

Reflection

Capacities of Zuidas

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At home in the city and the capacities of a Business district.

The Central Business District is a global condition, the enterprise dream of tall and impressive towers as an expression of financial stability and strength, is a model appearing all over the world.

The CBD models emerging in Europe, such as La Defense in Paris, Northern Quarter in Brussels and Docklands in London, is a typology implanted into an existing city fabric; they are perhaps beneficial to the financial development of a city, but it create a tension with the surroundings. This tension can create opportunities that enhance the urban street life, such as the case of Sony Centre in Berlin where restaurants and cafes under the large central canopy make it a destination in itself.

In 1998 Amsterdam saw the development of its own business district,¹ a master plan designed by Pi de Bruijn, the Zuidas district is composed of separate neighborhoods and a large variety of functions, but it is best known for its 650.000 m² of office space². It is however promoted as a second center for Amsterdam and fifteen years after its conception, the area presents issues that prevent it from becoming as such.

The research conducted with the Zuidas group of the Dwelling graduation studio focused on Zuidas as an isolated area followed by its relationship with the Van Eesteren neighborhood on the south. The research showed a disconnection between the two, with the Amsterdam Zuid station as the main reason to visit the site; neighbors describing it as “dead”.

My personal research focused on a deeper understanding of what *dead* actually signifies, and by analyzing the functions and their hours of operation it became apparent that the office schedule reign over the site, where 95% of site is empty during the weekend.³

Throughout the research, the notion of scale was an important factor; the abrupt change between the 20 meter Van Eesteren slab buildings and the 80 meter high towers⁴ behind a canal, (fig. 1) acted as a barrier between the two areas, aided by the restricted schedule of activities mentioned above, this was also a strong consideration for the project.

Parallel to the site research, the Dwelling graduation studio *At home in the city*, set a framework to conduct a thematic research; our research was based on the premise that globally the population is returning to the city from the suburbs, in search of job opportunities and greater interaction; where suburbs show decline in growth.⁵

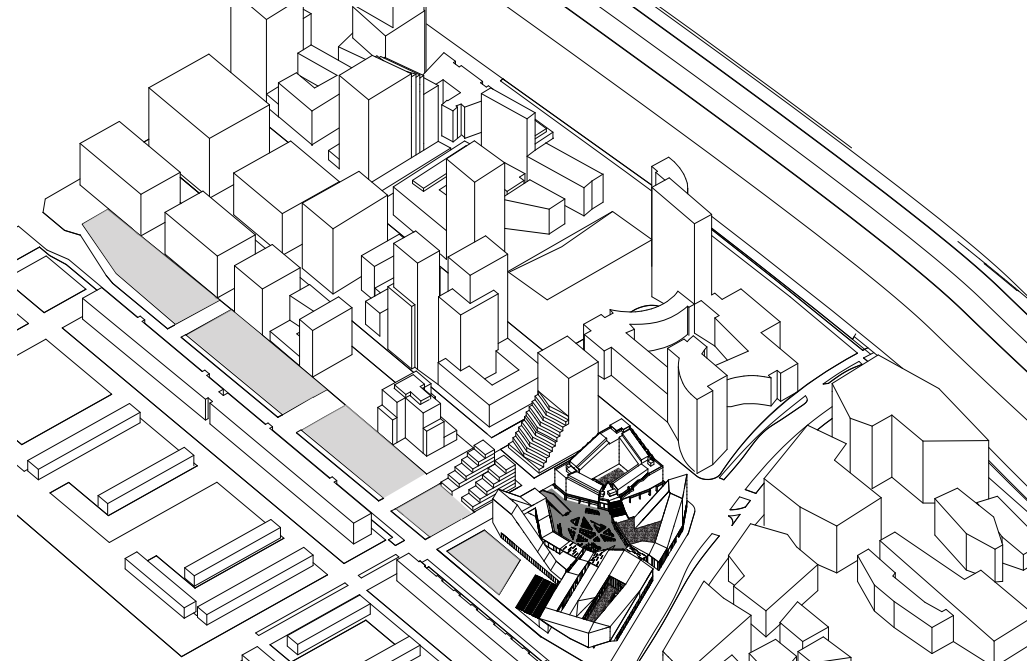


Fig. 1 - Project capacities of Zuidas on site- canal as barrier between van Eesteren on the left and CBD in the middle.

The thematic research focused on dwelling architecture as mediation between urbanism and the necessities of resident, exploring the concept of flexible housing, supported by ideas of John Habraken, Herman Hertzberger and the work of Tatiana Schneider and Jeremy Till. The research analyzed how these concepts performed at different scales – denominated Levels of permanence.⁶ The research studied different approaches to the concept of flexibility, in three different typologies: Quinta Monroy in Chile, as incremental housing, Next 21 in Osaka,

as participatory design, and Nemasus in France as user defined space. These three projects were consciously located in different urban settings and analyzed within their surroundings, taking the technical aspects associated with flexible housing into the larger scheme of the city.

For the development of my thesis, this research showed the importance of a project that stems from the site, and not a technical concept implanted into the city fabric, avoiding “object” architecture transplantable to any location⁷

1-S.Majoor, W.Salet, 2005. Amsterdam Zuidas European Space. 1st ed. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.

2-<http://www.amsterdam.nl/zuidas/english/menu/zuidas/facts-figures/>

3 Data collected from Amsterdam gisdro and independent websites of businesses on site.

4 100 maximum allowed on site due to proximity to Schiphol airport.

5 http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2012/06/28/new_census_data_show_us_cities_growing_faster_than_suburbs.html

6- Levels of permanence is a methodology developed during the thematic research to identify components of urbanism and architecture at different scales. The approach categorizes components that can be removed without compromising the integrity of the higher level. ie. interior partition to a dwelling, a dwelling to a building, a building to a city block, city block to neighborhood.

7- Referring to the concepts of the “tower block” typology popular in Europe in the 1960s and other siteless architecture.

Approach

An important consideration for the intervention of my project into the Zuidas site, was the introduction of facilities not present in the site and the neighborhood, but that would also create a stronger link with rest of Amsterdam. The decision was made to integrate cultural program as part of cultural rings of the city. It was also crucial to develop a scale that could make a smooth transition between neighborhoods and physically bridge the gap; this scale should furthermore be responsive to the pedestrian in the public space, a scale lacking in Zuidas. ⁷

Living in this scenario

The graduation project developed building No.1 (Fig.2) on the northwest corner of the Gershwin cluster. The building has a commercial and multipurpose base and dwellings on 7 levels above. The scale of the project is a direct dialogue to the plinths of the highrises and the lower Van Eesteren buildings, furthermore it is a height were even at the upper level one still feels a connection to the ground. The building slopes on all sides creating viewing platforms accessible by elevators and stairs and to the residents of both buildings 1 and 2- this is a commentary of the situation of the Zuidas highrise district,

where the most interesting commodity- the view from above- is committed only to those in private offices, leaving the site after business hours. The building has the intention to be mediation between the contemplation of activity and privacy for the user, based on the thematic research; this notion of dwelling and activity guided the design of the dwellings, façade and the public spaces. Furthermore it explored concepts of flexibility through its structural scheme composed of where load bearing walls and columns where dwellings can be expanded but still set a logic in how they expand ⁸.

Reflection

In order to jump-start activity in the site, the initial approach of adding program which was lacking in the site, with focus on a large variety of cultural facilities, provided a direction towards the programmatic distribution of the site; this approach failed to acknowledged the fact that privatized cultural operations also relay on office schedules counteracting the efforts of the project. This issue however helped to redefine the term “cultural” for the project, opting for the integration of a neighborhood library as one of the four buildings of the cluster. Furthermore it generated the development of work/live spaces at the ground level next to the library, useable as galleries or retail where other residents can take advantage of the commercial facilities provided on site.

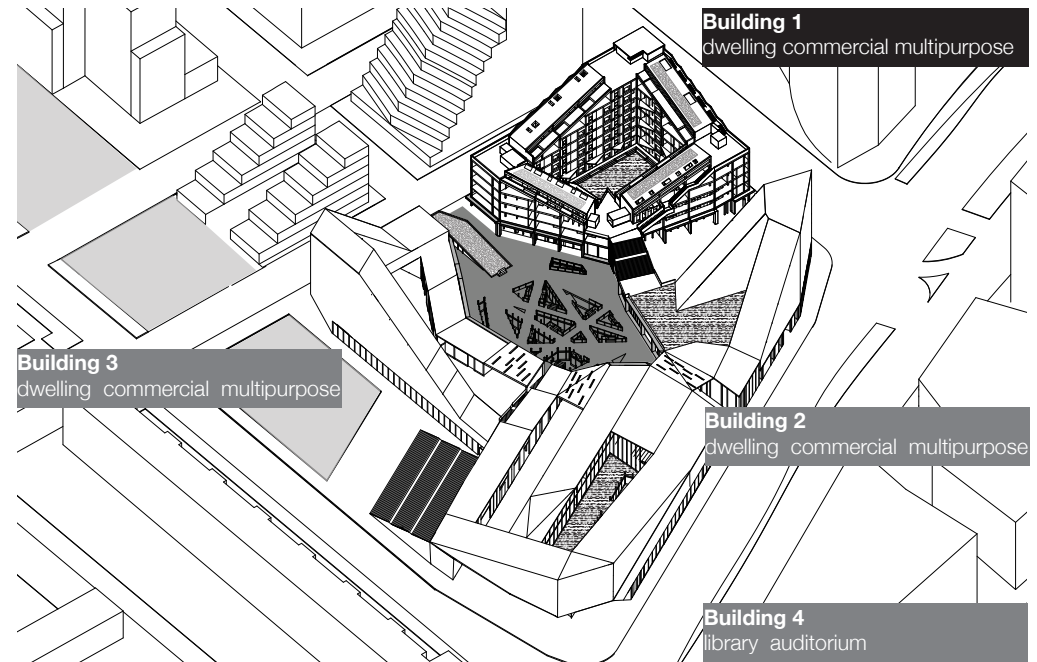


Fig. 2 - Gershwin Clusters and developed building.

This approach also set a strong conceptual stepping stone in the development of building 1 as the idea of how to perceive the ground level as a stage for activity guided the volume and distribution of the dwellings- It was crucial to the project however, that the dweller had the choice to be part of this dialogue, particularly with the operation of the outer facade not only as means of shading but also as privacy.

Why *capacities*? The thesis is an exploration on the capacity of Zuidas to be seen as more than a business district, as a

dead stack of slabs during the weekends; this is done by integrating new program that extends further than the office schedule. It also has the capacity to integrate different types of dwellings, levels of interaction and spaces for contemplation; this was done through strong volumes that do not rely on height but in composition, creating a stronger relationship between urbanism and architecture, transcending levels of permanence.

7-Attempts are made by 30 meter plinths as bases for the towers as connection to the ground.

8- Loadbearing walls having a better contribution to acoustic dampening for sleeping rooms.

