. Intellectual sharpness means abandoning the linear, result-based methods of design in favor of sensitive and tentative approaches. The open WTC24- floor obviously welcomes these experimental approaches.

The importance of craftsmanship is typically seen in projects of the faculty's students displaying humble craftsmanship out of scarcity. Most of the models are handmade. Digital drawing tools are employed to produce plans and isometrics rather than to experiment with complex 3D modeling or parametric design, and manual drawing is still a valuable tool. Not because of any taboo on the use of contemporary technologies, but as a consequence of a thorough exploration of what traditional techniques still have to offer.

Needless to note that the open WTC24-floor again triggered new paths in the described world of craftsmanship.

The second of the three concerns EMBEDDING (in the local) is probably even more important in regards to the WTC-experiment. Embedding means making an integral part of the surroundings. It implies positioning within and engaging with an existing context. Embedding occurs in other ways besides adapting or negotiating, such as opposing and contrasting. The question how to connect with diverse worlds meaningfully demands rethinking of concepts like 'integration', 'multicultural', 'authentic', and 'contextualization'. Embedding can be situated on two levels: firstly, embedding the project itself; and secondly, taking position, as designers or planners, through an intervention, pronouncing a discourse.



Figs. 5 & 6, Craftsmanship

Teachers, as well as students have been searching for answers to unpronounced questions. The particularity of the floor space, the context of the space, the embedment of the space and hybrid relation between openness to the surroundings and closeness because of safety regulations heavily contributed to the tone of the experiment. In other words, an equivalent space for so many thoughts would have been impossible to find.

The WTC24 was an event in the pure sense, happening (almost) accidental, based upon decisions made in a rush, raising enthusiasm among some, causing confusion among others, and forcing all those involved to rethink the school apparatus from scratch.

The third concern, on its turn, can best be explained within the scope of another concept, being the “de-schooling space”. This is relearning. This connection is made in the chapter underneath.

## **THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT AS A BROADER CONCEPT: ‘DE-SCHOOLING’-SPACE**

The school as COMMONS: the gaping void of the office floors was hastily filled with a minimal school infrastructure. It entailed many tables on trestles, chairs, a kitchen unit, a printer, two projectors, a few lockers and toilets. More was not necessary.

### **Un-school-like**

As Lieven De Cauter states, for him, WTC24 was perhaps one of the most unforgettable teaching experiences of his entire career. And that tells something, because he had the chance to teach at elite artistic schools, such as the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam and the dance school P.A.R.T.S. While these have been unforgettable experiences for the most part, WTC24 still stands out. He hopes the school has also understood the importance of a nomadic education and will continue to swarm across Brussels, looking for places to experiment with temporary occupations and uses: heterotopian places that lend themselves to de-schooling, to retraining for reconfiguration, to horizontal relationships between students and teachers who share a spatial laboratory with a large swarm of nomadic intelligence. For him, WTC24 has provided proof that temporary swarms of this kind offer a huge opportunity for an exciting and decidedly un-school-like education.

### **Unlearning**

The ongoing Bologna process in Flemish education forces the faculty, to constantly rethink its inner rationale. Where conventional learning is based on telling, on production knowledge, architectural learning revolves around showing, adding to the

discourse told: questioning knowledge and making artifacts as an illustration of one's progress, and adopting a position on how to make the world we inhabit.

Changing external societal or professional conditions that transform practice, and advances in tools to make and visualize architectural ideas, call for different approaches to the production of knowledge and its proper questioning or testing. They introduce a level of uncertainty that we need to embrace.

This third concern, next to Embracing and Embedding, thus is immensely integrated in the WTC 24-experiment. The mentioned uncertainty challenges the traditional idea of creativity and learning as a progression towards a final project. Dealing with this kind of uncertainty requires a form of learning which is indeterminate, in the sense that one has to be able to accept any result as a point of departure for new inquiry, to keep the learning process open.

### **School in exile**

The openness of the floor became the main programme of the Faculty. According to Joachim Declerck, the experiment can be defined as a 'democracy of doing'. Withdrawing from the school is, as Gideon Boie nicely states, the only way to rediscover the 'free space' of school. We wrote, he continues, a manual on education as a self-organising learning play. In the end, apparently the manual was not that easy to follow, but at least it set the tone.

## **THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT AS A SUBSTANTIAL REPORT: "WTC TOWER TEACHINGS"**

### **Open call**

Because of the highly interesting and educational nature of this explained experiment, the faculty has published a book on this episode. This publication was entitled "WTC Tower Teachings" and stemmed from the desire to formulate the lessons learned of one and a half years of experiences at WTC24 and to use these lessons as a sounding board to think about the future of the Faculty of Architecture. The initiative to script the short history of WTC24 was put in the hands of an editorial team that assembled (ex-)students, professors and staff alike. The call for contributions was open to everyone and sent out to students, professors, and casual visitors. Doing so, the common editorial process was a moment in which all those involved could not only script the lessons learned — as if the WTC24 was a scientific experiment (something it was certainly not) — but also find the necessary time to bring WTC24 to a close.

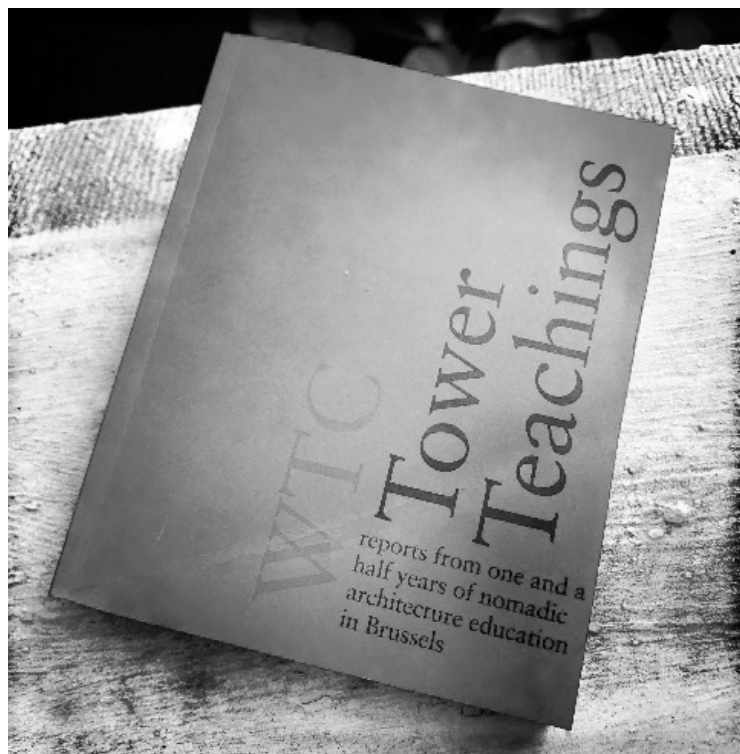


Fig. 7: book “WTC Tower Teachings”

### Open content

The citation underneath explains the structure of the book and thus reveals its main characteristics.

The pile of texts are organized in three parts. Under the heading of ‘EXPERIENCE’, the first set of texts give the reader a feeling of what it was like to teach and learn architecture at the bare 24th floor of an empty office building, theorizing upon the many enriching experiences and frictions. The second part ‘WORKS’ includes texts that scrutinize the scholarly results produced at the 24th floor, in the design studios, mixed media courses, elective courses, special project weeks and special public workshops. The third part ‘CONTEXT’ provides the reader with an insight into the temporary occupancy of the 24th floor, both in terms of the organization and infrastructural context, and the (historical and actual) real estate interests in the Brussels North Quarter.

In addition to factual data, the three parts regularly contain critical comments or negative comments. The book is therefore an experiment in itself. The open call and the democratic attitude were based on the wish not to ‘control’ the content. In

other words, the report of the educational adventure in book form is totally related and analogous to the experiment itself, which thus led to the to the above described curious form of critical thinking about the generally understood necessary context for architectural '(de-)schooling'.

## THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

The abovementioned experiment can be connected with a few the most influential theoretical reflections that have been in made in architectural research on the human use of surrounding spaces, which is the aim of this last and concluding chapter of this paper.

### Closing the loops

As such, the experiment can be connected with two theoretical ideas. On the one hand, the idea of *Closing the loops*. This implies you're not DONE until you've returned your environment to a stable state. It is precisely what the experiment never wanted to achieve. According to Asli Çiçek, the WTC embodied the dream of a revolutionary act, maybe even the desire to create a legend. But the experiment's short life means that it can only serve as a good memory of just what is possible.

On the other hand, the *open loop* thought is ought to be connected as well. The previous chapters have shown that an amalgam of problems, such as practical problems, the problematic origins of the WTC complex, the problematic embedding of the building in its direct environment and the intriguing and ongoing problems within academic architectural education have resulted in a thorough reflection on architectural education. Obviously, uncontrolled and free thinking and acting were a condition for this.

### Mindful physical presence

In "*Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing*", John Habraken argued some 50 years ago that it is people themselves who 'make' their surroundings, with the support making it possible for them to do this within the broad sociocultural context of society. By extension, the support allows for changes in layout and use over the course of time. The analogy with the WTC24-project can be made as well. In that case, the people are the users of the floor, the support is the open floor and the architect is the faculty board.

According to Habraken, the support cannot be neutral, because then you are doing a disservice to the process. In the WTC24-project, the support is all about atmosphere as a conscious physical presence in the space. German philosopher Gernot Böhme argues that in modernist architecture it

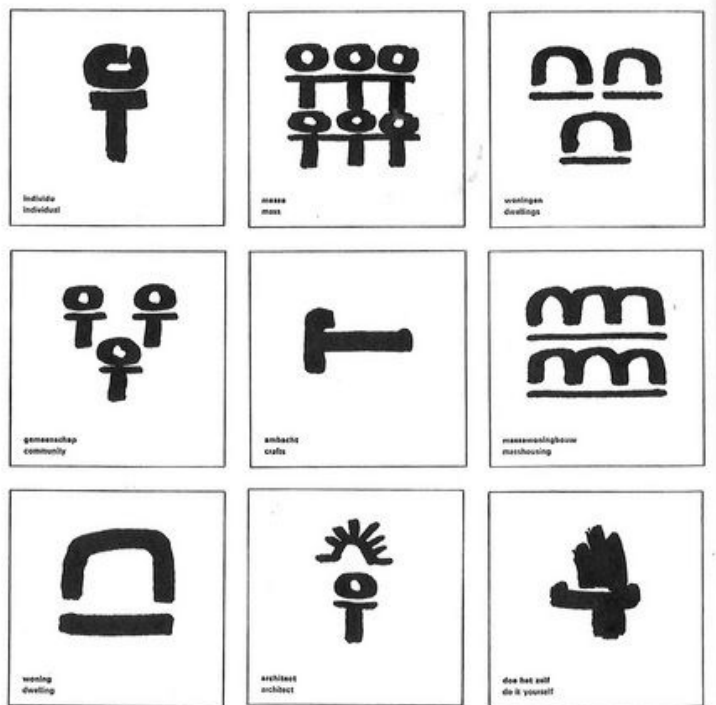


Fig. 8: *Open Building*, John Habraken

was of no real consequence that spaces for mindful physical presence were created, and human needs were no criterion. Only rationality, construction technology and functionality defined building. The WTC24-project showed, paradoxically, that mindful physical presence was possible in an extremely neutral and modernistic space only because of a deliberate lack of control and ‘too much’ flexibility.

### Use as Form

At the centre of Fabio Vanin’s research and most of Latitude’s work is the limit condition in which architecture and design disappear, fade away to the back of the picture. During study visits in Lisbon and Maputo, the distance between physical and ephemeral architecture became evident to Fabio. The use of the space emerges in the forefront and an architecture of human logics and rules is therefore revealed. Uses and ways of appropriating space reveal a hidden, less immediate, sometimes invisible architecture that represents its deep meaning and relates to key social themes such as inclusiveness, identity and memory.

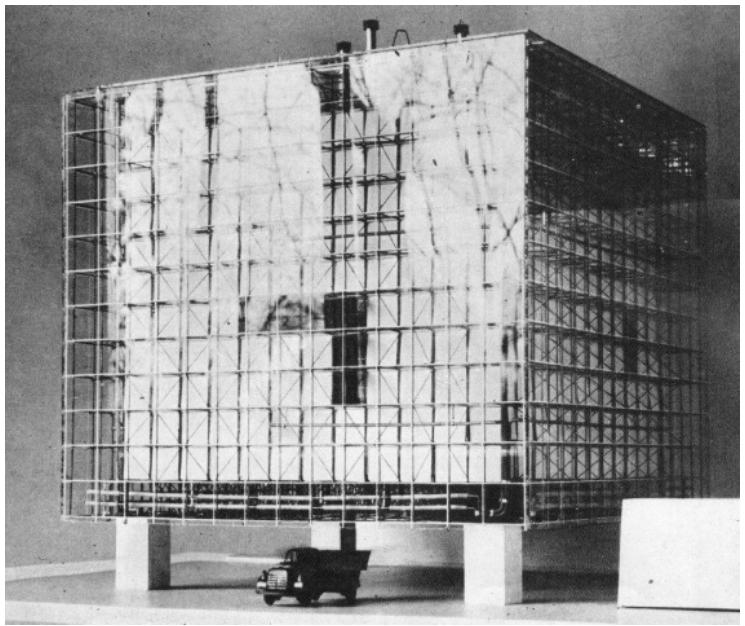


Fig. 9: *Open Form at Yale school*, Oskar Hansen

When we replace architecture with the WTC 24-project in Vanin's way of thinking, the use of the 24th floor became the form of the experiment. Focusing on the process, subjectivity and creation of frames for individual and group expression, the free space became an instrument that could be used and transformed by its users and adapted easily to their changing needs. Oskar Hansen's Open Form ideas of frame composition and subjectivity, presented as his Open Form Theory at the CIAM Meeting in Otterlo in 1959, was all about developing strategies of indeterminacy, flexibility and collective participation.

## CONCLUSION

This article extensively reflected on the WTC24 experiment of the faculty of architecture. This originally stemmed from a pragmatic need, but soon developed into a pedagogical project.

It can be looked at from the perspective of 'educational democracies'. The project could only arise in an environment of indecision, and an (un)conscious retention of control and control mechanisms. The experiment contains many more elements than anyone could have foreseen. A lot of them are described above. In this way, the project can certainly be labeled as a social-psychological experiment. In that sense, the word 'innovation' does not seem to be covering the full experiment. Unpredictability, on the other hand, appears to be more appropriate.