

P4 Reflection – Henrik Molander

Overview

My graduation project is one of the Projects within the Independent group which is a part of the Chair of Interiors Buildings Cities. Like the Explore Lab, the independent group allows the student to form a project based on their own fascination. The difference is that when applying for the Independent Group you are requested to have a programme and a location for your project. You are also working within the larger framework and philosophy of the Chair when it comes to architectural and methodological approach. This means that the research is supposed to be closely connected to the design process. In the end of the semester leading up to the graduation project we presented an idea for our projects and was chosen if the proposal was deemed to fit within the framework of the studio which this year has been dealing with the question of the urban institution and its role in the city and towards its citizens.

As a musician, I have taken an interest in the Dutch music scene and I found that the budget for culture has been dramatically diminished during the last years. Several music institutions and organizations have suffered from the cutbacks with downsizing and closure as a result. One such organisation is the Netherlands Music Institute (NMI), located in Den Haag, which had to shut down in 2013. The institute played an important role in maintaining and spreading knowledge about the Dutch music heritage.

The information I found about the current climate of Dutch culture and the fate of the NMI led me to investigate what a music institution of the future could look like. In a politically uncertain environment where funding and subsidies can be swiftly swept away from under the feet of any organization there is a need for alternative ways of funding.

Another personal fascination of mine, which I have linked to my research, is the architectural phenomenon of the European culture centres which came to life chiefly in the middle of the 20th century. Buildings like Kulturhuset in Stockholm or The Southbank Centre in London have continued to play an important role in the public urban interior of their respective cities. I wanted to research why this is the case and how architectural aspects of these buildings can be implemented in a cultural institution of the future

The Research

I have been dividing my research into different branches to keep a clear distinction to what is the task currently at hand. One branch is gaining knowledge about the music scene in Den Haag and deciding who or what organizations is possible stakeholders in my project and would benefit from a new music institution. I began my research by finding and visiting music organizations and institutions in Den Haag involved with different aspects of music such as education, public space (mainly bars and cafes), performance and rehearsal. The first task of the project was to make a short movie which was to be a trailer showing the context of our project. I interpreted the task by documenting the institutions and organisations I visited.

Through my visits, I gained knowledge of the spatial characteristics and urban locations of the buildings belonging to the organisations and institutions. Parallely I also visited the archive in Den Haag several times to gain access to drawings belonging to the buildings in my research and further understand their spatial qualities. Many of the music organizations in Den Haag is having different levels of collaborations which also became an import factor to consider when creating the programme for my building. To understand how the collaborations is working and to gain deeper and more accurate knowledge about the music scene in Den Haag I eventually chose to spend time a substantial amount of time doing lengthy interviews with people involved in the music scene of Den Haag. Getting to know potential users, stakeholders and clients for my projects has been important in making it connected to the reality of the current situation in Den Haag. The information has also formed the multi-functional programme I have created for my institution. Furthermore, I have looked into the wider context of the city of Den Haag in terms of culture and demography.



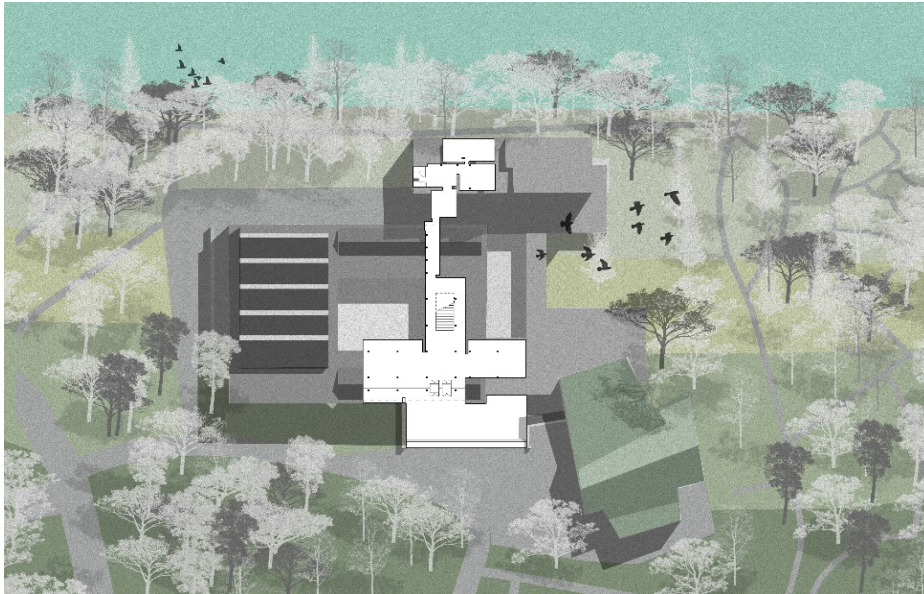
Pop Centrum Den Haag - an important institution in the cities pop and rock history

The second part of my research concerns the funding of the new institution. By basing my project on how the current political and economic situation in the Netherlands is affecting the culture my project had to take these issues into account. Instead of building a new building I chose to utilize an existing building to keep costs down. In Den Haag there is a large number of unoccupied office buildings which is centrally located. By occupying a vacant building instead of a new construction, costs can be greatly reduced.

Centrally located buildings has however the disadvantage of having higher rents. This is a reason why smaller institutions and organisation with a lack of financial means often has to be located in the fringe areas of cities which in turn creates a poorer culture climate in the more expensive city centre. Through my research, I found the organization Stad in De Maak which is involved in giving new life to buildings in the city of Rotterdam through alternative economical models. I went to their first project, located close to the Central station and got to know more about their methods and philosophy regarding reuse. They solve the issue of financing public space by dedicating parts of the building to housing which generates money and fund the public functions of the project. I have utilized their method into my building by putting housing on the upper floors while keeping the lower floors open to the public. A substantial part of my graduation research has been devoted to find a suitable building and to later understand the building in detail. I chose an unoccupied office building from the 70s close to Den Haag central station which I deemed to be a good framework for my project. I had initial problems with finding enough material about the project but eventually I came into contact with an architecture office what made restorations to the façade in 2002. Their first response was that they couldn't find drawings from that time which led me to contemplate to switch building for my project. They later found out that the owner of the building had recently requested the drawings and they could send me the same material. I received detailed plans, elevations and sections as well as façade details which gave me the opportunity to understand the building on a desired level. This is the first time I am making a project in an existing building so understanding the object in a meticulous way was of great importance to me.

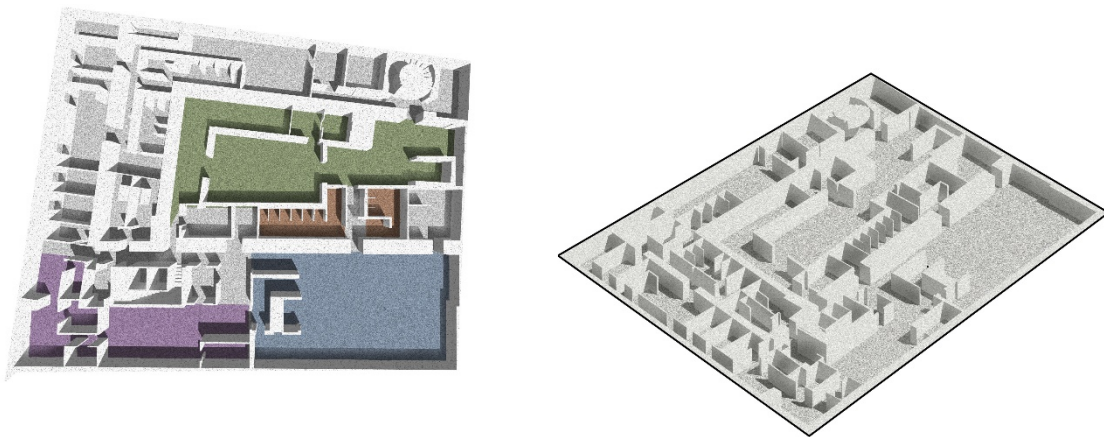
A third branch of my research has been an investigation of European culture centres built during the 20th century. Several such centres are still playing an important part as a public urban living rooms for people living in the cities. I have a personal fascination with culture centres derived from the European welfare state and I wanted to experience them in person to gain knowledge the spatial and architectural qualities that forms a successful public interior. I first however, had to understand the theoretical concept of what makes a public space which I did by writing a report on the works of Richard Sennett and Marc Augé.

The independent group made a collective study trip to London which gave me the opportunity to experience the Southbank centre and how people integrate with it. Other trips involved Akadeime der Kunste in Berlin, Kulturhuset in Stockholm and Vooruit in Gent. I processed the information I acquired through analytical plans and chiefly through drawings and sketches.



Akademie der Kunste – Plan over unprogrammed public space

I later redirected my research to buildings more programmatically similar to my project. These are multifunctional music buildings where different aspects of music practise is collected under one roof. One such Building is the BMC in Budapest which consists of different music venues, housing for musicians and a archive. By researching these buildings I have learned about requirements regarding layout and sizing of the spaces I am providing. To learn about acoustic requirements and what can be done to create a desirable acoustic environment I have consulted Christien Jansen of the faculty of building physics.



BMC Budapest Basement level

From my research, I have the material to create a building which can consolidate music organisations and institutions that has suffered from the turmoil in Dutch culture politics the recent years. I also want to extend this further than being a building only for musicians by providing a generous public space where music still plays an important role and which will be a backdrop for meetings between musicians and the public.

Reflection

The Chair of Interiors Buildings Cities has a proven and specific methodology regarding the architectural process. The theoretical research is traditionally firmly connected to a hands-on design approach preferable through model making. The independent group has been compared to Explore lab of the Interior chair with the difference that less time is supposed to be spent on theoretical research and more on actual designing. By working in the independent group, I have experienced a difficulty in dividing my time between theoretical research and design. When looking through the eyes of the chair, it is my belief that too much time has been spent on theoretical research and gaining background information while parallel designing has been set aside.

When looking back on the brief I provided before the start of the semester it now seems very shallow and naïve. You quickly realise that the more you investigate the situation as it is, the more complicated the task of setting a programme becomes. My project took a turn towards economy and politics at an early stage which was very interested but also complicated things further. It was very difficult to know on what level to put my research. I am not here to study either economics or politics but my research had to have a certain amount of realism to make the project relevant. Doing a project based on such complicated issues for the first time, this amount proved very difficult to measure for me and has probably taken too much time away from investigating the design.

The challenge of doing a project in an existing building has been both unexpected and interesting. The investigation of the building has been more time consuming than I first had anticipated but it has also been rewarding. It is interesting to follow my process of dealing with the existing building. The architectural interventions have gone from a complete make over to small precise interventions and when keeping as much of the existing building as possible, the research becomes a part of the design process. I realise now that when entering this process my initial idea was that a graduation project must involve grand and luxuries architectural gestures. After a long process of guidance, presentations and thinking I have started to appreciate the smaller interventions and what they can do to the whole picture. A more detailed and precise design approach also fits my programme consisting of organizations lacking financial means.

I have also spent a significant amount of time talking to stakeholders and clients to get to know the actual situation regarding music in Den Haag. The interviews have made me realise how much more complex the situation is compared to my initial brief and after the interviews I tried to adapt my programme to the need and wishes of my “clients”. This proved to be a very difficult grammatical jigsaw puzzle which I after some time partly had to abandon. The programme has gone from being as realistic as possible to mainly support my underlying idea of a public music centre supported financial by housing.

My concluding reflection is that a graduation project like this requires a tough approach to setting boundaries for the research and not wonder too far in any direction. By doing a project of this scale for the first time and by being in the independent group with all the freedom it brings, the setting of boundaries has not been an easy task.