Reflection

on Graduation Project

Project   University Library and Learning Center, Amsterdam

Studio   Interiors, buildings and cities
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Project review

Problem statement

The graduation project deals with a design of a new University Library and Learning Center for UvA [University of Amsterdam] on a chosen site in Amsterdam. The building should hold a program of 24 000 m^2, offering a variety of study places for students and academicians, open book, magazine and media collection, along with offices, storage and service spaces, but also public functions like café, exposition space and workshop rooms. The work on the project commenced in February 2012.

Product

The final proposal for the new University Library and Learning Center for UvA is located on the Sarphatistraat in Amsterdam. The spaces of the library are situated in two parallel volumes - prisms elevated 7 meters above the ground. They are supported by two masses - pavilions, which serve as entrances and hold public functions related to the ground level. The ground floor space, framed by the pavilions and the above-hovering library, is designed as a open public space - space which serves as a connection of the river side and the boulevard, meeting space for students, it can hold variety of events and activities. The open character of the ground floor space is reflected in the interior of the library. The inner world of the library is oriented towards the central atrium and acts rather independently from the outer world. The uniform 'anonymous' façade of the library underlines this concept. The main relation of these two separated worlds is the visual connection through covered atrium.

The building consists of two underground stories for parking, two stories high entrance pavilions, and three floors of library spaces, learning center, book storage, offices and adjacent functions.

Process

A broad architectural research and analysis of the problem was carried out in the first stage of the project. The main subjects of the research was urban analysis of the city and offered locations as well as the given building type and its users – analysis of the form of academic libraries throughout the history, until its role in the current era. Based upon the result of the urban analysis a choice of the site - Sarphatistraat was made, issues and potentials of the location were identified, a direction and a strategy for the role and function of the academic library was formed. The research made a departure point for the development of concept, which was further developed and tested in the second stage of the project. The aim of the project was defined. The concept addressed issues of urban setting, massing, functional distribution of the program within the building, quality of the created spaces. Further in the process these issues were specified and the design became more factual within a frame of the initial concept. Technical questions – structure, building technology, climate design, materiality – were answered in the second half of the project. The final proposal should meet the goals set at the beginning of the process as well as fulfill all the technical requirements.

Methodology

Throughout the project development the decisions were guided by the method of phenomenology, which focuses on the users and their experience. The chair of the graduation studio gives a great importance to the public interiors. As a result the character of the spaces was established early in the process, with the user as the primary element.

Development

Commencing the design process with the research allowed me to gather sufficient amount of information and ideas upon which the further design was built. The gained understanding of the problem allowed establishment of goals and strategies which have guided me throughout the design process.

Urban analysis of the city and site revealed potentials and issues of the area, which were addressed in the design. In the broad urban context the main virtue of the site on the Sarphatistraat was the diversity of surrounding elements – presence of both Uva and Hva campuses, different characters of the surrounding architectural styles and urban scenes, lively student as well as public life. The site presented a potential to connected the different elements, the redesign of the site could bring new dimensions and relation to the public life of the area – I saw this as a great starting point for the design. By freeing the space for interaction the site became a place where the various characters come together. The theme of 'connecting - bridging' and 'creating free and open space' consistently carried throughout the design.

Different characters of the university library building were identified – it acts as an academic institution which serves to the students and academicians, with the given size it is a significant intervention to the built fabric of Amsterdam – it can become a landmark and to a certain extend should act as a public building. This definition of the building characters helped to organize the program. Through analysis of the case studies I have created an opinion on the role of the library in the current study environment. The shift from library being a place to search for information to it being a place with a good study environment and social platform for students presents an important issue which significantly influenced the character of designed interior spaces. Creation of a good study environment, which allows one to concentrate on individual tasks and yet feel the presence of others, sense of be a part of larger entity – university and its community – became an important aspect of the design. I believe that the initial intentions for interiors have been accomplished in the final design, which is the result of following the focus on user-experience and phenomenological approach to the design.

As stated in the texts written in the initial stages of the process, I have set out to create a building which would become a destination for its users – students and academicians – and offer comfortable and motivating study environment; a building which would be a place for meetings and interaction – students of UvA and HvA, students and public; a landmark which contributes to the varnish and public activities on the neighborhood. I had a clear intention to propose a building which [in architectural style] relates to the current architecture which is being raised on the nearby campus on Roeterseiland. These were the spelled out project goals and aim, which remained in the core of the design and are reflected in the final product.

The initial concept of a building elevated above an open public space incorporated all the intended points laid out from the research. It gave a way for a large open ground floor space, which nicely reacts to the existing street pattern and with the cultivated water side creates new platform for public activities; it allowed clear organization of the program – distinction of public and library functions, creation of large open study spaces; in scale the building is comparable to the vast 19th century buildings situated on the boulevard. A volumetric simplicity presented the concept allowed development of spatial qualities on all the building levels. It can be said that the initial proposal worked well in a plan – as a foot print as well as roof top view, however appearances were not

addressed to the same extend as the plan, which has later caused a slight disconnection of the building and the context.

Meeting technical challenges was a big part of the design process. Structure of the building became its significant feature, very much present in the interior of the building. Consequently I chose to create a building which has strong presence of technology. In the process of refinement of the plan the building became more rigid, linear and modular. This has contributed to the clarity of the plan – straight forward distribution of the program, simple routing – and enhanced the open character of the library interiors. All the further decisions were affected by my determination to enhance the structure, horizontality of the upper mass and the self-contained character of the library spaces as well as create a good quality of the indoor environment. As the result the final product has an obvious strategy: an elevated mass – perhaps a steel cage, which treasures an open world of library and study spaces – a cozy one, with a good study environment, without distractions from the outer world. With a great focus on the interiors and the structure the self-contained character is also represented to the outside by multiple layers of screens. As a result of this it can be criticized that the building became rather rigid and has lost something from the initial gentleness which would allow it to relate to the local context more than just through the ground floor space and pavilions.

The text written to the P1 presentation states that the designed building shouldn't act as an alien object, rather visually and functionally relate to the diverse surroundings. This initial intention to have the library relate to the surroundings has changed in the process. After separating the building into two entities – ground floor pavilions and elevated mass – a great focus was given on creating a strong relation on the ground floor level. However in the upper mass the focus was given to the structure and interiors. The design was formed from inside-out. The open landscape of the library and learning center became a self-contained world on its own. The decision to disconnect the introverted inner world from its surroundings by covering it with façade layers and screens was a result of this method. The initial sensitivity to the context, is maintained on the ground level, however in the upper mass has been replaced with the idea of disconnection of from its surroundings. In the result the design partially diverts from one of the initial intention regarding building appearances and engagement with the context.

Critique

The research was taken as a departure point for the design. However the scheme should have been revised with the research at more points in the process. That would prevent the design from shifting away from the original strategy or allowed better argumentation for the shift. By focusing on the interiors and structure – the building was worked out from the inside out – it can be said that by using this working method other parts of it were compromised. Combining the method with a different approach would be an overall improvement of the design.

Overall the design is based on a result of a good research and main goals set at the beginning of the design were worked out throughout the process and are accomplished in the final design: the openness of interior spaces and its relation to the ground floor public space, which has the potential to contribute to the public realm of the area; the clear distribution of the program and its representation to the outside; in scale the building fits to its environment, it does have the monumental and representative function as intended.