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More specifically, architecture is: The sum times the difference divided. It’s also the way we see our courses in the Faculty of Architecture at KU Leuven.

The abstract nature of that image conceals a succinct summary of our vision: Architecture as a series of literal and often also figurative operations. It’s a series of thoughtful steps leading from sketch to structure, from ideas to reality. Architecture, therefore, not as mathematical dogma but as calculated exploration of a discipline that of necessity is constantly innovating.

Architecture is the sum of doing and thinking. Our students do. They make. Design. By investing well in practice-based research, we aim to deliver cutting-edge designers.

A hallmark of our faculty is the extensive professional practice group, who make up almost half of the teaching staff. Together with the teacher, the students practice the doing and develop their design skills. This repeated doing refines the becoming.

Design practice is more than just construction. Our students think and do. Not so much about how you lay stones, one on top of another, but more about how you can move stones, in your own biotope, your neighbourhood, your city, and yes: the world.

The architect’s profession is a starting point from which to think about public and private space and to suggest thoughtful intervention in both spheres. In the three degrees that we offer – architecture, interior architecture and urban and spatial planning – students learn how to reason, not only technically and humanely, but artistically as well. These three perspectives give rise to three research areas: Technology, Society and Arts.

Research is strongly integrated with education in these areas. The connection with research helps to shape the programmes.

The structure of the degree is characterised by these three perspectives which, in turn, are intertwined with the degree’s learning outcomes.

These learning outcomes, which apply design by research and research by design as methodology in different ways, increase in complexity and evolve from elementary understanding to fundamental depth and insight.

Driven by passion and engagement, the student demonstrates increasing decisiveness and takes a stand, based both on objective analysis and subjective personal observation.

And, and, and becomes plus, plus, plus – addition becomes expertise.

Our education model is project-based, consisting of a sequence of varying tasks and themes that bring the different perspectives together in the design brief. This sequence exposes students to diverse
types of expertise. As the course proceeds, students receive greater autonomy in directing their own education: they choose their own projects and supervisors.

Interaction is of great importance in this. We love the cut and thrust of discussion and debate. Conflicting visions and heated discussions are essential to us. Through these discussions, students learn to analyse leading projects, question each other’s work and weigh up their own designs, with critique and self-critique being the necessary yardsticks. The review is an essential part of the teaching method.

We work with an increasing number of researchers in order to develop training programmes that suit the integral academic growth of students. They carry out artistic design or theoretical research. Furthermore, we engage a large number of guest professors, including from abroad, to demonstrate the full breadth of the discipline.

Plus becomes surplus.

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In architecture, the junction between thought and action is the actual design. However, our architecture disciplines form the junction between many more factors. There is an inextricable link with the arts, for example. The relationship is intense, hovering between friction and surrender, allowing us to confidently enter and direct public debate.

In our faculty, there is a culture of great affection for the arts; a mutual generosity. This is reflected in a strongly focused curriculum, half of which consists of design-related courses. The use of new materials and shapes and the experimental nature of daring or unconventional designs originates from the dialogue with the arts. It is a recurring exchange of soil and foundation; a conversation that gives each design a cultural dimension.

These junctions are both inherent in the discipline and tangible. In this way, architecture is the combination of the exact and the human sciences, and the faculty is the place where our two Sint-Lucas campuses, Brussels and Ghent, meet the world. The campuses are distinct from each other in terms of urban location and scale. This distinction helps to determine the content of the design and research projects. Brussels and Ghent are not interchangeable; they play the role of amicable competitors. Yet they both represent a clear vision, an attitude that is able to link playfulness with seriousness via ingenuity. Students have the chance to experience this inspiring partnership by taking a number of courses at each campus or by meeting each other at our events, vertical transcampus workshops, lectures and exhibitions.

Thanks to a ‘mobility for all’ policy, our faculty is strongly committed to internationalisation. Each student may take part in various types of international participation, not only through study exchange, but also by building up relevant practical experience through development collaborations or international internships. Our internationalisation@home programme also offers alternatives for those who stay at home. Students receive the opportunity to join mixed studios in which they hear each other’s various views on architecture and thus learn the value of opposing perspectives. The
learning content is often also international, due to the use of international social and community challenges as design assignments.

This view of and towards the world highlights our openness. Our faculty aspires to being a sanctuary, a place where the search comes to fruition: where one starts with a hypothesis and ends up with a stance. It seeks to be the place to stop at the crossroads between influences and trends and reflect upon new challenges. Pause. In this empty space, the freedom to experiment arises, uninhibited.

In our three courses, we train students in giving a sustainable form to their living environment, and in so doing, to make a difference. This form of training requires students to choose a position: do they relate to a fait accompli, or to future necessity? They learn to feel the difference. To dare to do so.

In the midst of societal challenges the faculty therefore makes room to examine how the interaction between practice and research can lead to new insights that allow our discipline to intervene in the rapidly evolving environment.

The architect, interior architect, urban planner or spatial planner dares to be the 'fool' - a figure who questions the common practice and keeps a finger on the pulse. He or she wishes to hold a mirror up to society. This is a mindset that frequently expresses itself as an activist or resistant attitude. The architect does not become ensconced in an ivory tower. Neither eccentric nor outsider, the architect is a spectator who shapes, an explorer who expresses views and then shares them with the world.

By continually questioning ourselves, we create a culture of improvement, a natural reflex of involvement and concern in and around the faculty, of seeking balances.

We want to make a difference by combining a broad, social-cultural and sometimes extremely technical responsibility, and at the same time, by surprising and touching others.

Making a difference starts with getting a grip. Understanding.

Design is substantiated action.
The studio is the central venue where we share the product of our sums and differences. We share our knowledge and experience there. We learn to transform thinking into doing there. Students and teachers share a work place where they collaborate on a task.

Each studio has a specific working format that teaches students to observe and analyse a problem. Through reflection and creative experimentation, students give shape to their personal response, materialised and presented on a 1/1 scale in a model or drawing.

The bachelor programme guides students on the basis of a consistent building up of tasks through a process of conceptualising, materialising and contextualising. In the studio, the authenticity of the response is of great value. This makes a design unique and inspiring to others. A good design is also free of anecdotal style and reflects a fresh view of a possible world.

The studio is the place where different perspectives find each other. It is a place for debate, a place where theory and practice are shared, a place where students are challenged to find themselves within the discipline so that they can later question the world.

The master programme is based on self-navigation. Students choose from a broad range of studios and electives and can develop their individual portfolios both broadly and deeply, showcase themselves and master their future personal disciplinary practice. The academic design bureau (ADB) in the master programme is still broader than the studio. This is a form of education that combines design practice, design education and research. It consists of a fictional office where students use extensive designing to explore, ground and develop social issues.

It is a laboratory of ideas where visionary deliberation is the credo.

The master’s thesis constitutes the end point and synthesis of the student’s personal training journey.

The Faculty of Architecture at KU Leuven sets itself the goal of training designers, open-minded people who want to understand ‘building’ in its most universal meaning: from the transfer of an insight to the manipulation of physical reality. The designer sets no limits; he or she operates on both the infinitesimal and the infinite scale, and the quest for a career unfolds in the space between the two.

‘The sum times the difference divided’ is an invitation to everyone wishing to embark on this quest. A simple formula with unpredictable but fascinating outcomes.