

DESIGNING FROM INSIDE OUT

The name and didactic aims of the chair of Interiors have been open to interpretation ever since the chair was established. Even though the interior of a building and its experiential qualities and meaning have always been at the very centre of our interest, we regard a limitation to the literal inside of a building contradictory to the integrative approach to architecture we believe in. Quality and meaning of space are our main focus, whether the space is small or large, or outside or the inside a building. In recent years the chair therefore has been called Interiors Buildings Cities in order to express its open-minded and inclusive character.

The state of present day architecture with its unsettling lack of definition, limitations and consensus has been generally criticised many times, most recently by my colleague Dirk Somers in the introduction of his essay 'what happened to the façade'. Architecture in the Netherlands has, however, now entered a new phase that seems to be even more unsettling than before. Dutch architecture in general is losing ground. This crisis has been related to the economic crisis, but the problem is more fundamental. In contrast to the situation in our neighbouring countries, where architecture seems to be flourishing despite similar economic circumstances, and where firm political and cultural structures have recently been established to enhance this development, the profession in the Netherlands seems to have relinquished all the tools and structures that traditionally protected and communicated its value. We architects will have to redefine and reposition our profession if we want to find a way out of the present crisis. As educators we have a role to play in this, even though an academic institution has a different scope than the world outside and functions at a different pace. More than ever before we need to define explicitly what kind of architects we want to educate, what kind of skills and knowledge we want them to develop, and how we want them to reflect on their profession and to operate within a threatened culture. The more architecture seems to be endangered, the more firmly we believe in the specific aspects that, in our eyes, architecture has and needs. The more the current public opinion, the attitude of today's clients and recent economic opportunities reduce the profession to the surface, the more we feel the need to concentrate on the values we share at Interiors, namely the integration of skills, craft and reflection. The more architecture merges in the public opinion with other visual disciplines, such as design, photography, fashion and advertising, the more we feel like emphasising architecture's specific character and role. The weaker the foundations of architecture seem to be, the more we feel like concentrating on architecture's fundamental aspects, such as building and space and the relevance of materials, structure and proportions.

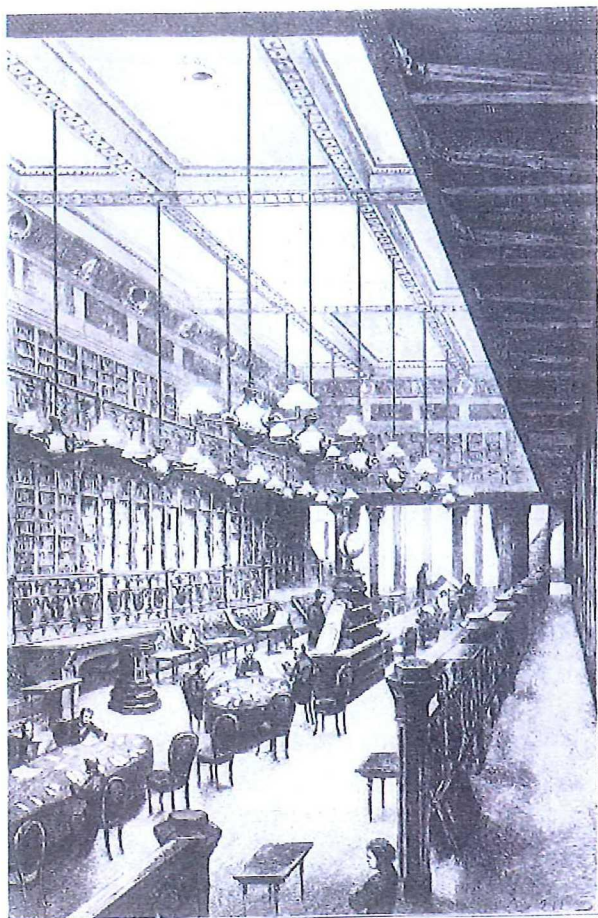
An integrated design task

The Msc1 project is the first big architectural project during an architecture study at the TU Delft, and the first design project after the multifaceted Bachelor programme. Because of the large variety of didactic concepts applied within the large faculty, architecture at Delft is taught as a colourful puzzle that often consists of many at times unrelated, fragmentary pieces, and despite considerable efforts it's hard to integrate for both students and teachers those pieces into one consistent whole. In the Msc1 project we expect our students to design a real building, with a realistic, complex programme. We try to stimulate them to design a considered structure and a thoughtful façade, and to pay attention to careful detailing and materialization. We try to include conversations with a 'real' client into the semester. We choose a location on a historically and spatially demanding site, one that is close enough for our students to visit several times, that they can develop their own relationship with it. For our understanding of architecture the integration of those aspects is essential. In the Msc1 project we try to bring it into practice. We can summarise it very shortly. It means to us that we design from inside out.

Designing from inside out

Designing from inside out means many things to us. But it mainly means that we look at the very inside of a design task from various angles, using both our minds and our senses. This turns the commonly expected, linear design process from small to large, from concept to detail upside down.

We start with the essence of a project and from there we develop a shape, an organisation, and an architectural expression. When designing a school we simply cannot avoid starting our work with our own memories of our own experiences and our own ideas about the feel and character of a classroom in our minds. So instead of starting our semester with an urban analysis we ask our students to make a classroom model in 1:20 in the first week of the semester. We look at its atmosphere, its scale and its proportions, and we develop our building proposals from there. When developing a façade, we start by building



Interior Rotterdamsch
Leeskabinet 1850

a fragment at a large scale instead of gradually moving from the large scale to more detail. This way of working forces us, and our students, to get down from the bird's eye perspective, right from the start.

Leeskabinet

In the spring semester of 2012 we worked on a design for the Rotterdamsch Leesekabinet—a small library dedicated to literature and history. It was privately founded in the 19th century, and now serves as a department of the university library. The library's original inner city building was destroyed during the war, and its present spaces on the university campus lack quality, space and specificity. The need for a replacement is easily imaginable, and the present librarian encouraged us to take on the project by acting himself as client.

The reading room of the pre-war Leesekabinet, with its large café on the ground floor and a reading room on top contained all ingredients that belong to the building type in general: a large, common reading table, the use of bookshelves as a powerful architectural gesture, the clarity and simplicity of its arrangement, and the combination of a high ceiling with a large, monumental skylight and the domestic intimacy of individual reading lamps. In the course of the semester we carefully studied the few existing, contemporary images of the beautiful space and discovered striking similarities to much grander libraries such as Labrouste's St. Geneviève and Dublin's Trinity College library. We then held an intensive, short workshop during which we intuitively worked on an experimental interior space as a large-scale model, testing our first associations, and then refining them. The models that were developed during the workshop were useful throughout the semester and formed a lasting source of inspiration for most designs.

Context

Designing from inside out means to us that we try to establish a personal relationship with the context in which we set our design tasks. We are quite suspicious about references taken from distant contexts, and try to avoid the unconsidered use of the vast imagery of architecture

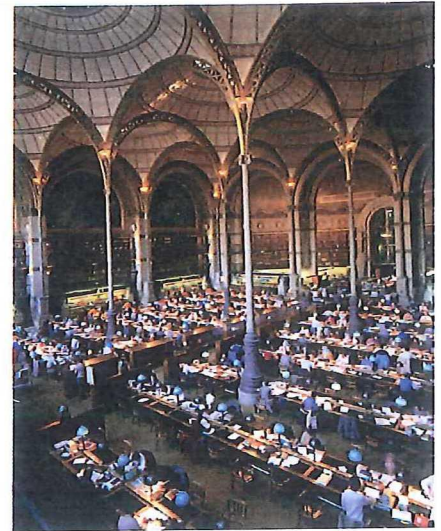
provided by the media. We start to look at our building site with our own, preferably unprejudiced eyes, spend hours walking around, taking photographs, observing its life, its buildings, its use, its light, its sounds and its atmosphere. We look at its history, its formalities and informalities, and at its qualities and shortcomings. We try (sometimes very hard) to develop sympathy for and an understanding of the place and from there we developed our interventions. We start to look at the urban space our building shares and influences and base our architectural intentions on this spatial experience.

In the spring semester of 2012 this proved to be a demanding task. Not many students (or architects!) look with empathy at the architecture of the (recent) past and at neighbourhoods that were obviously built on a small budget. This applies especially to the many participants of the studio who did not know Rotterdam well. It takes time to appreciate Rotterdam's post-war heritage, with its subtle beauties and obvious imperfections. It is even harder to make a conscious judgement for the required formal strategy for an intervention in such a fragile context. The communication with the context was mandatory (as it always is in our studio's) and we discouraged the many attempts by students to escape their mundane surroundings by making (too) large gestures.

Making space

In the work in the studio, designing from inside out means that we make things and look at them. We make many big models, sketches, drawings and more models. To get a closer look photograph them to bring the images of the model closer to reality. We concentrate on capturing space rather than objects. We look at the structural setup of our projects and the implication of the structure for the interior character and quality of all spaces. We try to think like engineers and discover the beauty of grids, columns, rhythms and structural logic. We understand and appreciate this structure as the very grammar of our work.

Finally, designing from inside out means asking questions. When starting on the essence of a programme, a building, a room or a site we need to know what kind of space we want to make.



Library St. Genevieve (1851),
H. Labrouste



Wren Library, Trinity College
(1695), C. Wren



Herenplaats 1945

What's the meaning of it, to us and to others? How does it suit its purpose, its context? What kind of materials do we want to use? Are those materials related to the structure and, if so, how? How do these materials relate to the surroundings? Does the choice make sense? Can we understand it? Would everybody understand it? Do we need clear shapes and proportions? Do we desire order, complexity or monumentality? What does our building represent? How intimate can a space be? How welcoming, warm, inviting? How much should architecture determine its use and how much should we leave to its current and future users? What does it take to inhabit a space? Or to put it more simply: what kind of skills do I need to make a good room? What kind of qualities does it need? Is there such a thing as a clear answer to good and bad in architecture? Is this a matter of skill, of good eyes or good thinking? Or is it a matter of luck? Or of skill, good eyes, good thinking and good luck?

Vedute

In order to encapsulate both the questions and the first attempts at answering them in one first-week design task, we started our MSc1 studio by making a Vedute. It's a powerful design exercise to start the design process, as well as a small design project in itself.

'Vedute has been set up with the aim to build up a library with spatial manuscripts: a collection of three-dimensional objects that make the notion of space visible and tangible, as visualised thoughts. Vedute invites artists, designers, architects and others working in other disciplines to illustrate and reflect their personal ideas about space by making a three-dimensional work. In contrast to books spatial manuscripts reveal their secrets by images. Some can be understood directly, whereas others need to be looked at again and again; the possibilities seem to be endless. By collecting and exhibiting these works Vedute aims to give giving new impulses to the thinking and the discussion about space and architecture.'

(Vedute Foundation website, www.vedute.nl)

The kaleidoscopic collection of Vedute inspired us to use the format as a warming up for our semester. Many students accepted the chal-

lenge, with all its limits and endless possibilities. And many showed a surprising ambition, creativity and artistry.

The idea arose from an own experience we had in our office. A couple of years ago the Vedute Foundation invited us to contribute to the collection. The invitation to make a manuscript in the Vedute format was a privilege and I felt happy to accept. At the same time it gave us enormous headaches. In our minds the whole thing grew to assume the proportions of a real project or even larger, with as its programme no less than our concept of space and architecture in general.

The impressive collection the Foundation has assembled over the years and the entertaining presentations that introduce new objects force the participants to take their small task very seriously. This sense of urgency is the very basis of the quality of the collection.

If done well, a Vedute is a spatial object with the lightness of a 'Santa Claus Surprise', the weight of an altarpiece and the value of a treasury. I still prize the lengthy conversations we had in the office about this project, our smallest ever, and the experiments we did as a result –(in our case the casting and modelling bee's wax!) I became more and more grateful for the opportunity to make a mission statement rather than having to think about writing down such a statement down. And I value even more the spinoff it all had for our teaching and our students. 'Visualised thoughts' –what more can a school of architecture hope to achieve in the first days of a design studio?

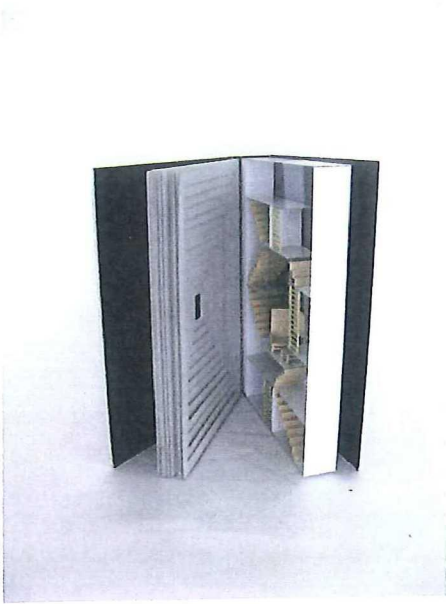
The Vedutes by our students were to be presented in the second week. We had asked them to 'make' their ideas of a library and compress those thoughts into the Vedute-dimensions of 44 x 32 x 7 cm. The task dealt with such issues as order, atmosphere, light, material, symbolism, simplicity- in short with the essence of a library. Wood was cut, guitars were destroyed and re-assembled in a Braque-like manner, paint was spoiled, transparencies tested, patterns developed, churches built, poems written, wood sawn, cardboard chopped. The variety of the results was impressive. Poetic, beautiful, experimental, creative. The objects accompanied those who

had accepted the challenge throughout the rest of the semester, as a meaningful guideline.

I recall the presentation of the Vedute's as one of the most cheerful, hopeful and inspiring moments of the semester. The almost absurdly tight restrictions of the Vedute dimensions made it impossible for anyone to reuse known strategies and to borrow imagery from somewhere else. The objects therefore revealed the surprising authenticity of our students.

In the weeks that followed it proved to be hard work to transfer the promising, initial creativity of the Vedutes into a 'real' building design. Not all of our students had been adequately prepared for their masters, and unfortunately quite many miss basic architectural skills. Nevertheless, the Vedute proved to be a friendly, speculative design exercise for everyone, independent from level or experience. It helped us to think and speak about the integration of meaning and material. With the Vedute we invited our students to reveal their thoughts in a more direct way than a design of a building would allow them to do. Those who accepted the invitation felt inspired throughout the semester. Some learned by looking at others, others need more time, maybe more invitations. But everyone in one way or the other kept referring back to this first week, its images, thoughts and conversations. And like this the whole group got at least a bit closer to what designing from inside out means to us. For young architects who will need a lot of willpower, dedication and authentic thinking in the years to come that's quite something.

Choi Wah Lui



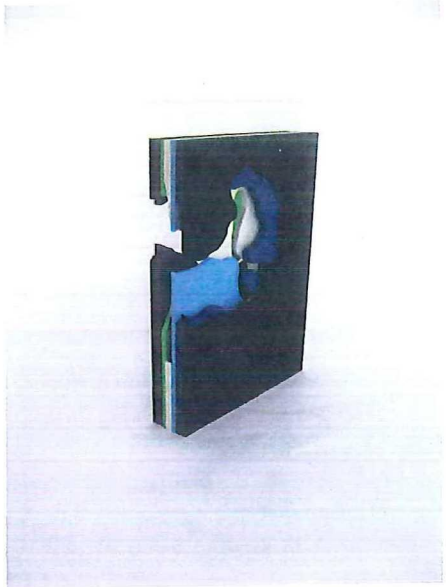
Roos Cornelissen



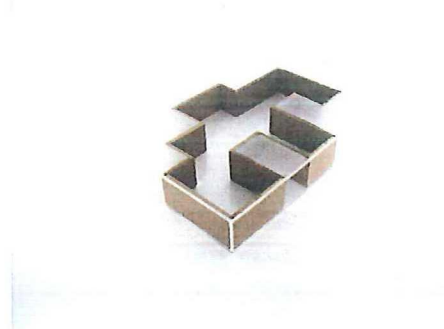
Taja Bencina



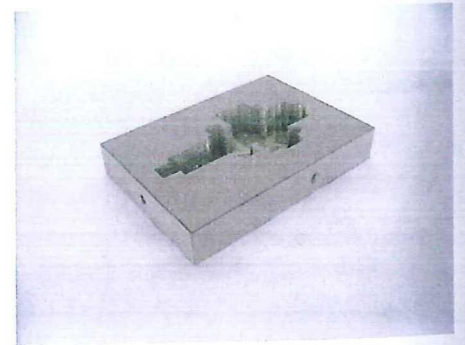
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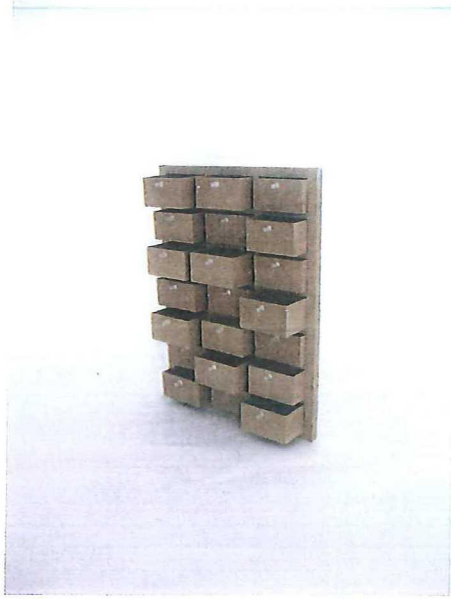
Nadine Spielmann



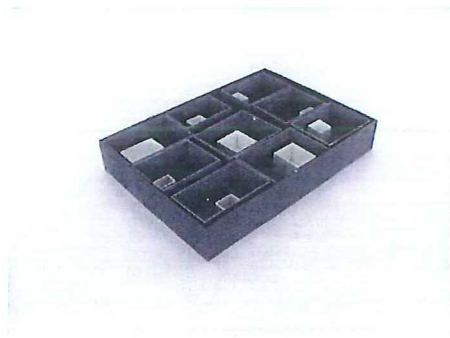
Bart van der Zalm



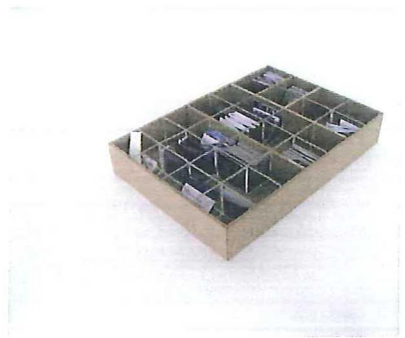
Warner van Haaren



Xiao Qin Zhuang



Anne Larsen



Tom Radenz



Marleen Klompenhouwer



Petra Sejkorova

