Reflection on Graduation

The Open Citadel, a new University library for the city of Amsterdam

Jorne van der Voorn (4062779), jornvorn@hotmail.com

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Personal information

Name: Jorne van der Voorn
Student number: 4062779
Address: Harnaskade 11
Postal code: 2635 CA
Place of residence: Den Hoorn
Telephone number: +31 618947941
Email address: jornvorn@hotmail.com

Studio information

Theme: The Public Retreat, a new university library in Amsterdam.
Teachers: Mark Pimlott and Henk Mihl (BT)
External examiner: Birgit Jurgenhake
Argumentation of choice studio: Strong affiliation with chair's philosophy towards design and practice, interest in project theme and trust in value of mentoring.
Personal theme: The Open Citadel
Reflection

This document will reflect brief but concise on the graduation project undertaken. Considered are the research done, the theme of the project prescribed, the method of design promoted and the project in the larger sociocultural context. All of these in relation towards the actual design made. Focus is upon the rate of success or failure of the approach taken and how and why this came into being.

Each topic will shortly be introduced by their original aim, procedure and format. In this way we should evaluate its result effectively and understand its operation and meaning.

Research and design

The research done, as part of the studio program, was twofold. First theoretical/anthropological investigation was undertaken. The emotional binding of the student to his academic city. The motivation of the chosen site in Amsterdam, in terms of historic, sociocultural and political aspects. Academic places in Amsterdam seen as Foucauldian heterotopias. And the use of university libraries through the intended use (analysis of made design), controlled use (interviews with management and policymakers) and the actual use (observation of user behavior). The results of the research done were presented in the form of essays and reports. These were critically assessed by the tutor(s) responsible, corrected and rewritten until regarded sufficient.

The second part of the the research was aimed at critical and systematic analysis of relevant precedents (historical, typological) developed through group work. In a same manner the sites were typologically investigated. National (Amsterdam, Leiden, Utrecht) and international (Antwerp, Vienna, Dublin) excursions were undertaken to physically encounter and scrutinize cities in their relation towards knowledge institutions and culture. From this analytical posters were made and presentations given. All this work was than gathered in a concise handbook, allowing communal inspiration and reflection.

Looking back on these efforts done I can say that some elements have proven more valuable for me than others. The extensive anthropological research has surely contributed to understanding the operation of modern day libraries and their users in the Dutch academic climate. These were however not the original aims of the specific research, but rather coincidentally attained. This means that, unfortunately, most of that research done had no direct relevance to the actual design. More successful was the investigation in the specific site and the academic places in the city. It made me understand the delicate distinctions and the social milieu in the intimidate environment. It made me get a grip on the complex functions of academic places in the city, and thus their significance.

Rather valuable appeared the precedental excavation, by being clear and inspiring models for design. The handbook as a group product gave the opportunity to discuss and reinforce design arguments. In extension to this the excursions undertaken gave better insight into academic places in an complex urban context. Only by experiencing a place “in the flesh” one can grasp it fully. And while our project must be firmly grounded in specific local conditions, it simultaneously reacts to a greater context, a global culture of making and learning and living.
Theme and position

The assignment for this graduation project given is the design of a new university library in Amsterdam, dubbed “The Public Retreat”. This gives much insight into the design question as perceived by the studio of Interiors. A university library should apparently be a place for all (the public) acting as a communal safe-haven from a threatening society. An issue now lacking the city or, at least not being adequately attended to. Furthermore, the theme is strongly linked to immediate issues in an existing problem field. The need and debate of an university library is a real topic in the city of Amsterdam for years and the chosen sites are relevant in terms of their relation towards the university and the urban.

In reaction, my position as I set forth in my P2 presentation was threefold. Assembly, resistance and continuation. The first addresses the city, its citizens and academics, the second modern, global culture (and thus architecture) and the last the question of the academic library as body of knowledge. Thus, assembly of academics in a sheltering building that allows continuation of knowledge practice.

Reflecting upon the stance taken than, I can say it still holds firm. The points I made then are still valid, differing now by being more sharpened and accompanied by a design that should concur its tenor.

Method of design

The methodical line of approach of the studio can be described as being pragmatical and thorough. Design is undertaken on the many levels of scale, all regarded with equal importance. Manual design instruments like sketching and precise modeling are promoted. Use of literature and precedents is much encouraged and high design production is expected.

I have experienced this not as a stringent framework, but rather as an encouraging and optimistic foundation to work upon.

My method of design involved “research by design”. Investigating buildings, books (theory and fiction), paintings and movies while simultaneously producing sketches (pen on calque), perspectives, CAD drawings, diagrams, models, maquettes on several levels, over and over again until an complete, sound and convincing project would emerge. Planning played an important role in co-ordinating the workflow. The weekly tutor sessions functioned as fixing point and semi-deadline. After each session I would reflect upon the work done and work ahead, further sharpening and excavating the design.

Evaluating the method followed critical, I can see strategies that had more success than others. Working on different levels of scale and modes of design proofed productive, but could really be more systematic. So it is in the end been effective, but not so time-efficient. Putting more effort in the production of study models would also improve the project efficiency. With this must be said that the design process is, by definition, uncertain and very personal. Optimal rate of success cannot be guaranteed a priori nor can it be valued objective.
Project in the larger context

Having analyzed the historical development of library typologies, I conclude that the current tendency does not motivate my thesis, nor grasp my fascination. Therefore I hark back to an almost forgotten urban model, what I would call the Citadel. One of the best examples still present is the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, Italy. This marvelous Renaissance building consists of a succession of rooms clustered around different courts, making a rich variety of spatial atmospheres. It flows quite naturally over in the surrounding urban fabric, while clearly stating its autonomy and public role. The structure culminates in what seems to be a tower, holding the studiolo, an extraordinary spatial configuration looking out over the city and beyond, thus expressing supreme power of knowledge. It is this successful model and its characters I have exploited to make my design.

This project designed, a modern academic library for the city of Amsterdam, is dedicated to its academic thinkers and knowledge workers. Creative individuals with their own thoughts and ideas gathered together in one building, driven to make and share knowledge in all possible media, new and old. This gathering in a devoted structure in the city is crucial. It offers resistance towards the highly individualist society we live in, with its technological possibilities that offer an complete physical and social isolation from one and another. My ambition is to have an architecture that accommodates and fortifies a long-lasting academic community. A people assembled in a structure that keeps representing its continuous significance and bond to the city.