

Reflection

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Self-attack on the 'Security-architecture project'

Critical assessment of the graduation project and its continuing educational value

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Introduction

The architecture of the urban defense had ever been a personal fascination of mine. Thus, when given the chance at the beginning of the project in September to research this topic, with regards to the city of Strasbourg, it quickly became clear that it would set the stage for this graduation design. More specifically, the initial research regarded the topic of the possible absence of clear security architecture in our current day and age, compared to their abundance in a nearly two thousand year history of the city. This sparked an interest in the hypothetical idea of a re-introduction of security architecture. Further research and theories however made this turn out to be a less of a big step from reality than previously assumed. In the light of terrorist attacks France has endured over the last few years, public space in downtown areas of cities such as Strasbourg has completely transformed to accommodate counter-measures. The discovery of this transformation in turn led to the critical assessment that we are possibly dealing with a self-reinforced spiral in which French –and other western- cities are becoming increasingly militarized again. In conjuncture with this statement, the migrant crisis that still made headlines in the time preceding this project had set off a wave of studies into the ways in which the European Union could reinforce its borders, only to come to the conclusion that it probably cannot. The border is porous, terrorists infiltrate cities trying to disrupt our way of life and as a result, we are happily reshaping public space. Technology on both sides of this conflict have always shaped the way in which both parties respond. This is true for the days of Roman garrisons, medieval fortified cities and industrial rings of fortresses around the city, as well as for the Maginot Line in which Strasbourg played a key logistical role. In the digital age the tools that shape fortification are decisively different from those ages that preceded it, but in contrast to history, the sheer scale of this system, this defense of public space, has become hidden and thus unscrutinizable. It brought up the following questions around which most of the ideological thinking for this project has revolved; "What is the architecture of contemporary urban defense in the near future?" and "Is it up to architecture to reject or accept this possible reality?" To answer the last question in short, no. it is extremely important to keep this in mind in order to fully assess the result and process of the project. The possibilities were weighted and discussed accordingly with the tutor. Architecture students find themselves in a position of great freedom when setting the scope and theory for their projects. They don't have to deal with the same consequences and essentially work on hypothetical scenarios. Furthermore, they possess a great set of tools to shape a possible reality. One would consider self-implied limitations on oneself to the constraints of reality, without the explorations and possibilities of hyperbole or exaggeration as a loss of opportunity having agreed to the former statements. Thus it came to be that the project took shape as a theoretical non-project. It was not informed by the authors own political point of view, but facilitate the public with a glimpse of a possible future if current trends are continued and, or exaggerated. What if the terrorist attacks become more common? What if the European Union can no longer effectively guard its borders? What would be the response of communities to these developments? The architectural graduation project offers the perfect platform to explore these questions. In return it offers a platform for a general discussion amongst the public. For those who want to morally judge the possibilities and the consequences the

design sheds light on. Whether or not these questions can be answered through the project is thus not up to the architect himself to express, however in the light of this reflection, an attempt will be made to assess this and whether or not the design provides a platform for debate. If so, does this platform provide a kinetical push towards the aforementioned topic and does it manage to exclude the architecture itself from this equation. In order to judge the design on these points, it must be understood as the result of its preceding research. In theory, it should be the extension or manifestation of the research and theory produced in the first semester. It should also entail an honest account of the errors, faults and mistakes that were encountered in this process. Problems that prompted during this period could have possibly snowballed into larger issues that influenced the project down the road.

Research limits

The research conducted in the period prior to the start of the design process offered a plethora of information, perceptions and visions to take ideas from in order to further develop the project. One of the issues however is that there's an issue in determining what should be incorporated in the scenario and what not. Surely, the various works of fiction can form an inspiration but the architecture in the end is heavily dependent on known facts. Dimensions, functions, materials, even building code, have to be taken into account which was not an easy feat. With inspirational theory and images ranging from Jacques Derrida to Blade-runner, and from George Orwell to Strangelove, The endless stream of inspiration proved to turn the project into an unguided missile. The research did however provide a solid theoretical foundation on which the rather peculiar perception of the project is based on. This basis can mainly be attributed to the development of the thesis. A side note to this is that the approach should have focused sooner on the incorporation of a determining scope rather than keep opening up to the endless stream of possibilities in works of fiction and theory. The revelation of this problem begs the question of how this problem snowballed down the road. The infinite amount of inspirations in the design phase of the project has also led to an uncontrolled sprawl of different building designs, all drawn from the same theories and organizational understanding, yet distinctively different in shape and plan. This has led a great backlog in the planning and a posed a serious set-back to the final development of the project. The goal originally was to create an architecture design that does not take too much of a political statement. This has created problems regarding the conditions on a contextual scale level. In retrospect, this problem could have been more thoroughly addressed beforehand in the creation of the graduation plan. The relation of the project towards the site conditions now prove to be more enigmatic. From the research point of view, the project was site-less and did not appeal to the specific site conditions since it characterized itself as a prototypical design for all similar, international, futuristic, security compounds. The problem of general un-specificity becomes painstakingly clear whilst reading the older versions of the graduation plan. All that being said, the current product is one that is still clearly drawn from the fictional inspirations that shaped it and stays true to the original theoretical intentions of becoming a physical manifestation of a modern security apparatus.

Research-Design arc

The way the research connected to the eventual project was through the following methodology. It was considered essential to the development of an architectural language to connect on a basic level to existing references in order for the architect to be able to develop the tools necessary for the development of the design itself. Therefore, it made sense at the beginning to start looking at movies, literature and historical fortresses to begin understanding the shapes that form the backbone of the way in which security is visualized, symbolized and recognized in society. However so, as the architectural

design progressed, the influences these visions had pose a hindrance in the ability of the project itself to fill in the scenario and shape the architecture that accompanies it. At the point that an architectural language should be shaped from the frame of reference, when in the absence of this language, the reference becomes a huge hindrance. In hindsight the method itself seems less well suited than possible other approaches would have been, though no alternative comes to mind at the time of writing this reflection. One of the faults to this problem can found on the ideas from which the graduation plan was formed. It was, in this regard, too vague, left gaps for possible distractions that led away from the problems and goals posed in the research and thesis.

Relevance

The thesis does however provide a strong theoretical framework which, when applied to the current situation in France, gives shape to the role of the architect in a way that has faithfully been executed over the last few months. More than 9 months since the start of the project, the topic has not gotten less relevant either. Even though the project is very prone to the whims of political change and military advances and set-backs in France and the Middle-East, it does not seem that the West's involvement in Syria or neighboring countries will be over any time soon. If the past 70 years of modern history in Europe has taught us anything, it would be that these topics are recurring themes, albeit given new twists by technological advancements and tightening or loosening of security standards.

Student-tutor arc

The feedback that was provided to the student over the course of the last months with regard to the design project has been a fruitful continuation of the feedback given during the research period. If anything, the single difference between the research and design periods, is the focus and level of production of the student in the development of the project. The amount of critique and feedback has at moments even proved to be more than one could handle and the various perceptions proved more difficult to interpret the right way as the project progressed deeper into the architectural realm. This would also reveal some of the strong- and weak-points that have been encountered as the project has progressed along.

Personal assessment

Since the project is now in the final stage of development it can be, just like all other points in the process, retro-actively be scrutinized for its shortcomings and assessed for its compliance with the goals that were set out. The architectural language that was finally developed, takes great influence from experiences and the referential and literature research. In terms of materiality the project succeeds in communicating the raw purpose of the project. However, it is impossible to look at the project and merely debate the theoretical grounds which the project set out to align itself with. Even though it does not take any direct political statements, not towards the inner city, nor to the outer parts of the city, its architecture is full of gestures that are debatable. This discovery is obviously not unexpected. The project has yet to be put to this test in reality. The platform it thus far has offered to myself has already been a great learning experience. Besides the architectural challenge that the graduation project ought to be about, this project was fraught with problems and personal shortcomings that had to be overcome. However, in this way, the project is a great personal service to myself. The learning experience it offered has made me better at developing my work towards my goals and deadlines and has helped develop theoretical, ethical and methodological ideology that will be of great service to my personal development.