

# Reflection of the graduation project

Heritage and Architecture graduation studio 2020-2021

Vacant Heritage: Department stores

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Before commencing with the substantive reflection on the graduation project, both the research and design aspects, a proper introduction of the graduation studio and project are useful. After this introduction, the five aspects described in the Graduation Manual are discussed in an alternative order.

## ***The graduation studio and project***

As part of the Heritage and Architecture studio, the Vacant Heritage project was offered. An adaptive re-use assignment in which a former Vroom & Dreesmann department store is researched and then designed with. In a broader context, this graduation studio is aimed at finding ways to redevelop the existing stock of architecture, while keeping in mind a large variety of social, practical and sustainable aspects in mind. It asks the student to think about how they can be part of a change, both in the architectural object itself as the way designers approach the ever limited supply of resources available. For this graduation project, the former Vroom & Dreesmann in Maastricht was first researched and then designed with. A former department store that has grown and shrunk throughout its existence. In 1932 the first part of the store was built. A building with a monumental façade designed by Dutch architect Jan Kuijt. In its presence at the Grote Staat in the historic city its center, the building has expanded twice (in the 1960's and the 1970's) and was divided into two department stores in 2002. Within the research approach of the 'Touch and Feel' under supervision of Wido Quist, a research was conducted examining the façade its materiality and its relation to the surroundings. By researching how the façade becomes part of the relation between the public, semi-public and private space, a better understanding of the possibilities for the redesign of the building was created. The proposed design and program is aimed at a broad target audience, including tourists and local residents. The new program of the building offers the public leisure activities while simultaneously serving an educational purpose. With its mixture of different functions (a wine experience center, a museum and a cooking workshop space), the local traditions and heritage of the city of Maastricht and its surroundings are presented to the public in an interactive way. The architecture of the building itself contributes to this interactive learning experience by being an integral part of the story that is told within the building.

***Aspect two: the relationship between your graduation (project) topic, the studio topic (if applicable), your master track (A,U,BT,LA,MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)***

Within the Heritage field there are three different aspects, *Heritage & Design*, *Heritage & Values* and *Heritage & Technology*. These three are in their essence quite different, but are essential to each other in an adaptive re-use project. The adaptive re-use of architecture is becoming a more important objective within the architecture field. Resources are (fairly) limited, space is limited and sustainability is at the top of the agenda. However, we are still able to develop new architecture, it is equally important (if not more important) to examine the existing stock of architecture and see how this can be re-used effectively. A former function, like a department store in this graduation assignment, often had a building tailored to its requirements. This can cause several issues in the re-use of the building, which in the past often resulted in the demolition and development of a new building.

With this graduation project, I wanted to discover what it really is like to work on an adaptive re-use assignment. During the first year of my Master program, I worked on a few different assignments that also all relate back to this final graduation assignment. During the Msc1, I participated in the Complex Projects studio. Here I had to re-use the Galeries Modernes building in the heart of Rotterdam. A former department store that is now being redeveloped by KAAAN Architecten. This assignment was however focused on designing a new type of learning environment, rather than designing with the heritage and its values in mind. Nonetheless, it was my first step towards this graduation studio. In the Msc2, I participated in the MEGA 2020 studio. A design assignment, in a group of eight people, in which a mega structure had to be made that consisted of multiple functions in one. Especially this last aspect of the assignment spoke to me. In almost every bachelor design studio the assignment was focused on a single function building. During the MEGA 2020 studio, I learnt how to actually think

efficiently about how to combine several, somewhat contradicting, functions. This is also something the graduation studio focuses on. According to the studio text, the assignment also relates to the finding of new programmes and combinations of these. In addition to the MEGA 2020 studio, I wrote my history thesis in the same semester. The research topic of my thesis was the shift in the retail industry in the city of Rotterdam. In this thesis I researched the shift of the retail area in Rotterdam, but I also found out why these movements happened. One of these is of course the rapid growth of e-commerce, leading to a lamentable number of bankruptcies and vacant stores in the city. This again relates back to the graduation assignment, with the power of e-commerce being one of the reasons why Vroom & Dreesmann was not able to catch up with the competition. Finally, as mentioned in the problem statement, there is a lack of engagement between the architecture of the former department store, its surroundings and the people in it. The research and design assignment that I decided on, aims to find a solution to this problem. With a building as large as the Vroom & Dreesmann (when comparing it to its surroundings) in Maastricht and its enclosed location in the historic city, it is important for the proposed design to efficiently re-use whatever is available in the building. By doing so, the disposal of old materials and the supply of new materials is minimized. But even more important, the proposed redesign should once again result in engaging architecture. As the former department store is now obsolete in the historic city, its desolate image needs to be tackled and it should once again become an integral part of daily city life.

The aforementioned things also relate back to the project its significance in respect to the larger social, professional and scientific framework. By first efficiently researching how the heritage architecture was developed and works, it becomes easier for the designer to work on a proposal for the adaptive re-use of the building. As these kinds of assignments still prove to be difficult in practice, this project tries to set an example of how to approach these assignments without taking the easy way out (eg. demolition).

**Aspect three:** *Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work*

The Heritage graduation studio followed a predetermined structure in which the research and design phases were split into two 'separate' parts. Before commencing with the design, extensive research was to be carried out first. Where the design phase of the graduation studio had one general approach, the research phase offered two different approaches. The *Spatial Building Typology Approach* and the *Touch and Feel Approach*. The chosen approach was the Touch and Feel approach, guided by Wido Quist. This approach focused on the role of materiality in adapting twentieth century heritage.

Early on in the research process, it was not yet determined which former Vroom & Dreesmann was chosen for the eventual redesign. For this reason, it was proposed that the research examined two buildings: the former Vroom & Dreesmann in Maastricht and the former Vroom & Dreesmann in 's-Hertogenbosch. As soon as the actual research started, it became apparent that researching two different buildings was simply too much to ask in the short period of time that was available. Therefore, it was decided to only research the Vroom & Dreesmann in Maastricht, the building which was chosen based on a personal preference.

The research investigated the role of the architecture in engaging in a relation between the public, semi-public and private space and the people moving within and between these spaces. To do so, the research had to be divided into multiple different topics. Each sub-question focused on a different element or scale level, in doing so each sub-questioned required a different method of approach. While conducting the research, it soon became clear that one of the five sub-questions could not be answered. Due to a lack of available drawings, (archival) photographs and the impossibility of a site visit, made it virtually impossible to come to a reliable conclusion. During the design process it eventually also proved irrelevant for the design proposal.

With a mixture of different research methods, like: typological research, plan analysis, simulation research, material analysis, examination of archival documents and categorizing types, the research was built up with a broad spectrum of information. And to build a more scientifically worthy basis around the research, some of these researched elements also had to be tested against literature. These 'tests' against literature however, proved to be fairly useless. For example, the research on the advertising opportunities in the building showed a variety of opportunities, which in turn were deemed ineffective when tested in the literature. The scientific basis of the research therefore became less accurate. Although not carrying a strong scientifically proven basis, the results of the research did

raise an interesting possibility of how to 'use' the materiality while adapting twentieth century heritage. As twentieth century heritage has often already been adapted to fit with society its needs at that specific moment, the architecture (and therefore the materiality) has often lost its ability to engage in a relation between the public, semi-public and private space. The results of the research clearly showed how the architecture could (once again) become a medium of connecting the sequence of space, rather than being a demarcation of what is public and what is private. These findings therefore also built the foundation of the design proposal.

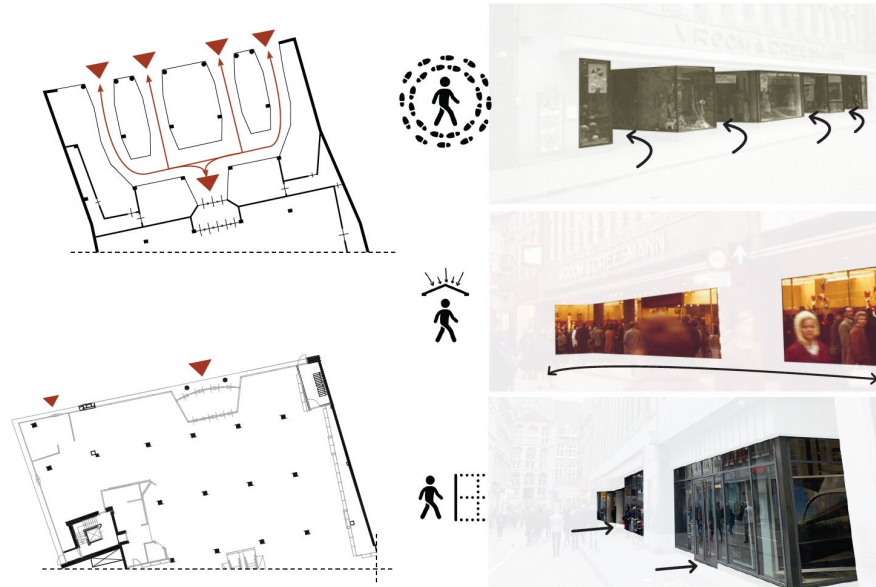
In addition to all this, the approach of examining a façade as an element of interaction between the public, semi-public and private space, could potentially offer a good insight in how these façades can be dealt with in future adaptive re-use assignments. Existing (vacant or not) buildings have always required and will always require maintenance. Every so many years a building will need to be overhauled and fixed, in these moments there was or is an opportunity to adapt the building to the needs of that moment. By doing so, buildings have been changed in such an extent that possibly many of the original features are completely different. Based on the research carried out for this adaptive re-use project it became clear that studying these adaptations is equally important as looking at what current desires demand. As these adaptations tell the designer a lot about what can be done with the building. This was a personal lesson for me, but should also be something that could be studied more in the professional field.

***Aspect one: the relationship between research and design***

As mentioned in the paragraphs above, the research was focused on the role of the materiality in the adaptation of twentieth century heritage. Each of the topics that were researched, were aimed at giving insights in how to deal with the façade in the redesign of the building. Based on observation alone (while visiting Maastricht), it became clear that the former Vroom & Dreesmann had lost its engagement with its surroundings. The vacant building overtime had become a separate element within its context. It alienated from everything else that was or is happening.

***Façade rhythm***

The sheer dimensions of the original façade contrast enormously with the traditional architecture in Maastricht, with a width that fits multiple of the surroundings façades. In addition to this, the expansion of 1970 which was redesigned by the Rijnbout office, created a big contrast due to its materiality and façade lay out. With a predominantly zinc façade, it is yet another alienated piece of architecture in the city fabric. The proposal for the redesign tries to make good use of these findings, the main focus will be put on the original façade by redesigning the façade of the 1970 expansion. The zinc cladded corner fits well with the surroundings in terms of dimensions, but contrasts with its materiality. With the new design, the façade will become a contemporary interpretation of the traditional architecture of the surroundings. By doing so, the corner expansion will merge in with the context and a focus is put on the original façade.



### *Transition zone*

With the main focus of the research being the engagement of the architecture in the relation between the public, semi-public and private space, the proposed design needed to become an actual part of the transition between the zones. The research showed the changes in the entrance zones throughout the years. Starting with a large intermediary zone between the street and the shop floor and being a strict border between public and private in the present situation. The almost one hundred year old concept of creating that intermediary zone where people could browse the displayed products before entering the store, is reinstated in a way that fits the program of the building well.

In addition to this, the change in the advertising opportunities in the building showed a lesser engagement while observing the products on display. The showbox islands at the entrance in the original design allowed for an almost 360 degree impression of what was displayed, while presently the shop windows are only observed from the front angle. By bringing back a number of showboxes to the entrance zone, the various programmatic elements can be displayed in a full 360 degree fashion. The passerby and visitor is able to fully circle the glass cabinets giving an engaging preview of what the 'new' building has to offer.

### *The public domain and the public interior*

Finally, the design took it a step further than just the 'materiality of the façade'. While only the façade was researched, the interior also plays a vital role in the ability to engage in a relation between the public, semi-public and private space. The visitor is offered the opportunity to take a number of different routes while moving through the interior space. Each of the programmatic elements has its own specified route through the building, which can alternatively be diverted from based on personal preferences. The 'journey' starts at the intermediary zone with the showboxes, moves to the lobby and ticketing area and diverts into paths through the original stairwell or the new atrium with a double helix staircase. Each of the different routes has a possibility to end on the roof or balconies along the façade of the Grote Staat and the Vijfharingenstraat. In doing so, the circle is once again closed; the visitor starts in the public domain and ends at the public interior on the roof, offering views over the city of Maastricht.

**Aspect five:** *Discuss the ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in (i) doing the research, (ii, if applicable) elaborating the design and (iii) potential applications of the results in practice*

As experienced in daily life, the practice of architecture and designing architecture is also faced with ethical dilemmas. While working on a project, be it a new development or redesigning existing architecture, there are always issues or problems where one needs to ask themselves '*can this [eg. intervention] be justified?*'. By asking these questions, one becomes more aware of the implications and effects of what is being done. These ethical dilemmas also occurred in the process of redesigning

the former Vroom & Dreesmann in Maastricht. In the process of coming to the proposed design, a number of dilemmas were raised and had to be dealt with. But through thorough weighing up of the positive and negative effects of each intervention, a good decision can be made. One ethical dilemma that was raised (based on aesthetic factors) concerned the removal of the zinc façade that was designed by the Rijnbout office. The removal and/or demolition of someone else's work has always been an interesting discussion within the architectural field. The decision to actually remove this façade was made based on the results of the research. As the research proved, the zinc corner extension did not fit with its surroundings. The large contrast between the corner and the surroundings caused the corner to become a focus point of the overall architecture of the block. While initial recognition of the building can be considered a good thing, the proposed design requires that focus to be on the original façade. By also discussing this dilemma with some peers, the decision was made. There was a clear consensus that the redesign of the corner façade would result in a shift of focus and therefore would be a well thought through decision.

Another dilemma that arose during the design process concerned the roof. The city of Maastricht is not considered to be known for its roof landscape. The agglomeration of small slanted and crooked roofs is in the first place not the most captivating view. However, this peculiar roof landscape is what characterizes an old city like Maastricht, it shows how the city has organically grown for centuries and in turn shows how the city is still growing around the historic center. The decision to use the available space on the roof, to extend the history museum into the present on the roof, came with a privacy issue. The center of Maastricht consists of a large number of shops and hospitality functions (bars, restaurants and hotels). These functions are however mainly situated in the ground floor level of the buildings. On the elevated levels the main function is predominantly housing. But what happens when a large roof suddenly becomes open to the public? The people surrounding the roof of the former Vroom & Dreesmann can suddenly be observed in their personal space. The accessible roof however was the final piece of the museum's puzzle. It is that final addition that allows the story to become a full circle. In order to deal with the privacy issues of residents in a close vicinity, the view from the roof is obstructed by creating scenes along a path. Visitors are able to walk around a specified path from which they have views over the city of Maastricht in predetermined locations. These overlook historic buildings of the city, or merely a roof landscape without directly disturbing the privacy of the residents. This solution actually came with an interesting benefit. By creating scenes on the roof, a certain mystery is created while walking around. There is a build up to the moment where the visitor is suddenly exposed to this scenic view over the city.

**Aspect four:** *Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results*

The main focus of the graduation studio is of course the adaptation of twentieth century heritage. While new buildings are being erected every day, existing buildings also become vacant. The original program of the building no longer works or perhaps became redundant. A lot of factors can contribute to the vacancy of architecture. The vacancy of the former Vroom & Dreesmann department stores is, how unfortunate it may be, a perfect example of how society has changed and no longer requires this retail typology on a large scale. As these buildings were designed to be a department store and nothing else, it is problematic to adapt those buildings. Solving the vacancy of these department stores is not the only motive to adapt these heritage structures, reusing existing architecture also has a beneficial effect on the environment. While researching and designing for this building, the question of why these buildings should be repurposed became a guiding theme in the process.

The proposed design for the adaptation of the former Vroom & Dreesmann in Maastricht aims to set an example of how society can give these large buildings in prime locations a second life, one that may not be as obvious. By providing a program that offers educational and leisure activities to both tourists as well as local residents, the reach of the new function is broadened. This in turn allows for a higher transferability of the proposed program to other places with similar vacant buildings. While not all cities may 'need' a new museum or cooking workshop space, there is always a way to combine leisure with education that can breathe life back into the building and its surroundings.

Furthermore, the act of studying a building's transformation history is a (personal) discovery within this project. When designing with existing architecture, it is not only important to research how the existing structure can be used for the new design. But previous interventions and designs are perhaps of an almost equal importance. Each designer or architect had their own vision and opinion on the project, but why should their visions and opinion suddenly be disregarded? As time affects our way of thinking, it also did in the past. These thoughts from past designer, could not only show designers what was done, but also how a project can be regarded in a different timeframe.