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THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE INTERIOR
'THE PLACE OF WORK' GRADUATION STUDIO - NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE PUBLIC INTERIOR

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Title: The Place of Work

For my Master Thesis, I chose the topic of the (future) place of work. I wanted to engage with this topic, because it is an architectural typology that is currently undergoing drastic changes, while it continues to influence the (social) life of the majority of working citizens. The one thing that fascinates me about this topic, and a big part of its relevancy, is its influence on the future of work, and the opportunity it offers to shape the work experience of future generations.

In the following text, I want to reflect on my Master Thesis, specifically how my ambitions, approach and strategy influenced my current design, both positive and negative. In addition to that, I want to share the challenges I encountered and discuss some of the things I have discovered and learned along the way.

MY AMBITIONS FOR THE PROJECT (GOAL)

When I started my Master Thesis, the project had two main purposes for me: Reimagining the representative and governmental functions through the architecture of the building, and improving the experience of the office workers with the space. Following those, I wanted to explore two major questions through my work:

1) How can principles of democracy, society, community and political engagement be shaped, materialized and fostered through architecture?
2) How can traditional workspace concepts be adapted to fit a constantly evolving definition of work and life?

Based on these questions, I started analyzing the macro and micro context of the site. I researched concepts of inclusive design, real transparency and direct access, since I was looking to express versions of those through my design of the public interior. One of my goals was to open the ministerial building up to become a space used by citizens and the government. I felt that if I wanted the building to become a space for the people, I had to rethink conventional means of representational architecture. My assumption was that if I could find a way to bring the public life back to where the government is and physically connect the people with politics, the site might actually be able to become a relevant public space in the city.

In addition to that, I wanted this project to reimagine the traditional workspace in order to develop a well functioning work environment for the civil servants of the ministry. In contrast to the conceptual approach mentioned before, I approached this part of the project focusing more on small scale detail and actual execu-

tion factors. That way, I tried to achieve a more in-depth design, with more attention given to the materiality and usability of the space.

STRATEGY

In the beginning of my thesis work, I conducted multiple rounds of research to lay the foundation for my approach and the later concept. I started of with a case study, followed by some qualitative and quantitative research to work my way into the topic. Through the case studies, I learned about the influence of social paradigms on the development of the office. Especially investigating the Bürolandschaft by the Quickborner Team and the Willis Faber Dumas Building, helped me understand the difficult and sometimes complex connections between the designers' intentions and the eventual development and outcome of their ideas. Even though I had known the Willis Faber Dumas building before, it was great to learn how Foster was able to balance his clients' interests with his own idea of the future office. Overall, this part of the research was really insightful and helped shape my vision for the future site and building.

Based on the first research effort, I wanted to look further into the concept of the workplace to better understand the effects the changing work environment had on the civil servants' identification with their workplace. This lead me to the question of how I could design a work environment in the new ministerial building that could help compensate for the impersonal workplaces, a result of the hot-desk system. Therefore, I started researching the development of territoriality and looked into the physical characteristics of impersonal workspaces, as they can be found in the contemporary middle class offices. Among other things, it helped me determine the different requirements of individual workspaces, but also made be realize the importance of the collective spaces as the linchpin of human face-to-face interaction. Based on my research, I synthesized my findings into two major dimensions that my building's floor plan design should offer:

1) Designated spaces to facilitate human face-to-face interaction and collaboration
2) Enriching the monotonous office life by adding public functions for the office workers to use as well as for visitors

While the building program was fairly detailed, it still allowed for us students to tweak it in a direction we wanted to focus on. This really helped me make my project more coherent and follow my own idea: I cleared the program from retail, for example, and added the function of pro-bono work-labs instead, which I felt added to my idea of how I think governmental buildings should become a part of the city, in order to support a (re-) consolidation of the people with politics (basic principles of democracy, community and engagement through inclusive design, real transparency and direct access).

REFLECTION ON DIFFICULTIES RAISED AND DISCOVERIES

One of my ambitions for the project was to create spaces of high value and high usability for the office workers. More importantly though, I wanted to design the spaces in a way that they would maintain valid throughout trend cycles to facilitate different programs and users in the future. One of my greatest struggles with that was scaling and adjusting my concepts to the size of the building and the functional program. With almost 80.000 sqm the ministerial building is significantly larger than the projects I've worked on so far, which made it a great learning experience, but also very challenging at times. Looking back at the project work though, it makes perfect sense to think about the building and the different floors holistically, as it helps build a strong overarching concept that can guide the subconcepts for different parts of the building.

To me, one of the greatest struggles during my master thesis was switching between different scales and effectively using different scales as design tools. With a project of this size, I sometimes got caught up losing perspective and got sucked into potentially irrelevant details. I realized that being able to intentionally and thoughtfully planning when to zoom in and when to zoom out of certain areas and parts of the project is a craft that can be very powerful when handled with precision. I think that my ability to flexibly work with this duality of high detail vs great overview has certainly improved throughout the process, but I am sure that it would have helped me reduce my workload and benefited the project, if I had been able to utilize this design tool earlier in the process. Looking back, one thing that might have helped me zoom in and out more effectively is building very simple physical models of parts of my design. I think that modelling a small fragment, for example of the office floor or the atrium, between P3 and P4 could have helped me to understand the spatial configurations that I designed better. I chose to model the spaces in 3D, which I think was a great tool for evaluating the designs, but in terms of materiality it would have helped me to physically prototype and experience them.

One great thing I rediscovered throughout the project was a different way of approaching projects in general. Due to the size of the building and the complexity of the program, the approach presented by the studio and the tutors was to concentrate on the design of a "Sequence of Spaces". It follows the idea of concentrating the design efforts on a series of special or important rooms in the building in order to make them highly expressive about what the design should be like. When I started the project I only focused on certain aspects to create an overall design concept. Thinking back, I feel that at that point in time I had not paid enough attention to the experience of the workers within the spaces and with the artefacts that I designed . After multiple tutorials, I started integrating this approach into my designs more and increasingly put emphasis on the way workers experience and their use of the different sequences of spaces. What was really enlightening about this progression was that the focus on the individual experience again impacted my larger, more conceptual designs, which influenced the exterior building and site layout. While this approach to projects wasn't completely new to me, the work in the tutorials helped me understand it better and apply it a lot more effectively, especially after the P2. It's one of the things that I will definitely try to incorporate in any future projects I will be working on.

Another really great thing that I learned throughout this project was to make difficult decisions. I had always been confident about sketching out scenarios and producing different versions of designs and layouts, but I had never felt really comfortable deciding on one thing and following through. In this project, for example, I had to make a decision about the facade, for which I had been trying out a number of different versions. I had also looked for reference projects but I never actually stopped and took the time to build a framework around how to make these kinds of decisions. In retrospective, I feel this would have been particularly helpful in terms of breaking down and evaluating my personal design preference, in order to balance it with user or architectural aspects. On the other side of the spectrum however, I experienced a slightly different situation regarding the design of the structure of my new building parts: I had already made an intuitive decision on materialisation and spatial expression and by sticking to it and following through with the structural engineer, I was able to really shape my rather rough ideas into a sound part of the building, where the integration of structure and design really created additional value. I am really happy that through this project I was able to practice the balance between being confident in my own ideas and following my personal design intuition, while at the same time establishing objective evaluation points, where my preferences are questioned and revoked for a better alternative.