

RELINK: LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

RISING ABOVE THE EXISTENT

Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities

REFLECTION PAPER



IOANNIS MEXIS

Chair of Heritage & Architecture
Graduation Studio: Future of Structuralism

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment,
Delft University of Technology

This project presents a realistic approach of how Structuralist Buildings can be adapted to contemporary societies and the evolution of higher educational institutions. When dealing with existing compositions, studying them prior to any design decisions is key to understand the main principles underlying them. Analysing the PN van Eyckhof and Matthias de Vrieshof Buildings in Leiden (Humanities Faculty) by Joop van Stigt, was a key starting point for my project. Expansion, adaptability and linking were the key aspects that guided and moulded both my research and design.

In order to achieve a holistic result in my project, following a combination of research methods was required; enabling me to investigate the historic building from different perspectives providing me with more broad knowledge about it, the movement it represents, and its environment. Through building archaeological research method (applying both qualitative and quantitative techniques) as well as case studies on existing projects allowed me to objectively understand the building, the layers of time and its full potential in order to take advantage of with my intervention. When dealing with existing structures, an objective view is vital in order to fully understand the composition's values, protect them and highlight them.

Through the findings of the research methods I followed, I was fascinated by Structuralism's and Joop van Stigt's principle of "Linking". Nevertheless, in this project this ambition was never realised. Thus my project's main research question is: **How can I re-link the cluster's buildings with each other, the university as a whole and with the wider context, Leiden and its inhabitants?** Although this is my main research question and aim of my proposal, other sub-questions will allow me to formulate a more thorough end result: What are the values of this building, and how can I maintain and highlight them with my intervention? What direction are university buildings heading to nowadays? How can my intervention create the potential for revitalization not only of the university but the surrounding context as well?

One of the project's biggest challenges and perhaps the most intriguing reason for choosing this studio, is the chance to work on the field of Structuralism, a movement that has not been explored adequately from contemporary architects, creating a "gap" in the architectural context. Historic compositions are carriers of values, memories and form the identity of a cities they are located. Such buildings make nowadays cities unique, during the globalization era that we undergo, where cities gradually start to look alike, losing their character. Thus, one can understand the importance of historic compositions in today's societies and the need for architects to understand the dangers of intervening on them. Through my project, I will explore a new approach of intervening on Structuralist buildings, influenced from an international context and my prior educational and work experience. However, how will the research methods and steps I followed, allow me to successfully intervene on historic buildings? A question which does not only apply to this project, but to every intervention project. Despite the similarities one can find in the starting points (research & analysis) of such projects, disregarding the architects, the end results always vary depending on the needs of each building.

Talking specifically about the graduation studio, Structuralist architects designed buildings in the 1960s which are now considered as young monuments. Nowadays most of these structures are abandoned or constitute a rather unpleasant environment for their users, putting their existence at risk.

As a starting point the goal of my approach is to identify the values underlying Structuralist buildings, and specifically the values and needs of Joop van Sticht's designs in Leiden's Humanities campus. Based on the results of the analysis, I will design an intervention that would revitalize the historic structure and adapt it to its context and our contemporary era.

In the first phase of the Studio, we started by visiting and studying some Structuralist icons, a significant study in order to understand the movement's main principles and values. From this analysis it was clear that some certain problems were present to every building that have created a poor environment for their users, causing their gradual abandonment. Providing solutions for such problems is also another goal of my approach.

From the icon's analysis the ideas of **Expansion** and **Linking** were some of the main principles that intrigued me from this movement. In van Sticht's Faculty of Humanities design, these ideas can be found in multiple cases; such as the lightweight top storeys that can be replaced, the building's structural capacity that can support two extra storeys, and the columns on the back garden of the site, characteristics showing the architect's consideration of making a building that could be altered in the future in order to adapt to users' needs. Although the idea of expansion was reflected in the design, the architect's ambition to create an open university linked to its context was never fulfilled.

Dealing with heritage related projects, is a complex subject affected by multiple parameters. Compared to designing on an empty plot (as in any other graduation Studio), the approach an architect needs to have in heritage related projects is different, as the responsibilities are much greater. Historic buildings carry values which need to be identified, preserved, respected and celebrated when intervening on them. Though, risks always underlie such projects, as a non-successful alternation can cause irreversible results to the monument. Therefore it is the architect's obligation to initially study the existing composition in depth so as to fully engage with it and identify the needs of both the building and its. Compared to other Heritage & Architecture studios, the "Future of Structuralism" studio is different due to its focus, which is buildings that are not old enough to be considered as monuments in the mainstream sense of the word, and thus are considered young monuments.

That being said, the method a heritage architect needs to follow must be very precise and well defined from the very beginning, in order to set solid foundations for the project's following stages. Studying ways architects have dealt with intervention-revitalization projects, I was influenced from the strategy used by Herzog & de Meuron in their intervention to Tate Modern, "This is a kind of Aikido strategy where you use your enemy's strategy for your own purposes. Instead of fighting it you take all the energy and shape it in an unexpected new way"¹. Which shows the importance of studying the historic environment in order to achieve a successful adaptive reuse of the existing, using elements from the past and giving them life in the present for the benefit of the new. Their method was mainly focused on the visible parts of the building (form, materials). On the other hand, another architect's approach that has

¹ Moore, Ryan, Tate Gallery, Building Tate Modern: Herzog & De Meuron transforming Giles Gilbert Scott, 125.

inspired me is Daniel Libeskind's, where studying the history of the building and its context, provides him with deep knowledge allowing him to create symbolic references between the historic context and his radical interventions (Jewish Museum in Berlin, Dresden Military Museum)². The juxtaposing strategies used by these architects, the first ones using the form of the building as a starting point and the second one using its history, inspired my approach on how I could study the historic composition and on which aspects should I focus on. This shows us how different research methods architects use in such projects, can result in successful relationship between the old and the new.

The method I used, closely follows the Heritage & Architecture studio's approach which, as said before is based on the Building Archaeological Research Method. Though, this approach is focused just on the way one can study and analyse the existing environment. In order influence and solidify my design decisions and to derive to a successful result I expanded my research method on studying the direction educational institutes are taking as well as a series of case studies on intervention projects. Analytically the process I followed is:

- I started off with the Building Archaeology Method. By studying the building prior to the visit, I gained knowledge regarding the architect, the building and its location. Afterwards, a site visit, provided me with more detailed information about the composition and its values. Using also the findings of a research performed by the university, regarding the users' experience in the building, I was able to understand even better the problems that exist, qualities that users appreciate and the needs of the university (client). During the off and on-site research, I made drawings, diagrams and models that allowed me to engage with the composition. Throughout this whole phase I tried to maintain an objective perspective as I did not want to affect the results of the research by any underlying design decision that might had emerged.

- Secondly, I focused on the program of the building and of my proposal. Studying the evolution of university facilities at an international level, I understood that the co-existence of enterprises³ and universities is a rising phenomenon. Studying this upcoming "movement", I

² Pieken, Rogg, *Militär historisches museum Dresden*, 18.

³ Entrepreneurship centre, workshops, enterprise sector

understood that would strengthen Leiden University's position in the highly competitive educational market.

- In order to understand how the introduction of a new function to the university could lead to a successful result, I performed case studies on realised projects. This allowed me to identify the parameters and characteristics I should take into account when working on my proposal, acting as guidelines for my design.

Overall the aim of my intervention both in programmatic and architectural terms was to respect and highlight the historic building; while at the same time improving any problems the building might have, always considering the users' experiences and needs. Following these steps would allow me to achieve a successful dialogue between the old and the new and at the same time derive to a reasonable, beneficial and successful approach for the future development plans of the university.

The principle of expansion (extension), one of Structuralism's main principles, indirectly stimulates experimentation by contemporary architects giving them the freedom to intervene and extend those young monuments. Despite this, there are only a few precedents of such projects. Working with a rather "undiscovered" architectural movement intrigued me to experiment in different ways on what could be done with those structures.

During both the research and design phase, after taking any decisions I evaluated them in order to find concrete reasoning behind every action. Talking about my approach, using ideas and characteristics from realised projects has allowed me to get a better understanding about the reality and feasibility of my proposal. Though, using reference projects and ideas that have been successful in other cases, do not always guarantee same results. Every project is unique and especially when dealing with existing compositions more parameters are added making this process even more complicated. Due to my position, what I can do, is present my ideas and possibilities for this project the best way possible and support them with valid arguments. During my P3 presentation, I received positive feedback for almost every intervention decision I proposed, showing me that the basic principles and ideas of my scheme could be feasible. On the other hand, when it comes to real life, other factors are also

included into the judgement of each proposal. In order to test prior to construction whether the project would be successful or not, an analysis by project managers, developers and other professionals would be required. Considering the results of this analysis and depending on the needs, feasibility, benefit and budget, the client is the one who would decide which of the ideas can be interpreted. Then, after the project is realised, only time can tell whether the intervention was successful or not.

My position as an architecture student has allowed me to utilise the possibilities offered by the existing building, proposing alternations on multiple aspects of the current situation, including the program, façades, interior spaces, vertical extension volumes and the landscaping.

In addition to the above compositional goals, the scheme also aims to have an impact on the wider context. Entrepreneurial functions⁴ are programmatically incorporated in a designated space, becoming self-contained entities, an approach which has emerged lately internationally but has not yet been widely implemented in the Netherlands. By presenting a rather daring but, at the same time, respectful and well considered architectural and programmatic intervention, I could influence other intervention projects. Given the current building this influence could be focused especially on Structuralist buildings and ideally on the development project of van Stigt's clusters, planned by the Leiden University. On a scale larger than the one of this specific project, my proposal has managed to show that, despite the issues underlying such building, there is still a lot of potential in them, giving space for architectural experimentation, showing that there are ways to actually preserve these young monuments from abandonment and, inevitably, extinction.

⁴ Entrepreneurship centre, workshops, enterprise sector

