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The making of BK City
The ultimate laboratory for a faculty of architecture

ALEXANDRA DEN HEIJER

Introduction
On Tuesday May 13, 2008 a huge fire did not just destroy an
iconic building and a workplace of work for thousands of students
and staff: an entire community lost its home. Miraculously, the
faculty library was saved, but the fire destroyed the individual and
group libraries of professors and researchers, as well as valuable
collections and irreplaceable art that individual staff members had
brought to their workplaces over the years. On top of that, many
students and staff lost their work in progress, at least that part
that could not be — or was not — saved digitally. This disaster
was unprecedented in its kind, on that scale, in the Netherlands.¹

Emergency management
Each student, alumnus, faculty member past and present, staff
member or associate of the faculty has a personal story to tell
about that tragic day and what the loss of the faculty building
means to them.² While every individual had to cope with the
emotions and find the energy and motivation to move on, the
university entered the stage of emergency management. Less
than three hours after the fire a crisis team was discussing an immense
challenge: where to find temporary accommodation for more
than 3000 students and 800 staff. This assignment was twofold:
the faculty needed not only an immediate solution for the remaining
months of that academic year but also a more permanent solution
for the academic year to follow.

Positive energy
From the first press conference and the announcement by the
dean, Wytze Patijn, that all faculty activities would resume the
following Monday, the energy started to flow. If the university ever
needed to demonstrate the value of the network of alumni, fellow
universities, related businesses, regional public and private partners
and all other associates, this would have been proof enough.
It could be measured by the sheer number of expressions of
sympathy and support, and the offers of help. Within one day,
the faculty had offers from Delft, The Hague and Rotterdam of
more than ten times the required floor area. Help from fellow
universities varied from sending doubles of books in their libraries
to offering shared use of their educational facilities. Within the
TU Delft practically every faculty offered to accommodate groups
of architecture faculty members. The dean of the Faculty of
Applied Sciences offered a complete wing of the building to
accommodate workplaces for the dean’s management team and
all supporting staff. As a neighbour of the campus, IKEA supplied
all office furniture for these workplaces, with compliments and
without publicity. Within three days these 70 workplaces were fully
equipped and ready for use on Monday.

Camp site
At the same time large tents turned the sports fields next to the
burned-down building into an academic camp site. The faculty’s
facilities team worked miracles and created a new place to learn
in four days, completely furnished — with wired and wireless
internet — and with designated areas for different semesters and
space for presentations and meetings. Indeed, all activities resumed
on Monday May 19, 2008, less than a week after the fire:
an astonishing result. In the next week additional tents were
added with workplaces for lecturers and student associations, the
faculty pub and cultural events. With lecture halls and modelling
facilities housed in other university buildings, ‘Camp site Campus’
was a successful temporary solution for those summer months.
It created a place to meet and a home base for a faculty scattered
all over the campus.

But there had to be a more permanent solution in place for the
new academic year.

Practise what you preach
The process of finding a more permanent solution had already
begun a few days after the fire. A team led by the university
president, Dirk Jan van den Berg, began exploring alternatives.
Many professional associates of the faculty offered their services to
rethink, redesign, rebuild, manage or supply facilities. But at this
stage and for this process the faculty needed in-house expertise.
The irony of this fire happening to the one faculty with professors
in all the relevant disciplines was (and still is) striking. Rethinking,
redesigning, rebuilding, relocating and managing these processes
are the faculty’s raison d’être. And with many professors,
researchers and lecturers combining academic and professional
careers, the potential workforce of designers, consultants and
managers was available with a single phone call. The message:
‘Practise what you preach.’

Teamwork and leadership
Immediately, those involved in the first week of the project
knew that there was more at stake than their own reputation
in successfully relocating the faculty. Both the process and
the result would be closely watched — and criticized — by
policymakers, colleagues, professional and academic associates
inside and outside the university, and the media. Success or
failure would also affect the reputation of faculty and university.
The project organisation needed to be a close-knit team rather
than an assemblage of experienced individuals. Strong leadership
was important too.

Exploring alternatives
From Monday, May 19, the first task of the team was to explore
alternatives to accommodate the faculty as a whole. The process
began with five options: two buildings that had previously
contained academic functions, two off-campus buildings and a
fifth option of erecting a new campus village on the campus
sports fields where the tents stood. Within three days
the team — led by the dean and consisting of members of
different faculty disciplines — had to present the options to the
university’s Board of Executives, the director of Finance &
Control, the director of Real Estate & Facility Management and
representatives of the insurance team. For this unique assignment
the team chose to assess all options on various decisive factors.
The team agreed on criteria from different perspectives —
organisational, functional, financial and technical — matching
the theories on campus management.³
Timeline: process after the fire; blue: the making of BK City (project Julianalaan); orange: thinking about the future: international ideas competition and think-tank (more about these processes in the next Architecture Annual and at www.bk.tudelft.nl)

1a
May 19, 2008 — Rector Magnificus Fokkema

1b
May 23, 2008 — selection of Julianalaan as new home

1c
July 3, 2008 — preliminary floor plans

1d
August — new furniture

1e
August 13, 2008 — BK City under construction

1f
August 13, 2008 — construction workers at lunch

1g
September 1, 2008 — BSc: studio space ready

1h
September 1, 2008 — new students arrive

1i
January 9, 2009 — glasshouse ready for Dies Natalis
The ten criteria were as follows:
- the location in relation to the TU Delft campus;
- the fitness for use — in terms of accommodating most of the faculty functions — qualitatively and quantitatively;
- the contribution to the faculty’s identity;
- the availability on September 1, 2008;
- the availability for a period of several years;
- the costs, both the initial investment and the annual costs for maintenance and management;
- the potential for growth and flexibility for change;
- the technical condition and required improvements;
- the number of procedures and their risk to the project’s feasibility;
- the accessibility by public transport and by car, also with regard to the availability of parking places.

Overall, the team had to consider the risks of not meeting the deadline of September 1, 2008. The faculty assured the new group of first year students that they would be welcomed in a new university building.

Selecting alternatives
After just a day of collecting and analysing data, discussing considerations from all perspectives — an equally thorough and quick analysis — the team narrowed the number of options down to two: (A) the monumental building on Julianalaan and (B) a campus village of various temporary structures to be built in the sports fields. At that time the Julianalaan building (option A) was about to be turned into apartments: the sales process had already begun. This was part of the campus strategy to redevelop the north part of the campus for related functions and to concentrate university functions round the Mekelpark zone. A decision to relocate the faculty in this area would change the use of the whole TU campus. Option B — the new campus village — would give the faculty a creative, innovative campus model, with students and staff involved in continually redesigning and rebuilding it. But for Option B, the faculty had to start from scratch. The area could be full of experimental designs and structures. This experimental character also meant risks, potentially threatening the attractiveness, productivity and satisfaction of the entire faculty community.

Options A and B were carefully assessed on all criteria (see fig. 2) in preparation for the ultimate decision at the boardroom table on Thursday May 22, 2008.

On May 23, 2008 — 10 days after the fire — it was announced to the entire faculty community in the Auditorium of the TU Delft that the former main building on Julianalaan was to be their new home. In view of the audience’s immediate reaction and spontaneous ovation, the team had one very important criterion confirmed: the decision had been approved by the majority of the future users.

Project organisation
The original team then took a few days to assemble a project organisation with the ideal mix of academics, professionals and support staff (see fig. 3). Due to the process ahead of us, the veto criterion for selecting parties and specific persons was a prior knowledge of either the organisation or the former or new building. There was no time to waste on background research: the team had to be able to act immediately. On June 2, all project teams set to work simultaneously, challenging all the theories on project management. Hans Wamelink, professor of Design & Construction Management, guided this exceptional process as the chairman of the project group.

The project group included the chairmen of the three parallel teams for brief, design and construction. The design team, consisting of five varied and highly experienced architects, was led by the Faculty Dean and former Government Architect Wytze Patijn. The construction team was led by Johan Hogervorst who has more than 25 years of experience in managing construction processes. The facilities team was part of this team and was led by facility manager Dennis Cruyten who had already proved his value in the former building, having managed more than 20 projects with many different architects at the same time. Finally, the brief team was led by Alexandra den Heijer, faculty member and campus management specialist who had been attached to the former faculty building for her knowledge of university buildings. Part of this team had already worked closely together in implementing new concepts and trends in the former building.

This was a huge advantage in the extremely tight schedule of rethinking faculty processes, redesigning a building with 32,000 m² GFA and refurbishing a monumental labyrinthine structure from the 1920s. With the faculty directors of ICT, Finance & Control, Marketing & Communication and a representative of the municipality of Delft at the table every week, the project group was very decisive and could act fast, very fast.

Brief team
The value of writing policy documents and periodically rethinking ways to study and work was demonstrated at the start of this process. The brief team could make use of the recent study that explored new concepts for studio space and office space, aligning these with the faculty goals and looking ahead to increasing student numbers. Another important basis for the brief was the functional mix on the floor area of the former building at Berlageweg 1, roughly 42,000 m² GFA. Available data on occupancy and frequency rates and evaluations of users could be used to reconsider quality requirements, in close consultation with the parties involved. With the homework already done before the fire, the brief team could explore the applicability and feasibility of new design concepts: from restaurant to library, from high-profile conference rooms to creating the ultimate place to meet.

The team, which represented many user groups, took the month of June to involve and inform departments and management. The most important consideration was that the ‘new’ building at Julianalaan had less floor area available than its predecessor. And even though it might be possible to reduce the demand for space by more facility sharing within the faculty and with the university, a space reduction of 25% was not feasible, especially in the light of increasing student numbers. From the very start, the idea of adding glasshouses was part of the design concept, to accommodate the remaining space requirements and give a prominent place to such functions as modelling studios and exhibition space. The building’s labyrinthine structure allowed additional volumes along the central axes. The team discussed the programmatic alternatives in close collaboration with the design and construction team so as to keep the process within tight time limits.

Design team
Most of the designers in the team were either intensely involved in rethinking the former building, such as Fokkema Architeciten
Exploring, presenting and selecting alternatives for the temporary location
(May 21, 2008 in the tents)