

The "Placerelle"

The competition set up by the authorities of Charleroi included three complex operations: the renovation of the quays of the river Sambre on the left bank over a length of 600 meters, the transformation of a disused government building at the location of a former Belgium National Bank into an Arts Centre, and finally, the construction of a pedestrian bridge crossing the river Sambre right in front of this building.

The project of the new bridge meant to connect the ground floor of the Arts Centre to the ground floor of a future shopping mall that shall be constructed on the other side of the river in the near future.

The competition proposal of the association l'Escaut-V+ greatly considered the question of the status of this bridge. The conditions of setting the bridge four meters above the public space and linking a cultural facility with a private commercial complex raised several questions. For example, such a high-pitched pedestrian infrastructure poses serious problems for the access from the public space below, particularly for the people with reduced mobility. On the other hand, the elevated end of the pedestrian bridge on the side of the commercial functions raises many doubts about the status and uses of the public space at the times when the shopping complex is closed.

The proposal of L'Escaut-V + was simply to connect this infrastructure element to the level of the public space and relate to it immediately, instead of organizing a connection between two buildings. This solution resolved the questions mentioned above, but brought other issues into consideration.

One of the problematic cases was the meeting point between the footbridge and the quays on the right bank of the river, as the pedestrian public space is greatly reduced by the presence of the railroad (the "underground" tram of Charleroi) and a traffic lane containing a fast car track leading to the South train station. The width of the pedestrian sidewalk remaining is therefore reduced to 3 meters. According to the authorities, this situation is going to change within about ten years, following a new masterplan that is currently under development. Thus, the end of the bridge should be designed in line with the temporary situation, but should also allow an evolution adapted to these future urban changes.

Another crucial fact: the left bank quays offer a public space, generous in length (600m), but rather narrow in width (20m). The stretching of this space allows to imagine recreational uses like walks along the river or installing playgrounds for children, but the part of the passage in the neighbourhood of the Arts Centre was problematic. The Arts Centre has foreseen organizing public outdoor events that would bring hundreds of people together, yet the public space was not large enough to accommodate so many visitors.

These two constraints have contributed to the idea of making this bridge rather an extension of the public space, than a pedestrian crossing tool. By widening the bridge, it could become a true public square above the water, a direct extension of the docks, located just in front of the new Arts Centre. Like the bridge of Avignon of a famous French song, it would finally become a bridge on which the crowd can dance.

From a symbolic point of view, this option also added a significant interest in the global layout, as the bridge offers views towards the surrounding industrial landscape of Charleroi. Therefore, it instantly

associates public gatherings with the historical background, crucial for the identity of the city.

This bridge has been called "placerville" (a mix between the French words "place" and "passerelle") in honour of its dual status of a crossing infrastructure and a public space.

By obtaining this new feature, the bridge fully found its justification in connection with the left bank of the river Sambre, regardless of the future developments or adjustments that would take place on the right bank.

On the left river bank, the bridge is connected to the quays by a monumental flight of stairs running across its width. Such as those present on the docks, these oversized stairs serve as much opportunity for sitting, as for climbing. They also allow the raised area of the "placerville" to be seen as a continuity of the docks, both in the means of the physical appearance and the functional uses.

A key criterion to ensure this continuity was to lower the bridge as much as possible in order to avoid an excessive difference of level between the docks and the "placerville". As the bottom level of the structure was strictly determined by the size of the passing boats, an important work was provided by the structural engineer office Bollinger & Grohmann (Paris Office). They have been challenged to refine the bridge structure to the thinnest, for lowering as much as possible the ground level of the bridge. The result of the study was a proposal to create the central element as a solid welded steel structure of 80cm height and 32m length.

The lower face of the bridge is integrally covered with stainless steel. It reflects the luminescence of the river surface and allows to enlighten the public space underneath the bridge despite the large width of the structure. From a distant view, this coating brings a dematerialization effect on the mantle, covering it with moving light reflections of the water.

On the right bank, the "placerville" is connected to the narrow footpath by two side ramps. Even though they are temporary, these ramps are made to stay in place for an estimated period of ten years, and have therefore been designed to integrate perfectly with the main piece.

As a part of the future urban space development is planned on the right river bank, it is intended to deploy the pedestrian area on a larger scale there. This will allow to transform the ending of the "placerville" into a monumental staircase, symmetrical to that present on the left bank.

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