

City Hall Brussels

a public house

reflection

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MSc4: Palace (2019-2020)

Interiors Buildings Cities

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Introduction

This year, the Interiors Buildings Cities graduation studio incorporates the design of a municipal administrative building. The context of this administrative centre is Brussels, the capital city of both Belgium and the European Union. It is a city with a highly diverse population which makes that the social, political and cultural differences are unlike any other city in Europe. 'Brussels: heterogeneous city' is therefore the overlapping theme of the chair and focusses on issues of representation, participation and presence in a place with such a diverse populace.

A new administrative building is planned for the city of Brussels to replace the current administrative centre that longer meets the needs of the public. The demand for a new building stems from the municipality's desire to move all its staff to a central modern workplace in order to increase the efficiency of the public service and improve communication. The new administrative centre will provide city offices for 1600 employees and a public space for the reception and processing of applications from citizens. The winning competition project, known as Brucity, lacks any description of a truly public space and doesn't engage with the citizens of Brussels on a political level. It is appearing as an anonymous office building, showing that the municipality has reduced themselves to their mere administrative task. The project is intended to be a critique on the competition project. The main objective is to design a building that allows for more direct contact and collaboration between the municipality and its citizens.

research vs design

The studio of Interior Buildings Cities works according to the the philosophy of learning through making or research by design. Through the process of drawing, physical and 3d modelling supported by lectures, students are asked to design a building that is the result of carefully observed needs. For me the process of physical model making and drawing really helped in finding answers to questions that where asked. The studying of precedents related to the subject led me to rethinking what the value of these projects are today and how they might be adjusted to the needs of the society we are in

now. The method of research by testing the design is what helped me to stay critical about my own project throughout the course of this year. In the next passage I will reflect and elaborate on which methods I used and how they influenced my design process.

a political space

During the first part of this year we started a collective research in order to get an understanding of the spatial, social and political structures found in Brussels. The investigating into activism groups operating in Brussel inspired me to think about how spaces or platforms enable political action as speaking freely and how public opinion could affect political power. While looking into the phenomenon of "the speakers corner" it occurred to me that objects such as a rostrum, or ladder, are devices that are used by people to disrupt norm and afford speech. By taking a series of photographs of myself standing on a ladder in 'het Binnenhof' in The Hague and the use of a physical model depicting a person on a ladder in front of the Brussels parliament, I was searching for possible moments of confrontation.

The research influenced my design in the sense of using the building to create spaces for people to act and speak. I believe that a space can have agency in encouraging or accommodating political engagement. Historically gatherings of people to protest or celebrate happened in spaces related to structures of power and authority. In Brussels, the former stock exchange -Place de la Bourse- served as such a space. In 2016 after the terroristic attacks this was the place where people spontaneously came together to express their grief. Now that the monumental building in front of the square is being transformed into a beer museum, the site will most likely lose this function within the city. By creating a new public square in the centre of the city I try to encourage or at least allow people to gather and have their voices heard. To create a lively square a new volume is erected which encloses the space and adds an active border. The municipal administrative building is there to define and give meaning to the space in front of it and declare public ground.

a political architecture

As a group we studied a series of precedents of political spaces, urban structures and buildings. We looked into the type of 'The Palace' and studied the history of such representative buildings. From palace proper to 'palazzi civici' in medieval and renaissance Italy to the people palaces in the twentieth century, which formed places of collective public life. When looking at the buildings in Brussels that house political institutions, you can see there is a clear change in engagement and representation. The architecture of the 19th century Parliament or the medieval town hall was clearly an expression of power towards the city and its citizens whereas current municipal buildings appear as anonymous glass office blocks showing that the municipality has reduced themselves to their mere administrative task. This made me reflect on what a political building today should be. I asked myself how one can design a large scale political building that is appropriable for everyone, a building that is able to represent all citizens and to provide space for citizens to engage with each other and local politics.

Studying the program, materialisation and thoughts behind projects such as Kulturhuset in Stockholm and de Meerpaal in Dronten informed me on how to create a building where everyone feels invited. Firstly, it is the access to these places what concretely defines the sense of people's belongings to a space. The building should have multiple entrances and the ground floor should function as a welcoming and permeable threshold. Secondly it is important that the program of the building does not solely include administrative functions but has something to offer to the citizens of Brussels in order to allow encounter between the public and the employees of the municipality. Finally, questions of human scale, inhabitability and adaptability are important so that people will engage with the building. The last where researched through the making of models and drawings.

The physical context of the building is another element which had great attention in the conducted research. Studying the site made me aware that the building is situated a rather dense urban fabric. It is on the border of the change of the street patterns from small individually owned houses to bigger buildings with a more homogeneous façade. This made me decide to limit the footprint of the building

and allow a new public square. The new square can connect important public spaces located in the current administrative centre to the sector around Sint-Kathalijn. It can also be read as an extension of Boulevard Anspach, an important axis that runs through the city and which is located only one street away from the site. To get an answer on what the character of the square should be, I studied historical precedents such as the Piazza del Campo in Sienna with its sloping ground and piazza del Popolo in Ascoli where the layout of the square defines the activities that take place. This led me to design a square with spaces of intimacy but open to interpretation and allows for several uses such as small performances, speeches, occasional markets or protests.

material measures

When designing such a big building one cannot ignore the impact it will have on the environment. The construction industry is responsible for 36% of all the greenhouse gas emissions and 33% of all waste (Green & Taggart, 2017). As architects we have the responsibility to make sure that the buildings that we build are the result of clearly defined needs and that the way we build them happens in a sustainable matter. Timber construction offers a better response to this issue than most conventional construction methods because it reduces CO2 gas emissions and at the same time extracts CO2 from the atmosphere by storing carbon. New technologies in the wood industry such as cross-laminated timber (CLT) and computerized design and fabrication techniques have increased the development of timber construction and in particular the construction of 'higher' timber buildings. It is for these reasons that I became interested in constructing my ten stories building out of timber. Moreover, I saw it as a challenge to construct a building out of wood that has a representative civic character.

Studying several high-rise timber buildings made me decide to choose for a hybrid structure that combines concrete with wood. The structure of the upper floors is an all-timber construction and rests on reinforced concrete base. The choice for concrete in the underground and ground floors is made

considering the big spans and the counterweight that is needed to keep the foundation from floating upwards. The timber structure not only lowers the footprint of the building but also adds an aesthetic and human quality to the offices.

For the material and the design of the façade I used models and drawings to seek for a design that in its size and appearance could mediate between modernist and pre-modernist buildings around and has the ability to represent and give dignity to the citizens of Brussels.

relevance and potential

The question of the scientific relevance of research by design remains difficult to answer because it is not a standard scientific way of conducting research that is easy to measure. However, this method of research is a way of finding answers to the questions posed within the studio and the field of architecture in general.

The building is the product of my own research that tries to answer the questions that have been asked. It is a personal answer based on my own vision. In my opinion, the idea of the studio is not to give a solution but to open a discussion about what in this particular case a political building could be. When placing my project in context of the other projects of the studio the scientific relevance becomes more clear because all the designs that emerged from this studio represent the discussion.

Even though the project will not be built and the impact that the building might have on the city cannot be measured, it can still have an impact by showing what the possibilities are in terms of sustainability for buildings on this scale.

What a political building is, is a sub-question of what politics is and this question arises in many different disciplines. The role of architecture in the visualisation and materialisation of this question is a very different way of finding answers to these questions and this method could potentially be applied to other disciplines as well. Architecture forces you to make questions concrete. For example, by relating research into materials to what a political building should look like, different valuable

insights can be obtained. The method of visualising something to give concrete answers to questions is something that could be applied in different disciplines.

In my opinion, a building itself will not have a direct influence on how politics is conducted, but the ideas and methods that form the basis for the design could.

ethical issues

The first question I asked myself when receiving the assignment to design a new administrative centre was to what extent it is ethically justifiable, as a municipality in times of climate crisis, to build a new building in the city centre when several offices are empty. As part of my graduation, I made the decision for myself to meet the request of the municipality to build a new building because I was interested in what the result could be if I started with a clean slate.

When starting the design process, other question arose such as what the role of the architect is and to what extent one has the responsibility to act politically. As an architect I focused on what I thought Brussels as a city would need in this place, and how to design a building that is appropriable for everyone. To justify the choice to build a new office building in a city with vacancy, I decided to make sustainability an important element in my design. Changes and insights about the environment have led to the beginning of a new phase in which we must rethink what a political building is. In my opinion a political building is no longer solely a durable building with a representative civic character, but a building that is flexible and able to adapt and above all has a positive impact on the environment right now.