

Reflection

Student

Jekaterina Balsuk
4505840

Mentors

Mechthild Stuhlmacher
Philippe Vierin
Tom Thys
Mauro Parravicini

Studio Roosenberg / Interios Buildings Cities
2018-03-02

The theme and objectives

Abbey Roosenberg in Waasmunster, Belgium was designed by dutch monk and architect Dom Hans van der Laan. This monumental and iconic building will no longer be used as a monastery. As KU Leuven is going to be a new host, they defined a program that would suit this new special location: a conference and study centre for architects and artists with expectation for it to become a new breeding ground for reflection and new forms of education. Therefore, our task was to make an academic facility that would include existing building and a new extension hosting this new function.

The main questions and objectives:

How do we extend a monument? How does old and new relate to each other?

What does the work by Dom Hans van der Laan mean today? Where are restrictions, chances, possibilities

What means to design a living and working environment which is in a close proximity to nature? How do we define these relations?

How do we understand the typology of a monastic environment as a historical phenomenon, urban building block and a timeless reference for present-day academic facilities? What is its potential and limits?

For me, this assignment together with the overall Interiors Buildings cities objective seemed as an interesting challenge that would encourage me to go out of my comfort zone and find new ways of researching, making and thinking about architecture that already exists.

Research versus design

From the start until the end of the design process, researching different architectural dimensions was an important assay for me. Every new finding not only broadened my understanding about various architectural approaches or social aspects, but also helped to draw the right guidelines for my project and make the important design decisions. Hereby, I give a couple of examples of the most crucial research I did during the graduation project.

Research on architectural language of van der Laan (in particular, the design of Abbey Roosenberg)

It was important to find a clear answer to what distinction between new extension and existing building is. Therefore, digging more into the design of Abbey Roosenberg and understanding the architectural language of van der Laan was crucial. On one hand, it was a fascinating research as the aspects found in his designs inspired me not only for this particular project, but in general, as a future architect. For example, that a very pragmatic and rational approach (using mathematical method of design in architecture) can also be very sensitive and meaningful. I was fascinated by the van der Laan's thrive to search for experience of space and relating it to human scale. As much as the fact, that every detail is a part of the whole: "We learned to always consider two things simultaneously: not just the building, but the building in relation to its site, that is to say, not just the inside of the building, but the inside together with the outside", he said. Van der Laan's ideas were so precise and thought through that it started to challenge my own ideas. I was constantly puzzled and questioning myself where I should draw a line between his ideas and mine. How far should I go? Should I repeat, reuse or do differently? Going further into the process, I understood that I have to take a personal position not only towards the physical design of the extension, but also the legacy of van der Laan and changes that I believe are possible. Therefore, I started to understand that van der Laan's writings were always more successful than his implementations despite the fact, that Abbey Roosenberg could be described as the most elaborate project that depicts the principle theoretical ideas. However, when thinking about the new bulding and new requirements, it is very difficult to repeat what is there and actually not needed. I became more critical to the design of Roosenberg and it started to be easier to let go and design a building that is way different than what is there already.

Research seminar with Irene Cieraad

Another research that I found very useful and from which I learned a lot was the one I did with Irene Cieraad during the Research Seminar. We looked at the Roosenberg and new extension

from the social point of view and thought about what potential user is the most suitable. Despite the fact, that the user, in reality, is already defined and KU Leuven knows what they want to accommodate, we were free to choose our own programme. As I always am very critical towards the decisions, I made a research on whether the art and architecture students and professionals can actually fit into this special environment. Finally, it proved to be more than possible and through this research I found great references for my future design.

Research on monasteries and other historical precedents

As I explained before, I had to take a personal position towards the design solutions for new building. During the studio we researched a lot on historical precedents, especially designs of monasteries, cloisters and study centres. I found it very helpful to use those strong references to proof my own decisions. The quite new discovery for me was a suggestion from my tutors to look specifically to the references that where build not earlier than the existing precedent we are working with. In a matter of fact, it was a great constraint for my research and thoughts which I never tried myself before.

Methodology and design process

As I mentioned before, the work of van der Laan stresses on the idea that the smallest detail in the building should relate to the whole structure which also relates to the site and the context. Therefore, it was important to work on different scales and test them in physical models, diagrams and drawings. This methodology of thinking through making is reflected in the overall studio programme and the work of the chair of Interior Buildings Cities.

One of the assignment that we had was an interior photography workshop where we made two pictures: the replica of the original photo taken in one of the spaces of abbey Roosenberg and its interpretation. This workshop required not only the understanding of how to achieve the final result through making of scale model but also helped to comprehend spaces of the abbey, how they are made and what is actually possible.

Diagrams where another very useful tool to redefine the design and make the main concept readable. Drawing very abstract but precise diagrams helped to explain the project in a very simple and clear way. One of the example would be explanatory black and white diagrams I made in order to explain why I chose that specific urban approach.

Through the overall process, the most fascinating part for me was to look through the lens of Dom Hans van der Laan while trying to find the right arguments for my design solutions. I was constantly going back and forth to van der Laan's ideas which sometimes seemed a bit too compelling and taking over mine. At the same time, sometimes, I was going far from what was there trying to make the most efficient architecture that would also suit the needs of the user. As a result, I would get stuck with the dilemma what is the right thing to do. Fortunately, with the help of my tutors, I found it useful to "check" my design with the abbey not necessarily meaning that it suppose to be the same. Therefore, it helped me to make my ideas stronger and more suitable to what is already there. I never tried to replicate van der Laan but more observe and understand his designs.

Relevance and potential

Despite the fact, that my final result is very contextual and correlates a lot with the ideas of van der Laan, I do believe that my approach offers spatial strategies that could be applied in similar urban settings: working in a close proximity to nature with separate buildings that could still be read as a complex – the so called *whole* that van der Laan aspires for as well.

Also, the study centre I designed not only provides an opportunity to continue the legacy of van der Laan: respecting its condition (it can still be visited in a way it was designed), location and history. It can also become a very special place for a wider audience as I do create programs and spaces for public events and exhibitions. In this way, remoteness of the abbey is not anymore so unapproachable but can work in its advantage.