

Down but not out. The loss and resurrection of Delft's Faculty of Architecture

Some cities make headlines when a new building is 'opened'. Delft made headlines because it lost a remarkable building: the Faculty of Architecture of Delft University of Technology. The fire that burnt down the building on May 13, 2008 was world news.

The 13-storey building, designed in 1956 by Dutch architect J.H. van de Broek and finished in 1970, was an outstanding example of modern architecture.¹ Some loved it, some hated it. I loved it because of its plain and uncompromising straight lines and materials and generous interior and exterior spaces. Particularly the double height of the entrance, entrance hall and beyond (the 'street'), library and exhibition space created an extraordinary feeling of space. The nearly completed refurbishment that increased the number of workplaces, restored spatial coherence and update facilities and interior design had by no means affected the building's strength and spaciousness.

After the fire-alarm sounded a few minutes after 9 AM nobody suspected that events would take such a dramatic turn. Used to emergency evacuation drills, staff and students left the building routinely. Within two hours after smoke was detected on the sixth floor however, several upper floors of the southern wing of the building were on fire. As the fire spread rapidly and the danger of collapse prevented firemen to enter or even go near the building², the only sensible option was to let the fire burn the building up in a controlled manner.

After the fire after over 30 hours was finally extinguished the faculty counted its blessings: nobody was injured and all digital data were secured. But what about our material and the building?

As June is the month for exams, staff and students were eagerly anxious to find out if any of their work (drawings, models, research, books) could be retrieved. Of equal concern was the fate of one of the treasures of the faculty: the large and unique collection of books, maps and chairs. Although both the library and the chairs' storage were untouched by the fire, access was prohibited until the safety of those entering the building could be guaranteed.

Suspense reigned. Finally, three weeks after the devastating fire, a limited number of staff and students were allowed to enter building to evacuate material. To prevent emotions running too high, everybody was allowed in for 10 minutes only and nobody was allowed to visit their own workplace. During these ultra-short evacuations a relatively considerable amount of material was retrieved, including some fragile models. But no doubt the best news was that library, maps and chairs could be saved. The almost miraculously retrieved material mirrored the positive attitude that characterised staff and students after May 13: we are down, but not out.

Thanks to the hospitality of all faculties on campus, the recommencement of lectures and exams and the temporary accommodation for staff and students was organised in no time. Equally accurate was the decision-making about the future of the burnt-out building. As resuscitation was out of the question, demolition started as soon as possible. By September the building will be gone.

Ideas about an entirely new building for the faculty will be presented in the exhibition 'ArchiPhoenix' in the Dutch Pavillion during the 2008 Architecture Biennale in Venice. As it will take several years before this new building to materialise however, staff and students

¹ Original designs for the Faculty of Architecture building by J.H. van den Broek, can be found on www.nai.nl/tentoonstellingen/webpresentaties/beeldverhalen/detail_beeldverhaal_tudelft/ rp_center1_elementId/1_277351

² For good reason: on May 13 around 4 PM part of the northern wing collapsed.

'temporarily' will be housed in a 1920's building on campus as of September 2008. To make the faculty feel at home in the new building, a replica of the 'street' of the old building will be constructed on the ground floor. As in the old building this street will connect and facilitate various activities of the faculty. Otherwise the building will be very different from the old building. Not least because the new temporary building is not nearly big enough to accommodate all staff and students. As nobody, including the dean, will not have his/her own workspace, the temporary accommodation will generate interesting practical experience regarding flexible workspace.

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