

Introduction

This project is rooted both in the chosen site, a monumental but now vacant barn in the Brabantse Biesbosch, and in a personal fascination for the moving and soothing effects of architecture and nature. During the research and design process, these two aspects have gradually grown towards each other, converging into a proposal for a nature retreat and a sequence of smaller structures that are rooted in the surrounding landscape.

The research phase started as a broad exploration, traveling between the fields of aesthetic philosophy, environmental psychology, architecture and landscape architecture. The aim was to identify the (landscape) architectural characteristics of a place for *beinning* in a natural setting. In this project, the term *beinning* functioned as a hyperonym for a broad spectrum of experiences related to relaxation and contemplation. The final report was threefold: a theoretical framework, a set of case studies and a spatial and historical analysis of the site.

Researching continued during the design phase, as I further investigated above mentioned themes and experimented with their application to the chosen location. The Amaliahoeve is a 1930s farm ensemble, located on a polder island in the Brabantse Biesbosch and registered as a national heritage site. Staatsbosbeheer, its current owner, is looking to redevelop the farm, potentially into a nature retreat.

In retrospect, the design process can be summarised as an increasing appreciation of the elements and qualities already present both in the farm buildings and the surrounding landscape, and the realisation that very little is needed to orchestrate the sought-after experience of *beinning*. In the end, the intervention distilled into a new layer of minimal, carefully fitted-in interventions that frame and strengthen the experience of the interior of the barn and its surrounding landscape.

Why

An important aspect of this project is revitalising and reopening a heritage site of national importance (*Rijksmonument*). With this came a responsibility to position the intervention in a unique landscape, a national park, that is attracting increasing numbers of tourists. The point of departure was to maintain the qualities of the existing, while increasing its accessibility, functionality and capacity and encouraging a healthy mode of tourism. The final design aims to intensify the bond between place and visitor and to make guests feel part of the site's identity and narrative. The proposed program invites a conscious approach to the goal of one's visit (*beinning*) as well as the surroundings and fellow guests.

The aspect of temporality is not only obtained by the arrival and departure of guests. While designing the interventions in this historically layered site, I was confronted with my ethical role as an architect: how should I position myself in this age-old scene of interaction between man and nature? It was important to me that the interventions made in this project were (in concept) reversible, retained and minimal. The landscape and farm complex lend themselves perfectly to the program proposed. The only interventions necessary are comparatively small gestures and accents that frame and strengthen the

existing qualities, i.e. the vastness of the polderscapes, the dynamics of the water plains, the basilical interior of the barn and the sheltered labyrinth of the *griend* wilderness. Decisions about materiality played a key part here: the new layer added should be easily distinguishable from the previous historical layers. At the same time, this new layer should not overrule the qualities and elements already present or further complicate its spatial and aesthetic experience. I opted to use soft materials, materials that are already present (wood and plaster), but apply them in a different way and/or in a different colour.

This project also responds to social and societal developments. The program and sought-after atmosphere relate to current issues such as increasing individualism, increasing disconnectedness from nature and increasing stress. We live in an ever-accelerating society; the key to modern life seems to be progress, moving forwards, improving. With this comes an urge for a physical or mental escape. The design orchestrates an atmosphere of collectivity, of introspection, of escape and of confrontation and reconnection with nature – inviting guests to temporarily step out of the habitual and reflect on their lives from afar.

Relation with the studio and master track

The studio ExploreLab has no particular topic, which is why I chose to do my project here. It enabled me to travel between fields of study (architecture, landscape architecture, psychology, philosophy, etc.) and scales (interior details, heritage intervention, landscape of the surrounding polder, characteristics of the Biesbosch overall). I highly appreciate the freedom that comes with this method and I feel that it has enriched my design proposal and process.

One of the main joys of this project was flowing over into the field of landscape architecture. It was very interesting to learn how these fields interact with each other, what lessons we can take from one another. In the end, I ended up approaching the landscape and the architecture of the farm in the same way. To me, they have become one.

Lastly, the master AUBS is above all an academic education program and this project has taught me that the academia does not only lie in citing your sources right. It has confronted me with the importance and meaning of academically founding your design choices, of substantiating every decision.

Research <> design

Process

The first phase of the research (before P2) was free and broad. I travelled between fields of study, between theory and examples from practice, resulting in an extensive toolbox of case studies and potential methods. When I started designing after P2, the research results had not yet distilled into key conclusions. I now see that, partly as a result of this, I started designing by implementing the lessons I took from the case studies in quite a literal way. An example is the spiralling route that defined my first design proposal (P3), which I presented as a vertically drawn-out cloister, inspired by the abbeys Roosenberg (Dom Hans van der Laan) en Emmaus in Doornburgh (Jan de Jong). In retrospect, I think

that, because the research results had not yet been summarised into more implicit, overarching conclusions, I was not yet able to apply my own spatial language, that fitted this specific site.

When I started the design phase, the themes of the research phase – i.e. heritage, landscape architecture, the program of a place for *bezinning* – had not yet blended together. Partly because of this, partly because of my ‘other’ background as an architectural historian, I often felt like I was working on three projects sequentially. I was unable to work from all of these perspectives at the same time. A telling example is my solution for the stables that rim the back and eastern wall of the barn’s interior. Intuitively, I felt that the stables were an important element of the barn’s history, but architecturally, I found it difficult to merge them with my design that proposed a sequence of intimate seclusion and overwhelming open spaces. Quite late in the design process (about a month before P4), I was finally able to identify that the stables were a key feature of this particular barn (the combination of monumentality and efficiency is what makes this barn different than others in the area). The position of the stables defines a sequence of open and enclosed spaces in the barn’s interior. Until this realisation, I had been trying to create exactly this by adding new volumes to the interior. Had I clearly defined the qualities of the existing barn and the spatial experience I was looking for before I started designing, the process might have been somewhat smoother.

On the other end, I now see that the design process to a large extent helped me to understand and clarify the spatial and heritage qualities of the barn and the landscape surrounding it. Designing – intervening in the existing – forced me to question and explain every intervention I made, to take position. It also encouraged me to reconsider the lessons I had taken from the case studies, to find the main threads and themes, and to apply them fittingly.

Another key connection between the research and the design phase is not only the lessons I took from the studied literature and case studies, but also the act of studying itself. Visiting and studying the case studies during the research phase taught me to look and to analyse the spatial, sensory and aesthetic experience and characteristics. Studying these projects with a certain theme in the back of my head – i.e. the sublime, transitions between spaces, contextuality – allowed me to develop further the way we (unconsciously) understand our surrounding. This was especially helpful for working on the scale and aspects of landscape architecture, for this is a field (and a way of looking) that I had hardly applied before this project. I enjoyed the discovery that, to me, there are no major differences between architectural and landscape architectural design and methodology.

Result

The case studies and theoretical framework distilled into two main conclusions. I will discuss them in relation to the final design

> Gradients of intimacy and intensity:

The research made me realise that a valuable characteristic of an inclusive *bezinning*-landscape is the availability of various degrees of privacy and collectiveness, of openness and shelter and of (overwhelming) sublimity and (soothing) beauty. Quite early in the design phase, I realised that this

particular location asks for a third gradient of interior and exterior: a unique aspect of a barn is that it is not outside, nor inside. To create these varying degrees, the design consists of the introduction of new 'cocoon' within an existing one. Overall, both the experience of the barn interior and that of the routes through the landscape are based on moving from openness to enclosedness, from privacy to collectivity, from prospect to shelter. To a large extent, these aspects were already present (i.e. in the mix of open polders and dense *wilgengrienden* and in the contrast between the open interior of the barn and the more human scale of the stables). Throughout the design process, orchestrating and lengthening these transitions was an important factor. The void that forms (or actually lengthens) the entry of the barn is an example of this: it lengthens the formality of the act of entering, enlarging the effect of the vast scale of the barn and increasing the relief of arrival when exiting the void and entering the openness of the barn's interior.

> Contextuality:

The second conclusion related to contextuality, referring to an architecture and landscape that respond to each other and form a strong and clear symbiosis that strengthens the experience and the feeling of rootedness and belonging. The point of departure for the design is that the landscape is already incredibly rich in variety, history, sublimity and beauty. By introducing small gestures the experience is orchestrated further.

Personal reflection

Reflecting on my previous bachelor and master projects, I can see now that in every project, first and foremost, I departed from the existing, from the spatial, societal and historical characteristics and qualities that define the identity of a site. I have further developed this interest through a master in architectural history and in practice, by working for an office that researches cultural heritage. However, this is the first project where these roles, which had thus far remained somewhat separate, were to merge together, and this would prove the biggest challenge on a personal level. In my head, I took on the voices of tutors and colleagues representing different opinions, but it was actually me trying to make sense of multiple positions. I find it difficult to identify the moment of break-through now, but it was probably the realisation that much of what I wanted to create (overwhelming spaces, intimate nooks, and everything in between) was already present and just needed to be made habitual.

What I am most proud of is that I seem to have broken a lingering habit of linearity in my design process. At the end of almost every design project I did, my tutors would comment that I should try to experiment more in the future, to dare and change my design for the better, to kill my darlings, to be more creative and flexible. I agreed with them and it became a frustrating spell that I was not able to break. In this project, I feel like I have finally managed to critically reflect on my own work and to return to conceptual changes far into the design process. My tutors and fellow students were a great help in this, as they always managed to ask the questions that I did not know the answer to. This encouraged me to reconsider my previous decisions and statements and to further substantiate my position. These moments of reflection and reconsideration have to a great extent strengthened the final result.