a house for craft.
P5 REFLECTION

A reflection in three parts on the research and methods developed in support of the architectural thesis project. Part 1 provides a brief account of the methods employed to research craftsmanship and craft discourse. Part 2 presents the choice of architectural programme and outlines the ensuing design goals. Part 3 concludes with issues encountered during the design phase and the positions adopted through design.

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I
UNDERSTANDING CRAFT

Over the course of my thesis work, I have questioned the role of craftsmanship in contemporary culture and in architecture. What is the position of craft in our society? What are the values inherent in craftsmanship, and how can these be supported? Further, what is craftsmanship in architecture, and what is an architecture made explicitly for craft?

My research intentions were to assess at a general level the meaning and role of craft in contemporary culture, and to explore via programme and materiality craft’s relationship to architecture and the city. These goals were anchored by wider social views, namely that I believe that supporting crafts and advocating for craftsmanship are important tasks for the present and the future, and that by promoting crafts we are inherently supporting multi-dimensional learning; material skills; local jobs; inter-disciplinary collaboration; personal development and creativity.

My preliminary research on craft was conducted in several mediums and at varying scales of investigation. The first segment of my research focused on a general literature review of craft discourse. This research culminated in a paper titled ‘Understanding Craft,’ which sought to identify important topics and trends, beginning with a brief overview of historical craft debate and moving to a broadened definition of craft and workmanship today. The literature review brought forward several themes for consideration. These themes included the meaning of craftsmanship and its role today; craft as a material discourse; craft in education; craft interventions in industry; and the representation and dissemination of crafts. Viewed in this way, it became clear that the craft industries are diverse and difficult to categorize. Situated between art, design, and production, contemporary craft is simultaneously in service to these three disciplines, and in possession of a distinct identity from them. For craft, this identity begins with material practice, the mastery of which defines core craft skills and culture.
The role of the material consequently drove the next segment of my research. I traveled to London to film for three days in the workshop of a stained glass craftsman. Film proved an ideal medium to record and share the multi-dimensional, subtle and often mysterious logics of the craft process. The film captured actions and reactions, but it also required consideration on my part: what to show, how to show it, and why. In doing so I reflected on what I had witnessed, and attempted to organize my findings into a cogent narrative. I felt I had a responsibility to the craftsman to translate his words and actions honestly and effectively into a new medium for an audience unfamiliar with his craft.

Returning to Delft, I continued my craft research by deepening my knowledge of stained glass as a craft discipline and an architectural medium. I considered the material from historical and contemporary perspectives, and I looked at the specific qualities of the material in the overall contexts of architectural projects, both religious and secular. It is worth noting that I encountered during this time high levels of prejudice towards the material due to its religious connotations. This resistance became an important benchmark in my later design work. The second important observation I made during this phase was that stained glass is best understood from the interior, and that the architecture of the room and the composition of the glass must work together towards an overall unity of expression.

The next step in my research involved physical engagement with the material. By endeavoring to work with glass myself, I learnt that my aspirations in design far exceeded my capabilities. Engaging with the material underscored for me the specificities, difficulties, and ultimately the value of material craftsmanship.

This material research was a formative and invaluable link between my broader research into craft discourse and the more concrete task of developing a building design. Working with glass by hand necessitated engaging with the material at multiple levels and scales. Although it was at times a difficult process with uncertain direction, in hindsight I can say with certainty that my architectural ideas gained direction and character from the direct input and experience of working with glass.
In parallel to my on-going material research, I developed an architectural strategy and approach to craft. The intention of this phase was to engage with contemporary craft culture via architecture. As the organizing theme of the studio was ‘Cultures of Craft,’ with an emphasis on craft in the city, several general categories of building were put forward for consideration:

- places of production
- places of education
- places of representation and/or dissemination

From the outset of the studio, I was interested in the broader implications of craft education and policy in society. How do we teach and promote crafts today, and what architectural programmes or building types could help further this agenda?

My personal research focus turned to craft knowledge and discourse at the level of representation and agency. I became particularly interested in the disciplinary ties that bring disparate organizations and individuals together: the umbrella organizations supporting craft industries. This lead me to examine the role of guilds, and their contemporary model: the craft council. Generally speaking, craft councils are organizations that represent the interests of the entire industry to the public, to professionals and to the government. They are representational bodies whose purpose is to educate, promote and support the crafts.

Two organizations have in recent years (2014-2015) expressed such ambitions within the Netherlands: Centrum voor Ambachtseconomie (CVAE) and Craft Council Nederland (CCNL). Both organizations, however, are in their infancies. Their websites are limited in scope and exposure, and they do not yet have the critical reach that maturity has brought to other, more established craft councils world-wide, the UK Craft Council and the American Craft Council being two excellent examples.

In researching the company structure and architecture of three established craft councils world-wide (the UK Craft Council, the American Craft Council and the German Handwerkskammer), and considering the as-yet nascent scope of the Craft Council Nederland, two problem statements emerged:

1. Generally, craft councils do not have a public face within the city. They are therefore only partial participants in the public realm.

2. In order for Craft Council Nederland to become an authoritative, publicly accessible craft partner for craft development and agency, it requires both digital and physical personas, such that it can work in both realms to exhibit, connect and represent the industry.
My design goals followed from these conclusions, responding with the following design questions:

Q. How might a Dutch craft council extend its presence beyond the web to become a representative civic institution in its own right?

Q. What is an appropriate architecture for a craft council?

The formulation of these questions marked a transition from pure research to research by design. The intention of the first phase was to probe the meaning and role of craftsmanship in order to establish a broad but critical foundation for design. The goal of the design phase was to develop an architectural project that supported craft as a discipline, and expressed craftsmanship in and of itself.
III
DESIGNING FOR CRAFT

My design seeks to respond to the problems and questions raised by my research, namely that craft councils buildings -- should they even have one -- are not typically public venues, despite their public agenda. My building is therefore focused on providing a public-private interface for the council organization. The goal of the project is to provide the craft council with a physical platform to promote craft industries, products and discourse.

First, an appropriate site was required. The chosen building site is located in the city centre of Amsterdam along the Singelgracht canal, and is adjacent to the Museumplein, Vondelpark, Spiegelkwartier and Leidseplein neighbourhoods. Locating the craft council within the museum district in Amsterdam helped to reinforce the message that craft is an equal participant in the realms of art and design on a national stage.

The chosen site is an empty plot of land on Weteringschans at the end of a set of six ornate villas. This villa typology brought a level of complexity and ambiguity to the project independent to that of the preceding research. Additionally, the programme and spatial hierarchy of the craft council required a lot of personal reflection as to the role and needs of the building. Combined with the selection of the Weteringschans site and the consequent introduction of the villa typology, several inherent tensions, or themes for design, emerged during the development of the design proposal.

The first theme is the tension inherent in the contrasting typologies of the house and the institution. It was a goal of the design process to straddle these two personas, so that the building feels at once suitably public and grand, whilst maintaining a level of privacy and domesticity characteristic of the villa. My design scheme has fluctuated in tone between private office and public centre, and it has been a central challenge of my process to strike an appropriate balance.

I have felt this tension most keenly in the evolution of the building plan, and the ground floor especially has been vital to setting the tone of the project. The conclusions of my research were that the craft council as an entity should be publicly accessible. Translating this into design, I wanted the ground floor to feel approachable rather than monumental. In essence, I was searching for a low-barrier threshold to the public that could also express through architecture the character of the craft council.
A second theme for design was the search for an architectural expression of craftsmanship. Designing a craft council meant that my building would not house production functions, but rather would represent the crafts in other ways: via the architecture itself, and via the events hosted within the building. As such, it was important to me to find an architectural language that could in itself, and without becoming parody, represent and embody an ethos of craft.

I began by identifying building materials which I felt matched the identity of the crafts council, the neighbouring villas, and the building traditions of the Netherlands more generally. I chose to work with brick masonry in recognition of the lengthy and proud history of the material in the Netherlands, and with stained glass for its artistry and contrasting delicacy. I felt these links to the Dutch historical context were important because I believe craft to be about more than material and technique. Indeed, it is deeply cultural: craft is tied to people and to place, and moves forward whilst maintaining a continuous dialogue with the past. From this position, it follows that a work of architecture designed to represent craft should be similarly rooted in its time and place. Copying tradition is, however, not the same as building on tradition: the first makes the purpose behind the tradition meaningless, it is tradition in aesthetic alone. The second finds value and inspiration in tradition, and utilizes these lessons in a new, relevant way. In my design process I have thus repeatedly tested my decisions against these positions, and asked myself how the design relates to the existing craft context, and in turn, what it contributes.

Following from this, I chose to express the structure of the building in an architectural way, such that the structure and the aesthetic of the building were one and the same. This approach felt appropriate for a craft council, in that craftsmanship and craft traditions frequently find beauty in the pragmatism of everyday objects. My design task was therefore to ensure that the materials and the spatial organization worked together to form a unified experience and aesthetic composition. In this way, my material choices were not arbitrary surface treatments, but rather essential elements in the architectural planning, structure, and expression of the building.

The craft council as envisioned in my design is a series of rooms, each with a distinctive character defined by the size of the room and its ceiling. The final design is a four storey hybrid brick/clay block masonry structure with a family of load-bearing clay block vaulted ceilings. These vaulted masonry ceilings give the rooms of the council a feeling of occasion whilst maintaining the intimate scale of the building.
Top: Sketch during the development of the vault family
The feeling of a house, the villa, is enhanced by the sequence of rooms set up in an enfilade. The entrance via a ground floor cafe provides an inviting, low-barrier ground floor, making the social statement that the craft council is open to the public, and a terrace on the canal heightens activity from street to canal. The progression of rooms across the rest of the four storeys is made cohesive by the continuity of atmosphere, the language of the vaults, the stained glass windows, and the central stair. The result is a rich society of rooms that as a collective strengthen each other and their own natures.

Significant time was spent researching the structural, craft and aesthetic unity of the vaults on their own and in the context of the project. In order to express the language of load-bearing masonry throughout the building, the brick/block walls are partially exposed on the interior as well as the exterior, in combination with plaster walls and wood finished floors. The design process thus unfolded by approaching architecture through materiality and by thinking critically about the nature of craft.

Zooming out, it is my hope that my final design proposal speaks to some of the broader questions commonly shared by architecture and the crafts, including the role of material, technique, culture and form. Through my design I have searched for ways to contribute to existing forms and an existing context without being nostalgic and without falling into parody. In doing so, I have pursued an architecture that, like craftsmanship, aims to speak a language at once both new and old.