

P4 Reflection

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The graduation topic of the Interiors Buildings Cities studio is the Palace. Palaces are used in the studio as a reference to complex representative public buildings that are able to accommodate the different scales and gradations of public life within them. The contemporary art museum for the city of Antwerp is a topic nested in the very present-day realities. Architecture for art is also nowadays the architecture for public life, which also has to express the critical history of the institution that will inhabit it.

According to the project brief, the museum is proposed on a site that will recast it as a significant urban figure in Antwerp's ongoing development, the gallery is intended to become part of a museum ensemble in the South of the city that includes several art galleries, Photo Museum, and the recently transformed and reopened Museum of Fine Arts. At the same time, regardless of the main purpose, it has to become a new representative architecture for the city of Antwerp, therefore, the typological and architectural investigations should be strictly connected with the context in which it is being designed.

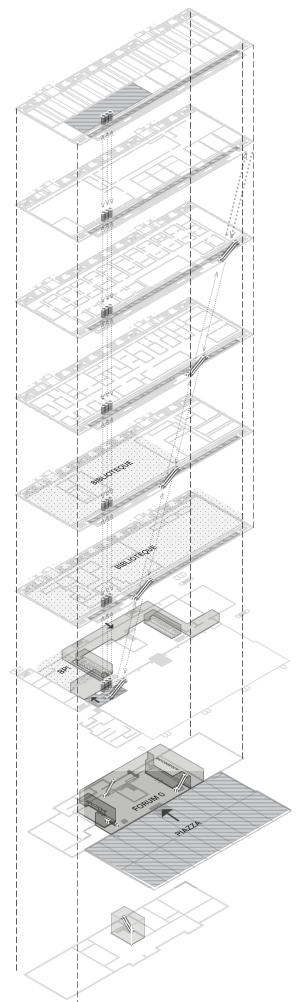
The Project started with several weeks of intensive research on the architecture that characterizes museums of contemporary art and studying history of contemporary art. Collective research was conducted by thinking and doing: analyzing precedent projects of contemporary art museums through making models of exhibition spaces, analyzing and creating plans, sections, diagrams, and other relevant drawings to understand the given precedents in terms of spatial and functional qualities as well as studying the architectural strategies and ideas which underpin each of the given museum references. I was especially interested in case studies when the architect or curator broke with the omnipresent aesthetics of the "white cube".

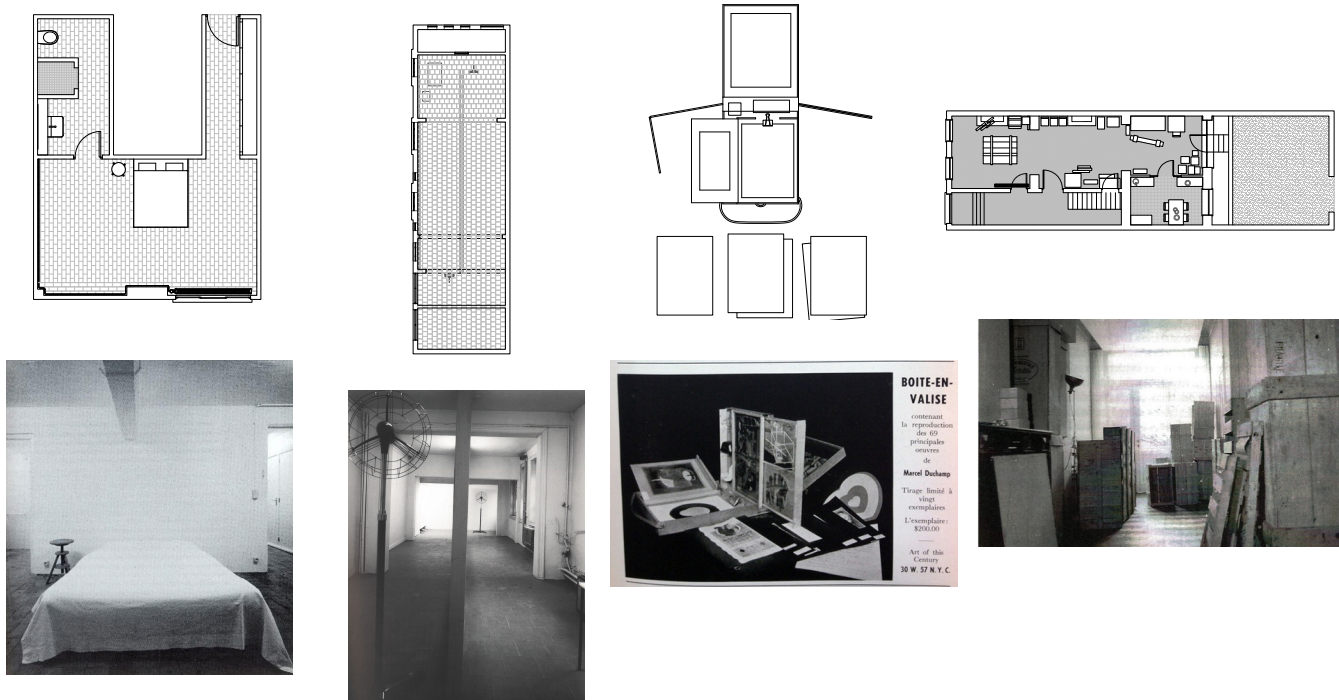
Next to research, the studio offered as well an interesting set of Briefs - design tasks, which were circling around problems such as exhibiting artworks, achieving a desired materiality of the design, curating the atmosphere of the gallery interior, etc. At the moment of P1 the tasks were more broad, but going through the process of designing one's own building, they helped to structure the design process.



above: work in progress of building the interior spaces of the Centre Pompidou exhibition rooms.

above: analysis of publicly accessible components of Centre Pompidou. The accessible amenities include the rooftop, public library, forum which includes the cafe, bookstore, ticket office.





above: selected anti-museum spaces translated into spatial drawings.
 from left: Chambres d'Amis, installation by Daniel Buren; Bruce Nauman, Wall with two Fans, White Wide Space; La Boîte-En-Valise by Marcel Duchamp, Museo de Arte Moderno, Departamento de Aguilas, by Marcel Broodthaers

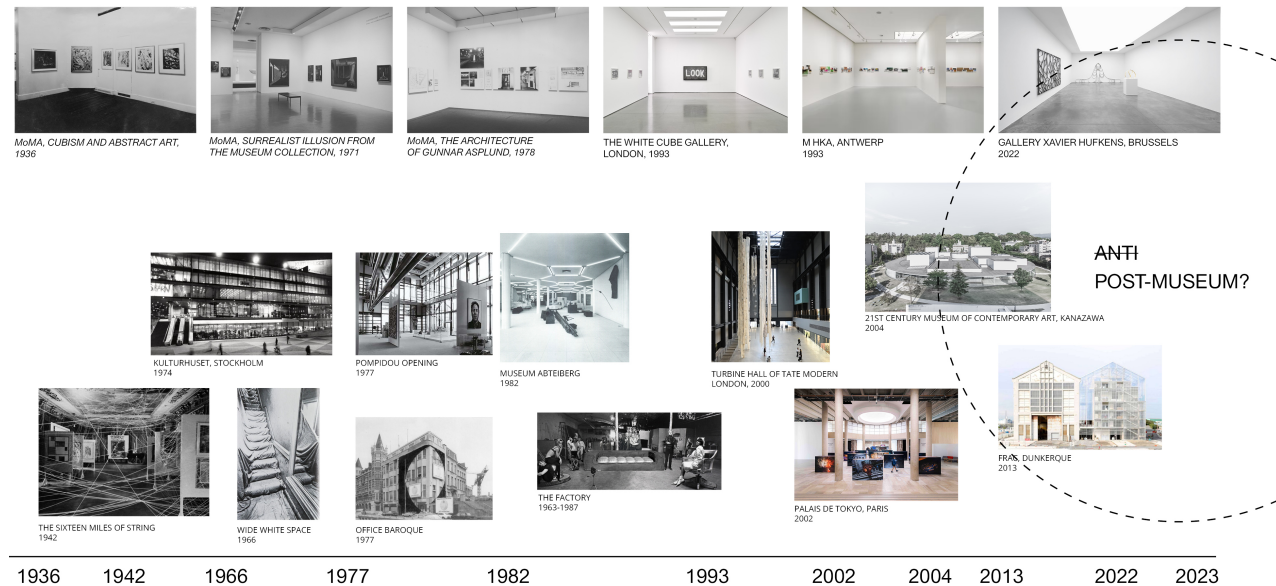
Working towards P1, I had a first chance to express my developing attitude towards the question of exhibiting art, creating a spatial ensemble project for Walter Swennen's artworks. The space had an ambiguous character that was breaking with the sacrality of the abovementioned white cube. In my proposal I delved into exploring the idea of a painting being a sculptural object. According to correalist beliefs of Frederick Kiesler, the paintings (or other pieces of art) inhabit the space and are creating a specific relation to it. Treating paintings as objects rather than flat pictures allows to engage a special relationship between the viewer and the painting, but also helps the viewer to acknowledge and appreciate the spatial qualities of the exhibition room. The two rooms house the whole collection of this artist that the museum owns. Connected with enfilade, spaces differ between each other in proportions and size. Simple benches in both rooms serve not only as a place to sit and spend time, but also to exhibit the artwork. Furniture and exhibition background blend with each other, creating a potential public space.



left: Walter Swennen Spatial Ensemble

After extensive overall research and P1 task, the specific site and institution to work with was introduced. M HKA in Antwerp has an interesting history, having its roots in an anti-institutional approach reaching far before the 1980s, when it opened in its current form. Its collection focuses not only on contemporary art, but also celebrates the 1960's and 1970s artists who were criticizing the museums as institutions and sought for alternative spaces to exhibit their works. Nowadays, the authorities of the institution want to radically expand the museum's capacity to accommodate the needs of the growing collection and mark the M HKA's importance within the contemporary institutions' landscape as well as expand their program significantly.

The problem arises of how one can reconcile this dichotomic nature of M HKA's anti-museum fascinations with contemporary technical requirements and design a well-functioning institution that also reflects the critical history of this contemporary art museum.



above: analytical timeline showing two main trends in exhibiting art in the past 100 years: the white cube and anti-museum.

After my P1 presentation and working towards the P2 milestone, I have developed an attitude towards the question of what the art museum of the 21st century should be, especially one with such a background as M HKA. The former weeks of conducting research on anti-museum spaces and studying the history of the given institution definitely helped me to position my project within the appropriate frames and build a strong basis of the design. After my P2 presentation, the feedback from the tutors was very useful to continue developing the proposal. I was advised to keep working on well-constructed argumentation to support the final design.

There is a fundamental contradiction between what M HKA's history is and what future its authorities want. Its initial anti-museum approach is still visible in the current narration of the institution. However, as a world-level museum, it also needs appropriate architecture to mark its presence in the Belgian art world as well as to host its constantly growing collection.

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As mentioned before, M HKA has its roots in the avant-garde, bottom-up initiatives of artists who were escaping the rigidity of institutions and sought for alternative spaces to practice art. Therefore, I decided to take over the building that exists on the plot to create the last act of appropriation and embody the spirit of the institution by this decision. I intended to treat the pieces of the existing building as a scenography which compliments the new design. In terms of its position in the urban context, The building is a mediator between two urban qualities - the park and the riverbank promenade. Vast urban space opens for visitors as well as pedestrians who do not intend to visit the institution.

What is more, while working on the interior qualities, I used the pieces of research from the former months to develop a broad catalog of types of spaces to exhibit art - ranging from the ones inspired by anti-museum warehouses and houses, to the white cube types. I intended to create some kind of plurality in the spatial qualities to allow artists and curators express their attitudes.

To conclude, looking at the process from the very beginning until my P4 presentation, the research conducted collectively in the studio was very useful when I was constructing my arguments and shaping my attitude towards the brief of the project. Despite having many collective tasks, I also had time to conduct individual research such as visiting the site, working with other relevant references from the architecture and art field, and studying the collection of the museum. The balance between individual and group tasks worked for me very well.