

NIGHTSCAPES MAASTRICHT

- reclaiming an industrial ruin -

P5 reflection paper

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PROJECT INTRODUCTION

In many cities across Europe, vast terrains which used to be connected by train tracks and inhabited by machines, have become redundant and lay vacant. This is also the case in Maastricht, the first industrialised Dutch city. Today not only the industry is moving away, the population count is also decreasing. The lack of funds complicates the reuse of the city's former industrial sites and as a result they are fenced off. The former gas factory of the city, a national monument today, is located in the derelict site of Vredestein near the old city centre. Built from 1912 until 1914, it was one of the first industrial buildings in reinforced concrete and one of the first works engineered by Jan Gerko Wiebenga. In his later career, Wiebenga played an important role in the development of the concrete architecture of the Dutch modern movement.

The gas factory produced gas for public illumination from 1914 until 1930. After its closure, a rubber factory soon moved in and surrounded the factory with new halls. Since the nineties the industrial activity slowly moved away from Vredestein, causing nature to take over the material remains. In 2014 and 2015 most of the factory halls and also a large part of the gas factory were demolished to make space for a new bridge landing. The city now envisions Vredestein as a creative district and event terrain. In some other preserved buildings the creative industry has already moved in, but the gas factory remains empty and closed off because of its damaged state.

Today the site of Vredestein is a site of memories; some have been buried, some have been intentionally preserved while others have been cleared for new construction. Both the site and the factory have played an important role in the development of the city, but are closed off because they are not productive at the moment. But despite the fences, the site has attracted artistic interest from photographers and new kinds of activities like small events and secret parties. In its current state, it has gained the appreciation of local residents. Its indeterminate nature contrasts the organised and designated city, offering dwellers more freedom for interpretation and use.

The proposed program for the former gas factory is a public place within the creative district of Vredestein, which can house expositions and events in the daytime and parties at night.

The design research is about how the state of decay of the site and the structure can add value to the experience of the space in a design for reuse. In the masterplan different hidden and buried layers in the landscape are uncovered. Of the gas factory, the concrete structure is preserved by repair, the facades are partly preserved by consolidation. Inside the ruin of the gas factory, a new timber structure is built which sticks out on either side. The new structure is designed so that the community can be part of its construction and continue to play an active role in the reuse of Vredestein.



Reflection introduction

This paper contains a reflection of the graduation project as part of the studio Heritage & Architecture. In this reflection the relation between planning, method, research and design are considered as well as the relation of the design project and the studio.

Studio and subject

Last year I chose the studio Heritage & Architecture because I had become increasingly interested in traditional building techniques during my travels abroad. This was the first time I took part in this studio, so I came in with some lack of knowledge on the subject of built heritage, but also with a lot of curiosity. This year the studio focused on Maastricht's derelict industrial sites. In the second week we visited the locations and chose one of the buildings to propose a new function and design intervention for. The damaged state of the gas factory, its heavy concrete structure and the strange way it had been cut off sparked my interest. The research question I chose later was about how the state of decay can add value to the experience of space in a design for reuse. In the reuse of built heritage, the design is often aimed at restoring the original state or image of the building. In the process of restoration many qualities that the site and building may have gained over time are often neglected. By exploring the qualities of decay and how these can be preserved in a reuse assignment, architects could gain more awareness of possible values which are already there at the start of the project but which are often lost at the end of the project.

Method and design

The general method of the studio consists of three main activities; analysis, evaluation and design. In my study plan I proposed an iterative process, research by design, in which all these activities are done continuously. I did focus on one of these activities during each of the four periods of the graduation year.

During the first period the focus was on the analysis; gathering and exploring different sources of information on the city and the location. By studying literature, archive material and the location on site, I could find the information which was relevant to me. The analysis was split into three parts on different scales; urban, architectural and technical. Because the development of the site and the development of building were closely related, I combined the analysis on urban and architectural scale in my report. In later stages of the design project, this influenced the way I looked at the location. I did not consider the site and the building as two separate design challenges; these had always been interrelated and would continue to be closely related in a new design.

The second period of the graduation year was focused mainly on interpretation and evaluation. The usual method of the studio for evaluation was described very briefly during a weekly course in the previous period. I found it quite vague and like the other students I struggled at first to put it into a format. I wrote a concluding narrative of the analysis of around one page and then chose three themes which I considered most characteristic for the location. These themes would form the basis for the choice of program and for later design choices. One theme was about the social context, one about the site and one about the building. During the graduation project these themes remained consistent, though I did change my position. In the beginning I was more concerned with restoring the order of the building; its symmetry and clean lines. The design I made for the P2 presentation was in many ways a continuation of the building; having similar structures and materials. Later in the process I let go of this idea, embracing the collage-like chaos of changes made throughout time and adding something quite different to the building myself.

For the third period I planned to focus on research and design. I started with looking for conceptual ideas for the design and how to relate the design to my research question. During the previous periods I had accumulated many restrictions and had already dismissed many possible solutions. By testing different design ideas on the project, I tried to open up my mind again to more possibilities. I read about the ideas of several architects who were fascinated by ruins and fragmentation like Louis Kahn and Carlo Scarpa. I tested their ideas on the masterplan and later on the building. Of each of these architects I kept some ideas and combined them to create my own. I was surprised at how few architects today are interested in ruination in a literal sense. When I watched a recorded lecture of David Chipperfield on the beauty of ruins, I did not recognize his ideas in his completed buildings. I later realized that decay and functional use are in most cases contradicting concepts, as well as decay and preservation of historic material. The role of an architect may therefore be a problematic one, when

attempting to preserve the qualities of a ruin in a reuse assignment. The examples of deliberate ruination or preservation of ruined structures which I could find, often had very little practical function. Since the studio was aimed at also increasing the functional value of the building, I slightly changed the aim of my research towards the spatial qualities of a ruin and the preservation of the historic material without losing the traces of the passage of time. During this time, I continued to test design ideas but many did not lead to valuable solutions and disappeared from the drawing board again. The main aim of my design was to make the building more accessible and public, by opening much of the structure. Towards the P3 presentation I had made several routes through the opened structure, but I had not considered the program inside the building so much. At the P3 presentation the main critique on the design was concerned with the social security. By opening up such a large part of the structure, there were many corners and covered outdoor spaces which would be accessible but not very visible or lively, especially at night. Also, much of the space would be unused, which could be considered wasted space by potential users of the building.

After the P3 presentation I had to make a lot of changes; I moved away from the idea of public routes through the building and looked for ways to make a more flexible and interactive façade which could be opened or closed depending on the activity taking place on the site. This way the space could be closed off and joined with the interior, or the building could be opened and joined with the public space. I had to reconsider materialization, functional requirements and the whole layout of the building. Before the P4 presentation I recognized that I had to make a lot of changes, but time was too limited to find proper solutions and to communicate them to others. After I did not pass this presentation, I changed my method of design and reconsidered everything again. I focused more on the process, rather than on the results. What helped me most to do this, was reading a book for engineers about the design process called Systematic Design. The book focusses on the value design can add to a project, and how the design process can be organized to facilitate this. I used some of the proposed techniques to better understand the assignment I had made for myself during the first semester. These were mainly about the actors involved and about the program. I also did some studies on how to preserve the building as a ruin by listing all the basic principles I could come up with and by drawing these in a diagram. I then did different design studies by exploring the basic principle first, then consider the implications for other design aspects and after that synthesize a solution. During this time, I made much more models and sketches and documented them more.

Planning and method

Between P2 and the first P4 I did not follow the planning set out in the graduation plan, nor did I follow a certain method. The proposed method in the graduation plan, research by design, proved to be a bit too vague and open as form of guidance. I did make a planning for each day at the beginning of the week, depending on what I had come across. After the first P4 presentation I realized that this way of working had not worked very well, so I focused on improving my method as already described. During this time, I was not as open to suggestions from others as I had been before, focusing more on studies and experiment to guide the process.

Conclusions

One of the most important things I learnt during this year of graduation, is not to get too attached to a certain idea or solution early in the design process; to be more objective in this sense. I sometimes tended to jump to a solution or fix myself to a certain idea, which often turned out to be problematic in combination with other design aspects. I also struggled at first how to interpret decay as a design theme; first I focused only on the concrete structure, preserving also the parts of the structure which would have no new function and demolishing most of the infill. Later I focused more on how to preserve the building as a ruin, while increasing the functional value by building something new inside. Parts of the structure which are given no new function, are partly demolished and most of the infill is preserved in its current state.

To me, decay symbolizes both resilience and vulnerability, and is expressed in the loss of material and roughness of textures. I have tried to represent this both in the design and in drawings and models. The incompleteness of ruins sparks the imagination and offers more freedom for interpretation. The process of decay also gives perspective on the influence of time and nature; it makes people feel part of a common history, in a way that is much more personal and adventurous than reconstructive or restorative designs.