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Reflection – P4

Relation of Graduation Project to Master Track and Program

My graduation project sits within the Architecture track of the aE studio, aligning strongly with their themes of material-based design, sustainability, and tectonics. By exploring the potential of minimally processed timber as a counter-strategy to standardized, over-engineered timber construction, the project responds to both architectural and societal questions around identity, authenticity, and construction culture. The project aligns with the broader studio focus on rethinking how technical choices influence architectural form. In this case, reclaiming a direct relationship between material and design.

Research and Design

The research phase of this project began with a critical stance toward the standardization of timber architecture. I was particularly interested in how over-reliance on engineered wood systems like CLT and glulam often strips timber of its natural logic and visual richness. This inquiry formed the backbone of my theoretical work. I explored how contemporary architecture might reframe timber not as a substitute for steel or concrete, but as a material with its own unique tectonic and cultural identity.

Translating this into a design project proved to be far more complex than expected. I underestimated the challenge of working from a purely theoretical starting point, and for a long time I struggled to find a clear design niche that allowed me to bring research into form. I tried to incorporate too many of the learnings at once, which blurred the design focus. It wasn't until I began keeping the concept simple, bold, and clear - that the design found its own identity.

The turning point came when I started to develop strict general design strategies at every scale. Forming a coherent narrative from massing to detail, gave me the framework, while still remaining true to my original fascination with timber and tectonic honesty.

Approach and Methods

Initially, my method was driven by curiosity and research depth, but not necessarily by architectural clarity. Writing a theoretical research paper early in the process helped shape the core ideas, but disconnected me from the act of designing, especially in the early stages where intuition and form-making should be central. I realized that, for me, the process works better when theory and design evolve together.

By the time the design process took shape, I adapted my approach. I used material diagrams, tectonic sketches, and stacking logics as design tools. Instead of reducing timber to abstract system elements, I allowed it to guide form, space, and façade articulation.

Academic and Societal Value

The project questions the direction of mass timber architecture by offering a counter-model rooted in material expressiveness rather than efficiency alone. In this sense, it offers both a cultural critique and a design alternative, particularly relevant in the context of Dutch cities like Rotterdam, where timber is gaining interest but often only in its engineered, standardized form. By proposing a building system based on minimally processed wood, the project not only reintroduces material character into architectural language, but also invites discussion around craft, imperfection, and the temporal qualities of construction. The project shows that architectural value does not have to stem from optimization, it can also emerge from presence, texture, and the honesty of how something is made.

Academically, the work contributes to discourses around material culture, construction ethics, and architectural storytelling. It situates timber not just as a sustainable resource, but as a medium for spatial and cultural expression. The project emphasizes that design decisions are never just technical; they carry values about how we relate to the environment, labor, and material cycles. Societally, it suggests a way of building that is more connected to local conditions and manual processes, and less dependent on distant fabrication infrastructure. In this way, the project speaks to current debates around resilience, circularity, and post-industrial modes of making, and suggests that timber architecture can be both low-tech and highly meaningful.

Transferability

While the design is specific in its tectonic language, the strategies I developed are transferable to other material contexts or urban environments. The core ideas are not bound to a single typology, but instead offer a way of thinking: one that begins with the character of the material and builds outward into architecture. These principles could inform housing, public buildings, or small-scale infrastructures that prioritize material identity, adaptability, and craft.

Rather than proposing a prototype to be copied, the project serves as a conceptual framework for resisting material neutrality and embracing imperfection. It demonstrates how a controlled structure can coexist with expressive material articulation, and how design can respond to local availability and construction culture.

Lessons Learned

One of the most important things I've learned is how crucial it is to balance research and design. Theory can be inspiring and informative, but if it's not connected to early design exploration, it can also make it harder to move forward and make clear decisions. I've learned that my strength lies in intuitive, spatial thinking - and I need to preserve space for that within even the most research-heavy process.

Starting from a purely theoretical position made it difficult to test and apply insights quickly, and I often felt disconnected from the physicality of the architecture I was imagining. In hindsight, a more iterative process - where research and design evolve side-by-side - would have helped maintain creative momentum. I also learned that not every insight from research needs to be directly visualized in the project. Instead, clarity and strength come from making selective, principled decisions and letting the core concept drive everything else. Ultimately,

I've gained a deeper understanding of how I work best - and how to structure future projects in a way that supports both intellectual rigor and design intuition.

Toward P5

In the final phase, I plan to focus on intensive model-making as a design and research tool - using the physical act of building to refine material logic, structure and construction. I also want to strengthen the storytelling aspect of the project: making sure the core narrative is accessible and legible, even without full technical or academic context.

Two Personal Reflection Questions

1. How can architectural expression emerge from the limits of a material, rather than its possibilities?
2. What happens when you remove the assumption of optimization and let the building process become visible again?