Final Reflection

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Libraries, *the* Library, and Current Issues

Libraries' roles evolve throughout time. Back then, "visiting the library" was a knowledge-acquisition ritual. Nowadays, however, public libraries have transformed from places devoted to "books and study" into open and expectation-free environments, embracing issues of equality and multiculturalism.

The Stockholm City Library, designed in 1928 by the renowned Swedish architect Gunnar Asplund, was groundbreaking for its day. As the first library in Sweden to welcome the general public, this building has always been a landmark in Stockholm. However, it feels somewhat ambiguous nowadays: the majestic front entrance is juxtaposed with McDonald's and 7-11 stores, the once atmospheric spaces are packed with cooperative-styled furnishings, and the building's monumental architectural language no longer corresponds to the variety of users and activities it currently accommodates.

There have been iterations of architectural debates on how this library should adapt itself as a contemporary public space: in 2006, a competition on expanding the City Library attracted entries from all over the world, yet most of these projects showed no consideration for the existing building; in 2012, a rather conservative brief sought to preserve the library as an architectural monument; in 2014, another competition had an idealised vision of making the City Library accommodating books of all languages; and finally in 2016, Caruso St John Architects was appointed to renovate the building, yet the project never got realised due to complex political reasons. Nowadays, the City Library is the elephant in the room that no one dares to touch, as an elderly from the last century, staring blankly at today's polarised society.

The Graduation Studio

As a graduation studio, we will each develop a proposal for Stockholm Library, exploring how this remarkable legacy can be transformed into a contemporary library in response to its current and future challenges. The previous competition in 2006 asked for a rapid expansion. The later brief in 2014, on the other hand, did not have prescribed areas but left it for the architect to decide how they might optimise the existing, to accommodate the original intentions, but in a more flexible manner, while also proposing that various elements could be reduced or removed. By testing and critiquing these briefs, we will develop our own attitude towards the Stockholm City Library, with the detailed programmes in respect to how we reconcile with the quality of the existing architecture.

The Process: Research – Design

The research and design processes were intertwined and influenced one another. In the beginning, we conducted research as a studio group on the past and present conditions of the Stockholm City Library, other works by Asplund, and other contemporary library buildings. Later, as I was developing my design, I also researched the functions and adjacencies of contemporary libraries, the iterations of changes that happened to the City Library over time, Asplund's approach to building with landscape, and the technical aspects and materiality of the existing building. The relationship of design and research in my project can be briefly illustrated like this:
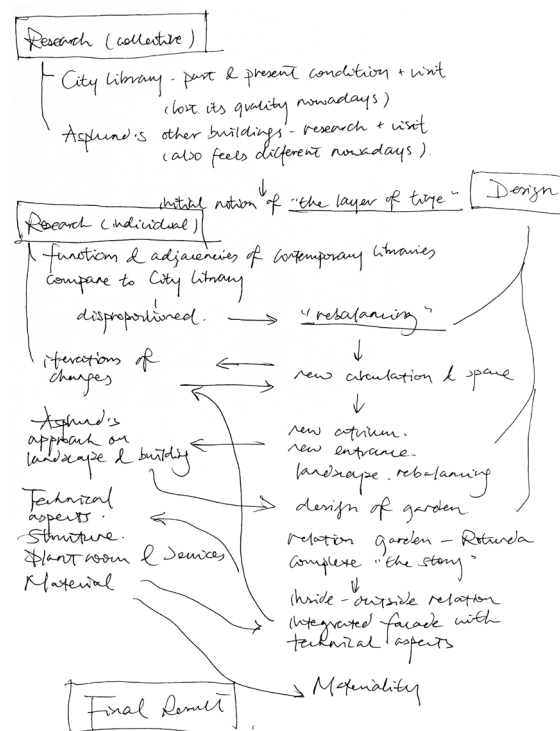
The notion of "the layer time" was established quite early, especially aftering the site visit to Stockholm and seeing the contrast between past and present conditions of Asplund's works. As I stated in my research plan for P1:

"It was intriguing to see how the layer of the fourth dimension – time – has shaped the architecture. (…)

This highlights two aspects to consider: people and time. How do various groups of users interact with the library at the same time? Will they have different encounters with this library over a more extended period? Furthermore, how can a contemporary library adapt to this ever-changing nature of society and culture? And how will the architectural interventions of the Stockholm City Library respond to all these?

Asplund, at his time, could not foresee today's drastic changes in socioeconomic and cultural context. Similarly, we cannot predict how the role of a library will evolve in the future. Therefore, we must be aware that our current architectural proposal may not be the ultimate solution."

After researching the functions and adjacencies of other contemporary libraries compared to the City Library, I noticed that this library has a disproportionally low percentage of areas accessible to the public, as a lot of the space is taken by redundant circulations. In addition, the monochrome character of reading spaces and the overly dominant role of the Rotunda in visitors' routing also result in the monumental, institutional feeling of the library, which mismatches people's expectations for a contemporary library.

This leads to a fundamental step in my design decision: **Do we really need to build a new library?** The City Library is in its current condition mainly because it lacked strategic intervention over the past few decades: people simply added things as needed. If we erect another building next to it as required without addressing the library's current concerns, this new expansion will quickly become another burden.

After making this decision at P2, the following design process seemed in general relatively smooth to me. The subsequent research came along as I narrowed down my design focus and further supported my design decisions.

Recording my process chronologically in the project journal was really beneficial to my design. I constantly have many thoughts and images in my head, and when I put them together in the book, it allows me to grasp those that appear repeatedly: the things I truly care about, even if I am not conscious of them. I hate putting my thoughts in nicely written words because I will lose them once I start phrasing the sentences. Therefore, I prefer keywords, short phrases and illustrations, and I find it helpful to handwrite whatever comes to mind and record it in my journal. Eventually, all these jumbled notions will emerge into a coherent design narrative.

From Abstraction to Concrete

I enjoyed working with models and drawings, not the neat, presentational ones but the rough testing models and quick sketches. Especially at the earlier stages, if I work with digital models and drawings too soon, I can get trapped in the rabbit hole of fixing things rather than developing my ideas. With models and drawings, I can test my intuitive thoughts as they pop up.

Atmosphere is very important to me, and working with models and drawings helps me best grasp the atmosphere of the space I want to achieve. Sometimes, I stare at these images and imagine myself in the space. Once I am certain about the atmosphere, it gives me the motivation to realise it.

Then, as we move on, I enjoy working with the details, as I can materialise the image and the atmosphere and make the abstract imagery more concrete. When dealing with an existing heritage building, precise operation is especially important. I tend to make decisions on tectonics and key fragments before figuring out the entire building, and this, in fact, helps me to figure out the rest of the building in a more coherent way.

Position

The master's programme in architecture constantly raises the subject of "positioning": How do we position ourselves as designers? How should architecture place itself in a broader environment? The graduation studio of Interiors Buildings Cities focuses on "Palace", referring to complex public interiors whose societal responsibilities are constantly re-interpreted over time. This project on the Stockholm City Library, in particular, urges us to reconsider the meaning of "libraries" as public spaces today – and in the future – and challenges us to adopt such transformation concerning Asplund's architectural legacy.

This also raises the question of how we, as future architects, deal with the past, present, and future.

The previous competition's intricacy emerged from the architecture and competing interests among the library institution, the municipality, and other political bodies. This project, therefore, seeks to form an opinion on how we treat a heritage building. This is especially relevant for architects nowadays because we need to know what to do with the old to build new.
Sustainbility of architecture regards not only the tangible aspects but also the intangible ones. Adding another layer of time, therefore, gives the existing heritage building a new life. Yet, we must be aware that our current architectural proposal may not be, and will never be, the ultimate solution.

Just as a library holds books reflecting layers of human knowledge across time, its architecture bears traces of interpretation from different generations. I think that is the charm of this architectural intervention.