Reflection: graduation studio ‘At Home in the City’- Amsterdam

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Rigid transitions between the dwelling and the neighborhood can occur when the strict separation of functions and domains is being pursued in designs. In the Kolenkitbuurt in Amsterdam-West the same thing happened. Back in the fifties this was one of the neighborhoods that was being built according to the ideals of the modern city of the CIAM movement. Some of the problems the Kolenkitbuurt is facing at the moment are the result of the use of the CIAM ideals in this neighborhood and include: a strict separation of the public and private domains and rigid transitions between different levels -city, neighborhood and dwelling. In the fifties Team 10 came up with theories to restore the broken connections between the dwelling and its surrounding environment which were caused by the ideals of the CIAM. One of the concepts the architects of Team 10 reintroduced was in-between space and Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger played an important part in developing theories concerning this topic. Because I also noticed this strict separation of spaces when I visited the Kolenkitbuurt I decided to research the concept of in-between space further and chose to study this theme in the context of densification. Instead of expanding the city outwards beyond its borders most new projects are currently being built within the existing urban fabric and this is going to continue to be done in the future. With this development -in which the in-between space has become more restricted than ever before- comes the need to design in-between spaces than can be meaningful places. My site in the Kolenkitbuurt is a remaining space enclosed by the A10 highway and the Bos en Lommerweg and has become a meaningful place by using the concept of in-between space to create a platform that forms the connection between the neighborhood and the city. In order to better understand the relation between the concepts of densification and in-between space we compared two densification projects that were built in the 1970s and 1980s with two urban renewal projects from the last 20 years in our theme research. We found an important difference between the two periods: in the case of the earlier built densification projects it is apparent that in-between space is taken into account in these designs. When spaces are ambiguous -and you cannot tell whether you are in a public or private space- there are more opportunities for chance encounters and interaction and residents might also appropriate these spaces. In the case of the more current urban renewal projects one notices that the boundaries between the public and private spaces here are sharp and for more clearly defined which inhibits interaction between spaces. So the challenge is to incorporate this ambiguity into my design while also guaranteeing the privacy of residents.

In my design I demonstrate how in-between space can be used as an instrument of mediation to make more structured and subtle transitions that connect different levels -dwelling, neighborhood and the city. Some of the problems the Kolenkitbuurt is facing right now could be solved as a result. I used in-between space to create ambiguous spaces in my design. I did this by using twin phenomena -such as public and private, individual and collective, inside and outside, order and chaos- not as polarities but as things that can complement one another. Spaces where both polarities are being found form the ambiguous spaces. Because the design consists of these ambiguous spaces a gradual transition is formed from the public street to the private dwellings. Inside each building and even within the dwellings there are subtle transitions from the public to the private functions and domains. I brought continuity into the design by using blocks as recurring elements on the levels of the dwelling and the neighborhood. On the level of the neighborhood the four buildings are shaped as blocks. In the buildings the blocks are formed by the dwellings and inside the dwellings the private functions are once again housed in blocks. Due to the ambiguity of each space and the gradual transitions between public and private spaces -that are reinforced by the blocks- the three levels become connected. Residents get a living environment where they can feel at home in the city of
which they are not separated anymore. You are both part of the public spaces where you can meet others while also having a private space.

In order to gain more privacy -which is so important to most people nowadays- it is not necessary to create a strict separation of the public and private domains. In fact, this does not seem to be a proper solution for the Kolenkitbuurt at all, for the strict separation between the public and private domains and between the three levels of the dwelling, neighborhood and the city has resulted in fragmentation and the absence of interaction between people and spaces. What this design gives insight into is the ways in which both public and private spaces as well as different levels can be connected to one another while guaranteeing privacy at the same time. In this sense my design serves as a possible approach to counteract the isolation of the Kolenkitbuurt and perhaps also other neighborhoods that are dealing with the same issues that are at hand here.