

Reflection

INTERIORS, BUILDINGS AND CITIES
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Relationship between research and design

Design and research are two distinct activities while they embody many complementary qualities. The design starts from the processing and understanding of the research, while the research can also be further enriched and inspired by the design process. An adequate and sound research study proves to be highly beneficial to the wholistic understanding of certain issues. In the graduation studio, my project is constantly inspired and developed benefiting from the gain from research study, from the urban ideas to the specific architectural strategies.

Engagement with the graduation topic & studio topic

The graduation theme of the year is “Palace”, which refers to the role of representative public buildings. “Palace” is of great importance to gather people together. Its urban position, form and appearance foster the collective public life. The studio works closely with the year theme, and its topic is to design a new city hall for the city of Brussels. The given location is in the center of Brussels, where the former parking 58 and Les Halles centrals were located. The new city hall, Brucity, is now under construction on site. Brucity is an enormous glass building which has little interactions with its surroundings. It is a pure office building with almost no inclusive public space for citizens. In terms of both form and programme, Brucity is exclusive to the city and the public. Therefore, the project starts as a critique of the Brucity. Exploring and understanding what is the meaning of political space and what role a representative building should play in contemporary context is crucial when conceiving a city hall.

Research and Research method

At the start of the studio, research on different branches were did on the same time, which can be mainly divided into three parts, historical research, phenomenological study of the site and modeling.

The historical ideas of political space and palace are studied through historical precedents, which provides insights and inspirations for the understanding of contemporaneous environment. The whole studio worked as a group to study a series of precedents from middle ages to the late twentieth century through literatures and drawings. As society shifts and evolves, the nature and meaning of political space is constantly developing and changing. The nature of the palace is gradually enriched and ordinary citizens have been more taken into consideration. The study of the historical precedents is not to use them as existing models, but to understand how different types of architecture is gradually shaped by certain social realities. Among these, the study on the piazza and palazzo of the Italian cities helps me to notice and understand the relationship between squares, streets and the city. The piazza in Pienza and the piazza Signoria in Florence, both of them sit along the main street in the city, well defined by the surrounding buildings. They are addressed by one important buildings on one side of the square. Those squares are important nodes in the city, not only in the urban network, but also in the collective public life. It put forward a question to myself,

which is the position and role of the square in the design of the city hall. In addition, during the research on the twentieth century metropolis, a series of people's palace were studied. Architecture becomes a kind of infrastructure, providing space and opportunity for the daily public life. Common people, collective public life and making of culture are more addressed in those buildings instead of power and authority. Particularly, Nantes school of architecture of Lacaton & Vassal offers great inspirations to my design of the city hall. City hall is not merely an instrument of government, it should embrace the democracy of the space and ordinary citizens.

The second part of the research, the phenomenological research, runs parallel to the historic research. It involves the study and analysis of the city of Brussels, specific study of the site, and first-hand practice. Under the format of photograph, sketching, mapping and literature, we as a studio get to know Brussels mainly in terms of five aspects, which are history, infrastructure, public space, culture and political institutions. To my personal interests, I focus more on the different types of public space in Brussels, including squares, streets and markets. Typology study of those squares helped to understand how these places embrace and direct political engagements. The form of the square, its relationship to surroundings, the building standing beside the square together shape what it is. Additionally, a study of different activism groups in Brussels was conducted to observe the appropriations of public space for public activities through drawings and interviews. The axonometric drawing was made to document the scenarios of activities of those activism groups, which shows how human and objects interact with the space. Interviews with people from the activism groups was made to engage the local people and to understand the place from others' view. The activism group I worked on, Cultureghem, makes the minimal intervention on the vacant market space and fully explores the social potential of the market hall to connect people and strengthen ties with the neighborhood. It is in accordance with the former understanding of people's palace, in which architecture is an infrastructure to accommodate the public life. In the study of the city and activism groups, I positioned myself more as a spectator, while by first-hand practice in political actions, the climate strike, I positioned myself as a participant to experience how the collective political activity works. The whole process from the assembly, demonstration on the chosen route benefit my understanding of common people's political engagements.

The third part of the research is about modeling. A physical model was made to present the personal understanding of political space based on all the research and study before. The definition of politics is no longer confined to the spheres of power and government affairs. Common people's engagement in politics is not only about protest and demonstration. Thus, the political world can be more related to daily life, which perceives democracy as a way of life, not a type of political regime. The speech corner and the community meeting, which are about sharing ideas with others, expressions of concerns for the society, are also daily political involvements. The intention of my political space is to provide a space that enables and encourages various social interactions, a space of inclusion, diversity and dialogue. It is a grid system, in which traditional wall is replaced by flexible curtains. It provides adjustable spaces and programs in accordance with the active involvement of users. To enable more conversations, the space has more versatility and openness. This is the democracy of the space. People have the freedom in the space to voice their concerns. They can decide how the space is used, varying from intimate space to big rooms. The notion of the political space has further been developed and integrated into the design of the city hall.

The narrative of the research work continued in the design process and has constantly be reevaluated and considered. The project rethinks the relations between ordinary citizens and political authorities, and the role of the political buildings. For the city, the project should response to surrounding environments and create or leave some space for the city. For citizens, the project should embrace the democracy of space and common

people. I imagine the city hall to be a kind of infrastructure which can accommodate various social and cultural activities and encourages democratic expressions. The project addresses and responds to these issues from both urban and architectural layer.

As for the urban position of the project, it will be a significant node of the public networks. Inspired by the research on the Italian cities and public space in Brussels as mentioned before, squares are important elements in the city hall project. The form of the project will respond to the surrounding urban fabric and different characters on two ends, resulting in three new squares. The squares are endowed with significance because of the character of city hall and buildings around. Different roles of the street create different moments of the city in these junctions. More space is given back to the city and to the public. This public space for the people is vital in the city to draw people together. People can take over the space, and they are free to use the space for democratic expressions and various activities. For the architectural strategy, the project is the reorganization of the programs of Brucity. Two separate volumes are placed, with one offered to citizens and the other offered to administration staffs. The space for citizens is introduced and addressed in this project. Meanwhile, they are connected underground using the existing hole. The extension to the underground market in the south, metro and parking in the north, makes the city hall a more important joint in the city. Inspired by the Nantes School of Architecture, the project will develop a double structure system, with one primary load-bearing structure and a secondary lightweight structure to accommodate different programs. Two structural systems enable the freedom of use and high possibilities. The double-height space in between is left free with no specific uses and enables citizens with freedom to appropriate the space for different uses. The flexibility and adaptability of the building is also a way to create a sustainable building, which is open for reuse and repurpose in the future. Integrated with the idea of the political space, the building becomes giant infrastructure offered to the citizens and encourages public engagement. Same language is used in the design of space and facade to keep two buildings in one dialogue. The two buildings both have large-scale structural frames, but with different dimensions. Within the facade are sub-structures of a different small internal order, which addresses their different characters. Throughout the design, the image of the big frame, the flexible secondary structure are the essence of the project, aiming to express the openness, welcoming the public and foster social interactions.

Conclusion

The project reflects on the existing mode of city halls and explores the possibility of political buildings. Research on historical precedents, study of the activism groups and modeling of a political space lay an important foundation for the project. The development of the project is an enriching process while it is also a process of simplification. The inspirations from the research, personal understanding of the topic and site together shape the idea of the project. When it gradually develops, I found it is important to make choices, stick to the essence of the project and get rid of the unnecessary parts that might obscure the main idea. Overall, the whole process of research and design is fruitful, and helps improve my existing way of designing throughout the year.