

Reflection

Beursgebouw as social platform: reinterpretation of communal spirit

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Introduction

This reflection is a summary of my graduation thesis within the track of Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences. I reflected on the research methodology, the design process as well as the important aspects regarding the analysis and design strategies throughout my graduation project.

Nowadays, people pay more and more attention to the culture values of heritage buildings, and it's always an important task for the renovation architects to thoroughly investigate and interpret the essential values of the existing building from all scale level: including urban situation, site and surrounding, historical changes, as well as building technology aspects, etc. A considerate heritage value study and assessment would be crucial for the renovation projects to achieve good balance between preserving and changing, thus allowing heritage buildings to keep their core values and at the same time adapt to current social needs.

The graduation studio is called 'Adapting 20c Heritage', and the renovation assignment deals with young heritage in Almere city. Almere is a planned city in the south-west of the reclaimed province Flevoland, and my graduation project is about renovation of the Beursgebouw, which is the first office building in Almere Stad. The Beursgebouw has been the office for company Oranjewoud from the very start, and since 2005, it remained vacant until now.

The research and analysis of the site and building started with some lectures regarding the history of Flevopolder. Then an excursion to Almere and Lelystad is organized, during which we as a group learned about history and development of Almere city, gathered some information about the building and the site, and formed up first ideas about the opportunities and challenges for the renovation. Our findings were gradually improved with more information from a deeper research of all the aspects of the heritage building, and the product was a complete analysis in P1 that included historical study, value assessment and building technical information.

Based on findings of preliminary research and analysis, I started thinking about my own design assignment, and my focus point turned to the social value and communal spirit of the Beursgebouw. My ambition for the renovation is to make a new social platform where people from different generations and different groups come together and interact with each other, thus benefitting the Beursgebouw as well as the Almere city. In the design process, the reinterpretation of communal spirit, the emphasis on the essence of original design language, as well as the sustainability pursuit functioned as the main principles regarding decision making. My main research question is as followed:

“How can the historical, architecture and social values of the Beursgebouw, which define its original identity, be kept, changed or reinterpreted to create a sustainable social platform and further contribute to benefits of the city as a whole?”

There are several sub-questions raised in order to answer the main research question:

“How to reinterpret the communal spirit of an office building and make it fit the new program?”

“How to renovate the existing building volume and façade to promote communal atmosphere and fit with the new communal situation?”

“How to create public space that can be enjoyed by different groups and different ages of people?”

“How to improve the sustainability of Beursgebouw to meet up with current standards?”

The relationship between graduation topic and the studio topic

As Heritage & Architecture is a studio that focuses on the study and renovation of heritage buildings/sites, the topic of balancing old and new is always a leading theme. In my graduation project “Flevoland – Adapting 20c Heritage”, the topic is researching, analyzing the culture values of a young heritage and develop sustainable solutions that give this building a new future. On the one hand, the Beursgebouw works perfectly as a modern office building, with its efficient wing-core spatial organization and large column-free working space. It has been functioning quite well as office for company Oranjewoud for almost 25 years. On the other hand, with the changing needs of society, Almere Stad now face the problem of structural vacancy in office buildings, which means that there will be new programs for the Beursgebouw. The key issues in the transformation of this modern office building are related to the adaptation of new program with essential culture values of the original building. Therefore, the topic of my graduation project corresponds with the studio topic.

The relationship between research and design

In renovation projects, the study of heritage building and the attitudes towards original values have big influence on the design. Therefore, the preliminary research process lay the foundation for the design process, and during the various steps of research, the renovation concept is gradually formed.

The research of Beursgebouw is carried out on different scales, and the study of urban situation and site analysis help determine the appropriate program to revitalize this building. Firstly, a study of urban morphology in Almere Stad indicated opportunities for Beursgebouw: it is in the connection point of office area, residential area and the city center. (Fig. 1) The advantage of this location makes it possible to serve for a wide group of people, thus creating social opportunities. In order to find out the right program, the function distribution of the site is investigated, and the conclusion is utilizing art and culture activities to revitalize the Beursgebouw. Secondly, the in-depth research of Almere city development gave me some inspiration as to the potential problems that the city is facing. When I look at the demography

estimation of the city, I noticed that the number of elderly people will double in the next 15 years. However, a study of housing market indicated that Almere is not well prepared for the demographic change. Based on these researches, I view my renovation project as a chance to solve the problem of a surplus of offices and a lacking of elderly-friendly housing at the same time. Along with more detailed design, more research is carried out including topics of different elderly-friendly housing schemes, the relationship between art activities and elderly health, etc.

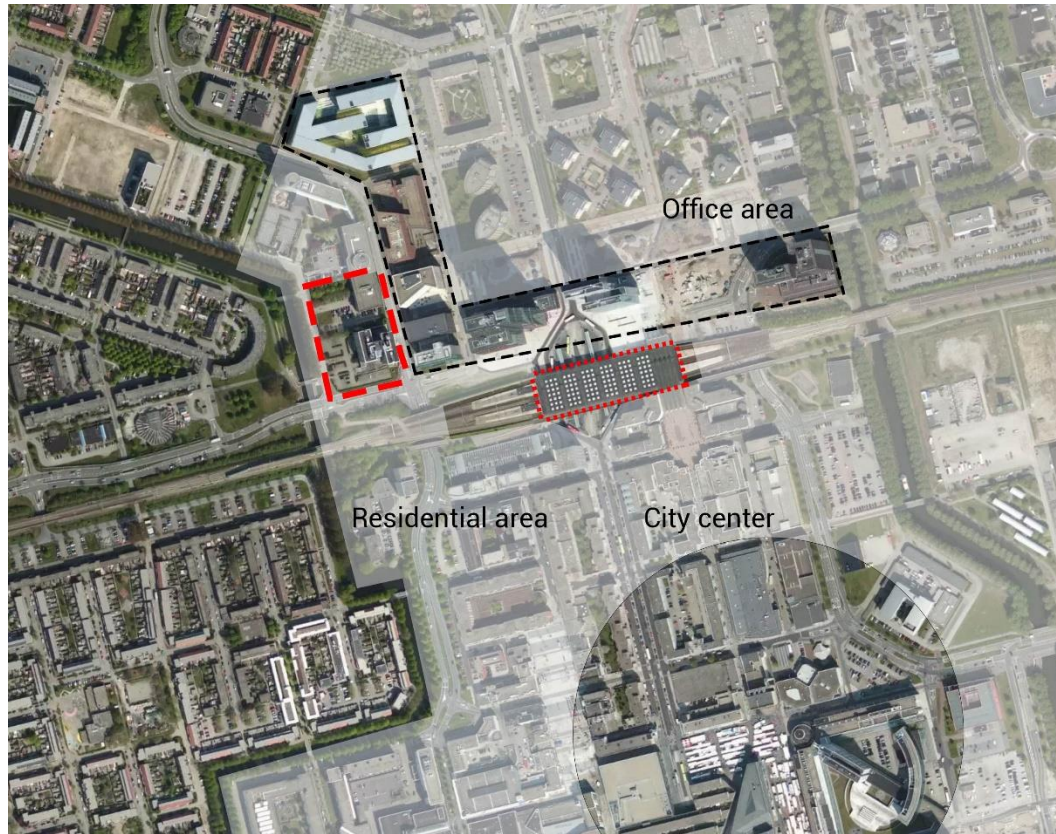


Figure 1: Connection point of office area, residential area and the city center (Author, 2019)

The research of Beursgebouw in building scale firstly determine the essential values that I will maintain or highlight in the renovation, including esthetic values, social values and architecture values. The next step is translating the essential values into principles that help with the design. This requires more in-depth research and analysis of original building to have a better understanding of what the original value really means. From the value assessment, I understood the core area as in-between space that promote interaction; however, this is very rough for guiding further spatial intervention. So, I studied the theory of Jan Gehl about patterns of social interaction and applied his idea in interpreting the original plan, and the result is that I realized the true social value of original building lies in two aspects: promoting diverse patterns of social contact (Fig 2), and a clear and efficient structure of communal space(Fig 3). These principles are quite clear for me to maintain in the new design, and I also add new quality according to the new intergenerational scheme (Fig 4).

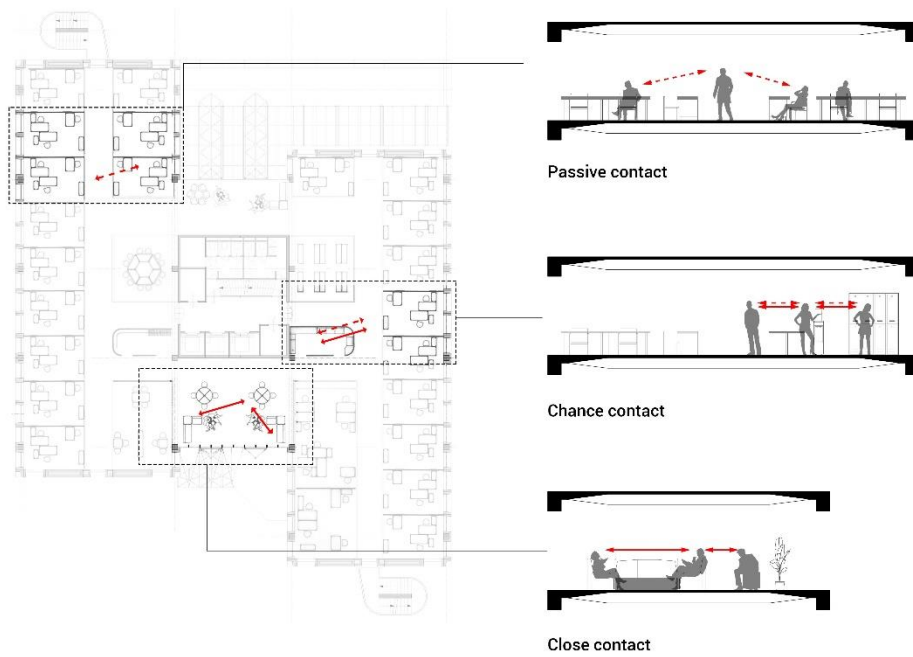


Fig 2 Social value diagram – original communal patterns (Author, 2019)

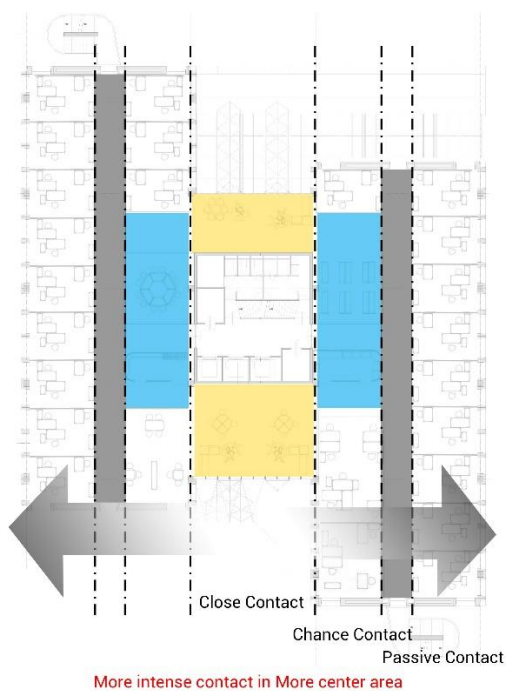


Fig 3 Social value diagram – original communal structure (Author, 2019)

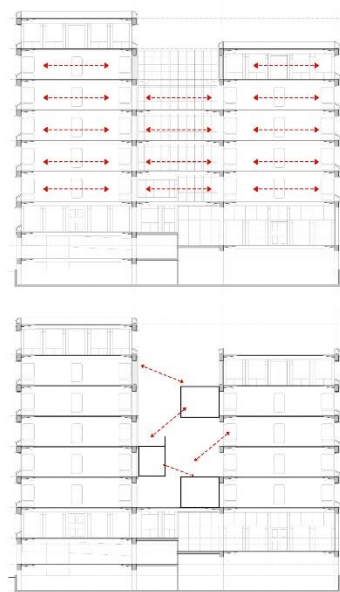


Fig 4 From interaction every floor to interaction of the whole community (Author, 2019)

In short, there is a reciprocal relationship between research and design in this project. On the one hand, only when there is clear and strong research as solid foundation can the design keep in the right track. On the other hand, research is nothing more than some abstract drawings

without actual design. It's important for the research and design to always have a dialogue throughout the whole project.

Chosen research method in relation to the studio methodical line of inquiry

Just as stated in *Designing from Heritage*: “Key to our approach is the extensive research we undertake into the historical, conceptual and technical backgrounds of a building ... that serves as principle source for a ‘research-based’ design method.”¹ Transformation design is based on the thorough research and analysis of the heritage building, and in the Heritage & Architecture studio, the preliminary value assessment shows clearly original values with the help of value mappings including value matrix, chrono mapping, etc.

In my project, the value assessment (Fig 5) provided a solid foundation for my design strategies, and more importantly, my interpretation of hierarchies of values help me making decisions and keep the story a complete one. For example, in the value axonometric, the structure core is of high value, which means that it is very likely to be maintained instead of being replaced. However, in the new program, a lively and vivid new social core requires a more open space so that people can gather in the core area instead of being blocked by concrete walls. A deeper look at the values gives me the answer – the original structure core gains its high value mainly because of its structural function that resists the lateral forces, and this value can be maintained even when the core itself (the massive concrete walls) is replaced. The solution is using bracing structure as a new structure core, with original walls and floor slabs in the core being removed, and the result is a more attractive social platform in the core area. This process of distinguishing hierarchies of values make it possible for me to understand what is the specific value that the original elements are carrying and what it really means for the renovation to change or replace these elements.

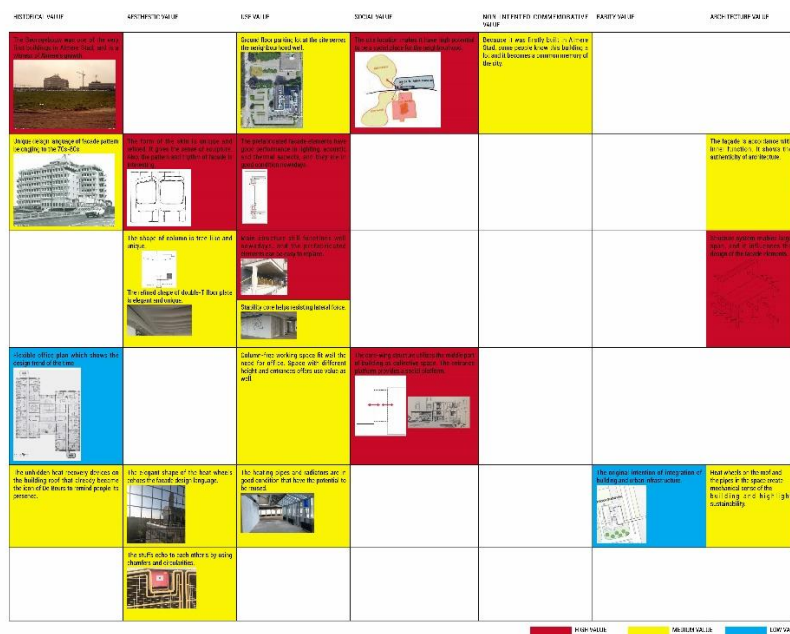


Fig 5 Culture value matrix (Author, 2019)

Relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework

The topic of my project is “Beursgebouw as social platform: reinterpretation of communal spirit”, and its meaning for wider social framework lies in the reinterpretation of modern office building spatial organization, thus adapting to the needs of new program. In the Netherlands, the problem of office space surplus has already been an imperative issue for the market, the architects and government. “On average, more than 17% of office space is unoccupied in 2015 and the percentage is still growing.”² While there is more and more renovation planning regarding the abandoned office buildings, it is important to first understand the characteristics and values of original spatial organization, and thus decide the opportunities and challenges for transformation. In my renovation design, the space is reorganized in such a way that new communal situation is created, and residents as well as citizens can experience the space as an attractive and inward new community.

This project also has the ambition to look at the issue of intergenerational scheme. The society is increasingly changing its attitudes and views towards elderly people, and as a country that has very high rating in social welfare, Netherlands is rethinking about possibilities for the elderly. “As Dutch society transitions from a welfare state to a society based more on individual responsibility, the increasingly well-educated and financially well-off elderly people wish to exert more control over their own lives.”³ The benefits of intergenerational scheme is actually multifold: seniors remain integrated into society and relieve their loneliness, families can draw on different generations for child support, and the government can save spending on social welfare, etc. More and more elderly people choose not to live in an isolated community like an elderly home that is specified for them, but instead to stay in the city where all facilities are close-by and they feel like part of the society. Actually, the intergenerational housing scheme is already gaining popularity in many countries like Germany, Austria, Switzerland, etc. Furthermore, apart from intergenerational housing, the renovation utilizes the ground floor as art activity hubs for the citizen, thus creating a social platform where residents and citizens can benefit from each other’s skills, experiences and knowledge. In all, the Beursgebouw revives its communal spirit and becomes a meaningful and attractive social place for the Almere city.

References

- 1 Kuipers, M. C., & de Jonge, W. (2017). *Designing from Heritage: Strategies for Conservation and Conversion*.
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- 3 Carolien H. M, SMITS (2013, September 2). Aging in The Netherlands: State of the Art and Science. Retrieved May 9, 2019, from <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/54/3/335/719901>