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The Building is Present

The 1:5 Model as a Way of Seeing, TU Delft, Chair Buildings, Interiors, Cities, 2018–2019

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CHAPTER 11

The Building Is Present: The 1:5 Model as a Way of Seeing, TU Delft, Chair Buildings, Interiors, Cities, 2018–2019

Sereh Mandias



Fig. 11.1 Concrete and MDF model of the meeting of two walls from different times, scale 1:5, by Riccardo Garrone and Sam Stalker. Photograph: Bas Leemans.

The object is both large and small. It stands before us on a makeshift table, at eye level.

There are two parts, pushed together to create a three-dimensional figure: a composition of two walls, three openings, and two cantilevers. We can further dissect it on the basis of its colours and materials. A white painted volume bears a surface of what appears to be tiny bricks, painted in shades of deep red and brown and assembled in a bond of alternating rows of narrow and wide bricks. It is created as cladding, as such depriving its host of structural logic. And a concrete element, which is cast in one piece, meets the brick surface in the middle, while distancing itself at the top and the bottom. As an autonomous object, it is small; its rows of small bricks allow us to read it as a miniature. But as a model, it's large. One has to walk around it to see it from all sides. Even without lifting it, one senses its weight.

We are looking at a model at 1:5 scale of a fragment of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. It was made by two students out of a group of thirteen during a design course in the spring of 2019 in the Chair of Interiors Buildings Cities at TU Delft.¹



Fig. 11.2 Presentation of the fragments, with a foam and paper model of a monumental stairwell in the original museum, scale 1:5, by Chen Zhu and Seongchul Yu. Photograph: Sereh Mandias.

Museum Boijmans van Beuningen is an extraordinary ensemble of different building parts from different times. In opposition to a harsh and large-scale renovation plan, the course intended to address possible shortcomings of the current museum by departing from what was already there. Through a close reading of the architecture of the ensemble, the students explored a sensitive and intimate way of thinking about the transformation of more and less monumental pieces of architecture.

An Intimate Encounter

The 1:5 model anchored the course. Over the course of eleven weeks, it was used as an instrument to examine the architectural qualities of the building and, subsequently, as a basis for architectural interventions within the museum.

Rather than seeing the museum as something abstract, represented through drawings or digital models, the intention was to foster a kind of empathy with the museum ensemble. The 1:5 model focused the attention of our students on the physical and intimate encounter with the building – as a tactile experience.



Fig. 11.3 MDF and veneer model of a passage in the original museum, scale 1:5, by Shamila Gostelow and Silja Siikki. Photograph: Shamila Gostelow and Silja Siikki.

The approach and design of the course sprung from a collective interest at the Chair of Interiors Buildings Cities in exploring the notion of intimacy in architecture. It was initiated and taught by Tomas Dirrix and myself, who have both been educated in this Chair and now teach there. Its culture is characterised by a sustained attention to the things that surround us, an attention to the bodily experience of architecture, the specifics of materials and their assembly, the atmosphere of spaces, and the construction of this atmosphere.

This is reinforced by Tomas Dirrix's research into vernacular construction and its materials as a practising architect and my own training in philosophy, which has led me to attempt to translate the precision one acquires in philosophy in dealing with language into the discipline of architecture.²

We visited the building. Construct a model at scale 1:5, we asked our students, of a fragment of the museum that captures your experience of the building, of the body in relation to specific architectural moments. And choose and build it in such a way that the model itself becomes a potent physical object.

One of these moments is situated within the original museum of 1935 by the architect Adrianus Van der Steur and concerns the transition between gallery spaces. Here, the wall widens, and in this thickened wall, a passage is carved out. The wooden wainscoting extends to clad the entire opening, making it stand out against the light grey walls of the gallery. If one steps from the linoleum of the galleries onto the wood of the passage, one suddenly hears one's own footsteps.



Fig. 11.4 MDF and veneer model of a passage in the original museum, scale 1:5, Shamila Gostelow and Silja Siikki, detail. Photograph: Bas Leemans.

The model isolates this moment from the sequence of spaces that it is a part of. In plan, it is shaped like a truncated triangle, but not all sides have been treated the same way. The opening and its adjacent surfaces have been clad in stained veneer and grey paint. On other sides, the thin boards of MDF with which it is constructed remain visible. In doing so, it brings into focus the way the wall opens up and becomes a deep threshold between one gallery and the next.



Fig. 11.5 Concrete model of the meeting of two extensions from different times, scale 1:5, Ananta Vania Iswardhani and Coen Gordebeke. Photograph: Bas Leemans and Tomas Dirrix.

Intentional Abstraction

The 1:5 scale posed an interesting challenge, as we found that it is, at this scale, almost always possible to exactly replicate the existing structure. Abstraction is no longer a necessary consequence of the format, but becomes a deliberate choice. The most interesting models hovered between exact representation and intentional abstraction.

The brick and concrete model is one such example. The students chose as their fragment the meeting of an exterior wall of the original museum with the 2003 extension by Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem. Their model is a precise representation of the meeting of the two surfaces. Van der Steur's 1935 brick wall is reconstructed using bricks cut from MDF, which are painted with ecoline, in a very near approximation of the colour of the original wall, and then assembled in Van der Steur's characteristic bond. Robbrecht and Daem's extension is abstracted to the rough concrete of the construction and poured using actual concrete. The window frames inserted by Robbrecht and Daem next to the original wall are left out, abstracting this moment to the meeting of the two materials.



Fig. 11.6 Concrete and MDF model of the meeting of two walls from different times, scale 1:5, Riccardo Garrone and Sam Stalker, detail. Photograph: Bas Leemans.

This model was both a highly accurate and vibrant representation of the material expression of the fragment and, at the same time, an abstraction focusing on the specific way that the architects of the extension explicitly expressed the meeting between new and old. In doing so, they were able to identify the confrontation of different building parts from different times and the way these moments of confrontation are negotiated within architecture, as a core characteristic of the museum's architecture.



Fig. 11.7 Foam and polyester model of a fragment of the facade by Robbrecht and Daem, scale 1:5, Mees Wijnants and Tommaso Tellarini. Photograph: Bas Leemans.

Neither Detail, Nor Space

The 1:5 scale poses restrictions to the size of the fragment that can be extracted from the building and therefore in large part determines what becomes significant. The fragments are neither detail nor space, but rather experiential and material moments within the building. They teased out specific architectural themes and made them explicit: from the way that the relation between the museum and the city is negotiated through the facade to the particular way that the meeting of old and new is staged or the idea of the museum as a series of thresholds.

As a result, we came to locate the essence of the building at the scale of the fragment. In doing so, our way of working proposes the identification of the “significant architectural moment” as a way of analysing what is valuable in a building. It is a specific way of looking, one that locates architectural themes within the material fragment.



Fig. 11.8 Concrete model of a proposed intervention, scale 1:5, by Shamila Gostelow and Silja Siikki. Photograph: Bas Leemans.



Fig. 11.9 Concrete and MDF model of a proposed intervention, scale 1:5, by Riccardo Garrone and Sam Stalker. Photograph: Bas Leemans.

On the basis of the themes they identified when building the 1:5 fragments of the museum, the students went on to develop interventions into the museum.

One of the results was a pink column. It was made by the builders of the passage between two gallery spaces, who continued their research by interpreting the museum as a collection of thresholds. They proceeded to address one especially problematic threshold: the transition from the entrance area of the museum to the museum space proper, an awkward and slightly chaotic way of entering the galleries.

The precise position of the column reorganises and highlights the moment of passing through. It has a slightly rectangular footprint, and the side facing the entrance has a different texture from the others. It was developed from a series of experiments with casting concrete models to explore texture, colour, and tactile qualities. Referring to the playfulness of other art objects in the entrance hall, the intervention oscillates between architectural object and artistic intervention. It is a small project, but as it reorganises the entrance area of the museum, it has an impact beyond its physical limits.

The Resistance of Materials

Working on the 1:5 scale was instrumental in retaining the focus on the small scale and made it possible to discuss the tactile and material qualities of the evolving designs within the studio setting. It made students aware of the resistance of materials, of how things are constructed while designing them, and enforced a kind of concreteness and precision into the analysis and design.

The duo examining the meeting of different building parts from different times expanded their research into the theme of the architectural joint. They focused their intervention on another, more complicated, and currently less successful joint: a small patio next to a narrow landing, between the original building and one of its extensions. The intervention proposes to eliminate the patio in favour of extending the landing, making it a more generous space when entering the galleries on the first floor. The proposed structure, crafted out of timber, repeats the move of visually distancing the new from the older as a clearly legible addition by detailing this extended threshold as a piece of wooden furniture within the gallery space.

Beyond demonstrating the value of small-scale interventions, these projects show how one can develop a contextual and precise approach to adjusting existing architecture. The 1:5 scale makes it possible to develop this approach in a concentrated way, without having to immediately address the complexities of the entire building. Just as the 1:5 fragment of the building can tease out a critical moment and stands for a specific interpretation of the museum, each intervention is a highly suggestive example of a specific approach.



Fig. 11.10 Foam and polyester model of a fragment of the facade by Robbrecht and Daem, scale 1:5, by Mees Wijnants and Tommaso Tellarini. Photograph: Mees Wijnants and Tommaso Tellarini.

In setting the terms of the project, we suspected there might be value in creating a collection of beautiful material pieces to represent the museum. During the design process, when the fragments were present within the studio at all times, these models worked as highly concrete reminders of the experience of the building. It was not allowed to recede into the distance, but remained a character in the room.

Notes

1. The students' names are Ananta Vania Iswardhani, Chen Zhu, Coen Gordebeke, Dinand Kruise, Helen Cao, Jakub Wysocki, Mees Wijnants, Riccardo Garrone, Sam Stalker, Seongchul Yu, Shamila Gostelow, Silja Siikki, and Tommaso Tellarini.
2. The Chair Interiors Buildings Cities, previously run by Tony Fretton and now by Daniel Rosbottom, and where Mark Pimlott is a continuing presence, has a tradition of working with large-scale models. Varying from courses in which conventional types of models of various scales make an appearance to design courses in which one specific type of model serves to anchor the course as a whole. However, the 1:5 scale had not been explored like this before.