

# Reflection

Master of Science Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences



## Refection

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Reflecting on the process and on the results of the graduation project is key in creating a better awareness of your way of working. This paper holds the main findings from reflecting on the graduation process.

### **A larger framework**

The design itself started out by creating a masterplan for the ensemble. Currently the Hembrug terrain is just in an early stage of redevelopment causing the essence and character of the former military production terrain to be very visible. In my view the biggest threat for the Hembrug terrain is the urbanization of the Randstad. The green production terrain could become the prey of a project developer who will simply add the Hembrug terrain to the ever expanding city of Amsterdam. Facadism, the use of the existing facades to 'dress-up' regular apartment and office buildings could be the result of this, diminishing the true essence of the Hembrug terrain as an entity in itself.

In order for this not to happen an inside out approach in developing a new programme and master plan for the ensemble was handled. Instead of projecting a masterplan on the ensemble, the essence of the ensemble formed the basis for the masterplan.

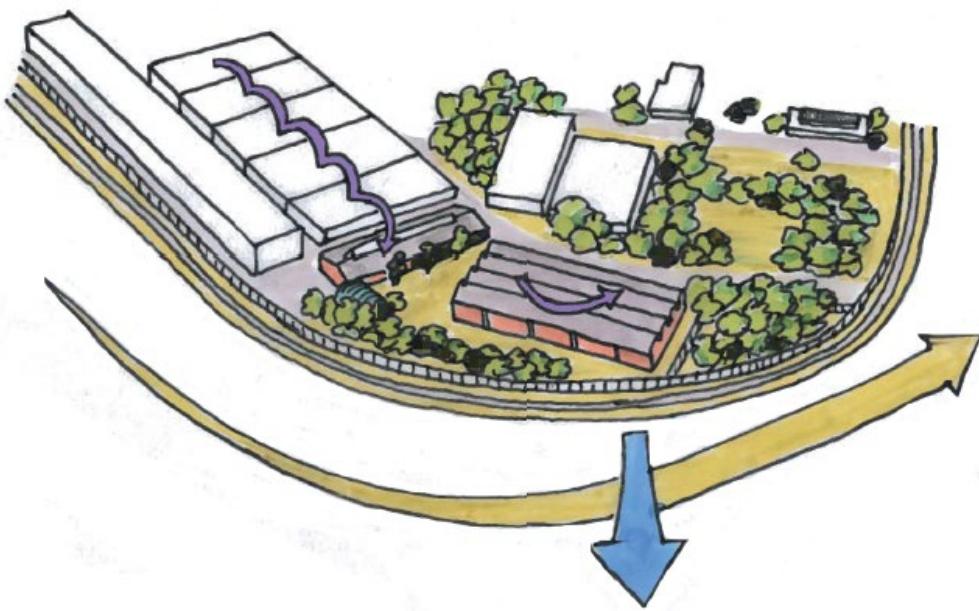
By doing this the approach mentioned by Paul Meurs was closely held at hand: "which is to take the existing qualities of the object or the site as the starting point for the new development" (Meurs 2016, page 33).

This meant that I tried to hold back my personal fascination for a specific programme or design at first instance and tried to derive a suitable programme and spatial masterplan from the existing situation. In this way the research and value assessment did only attribute to identifying the essence of the ensemble and the various buildings, it enabled me to see opportunities for transformations and reprogramming as well.

I discovered that in essence the ensemble has a rather divers character originating from the fact that the ensemble was always a 'left-over' space at the end of the two grid systems of the Hembrug terrain. The buildings that were eventually built on the ensemble do not have a lot of connections to each other. There are four buildings with a different building age, a different architectural typology and different programmes.

The following research question was therefore not that easy to answer: "How do the different buildings relate to each other and to the ensemble as a whole?" In order to answer this question it was important to zoom out again and look at the bigger picture. Only then I was able to identify the connections of the buildings and the ensemble to the bigger context. The question "How to approach the ensemble: as a whole or as several parts?" became of great importance. Eventually the boundaries of the 'ensemble' had to be redefined.

Whereas the masterplan of Palmbout (2017) tries to tie the tip to the bigger spatial system of green and infrastructure of the Hembrug terrain, this masterplan has taken into account the essence of the ensemble as a aloof part of the Hembrug terrain with a green character and unblocked views towards the water. The essence of each of the buildings has been taken into account in reprogramming the ensemble and (spatial) connections to the surroundings are made on specific places.



*Image 1: the essence of the current ensemble.* Source: own image

In addition the ensemble forms a counterpart to the urban developments in Amsterdam while an effort was made to maintain the visibility of the green and spacious character of the Hembrug terrain.

### **Preserve vs redesign?**

Once the meaning of the ensemble was redefined the buildings were given their place in the new masterplan. Although a lot of buildings on the Hembrug terrain are listed, and therefor protected, I believe that only preserving the buildings is no guarantee that the essence and character of the terrain is preserved. Adding new volumes, reprogramming and redesigning the existing buildings and the in between spaces can have a major impact on the cultural values. So although Marieke Kuipers states that "the cultural value of most built heritage can only be safeguarded through physical preservation" (Kuipers & De Jonge 2017, page 101)

even without demolishing any of the existing matter the cultural value can be diminished quite a bit in my view.

A moral dilemma which is connected to the above mentioned problem is the issue of demolition and adding. The in between spaces on the ensemble were so well defined by the existing buildings that any demolition or additions could largely impact the spatial quality of the ensemble. Next to that I struggled with the question how much it is a heritage architect can demolish. Who is he/she to decide what to demolish?

Within my design question I mentioned the words sustainable and future-proof. Demolishment of big parts of the building is in itself not very future proof while these interventions are most likely permanent. Future proof interventions could for example mean that the intervention itself can be undone or altered over time.

This realisation made me think about different types of interventions. Interventions for the specific new programme and interventions that the building (regardless of the programme) benefits from (from an spatial/architectural way of thinking). Even some interventions that unlock specific 'hidden' values within the building could be identified.

The critical question arises, who am I to decide which values I take into account and which I do not. In a way the design can be redirected in a lot of ways. However, a building has a big lifespan and I am not the first and probably not the last person to work on the buildings. In addition, professor Wessel de Jonge stated: "the quantity of heritage is too big and the society is too dynamic to consider heritage to be a frozen piece of history" (De Jonge, 2017). This helped me to look differently at the challenge: I started to see the existing buildings as dynamic and changeable.

At the core I believe there has to be a balance between expressing yourself as an architect of this moment and to make sure that the dynamic timeline of the building is not ended by a permanent and value diminishing intervention.

A good example within the design is the intervention of the central hallway splitting through the existing factory building. Although this seems a large permanent intervention at first glance, the location of this split is carefully chosen and the rhythm and dimension of the hallway can be traced back to the existing building. In this case the seemingly big intervention did fully originate from values that lie within the existing situation.

## **Urge for form**

The elaboration and expression of these interventions enable an architect to leave a signature. During this graduation project I became aware of the mark I tend to create while designing. Looking back at previous designs confirmed my finding: there is a strong urge for forms in the design. Almost all designs include (at the base) monolithic and rudimentary forms that make up the interventions. Within the graduation project I started out the same but this time I became aware of this urge for form.

I think this has to do with the fact that I want the interventions to be clear and understandable. In this way they can set themselves apart from the existing, creating a contrast in form. In addition, my architecture always has a 'gesture to the context' and mostly this is through form as well.

There was one moment during the project where this urge for form became very apparent to me. I was struggling with an intervention in the factory building. I was creating new 'boxes' within the existing building to house all new services and functions. I eventually asked myself the question, why are these 'boxes' really boxes? Why are they sticking through the roof? The intervention had evolved into this shape but I never questioned the form itself. The intervention appeared logical and clear to me, while it turned out to be everything but logical, just logical in the sense of shape.



*Image 2: testing the impact of the interventions.* Source: own image

This confrontation with this particular problem paved the road to completely rethinking the interventions. It turned out the 'clear' and 'understandable' forms of the interventions blocked the design process a lot. By becoming aware of this I gave myself more freedom in the design and it made me revise my position as a heritage architect.

## **Harmony and differentiation**

By reflecting on the process I can state that one of my starting points is that I want to use what's there. Interventions should either unlock/strengthen already existing values that lay embedded within the existing buildings or the interventions should add new values to the existing. In addition, a heritage architect should be able to put his mark on the building in harmony with the existing building.

In my view harmony does not mean that the work of an heritage architect cannot be visible. I want a laymen to be able to see the different layers. Confrontations between time-layers should not necessarily be avoided although a balance and coherence throughout all the time layers was something I was striving for.

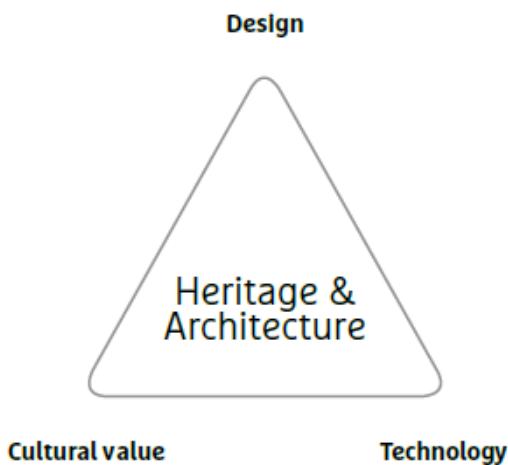
To redefine this statement, harmony can be achieved by having analogy to the existing building. One of my research questions did cover this specific problem: 'How will the new

time layer be visible in relation to the existing time layers?'. A short answer to this question by reflecting on my design would be through having a clear hierarchy between the old and the new. However, sometimes I noticed that there was too much contrast and the interventions were alienated from the existing building. Although I seek for clarity between old and new, alienating the interventions from the existing building is not the aim. An interplay of harmony and differentiation of the interventions and the existing building turned out to be one of the key challenges within the design process.

## Research and design

In previous heritage design courses the (historical) research was largely comprised into the 'analyses phase' of the project. Analysing still formed the first phase of the graduation project and with the P1 a good base was created to work upon. The general information was gathered and a first understanding of the DNA of the existing situation was created, summarised in a value assessment.

However, from the P1 onwards the more specific questions started to arise. More research of the existing situation through all scale levels turned out to be the key in order for the design to develop. But through developing the design, a better understanding and interpretation of the already gathered information could be achieved as well. Every change in design was held against the value assessment of the P1. Sometimes this meant the design had to be altered, but sometimes the design made me look differently at the value assessment.



*Image 3: the three departments of Heritage and Architecture.* Source: Kuipers & De Jonge, 2017

This interplay between the meaning of the identified values and the way in which the design reacts or interferes with them forms an important part of the design process. Even in the last couple of weeks when working on the design details I started revisiting my values assessment. I now understand the interrelationship of the three chairs of the department of Heritage and Architecture (Design, Cultural Value & Technology) even better. For me they do not hold a specific place in the process, they develop all at the same time. Although the design itself can be based upon a personal fascination or a social problem, simply projecting

this on an existing (listed) building cannot be done. It demands the constant dialogue between old and new, research and design.

I could say that the historical research was conducted in a way that it is not a goal in itself but a means to an end. Another example of this understanding was created by the challenge of sketching every day. My main mentor stressed the importance of sketching and hence I challenged myself to make a sketch every day. Most of the time I wasn't happy with the way the sketches turned out but like making a value assessment I realised that a sketch contains a bigger goal than to create a nice image or overview; it is a research and design tool.

Next to sketching I started to use physical models in the same way. First of all a better understanding of the previously made spatial valuation was achieved and the implications of the interventions in relation to these values were made visible. Next to this, a physical model helped me to have a conversation piece to discuss with peers and tutors and the models were used for various studies such as lighting studies, spatial studies and colour studies. I pushed myself to keep the sketches and the model 'quick and dirty' enabling me to test the relation between my design thoughts and the value assessment throughout the entire project.

In short, constantly shifting through different scale levels, different design tools and revisiting the site and the research data was crucial in order for the design to develop.

## **In conclusion**

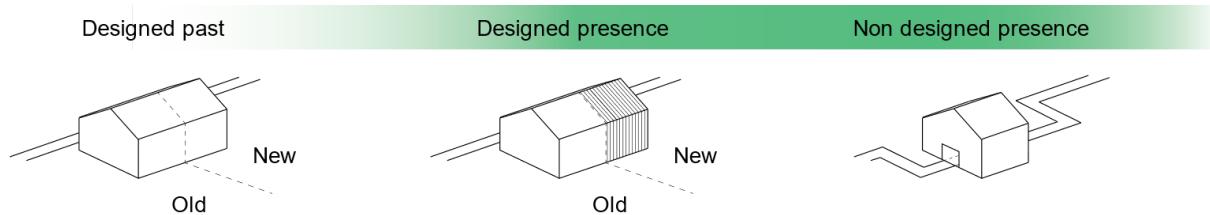
During the graduation project I have created a better understanding of the relationship between (historic) research and design. Using an inside out approach in redeveloping the ensemble enabled a project that is in coherence to its past without being a frozen piece of history.

A clear (and framed) programme was chosen, closely connected to the essence of the Hembrug terrain while at the same time it reacts to a social problem. With the new program a response is given to the mass production and mass consumption of our society. The design therefore forms a frontrunner for a new and sustainable way of producing and consuming, for anyone to see at the tip of the terrain.

On a building scale the reprogramming and the required interventions reflect the essence of the existing buildings. The more permanent interventions and the redesigned parts of the building show an analogy with the existing building while at the same time they are clearly part of another (time) layer. Other interventions like the interior frames of the factory building are more subordinate to the existing building. These interventions add a certain quality without permanently disturbing existing values of the building.

In general the design attitude can be placed under the header of the 'designed presence'; a design approach wherein certain features and elements of the existing architecture are used in a new way (Meurs, 2016). There is harmony between the old and the new although some of the intervention can be seen as autonomously. This is oppose to the design attitude of the designed past wherein the new architecture is a complete clone of the already existing

architecture and the boundary between real (authentic) and fake (newly added) is blurred (Meurs, 2016). Next to the dominating 'designed presence' attitude a 'non designed presence' attitude can be identified within the design as well. In essence this approach includes minor changes resulting in maximum impact. The path around the shelter and the connection of the Warehouse to the public domain are examples of this approach.



*Image 4: design attitude in comparison to the three design attitudes by Paul Meurs.* Source: own image

If I compare my method to the three types of dealing with heritage: reduce, reuse and recycle (as described in Petzet, Heilmeyer and Overmeer, 2012), it can be concluded that the masterplan and all interventions have at its base 'reuse'. Even the bigger more permanent redesigned parts of the building can be traced back to spatial ideas that lie within the existing building. Although recycling is not an overall theme, an effort was made to limit the amount of additions and new material.

The graduation project enabled me to create a better understanding of my way of working and my position in designing with heritage. In future designs I aim to strengthen this position even more.

## Literature

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