

Vysehrad Performing Art Centre

architectural translation of indigenous images in Prague

I. DESIGN THEME

Under the title “Alpha Global City Prague: Unravelling hidden underworlds and public interiors; how to construction future memories and identities?”, Prague studio emphasizes on the mutual relationship between architecture and city, especially under the increasing complexity of contemporary city. This question has played an important role in my project as well, which discusses the possible position of a historical compound under the context of highly complex modernity. It searched for the way to achieve the ‘harmonious coexistence’ in a ‘hybrid compound’.

The design theme is to create a subterranean cultural compound including hybrid programmes under the general theme [Vyšehrad Spring] on the historical site in the north of Prague. The goal of the project is to add a secondary identity to the site, a place which will be characterized not only by its historical value from the past but also its creativity to the future. The definition of selected programs includes a theatre, performing art centre, library, gallery, artisan studios and a sanctuary (meditation centre), encouraging creativity from multidimensional knowledge and responding to local culture and tradition. The other main research question is 'How to tackle the coexistence of historical relics and new construction'. To preserve the atmosphere of serenity and keep its current identity of historical compound, most of the programmes will be located under the ground level. A master plan and a 1:1000 physical model has been provided during the P2 showing the relationship between new construction and the historical context.

II. PRELIMINARY DESIGN: PROGRAMMES AND VOLUMES

The main feedback upon P2 presentation from mentors is that the complexity of the programmes will be too much to tackle for rest of the graduation period. Therefore, the design scope has been narrowed down to one single building, a Performing Art Centre, which is the most complex and collective programme from the masterplan. This building includes a professional multi-form theatre for performing arts, a learning centre for young professionals and amateurs, and public access areas for various collective activities. The design aim has been changed accordingly in Msc 4 stage, focusing more on elaborating the single building in a practical manner.

Starting from the volume study, the first main design question is ‘how the building could be integrated into the site in a harmonious way while retaining its identity and accessibility as a public building? As a result, the massive volume of this hybrid building has been reduced by breaking down to extruding small volumes above the ground and large integration under the ground. These popping-up blocks are in the similar volumes as the surrounding buildings, which contributes to the integration with the context, keeping the dominated role of the neighbouring cathedral in terms of building volume. Reference for volume organization includes the lighting

issue, accessibility for various target groups, and interactive connection within programmes. An efficient layout has been achieved as a result, two major volumes (the learning centre and theatre) are linked by a large collective hall in between while retaining their independence in functions and efficiency in accessibility by separated entrances and circulation system.

III. FORM, MATERIALITY AND COLOUR: TRANSLATING GENIUS-LOCI

An phenomenological approach has been applied during the process of designing the architectural language. From my perspective, learning from the genius-loci is one of the most fascinating ways to connect the new construction to its context. In this particular case, the inspiration source for architectural language are the indigenous images and city experience of Prague. Instead of using local materials or referring to traditional buildings, the inspiration comes more directly from the personal perception.

First, the concept of [a promenade of stages] comes from the most enjoyable experience in the Hradčany district. The way that the rampways and steps connect streets, squares and buildings and the walking experience of going up and down while encountering dynamic urban sights have formed an impressive city experience. In this project, this experience has been translated to a large circulation path in the central hall, which links most of the public accessible spaces while providing generous spaces for collective activities along the route. Flexible use of the space can be achieved including housing casual performance and temporary exhibition, enabling loose furniture arrangement, and occasionally performing as a large stage for experimental performance.

The other intriguing architectural element is the traditional Durchhaus typology, in which the gallery space of residential blocks and open courtyard formed a pair of shifting roles as stage and audience. This relationship has been translated to the gallery space and hall space in the central volume. When the major circulation space performs as a stage, the gallery space will naturally become the audience space accordingly.

Last but not least, the characteristic architectural language in this project, the large number of massive concrete columns and the resulting colonnade spaces, is inspired by the dominated images of continuous colonnades in Prague. Apart from its function as passageway which forms a secondary street network, the colonnades impresses me most by its strong and massive form and the resulting dramatic cast shadow. Compared with colonnades in other European cities, where the substantial materials (generally stone and brick) are usually exposed, colonnades in Prague were commonly painted with coloured plaster, which rendered them with a even stronger geometric configuration. Therefore, in order to bring this image to my building, pigmented concrete is chosen to build all the columns to enhance the impression of the massive character and minimalist configuration. Meanwhile, the main facade has been designed in a similar language correspondently, featuring a series of concrete blocks in different shades of pinkish tone, which contributes to contextualize the building in its context and presents as a response to the colours of Prague.

IV. DETAIL DESIGN: INTEGRATED CONCRETE ELEMENTS

The main structure of the whole building is column-beam based structure in reinforced concrete cast on site. In order to emphasis on the clear geometrical configuration, the design of details is searching for a minimalistic approach. Some key elements are designed into an integrated concrete element. For example, in the open library, the floor slab, beam and balustrade has been integrated into one structural element and anchors between structural columns. In-situ pigmented concrete provides natural patterns to the building finish and elevated the atmosphere of interior spaces. Additionally, for the interior space of theatre, rammed earth will be filled between concrete structure to enhance the interior atmosphere of being underground and surrounded by material with natural texture.

V. REFLECTION ON DESIGN APPROACH

In the early stage of preliminary design, the concept for this performing art centre is to create a [promenade of stages], a route which links various types of performance space, which houses both casual/amateur performance and formal/professional performance. The audience can enjoy various performances while promenading and the performers can choose their preferable spots and feel free to come and leave like the combination of street performance and tourists on Charles bridge. However, this concept has been weakened by the compromises to practical concerns during the design process and presented mostly in the flexible use of central hall as a result. Apart from fundamental knowledge of public space design, theatre design, materiality and construction design, the very essential part which gives the building its main character is produced under the phenomenological approach. Phenomenological approaches allow architects read the site an context as emic account, active empathy and build emotional connection to the location, leading to the priority of spatial experience. However, it had caused excessive obsession with personal fascination and became an obstacle to some extent at the early stage of preliminary design. To avoid the tendency of obscurity and self-indulgence, a phenomenological approach should be applied with the awareness of its subjectivity and well-balanced compromises to practical concerns.