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15-05-2017
Heritage & Architecture

This graduation project is part of the architecture studio Heritage & Architecture and focusses on the redevelopment of 'Maison de la Miséricorde', a former convent located in the city Maastricht. The complex is located in the old city centre and functioned as a convent from the 1880's until the 70's of the 20th century. The complex and the congregation growing steadily over a span of 123 years. From 1979 until 2013 a community centre housed in the complex.

Connection with the graduation lab

Re-use or redevelopment of buildings is a hot topic in present day architecture. Due to the worldwide economic crisis buildings in the Netherlands have become vacant. Next to the social context that is influenced by a vacant building vacancy is a big problem for the building itself. Degradation and damages have a free pass to do what they want without interference of human hands. Without people heating the building or doing the necessary maintenance the building is more vulnerable to things like frost damage and leakages which in turn can cause greater problems like rotting timber beams, cracks in load-bearing walls, vandalism or an increased fire hazard, among other problems.

Existing buildings have already proven themselves to be structures that can endure the elements since they were built. The context has or is using it, giving the building a connection with its surroundings. It is simply a waste to let such things perish because of vacancy since elements that are of historical or cultural significance could be lost.

The Heritage & Architecture studio is specialised in the relation between existing buildings and a new intervention, the cultural history and technology also play an important part.

The Miséricorde complex has only been left vacant for a short time but this has had an impact on the complex and its surroundings. The former convent has a very introvert character, that was grown like this over time, and is now completely shut off from the rest of the city as it lies as a blockade in the middle of a city block. The complex used to have a program that supplied guidance or help to the people of the city, this happened while being a convent and later as a community centre, making sure the complex had a strong connection with its context. Now nothing happens within this place and people are forced to walk or cycle around its impenetrable walls.

The buildings that make up the complex have signs of degradation and the complex shows that it has seen its share of modifications throughout the years. The last intervention making its biggest mark yet as the complex is now divided in two parts where it used to be one.

The new design introduces a program and adds a new layer to these modifications. It seeks for interaction of the context and a spatial unity of the building parts within the complex.

Relation between research and design

The research provides a strong foundation for the design of this project. The research provides information whereupon the design is based.

The main research question was “How can the Miséricorde complex be adapted for re-use without losing its essential architectural qualities?”. To be able to answer this question the essential architectural qualities of the complex had to be found.

The architectural qualities can be divided in two scales, qualities of the ensemble and the qualities of the individual building parts. On the scale of the ensemble this comes down to the introvert character that the buildings form together, a barrier to the outside world, and the iconic image that is formed through the different masses. This also adds up to a non-cohesive architectural whole that makes up the complex. On the scale of the individual building parts their own architecture plays an important role in the appearance of the ensemble.

Next to this research an analysis to the urban, historic and building technical aspects was done. From this research and analysis a cultural value assessment was made. This assessment shows the cultural values that can be found in and around the complex and its individual buildings. Values can only be acknowledged by a person and therefore are always subjective.

The conclusions of this research and analysis have provided a framework from where starting points were formulated to guide the design.

- Integrate the complex with the urban structure
- Preserve/strengthen essential architectural qualities
 - o Relation/orientation between inside and outside the complex
 - o Assemble buildings, create spatial unity
 - o Show the different architectural styles
- Improve inner circulation

After this thorough research phase and the formulation of starting points the design process started. During this process my tutor challenged me to give specific argumentation about what and especially why I was doing things. This resulted in me retracing my steps several times but in the end it gave me a stronger base for the design.

Methodology

The chair of Heritage & Architecture uses the research by design approach to concentrate on the architectural and technical aspects in the transformation of existing buildings. The process of this graduation project mainly followed this given structure. This process started by a thorough research of all the aspects of the existing situation on several scales and in several times. This research ranges from the urban context to the detailing of the buildings and from the past to the future. Next giving values to those elements and responding to them in an appropriate way.

In case of the Miséricorde complex the main structures of the individual buildings are highly important because together they form the different time layers that make up the complex. Next to the structures of the buildings are the outdoor spaces that are of great value to the former convent.

From this research and value assessment several starting points were formulated that form the basis for the design. Every decision in the design process can be tested through this value assessment, more often than not design aspects are reconsidered because the cultural value is deemed more important than the aesthetic outcome of the design.

This makes the cultural value assessment an important part of the design process but it is only there to guide and doesn't consist of rules to follow. If the design asks for certain cultural elements to be demolished and the value of this element is high than that means that the argumentation of why this element should be removed should be strong but it can still be removed. Such argumentation only strengthens the design and the decisions, which can be thought to take.

Relationship between project and the wider social context

This design ensures that the complex becomes part of the city of Maastricht again and complements its connection to the city block wherein it stands. A part of the history of Maastricht can be viewed here, by anyone and everyone who wants to see and experience it.

Secondly, this project addresses the decline of interest in art and culture in Maastricht and its region. The new program and the design give the possibility to connect youth with higher educational cultural (art, dance, music or theatre) institutions. These institutions will provide workshops, lectures and shows/performances within the complex. These events can be exclusive for the students of the school but can also be open for external interested parties. Thus by giving youth the possibility to discover and develop their own creativity this design can help boost the cultural network in Maastricht.