

Reflection on the project

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Public engagement, Public interior, and Public assemble, all of these have always been interesting topics for architecture. And the graduation project of designing a new city hall is for Brussel, Belgium in the city center exactly provided me a chance to explore the publicity in between city, building and interior.

Based on the given brief, I can't help wondering what do the city and citizens really needs, what can this project do for the public and how this project engage the public with politic. With all these questions, I start to make a general research on Brussels in terms of history, transportation, politics etc. with my colleagues in order to get a better understanding of Brussel city in urban scale

In this general research session, I was quite interested in the public space in front of the government or a political building. Because it indicates the relationship between the public and politic, showing the accessibility of the building and the public engagement of the political activities. Sometimes, the public space in front like a big square could be a stage for citizens to present themselves or could also be a symbol of regime and power. For examples, the big square in front of Grand palace in Brussel is an enjoyable public space for people assembling. All kind of activities take place here and the political building is well connected with the plaza by colonnade, which seem to become part of the plaza or could be even defined as the background of a stage where people enjoy their public life. To compare with, the big squared in front of the Parliament of Belgium in Brussel is disconnected with the political building by roads and fence. It is an isolated squared in between the Parliament and the royal palace, which makes it more like a symbol of power and regime. Therefore, instead of looking into the interior of a town hall or a political building, I am quite fascinated by the public space in front. Because I think this space is a bridge to connect the urban with the building, the exterior with the interior, more importantly, the public and the politic.



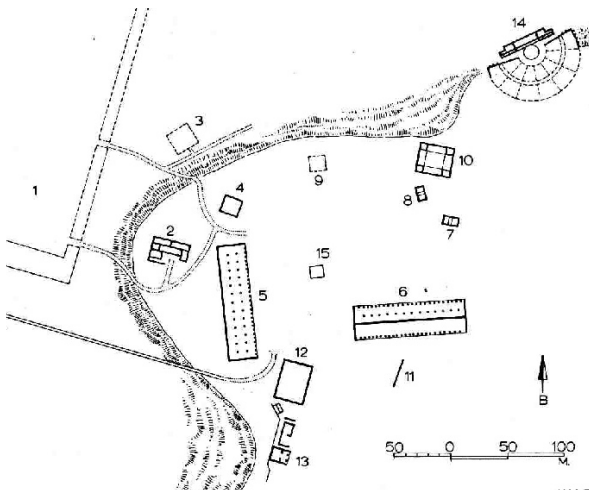
Image of Grand palace



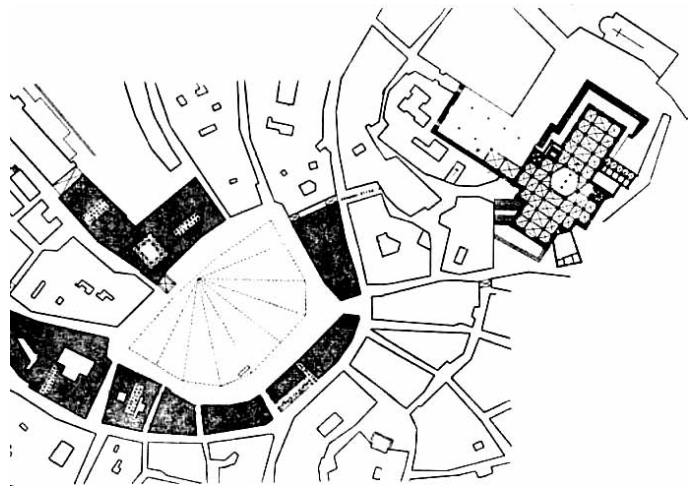
Image of Belgium Parliament

Meanwhile, Cases like medieval town halls, Early forms of political assembly are being studied, from which I also got lots of inspiration and reflections. The most impressive cases for me is the Agora in Ancient Greek and the square in Siena, Italy. The early form of agora is just a void, an empty space where people gather spontaneously, and buildings start to scatter around later. Gradually, the void had a boundary provided by the surrounded building and became a square, a central public space for citizens to assemble. Similarly, the square in Siena, Italy, is located in the city center and well connected with the streets in all directions. Its centrality made it the most welcome and public space in the city. Both of these cases impressed me by the power of the square, an urban void. Its publicity, openness and permeability make it a nature stage for all kind of people in the city to present themselves to each other and to the city. People could gather there, making conversation, taking activities, exploring possibilities, enjoying their public life.

Going through this general research session and the cases study. I realized that "square" had become a key word for my project, which I would like to explore in the design phase.



Agora in Ancient Greek



Square in Siena

After the research session, I have designed a political space for testing or exploring some of my thoughts. It is more like a space prototype without any context. In this session, I committed to exploring how to form a permeable boundary for a void to create a sense of centrality, which can invite people to gather from all directions. Because, to some extent, I believe politics is not only about making decisions with a few people in a room, but also could be a public conversation in the open air. Therefore, I have been testing with the proportion of the space, material and spatial fragments, from which I found that nature, as an original spatial fragment could be an enjoyable element to help gather people around. Because it could provide people a relaxing atmosphere where they could talk with each other freely. Also, many nature elements could also create boundary or enclosure as buildings. Like a row of tree trunk could be a permeable wall, or the crown of the tree could be a canopy. Since then "Nature" became another key word for my project.



Image of political Space 1



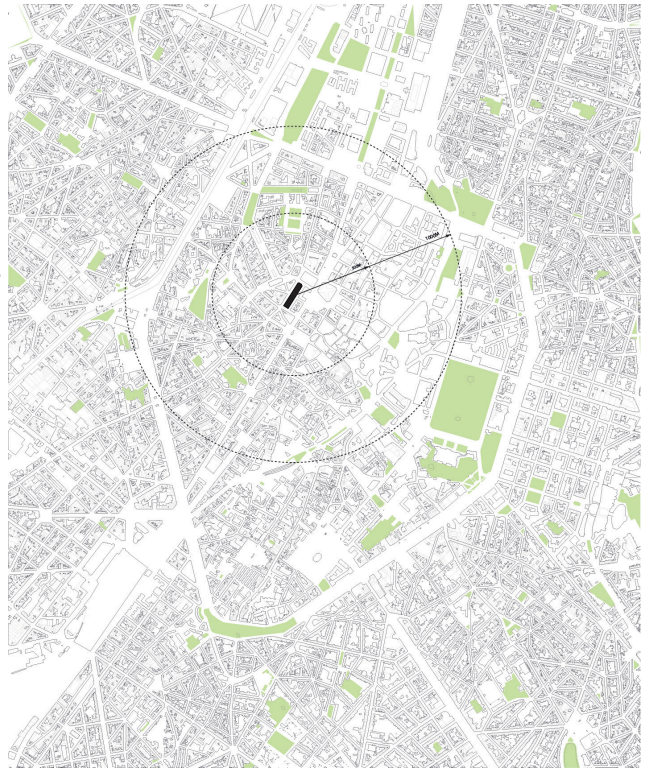
Image of political space 2

Before I start to design the city hall, I looked back to the site of the project and made a specific research about the surrounding. One interesting thing I found is that there are several squares with different proportions and programs around our site. Going through all these squares, I start to imagine another square with different characters in front of my city hall could be designed to cooperate with these existing squares, forming a bigger network of public space. And this strategy is exactly related to the reflections that I have made on my previous research.

Furthermore, by mapping, it was found that the greenery is very insufficient around the site. Also, many renovation projects about bringing back the greenery to the city have been proposed by public. Therefore, "nature", another theme that I extracted from my previous study, has been brought into my design. A square featured by nature has come into my mind in the beginning of my design.



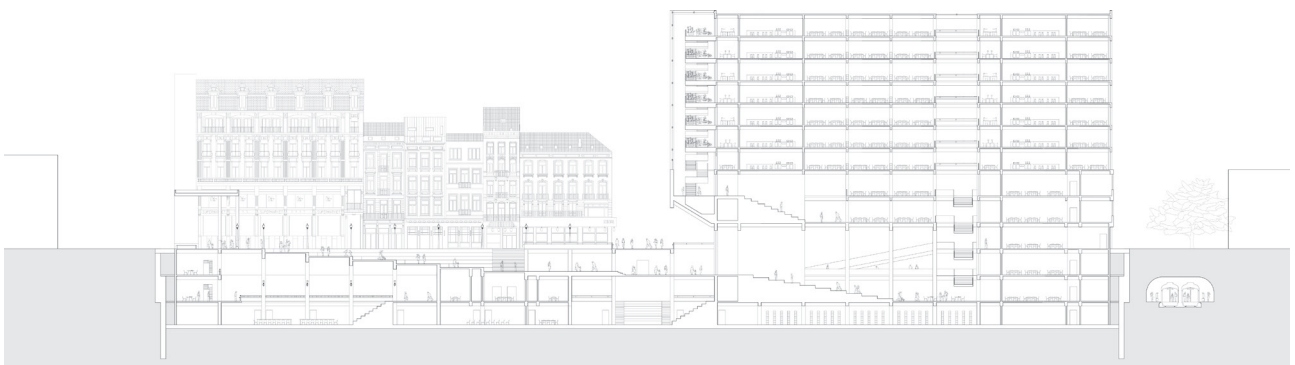
Network of public space



Greenary research

At the beginning of the design, I have analyzed an existed proposal of this new city hall named Brucity. It is a huge void with two large atriums inside, which occupied all of the site. Undoubtedly, atrium is quite helpful to the interior working environment, well for natural lighting and ventilation. However, from my perspective, a city hall is responsible for making contribution to the city and the public. And that's why I decided to "take out" the void of the building and give it back to the city, creating a public square in front of my building. Making full use of the underground space, I aim to create height different between the center of the square and the street to create a sense of centrality while preserve the accessibility and permeability by stairs and slopes. From an urban perspective, the square becomes a centripetal space for public assembling and a stage for citizens to present themselves to the public and the city. Meanwhile, the square is closely connected with the entrance hall of the building and the metro station, so it could also be read as a transitional space to connect the connect the urban with the building, the exterior with the interior, more importantly, the public and the politic.

To design the project as a whole, I not only explore this permeability and publicity in plan, but also in sections. In another word, I would like to extend this public space up to the building. And this thinking greatly influenced my decisions of space and structure design. For the spatial arrangement, different from Brucity, which contains public space and private working space on each floor, I concentrate the public space on lower level, providing people larger and freer space to wander. Meanwhile, since the office space is located on a higher floor, it can be controlled uniformly, which maintains its own publicity within the office space. Therefore, for the openness, I choose steel as main material for the whole project, because of its light.



Longitude section to show continous public space

Façade, as the envelope of the building, also expresses this publicity. For the side façade, transparent glazing is applied, through which we could see all kind of activities that happened inside. For the front façade, which is facing south, I design a winter garden over there, as another kind of indication of publicity. More importantly, the green façade could correspond with the green square in front, giving people a sense of continuous greenery from the ground to the air, which again responds to the key words “square”, “nature”.



Continuous greenery from the Square to the Façade

While making decisions on the design, I also never forget about the sustainability of the project. For example, the winter garden on the south side could act as an interface between the outside and inside to provide indoor climate control. And the prefabricated steel structure is very flexible for further changes and is easy to be recycled. From urban perspective, inviting greenery into the project also helps to purify the air and reduce the urban heat island effect.

To sum up, I have been trying to discuss the topics I have mentioned in the beginning - Public engagement, Public interior, and Public assemble by exploring the mutual relationship between building (the city hall), square and nature. And I am aware that there are still some problems I need to address at this session, but I still quite enjoy all these processes including research and design. Because, unconsciously, I find all the thinking and reflections are connected and somehow expressed by the building I have designed. Finally, I would like to thank all the people that have helped me, including my tutors and colleagues.