

## **Building Restoration Craft School - Leiden**

### **P4 - Reflection**

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The Architecture of the Interior  
MSc 3/4 Craft Studio (Spring 2015)

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To startup the studio, students were asked to pick a specific craft for which they had a personal fascination. Part of the obligatory research was the making of a film about this craft and writing three reports. The first report about 'the craft' in general, the second about 'the workshop' and the third about 'the network'. The film was meant to get to the tacit knowledge of the craftsman. In the end it wasn't the tacit knowledge which led to my project, but the spontaneous conversations I had with the craftsman while filming them.

I filmed at BamBam Restoration Natural Stone masons and found out there is no clear educational track to become a Restoration Natural Stone mason. When doing research on the topic it became clear there is a problem with the restoration profession in general in the Netherlands. As carefully formulated by Restauratie Opleidings Projecten (ROP):

"The restoration profession is losing its craftsmen. Craftsmen retire and leave the profession, while new students are scarce. If nothing is done, their knowledge and experience will be lost. This could have major implications for the quality of Dutch monuments."

I started looking for the source of the problem at the educational side, as 'new students are scarce' and found out that the restoration education suffers from image problems. The two main reasons are: highly fragmented education and an uninspiring environment. This uninspiring environment is partly due to the fragmented education which results in a lack of focus on the restoration student. In 2013-2014 81 students Restoration Carpentry were spread across 17 vocational schools. At the same time 43 students Restoration Masonry were spread across no less than 13 vocational schools! This fragmentation leads to loss of quality due to forced combined classes and a lack of skill of teachers. Besides, there is no vocational school in the Netherlands that offers a track for restoration natural stone masons. If a stone mason wants to become specialized in restoration one has to follow separate courses somewhere else. All the employees of BamBam followed different tracks to get where they are now.

The restoration student is combined with the 'normal' student in, often, big vocational schools on the outskirts of the cities.

The focus of the studio; 'craft in the city', very soon led to the understanding that the restoration craft might benefit from a building restoration craft school located in the city. A school that might combine several restoration crafts so they could benefit from each other.

Again, it was the informal conversations with the craftsman of BamBam which led to the development of my project and in this case, a suitable location for my school.

Bam Bam happened to be located in a former communal waste incineration; a monument on the site owned by the Nuon Energy Factory in the north part of the city centre of Leiden. The factory will still be in use for another 15 years, but the area around it will be available very soon/is already partly available. The area has been closed off for a long time, which resulted in an almost forgotten part of the inner city of Leiden, so it's a challenge to make the site part of the city again.

The location is already part of a bigger project of Leiden; the Singelpark. The Singelpark will be a continuous band of interconnected green spaces, more than six kilometers in length, along the former military fortification surrounding the historical centre of Leiden. At the moment the Nuon area is disrupting this connection. This discovery resulted in a general research question: how does the building relate to its surroundings? Now, at the end of my project, I could say I found an answer on a levels. Levels, as formulated by the studio: 'The Building in the City', 'The Building' and 'The Detail'.

In the end, I think the approach of the studio, reminding us of our starting point (our 'personal' craft) led to a development of the project on each level. It was the first report I wrote on craft in general and natural stonemasonry in specific, that led to an development of my project on 'detail level'. In my first report I compared craft to 'art', 'design' and 'technology', with which it seems intimately related. However I believe craft has also a position on its own. Craft should not be understood merely as a technique, or a mastery of material or a skill, but as a culture. If we do understand it merely as a technique, craft will always play a secondary role. As a means to create an art or design work and even as something which can be replaced by technology.

But, if we look at craft as a culture, we see craft is firmly rooted as it is build on tradition. Craft is part of a long history which anchors people to a place and makes them deeply rooted in society. Here lies the value of craft.

Through my interview with the craftsman of BamBam and some literature research, especially the article of Yarrow and Jones on "'Stone is stone': engagement and detachment in the craft of conservation masonry" was important in this respect, I understood that this rootedness in tradition is key in the restoration culture. This led to the believe that I should create a building that has a lasting structure and has associations with old traditions. I think the restoration craft can best be expressed by careful choice and, especially, careful USE of materials. It's about using materials in a way that they are reminisced of a certain tradition.

The simple way of constructing of the new restoration school building is reminiscent of the way in which many ancient Greek buildings were constructed. The new building borrows from the conspicuous clarity of the Greek temple design. As pointed out by Robert L. Scranton in his book on Greek architecture: "the distinction of elements in uncomplicated and unimpeded. So, too, is the emphasis on mass, on form in three dimensions, on the composition in figures of solid geometry."<sup>1</sup>

The restoration school has a (visual) clear architectural organization which is evenly and logically structured. It's basic element is the brick wall, from which brick columns arise, capped with a piece of natural stone. The natural stone fulfils the decorative function of the capital of a Greek column. The

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Scranton. *Greek Architecture*. London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc. 1962.

concrete lintels/beams are comparable with the architrave of the Greek Temple. The wooden beams of the floor and roof are stacked on top of this lintel.

Another important principle/reference, which led to the choice of material, derives from the theory of Kenneth Frampton on tectonics with the townhall of Alvar Aalto as perfect example, where Frampton describes how an awareness of tectonics can result in a space which recalls a strong bodily experience:

"Thus, from the stereotomic mass and relative darkness of the entry stair, where the feeling of enclosure is augmented by the tactility of the brick treads, one enters into the bright light of the council chamber, the timber-lined roof of which is carried on fanlike, wooden trusses that splay upward to support concealed rafters above a boarded ceiling. The sense of arrival occasioned by this tectonic display is reinforced by various nonretinal sensations, from the smell of polished wood to the floor flexing under one's weight together with the general destabilization of the body as one enters onto a highly polished surface."<sup>2</sup>

To conclude this reflection I would like to state that there is a great importance in studying old examples and traditions and there is no shame in using this, by some referred to as dusty, examples; as opposed to using new materials and technologies just because they are new. Obviously I am not against improvement or development in construction or material and I do believe it is necessary to translate old examples into more contemporary solutions, however, 'tradition' has an evident, rich vocabulary which we should not hesitate to use. I hope my project demonstrates this.

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<sup>2</sup> Frampton, Kenneth. *Studies in Tectonic Culture. The Poetics of Construction in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995.