P4 REFLECTION

INTRODUCTION - STUDIO, LOCATION, AND OBJECT

RMIT concerns itself with the renovation, modification, intervention and transformation of the existing building fabric at all building scales: from a single building to a larger (urban) area. The Mixed Projects graduation studio, a subsidiary of the RMIT department, focused on an area of Amsterdam West (see figure 1). From an early stage in the project, I was drawn to the Haarlemmerpoort (see figure 2) due to its landmark nature, otherness in its context, and its borderline location between the centre of Amsterdam and the western districts. I set out to reconnect the Haarlemmerpoort to its surroundings both physically and programmatically by basing exhibition spaces and supporting facilities for the facilitation of volunteerism in the building.

The purpose of this reflection paper is to compare the intended research and design process set out in my thesis plan with the reality of my graduation project. The effectiveness and shortcomings of the process will be discussed. A portion of this paper will also reflect on the relationship between this project and a wider social context.

Please note that aspects of the actual design will be discussed only in order to successfully compare the proposed and realised methodology and the effectiveness thereof; a full documentation of the final design will not be given in this paper.

INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Within my thesis plan, I proposed to adopt an investigative research strategy which gradually branches out from the main subject into sub- and sub-sub-topics (see figure 3). Some of these topics would be pre-determined (such as the history of the object and its surroundings), other subjects would present themselves as unknowns throughout the research process that require further investigation (such as the history of Amsterdam’s defensive works).

After an initial stage of pure research, I predicted that designing would gradually increase in importance. Yet this design would in fact be just another form of research, thereby effectively making the entire project's process one of research. As illustrated in figure 4, I planned that an initial period of research would be followed by a period in which research and design would be increasingly related to each other.

The reality of my project was very much in keeping with this proposed methodology, and this method also coincided well with the set up of the studio itself. The first quarter of the graduation year was dedicated entirely to research structured into several definite categories (the urban, architectural, and building technology analysis) with some predetermined sub-categories. This research was translated into the P1 report, but inevitably this research was not exhaustive.

After this initial stage of pre-determined focus, it was left up to the students to take the reigns of their design and research. Luckily I had spent the pre-P1 researching the same building I spent the rest of the year designing an intervention for: the Haarlemmerpoort. Yet still all my research conducted after the structure before the P1 felt very theoretical as I endeavoured to get a more concrete grip
on my project. Having thoroughly researched the Haarlemmerpoort, what would I make of it? What program suited the building and the location and related to the larger societal issues I had identified? What did that program demand? What did the building demand of this program? What about the building needed to be changed? in what way did it need to be changed? What needed to be left the same? emphasised? added? taken away? What was my position in the frame of heritage architecture? With every design decision made, my research got increasingly focused and practical and slowly my project was moulded into its P5 ready shape.

One of these gradually clarifying decisions, as alluded to previously, was the function of the building. I wanted to use the building to connect the city center with the western districts, but that aim in itself leaves a wide variety of functions as valid options. Through the function workshop, a real turning point in my graduation year, I decided for a volunteer center as the main function. Further research into volunteer centers led me to discover the Irish Aid Center in Dublin by Tom de Paor (see figure 5), which proved to be a crucial reference project. As was the case in that project, I amended my program to focus on the promotion of volunteerism through an exhibition area which informed visitors about projects that needed their help. Thereafter followed a long period of research into the specificities of the Volunteer Center Amsterdam and the generalities of exhibition design.

My gradually shaped vision of what a volunteer center in turn shaped my design for the Haarlemmerpoort. For instance, my use of the 6 different categories of volunteer work and my desire to house multiple small charities within the building made keeping the divided structure of the Haarlemmerpoort desirable on a practical as well as a conceptual level. This use of the existing division within the building became a strong design criteria in order to successfully and respectfully connect my intervention to the existing building (see figure 6). The result (see figure 7) is an interplay between internal connection and division in the form of the building’s original rhythm.

As my design got more concrete, uncertainties about the building arose which I had not previously realised were uncertainties. For instance, the P1 report refers to the exceptional use of sandstone as the loadbearing material of the Haarlemmerpoort. At the P3 presentation stage it transpired that the building’s structural material was in fact brick faced with sandstone. This discovery had significant implications for the structural feasability of the proposed extension: initially I had planned to place the walls of the extension directly on top of the existing walls, an added load which a thinner masonry wall with sandstone facing cannot hold. This realisation also necessitated further research into the building’s structure and ways in which to extend an existing building vertically without increasing the loads borne by the existing structure.

DESIGN METHODOLOGY

The design methodology to which I aspired while writing my thesis plan, was that which I had learned and practiced throughout the previous semester in the “Van Gezel tot Meester” studio. This method can be divided into several categories, each one of which I will compare separately to the reality of my graduation project experience. These categories are:

1. Guiding theme and criteria
2. Exploring and Deciding
3. Domains
4. Frame of Reference
5. Language of Sketching and Model Making
6. Other
THE HAARLEMMERPOORT AS A POINT OF PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONNECTION BETWEEN CENTRAL AMSTERDAM AND THE WESTERN DISTRICTS

1. GUIDING THEME AND CRITERIA

I aspired to have a clear concept which would function throughout the design process as the “hat stand” on which to base my design decisions. This concept would be supplemented gradually by additional criteria.

From the hand-in of the thesis plan onwards, I had a very clear guiding theme in mind for the entire project: connection (see figure 8). I worked hard to incorporate this concept into all levels of my design from the masterplan down to my details. Connection was quite overtly my mantra throughout each and every presentation this year to the point that I began worrying about overuse of the word.

As for additional criteria, these were quite regularly being developed and transformed throughout the design process as a clearer image of the project presented itself. For instance, one of my initial criteria was to leave detailing connections visible within the design: literal connections. Yet gradually it became apparent to me that this image I had of a steel structure with visible bolts conflicted with the scandinavian style museum calm atmosphere I aspired to create (see figure 9). Instead of leaving every bolt and connection visible as could be done in an industrial reuse project, it was far more suitable to allow the structure to form a calm order within the building as is more relevant to the building’s neo-classical nature.

In the design of the extension, the formulation of additional criteria proved essential to actually completing the design (see figure 10). I found the overarching concept of connection and the few sub-criteria I had formulated too general for the creation of an actual design. Yes, I wanted to connect my extension to the existing building, but connect how? To create an appropriate connection I needed a much more specific rules to determine what was appropriate.

One of the criteria that became crucial to the design process was my position as a heritage architect. Having written a “position paper” during the research quarter, I presumed to know my stance when it came to designing with an existing building. Re-reading this paper while in the throws of design difficulty, I was disappointed to find that my pro-reuse stance was woefully inadequate as a handle on which to base a design. Yes, I still believed old buildings should not simply be demolished; and yes, I still believed that old buildings did not all warrant museum-like preservation.... but where did that leave me in terms of designing with an existing building?

I dedicated an entire week purely to figuring out exactly what my positions was, and it took a great deal of further thought, research and designing to finally come to grips with what this elusive position actually is. My position developed out of the area’s history and current critical attitude towards change as well as my own guilt over changing the function of the building away from housing, effectively evicting 16 family units: the Haarlemmerbuurt lost at least a fifth of its original housing stock with the demolition of the Haarlemmerhouttuinen and the residents have a very antagonistic attitude to the buildings which have arisen on the barren land.

Keeping in mind these factors, I adopted a very respectful and kind attitude towards the existing building in the design of the extension and its facades (an almost timid attitude, if you ignore the fact that proposing an 8 meter extension cannot actually be considered timid) (see figure 11). In terms of the interior’s design I adopted a similarly calm relation to the existing in keeping with my ambition to realize a calm and museal interior (see figure 7 and 9). I designed with the building without copy-pasting neo-classical elements; instead I created and acknowledged subtle differences between the existing and my proposed additions while still always working in accordance with the existing building. For instance, the floor of my new level is still supported by wooden beams, but these
are glulam instead of oak, and connected to the loadbearing structure with steel profiles instead of being imbedded in the wall, as is the case with the existing beams.

For the collonade area I adopted a slightly different position. Given my theme of connection, the collonade’s historic use as the place where the connection between Amsterdam and the outside was realized, and the current disuse of the area; I really wanted to activate that area. I wanted to draw people in and around the building, and for that I adopted a more radical relationship with the existing in materiality, form, intervention, etc. (see figure 12).

The position described above relates specifically to this project; had my graduation project focused on a different building, my position will probably have been different.

2. EXPLORING AND DECIDING

Designing is decision-making. It took me a while to realize this truth, but once I did I also instantly understood why I sometimes struggled at designing: I find decision-making rather difficult. I discovered that as I undertake more sketching and model-making, basically as I increase the amount of exploration I undertake to come to a decision, the decision is often easier to make. Rather than indecision, the search for options tended to be self-regulating: at a certain point one option becomes the most obvious one.

Therefore I had decided at the start of this project to not allow myself to be frozen by indecision. Rather, I would keep on searching for answers. In the case of this project there were times when this exploration seemed to threaten to go on forever. At these points criteria often became essential to narrowing down the search and it was often my supervisors who would encourage me to look for that kind of a structure on which to base my decision rather than to simply keep searching forever. I needed to make higher level decisions in order to make this causal decision.

One example of this endless searching was the oft quoted case of my extension: its form, rhythm, style, materiality, etc. Everything seemed like it could be possible, because it was: my position as an RMIT architect and resulting design criteria were not specific enough to make the ream of design deciscions necessary to come to a facade design. I needed to develop the additional criteria mentioned in figure 10 to get sufficiently concrete guidelines to create a design. Those criteria were developed based on research: specifically the analysis of other neo-classical buildings with an extension as well as a very unsatisfying vitruvian period (see figure 13 for a few of the neo-classical buildings consulted).

3. DOMAINS

Designing encompasses a wide spectrum of decisions. These considerations can be organised into the following domains:

- space / form / image / composition
- material / construction / climate / sustainability
- function / use / ritual / movement
- urban context / site
- social / historical / philosophical context

An expert designed moves erratically between these domains while designing resulting in a more integrated final design (see figure 14). Therefore I aimed to emulate this expert behaviour within my graduation project process by working quickly between these domains rather than lingering on one particular domain or product (three cheers for never mindlessly working on plans for three weeks straight ever again).
THE HAARLEMMERPOORT AS A POINT OF PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONNECTION BETWEEN CENTRAL AMSTERDAM AND THE WESTERN DISTRICTS

Needless to say, I am not an expert designer, so switching between domains did not go smoothly nor without conscious effort. And instead of doing endless plan iterations, those struggles were reserved for my facade design on a recurring basis. At times specific domains should have been treated more throughly and concretely. For instance, in the case of construction, I kept discovering floating floors. Although I had frequently considered the specifics of the construction in the two wings of the building and how the roof could be supported via the structure in those two bays, I repeatedly forgot about the floor below the roof. It was not until I made a model of the entire new structure that I rediscovered that this third storey floor was not structurally supported.

At other times domains could have warranted a thorough investigation but also a swifter skipping over, as was the case with the facade composition. At several moments throughout the year I spent a considerable amount of time working on the facade without making any decisions either way: yes or no became later. While this avoided the frustration of being unable to make a decision while entertaining the joy of exploration (see figure 15), the end result of zero decisions in which everything was still possible proved a bit frustrating down the line when a blank box kept cropping up in my presentations (see figure 16). Perhaps in this case part of the problem was that I was trying to make decisions in too many domains at the same time: each design in figure 10 makes different decisions in numerous domains. Obviously (in hindsight) I could not choose between the various options I created since each of them did certain things right and certain things wrong in the different domains: form, image, composition, material, etc.

Something that I did manage to do quite successfully within this project was to work between scales. The transition from research before the P1 and design was marked by several weeks of group design in the form of the masterplan. At numerous points throughout the year did I look back and rework the masterplan in keeping with my design advances for the building. What could definitely be improved in another project is the speed at which I work through a building. Without really meaning to, I started on the ground floor and worked my way up: first designing the collonade area, then the bays, then reworking the collonade area, elaborating on my design for the bays.... It took a while for me to work up the courage to really face the great unknown of my extension. Therefore while I applaud my process of reintegration (looking back at past design decisions to verify their continued relevance), at times this did feel like avoiding the unknowns ahead at which I only peeked for an hour at a time. Part of this clarification of the existing can be rationalised as determining the rules on which the extension would be based, but about 20% of this habit was down to cowardice.

4. FRAME OF REFERENCE

In the thesis plan I set out to use references at all levels and scales of the design. Some of that referencing is subconscious, but I did undertake a surprising amount of referencing throughout the process, even more than I expected even given my ambition for extensive reference consultation. I initially thought aiming to use references at every since scale of the design was exceedingly ambitious, but as the project went on I found myself consulting references for all of my major decisions: like my facade (have I mentioned how difficult it was to design the facade of my extension and basically all of my extension as yet?), the staircase in the collonade, the offices and exhibition spaces. The general reference folder on my laptop has over 400 new images (see figure 17 for a measly megabyte).

5. LANGUAGE OF SKETCHING AND MODEL MAKING

The process of sketching and model making as well as the resulting model and drawing are incredibly helpful in the design process since they provide a wealth of information. I set out to avoid merely using perspective sketches and models as a presentation tool and rather to incorporate these tools into the design process.
I also used multiple representational tools to solve the same issue: for the much mentioned extension I worked in sketch perspectives, models, computer models, and sketch drawings to come to my final result. Again, it would have been useful to switch more between the modes as I used them: instead of spending a week on models until I felt I had exhausted the medium, it might have been advisable to test the same suggestion in different media. As it was, I suggested general extension forms in my 1:100 model, which became entirely redundant by the time I drew my second drawing a week later.

6. OTHER

One final method-related decision I made early on in the year was to work as much as possible in the studio area. This choice was made in order to benefit and contribute as much as possible to a strong studio dynamic. Given that I wrote my initial draft for this report on Ascension Day weekend in a project room at the TU Library surrounded by my project peers, I can definitely state that I have succeeded in this ambition.

Besides the success in terms of sheer number of hours spent working in the studio space (or its out of hours equivalents), there is also the success of benefiting from that effort (like by being reminded about deadlines that had been forgotten). To name a very concrete example, between P2 and P3 I was for a time incredibly stuck with relation to my facade design for the extension. I had talked to my supervisors about this problem, and how I could approach a solution, and they both gave me good advice in that regard; but it was my fellow students who set me a research deadline for looking into reference projects and coming up with concrete statements about the successes and failures of those projects in order to formulate what exactly I considered the right extension for the Haarlemmerpoort. As part of this “other”, I must include a word of thanks directed at my fellow students. I really enjoyed being in a studio environment with this diverse group of people. Not only was the Berlin trip informative and enjoyable due to their effort (figure 18), but the entire year was fun and worthwhile thanks to their presence. We urged each other on, helped each other out, and also applied a little bit of tough love. Designing is a very personal process, making set-backs all the more painful to encounter; and a stimulating studio environment is one very effective element that kept me working through the tougher times. I am very curious where we all end up, and I am very greatful to the group’s energy for an amazing project.

PLANNING

I planned for myself a very everything-at-the-same-time structure in keeping with the method I aspired to of working swiftly between different domains. I planned to stay on the P1-P5 schedule by using the minimum requirements per presentation moment as a guide for how developed my project should be at any given stage. Working at the department was also very beneficial for staying on track while avoiding a plans, sections, facade type structure in the year. Instead I saw myself get gradually happier about each of these aspect as time went by, sometime seeing more results on one aspect than another, and at other times lagging a bit behind while I struggled to get my extension up to par with the rest of my design, but overall progress was made with the predictable peaks of productivity the weeks before each presentation.

I think this general planning strategy can be transferred into practice, even within a small office without other practices to keep pace with throughout the design process (after all, its the expert designer who move smoothly between domains, so surely this strategy is applicable in practice). In this case you would simply keep an eye on the requirements for various presentation points.
THE HAARLEMMERPOORT AS A POINT OF PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONNECTION BETWEEN CENTRAL AMSTERDAM AND THE WESTERN DISTRICTS

RELATION BETWEEN PROJECT AND WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

My graduation project investigated the relevance of monuments and heritage within today’s society and built environment through the specific example of the Haarlemmerpoort.

The Haarlemmerpoort has been deemed a monument, but the monument description is simply a description of the building. Therefore, although few people would dispute that the fact that this building is a monument (its age enough to convince most people) this left me with the exciting prospect of determining what made this monument valuable, and what to bring forward in my intervention. From the onset I was opposed to preservation without alteration, nor did I want to return the building to its post-construction “perfection.” It was a very interesting balancing act between respect and continuation, and this toeing the line is the relevance of any RMIT project in a wider social context.

There are a lot of historic buildings and vacant buildings in the Netherlands. Its propostorous to preserve everything old and destroy more recent desings as the ugly errors of the post war period (for instance). All projects have an existing context, even ones which start with an empty plot somewhere in the countryside. The compelling challange of RMIT is that of social representative: the designers voice passes judgement over a building, deciding what goes and what stays. Each project demands a different approach, but each designer should be generous enough to design for the right balance, a balance I hope to have achieved.

Initially the attitude towards these monuments was to preserve their existing state. Considering their high number, the perseverance of such an attitude would risk turning the entirety of the Netherlands into a museum. Fortunately, today preservation is only one of many options in dealing with heritage, only one of the ways which enables us to take the past with us into the future. Yet still the general public seems inclined to favour the original state without necessarily understanding the implications of such a stance. While yet another group seems disinclined to value heritage at all.