

P4 Reflection

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During the past year, while working on my graduation project a couple of research themes and design ideas have shaped the project in its current form. I believe these themes and ideas have a meaning in a broader context and have had an important impact on my design process. By writing the P4 Reflection I would like to take some time to reflect upon them, to see how they have helped me and what they could mean for my design process in the future.

My graduation project proposes a new concert hall for the City of London. As London currently doesn't own an acoustically 'world-class' concert hall yet, the City of London is, as we speak, in the process of developing a new concert hall in their city. Our graduation project hypothetically mimics this 'real-life' brief of a new 15.000 m² concert hall, but also criticises it, in order to arrive at a meaningful new public building for the city and its citizens.

Research into precedents

One of the first acts during the beginning of the first semester was to study precedents of concert hall buildings. Three research booklets were produced, of which one of them was dedicated to contemporary European concert halls. In this particular booklet, we studied the concert hall building as a building typology including its historical and social role within society. We started analysing the precedents by looking at and retracing their plan and section on a comparative scale. This first act proved to be particularly helpful for me in understanding and getting a first 'grip' on the sometimes complex organisation and scale of concert hall buildings. Besides that, by retracing the plan and section, the usually 'staged' set of spaces of how one enters, moves through the building and arrives at the seat became more visible. Next to this, some more analytical drawings of the precedents, such as a Nolli-plan were produced. In these Nolli-plans, the areas publicly accessible (front-of-house) are shown in black and white, while the non-public spaces (back-of-house) spaces are left grey. By doing so, characteristic questions concerning concert hall buildings such as how is the building situated within its urban context, where does one enter and how does one move through the building, but also which parts of the building are left 'unseen', became clear. The Nolli-plan proved to be a successful tool to start understanding how concert hall buildings can be placed within the city, how their public spaces are placed within the building and what form and role these buildings can take on.

One of the precedents that appealed to me from the beginning was the *Concertgebouw Brugge*, designed by the architectural duo Robbrecht & Daem in 2002. The building shows successfully that a concert hall building can accommodate more than just the performance of music, but also can be a meaningful public building for the city and citizens and 'non-visitors' of musical performances. The building is divided into two main elements: a lower volume consisting the main concert hall with its back looking away from the city and a higher volume at the front, the 'Lantern Tower', facing the city, consisting most of the public program, such as a cafe, a shop and a publicly accessible viewing platform at the top floor. As a result of dividing the program into two main elements, an important third space is created, a public square in front of the building, which opens the building up towards the city and citizens of Bruges. Analysing significant precedents of concert hall buildings helped me to discover and understand different 'strategies' of organising and positioning a concert hall building within the city. These analyses created a solid base of knowledge to start developing my own proposal for a concert hall building, located in the city centre of London.

Urban strategy

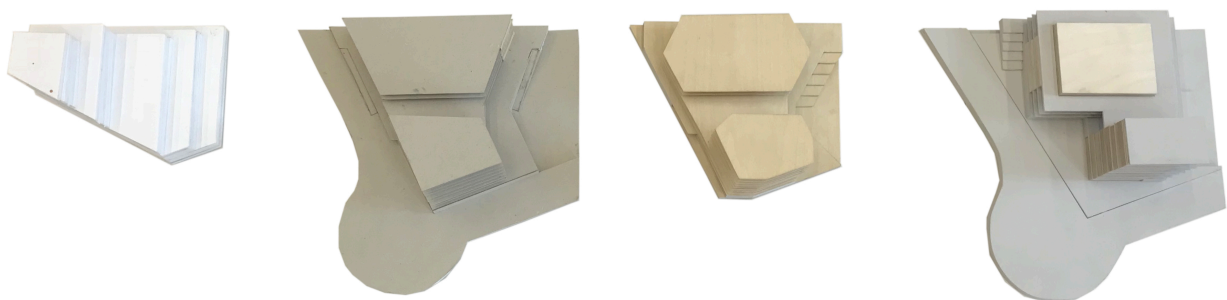
Simultaneously to analysing precedents, an urban strategy of the to be designed concert hall building was to be developed. From the beginning the relations between the proposed urban mass, the urban surroundings and the public space of the site had a significant impact on the design process. In order to understand the urban surroundings better, a 1:500 model was built showing the site and its immediate surroundings.

The site is located in the district City of London, London's historical financial district. This area of London was heavily bombed during the World War II, creating a 'tabula rasa' left open for redevelopment. On the northern boundary the site meets the modern residential complex the Barbican Estate, designed by the architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon from 1960s until the 1980s. As a consequence of the bombing, the urban pattern of the modernistic Barbican Estate takes on a rigid form laid over the former ancient medieval street pattern, creating a rather autonomous in warded residential complex in the city centre of London. At the same time does the district of City of London consist of a large amount of financial institutes and tall office buildings, which were also built as part of the redevelopment of the city.

As a first act of the design process, 1:500 massing models, roughly consisting the project's program, were tested in the 1:500 model. My first intuition was to implement a high building volume which would be able to, at the same time, accommodate the program in a stacked way, and on the other side be able to meet the height of surrounding urban volumes. Although I felt like meeting the height of surrounding building volumes was successful, I wasn't sure about accommodating the program in a stacked way, as I was also looking for an urban form which could somehow respond to the rigid forms found in the Barbican Estate. Nevertheless, by trying out quickly made models in the bigger site model, the idea of an urban mass which would be able to meet the surroundings building height was a design theme that I felt confident about and continued to use as a design theme throughout the rest of the design process.

At the P2 presentation, I proposed an urban strategy consisting of two separate volumes connected by a third volume. One of the volumes of the ensemble is a lower, rectangular volume accommodating the main component of the program, a concert hall for 2000 visitors. This lower volume was placed against the boundary meeting the Barbican Estate and would enclose one of its residential courtyards. The other part of the ensemble was a higher volume, placed at the front of the side, which would be able to accommodate most of the public program, such as the cafe, restaurant, music education facilities and the chamber music hall (placed at the top of volume with sights towards St Paul's Cathedral). As I was more content with the way the ensemble sat in its urban context and met the neighbouring Barbican Estate I continued to develop it.

After P2, I made one more significant adjustment to the urban strategy. Until then, the urban form followed the boundaries of the site, which are loosely based on the medieval street patterns. As I felt that following directly the boundaries of the site would give too much of a compromising form, I decided to clarify the urban mass into a strong L-shape, acting lower at the boundary with the Barbican Estate and higher at the front of the site, leaving as a result a public space in between, opening the building up towards the city. This public space is given back to the city, while at the same time it can act as a (formal) approach towards the building. Inserting physical models into the 1:500 urban model felt like a successful tool to develop an urban strategy, as in a quick way different design strategies and ideas can be tested, while at the same time the relations of the proposed mass with the surrounding urban fabric and public space becomes clear. However, after the 1:500 urban strategy was fixed, it felt like it was a good moment to start developing the ensemble and to see how the building could be expressed on a bigger scale.

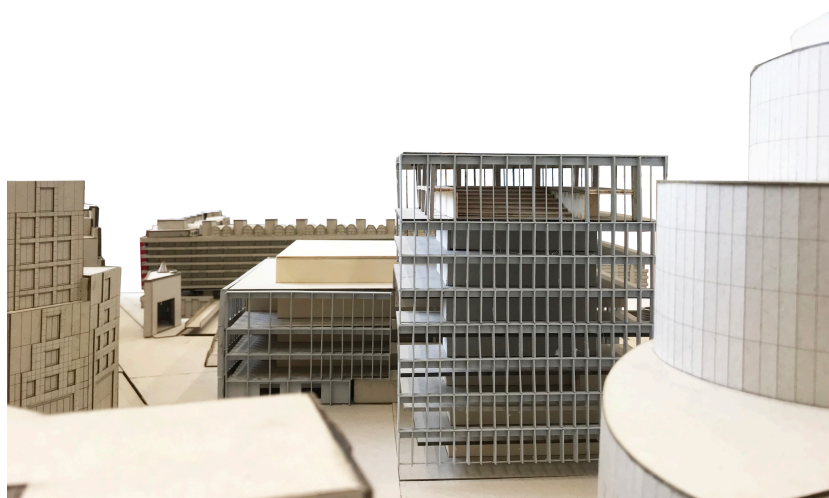


Process of the urban strategy, from left to right: first intuition until the final proposal

Architectural expression

Another significant aspect during the design process has been the architectural expression of the building. My process of developing an idea about the building's expression started out by, once more, looking at the urban surroundings. In terms of architectural expression, I was quite fascinated by the uncompromising, modern architectural language of the Barbican Estate. The lower, terraced housing blocks of the Barbican are characterised by long stretched bush-hammered concrete balconies, which emphasise its urban rigid forms. The higher, rather more sculptural, residential towers are equally covered with bush-hammered concrete elements, but exists of an interplay of vertical and horizontal elements, still expressing a modern clarity. Since the project proposes a new public building in the city centre of London, one of the main design concerns in terms of architectural expression was how to express a new public building in such an urban setting, directly adjacent to a modern residential complex as the Barbican Estate? As for me personally, buildings always stand in dialogue with each other, for the architectural expression of my building, I propose to continue the dialogue of the modern clarity found in the Barbican Estate. This is expressed in the building having slender, vertical facade elements leaving a rather transparent facade in between. Through this transparent facade, the public spaces of the building, such as the foyer, becomes visible from the exterior and vice versa, the city becomes visible from the interior for its visitors. Subsequently the main component of the building, the concert hall, having its own expressive form, equally becomes visible, with the foyer in between being a 'podium' for society. While the Barbican Estate has a rather inwards orientated expression focusing on its residential garden, in my proposal I have tried to give the building an outward expression, revealing the buildings public function and to establish a dialogue with the city and in a more specific way with the neighbouring Barbican Estate.

At the P3 presentation, I presented a 1:200 model, including my ideas concerning the architectural expression of the building and the organisation of the foyer positioned behind the facade. As this was the first time I actually built and 'tried' the facade in a physical model it was a good moment to reflect upon its outcome. Looking at the model, I was not yet entirely satisfied with the final result, as the architectural expression of the building seemed somewhat corporate or office like. This was then also confirmed during the remarks after the P3 presentation, which gave me new input to continue developing the facades. As I am currently in the process of preparing for the P4 presentation, I am trying to give the building a less corporate appearance, while keeping my initial ideas of how I want the building to express itself. In order to improve my design, I have tried several sketch models including different facade ideas, but unfortunately, in my opinion, it feels like until so far I haven't found the 'final' solution yet. I suppose that at the same time, this shows the challenge of designing a new public building of the scale that the brief describes. Questions such as how does a public building addresses itself in the city and how is it expressed and materialised have been a returning theme during my design process and is a question that I am still dealing with. I hope that in the upcoming period, after the P4, I would still be able to improve this part of my design as I think this has been one of the main design challenges during my process of the graduation project this year.



P3 1:200 model