The poetics of Sacred Places

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A reflection on a combined design- and researchproject

within the studio Explorelab (18), MSC Architecture,

TU Delft in which the project is placed in social, pro-

fessional, personal and studio context.

REFLECTION

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Reflection

[research and design – evolution]

The graduation project is rooted in personal fascination with sacred places and the experiential effects they have on people. On the one hand this fascination is based in personal experiences with these places; being touched by them without being part of the ideological group the places were specifically built for. Secondly, it always touched me, in a negative way, to read and see messages of these places being subjected to violence as a result of (religious or cultural) intolerance. Although in opposite ways, these places seem to have the power to move people and my goal was to understand how and why they do this. As a student in architecture, I was specifically interested in the role architecture has in this and the potential of architecture to evoke the experience of sacredness without connection to a particular religion.

      The first thing to acknowledge in this research was that the sacralisation of space is about giving meaning to homogenous, undefined space. This meaning comes into being through three processes; pragmatic, poetical and political. Whereas in the beginning of the project, I had the idealistic vision that architecture could bring religions together, during the research it became more and more clear that architecture does not bring people together. It facilitates, but first people need to want to come together.

The design proposal for a multi-religious building, as presented in the P1 presentation, was confronted with the fact that when you want to build for religions, you could never build for all religions and you will inevitably exclude certain groups which is precisely opposite to the goal I had; to build a place welcoming all.

      Where the question first was (how) can architecture bring different worldviews together in one place it seemed more relevant to first question whether religion is the place to start when you want people to come together in one place to overthink life and take distance from the daily. Investigating into the poetic, pragmatic and political processes, I realized that an architects' main influence mainly lies in the poetic process. Whereas the pragmatic process of sacralisation focusses on specific usage by a certain group, this would not help me in a design project since I had let go of building for predetermined worldviews. Moreover, it was not the pragmatics that had been able to move me personally in these buildings, since I did not practice nor knew predetermined rituals. Politically deciding whether a place is sacred is a formality that does not require the qualities of an architect. I got more and more aware of the power architecture itself has in the sacralisation of places. Architecture has a poetic potential of its' own which is of great influence for a place being experienced as sacred.

From there, the research focused on the understanding of sacred places as poetic places. This did not only lead to an understanding of the origins and development of religion and religious buildings but also to a deeper understanding of architecture. It made me more explicitly aware of the notion that architecture is not purely about objects defining space, but about the affect and effects the objects and their enclosed spaces have on our emotions, feelings and activities.

      With this gradual shift, focussing on the poetics of architecture to understand sacred places, the value of the own, direct experience became equally more important in the research. This makes the final research a combination of phenomenological and literature research where both enhanced, supported and questioned each other.

Although in the end I am glad with this combination, during the research process, I struggled to link the sometimes highly abstract philosophical texts to my direct, poetical experience; to bring the immaterial together with the material and sensuous.

      In the end I realized that these two – the literature and the phenomenological – parts did not have to come together in one fluid text or product but that they each have their own way of explaining sacred places; one in words as objective text, the other in images and poetics.

Answers to questions thus can come in different ways, one way not necessarily being better than the other. In this way, the literature research became more tactile and the material and immaterial were brought together. Understanding of the phenomenon sacred places in this way became not only a mental but also a multi-sensory and bodily process and I think that both processes enhance each other in gaining knowledge.

With the development of the research, the design project shifted from a multi-religious building to a place of silence and retreat; a place that could evoke the experience of the sacred through the direct multisensory, bodily experience of the place. In this way I was liberated from practical and political weight in order to focus on the poetical notion. The usage of poetry and images helped the design process since it made me highly aware of the fact that the main task for the design was to evoke feelings and activate the imagination with the design. If the research would have solely explained the phenomenon objectively, the step from research to design would have been a lot bigger.

[architecture and poetics against a technical background]

A big step from research to design would not have been a bad thing per se, but I am convinced that it was a good step to narrow the gap between research and design already during the research by bringing my own experiences into the research. Clarifying this; during the year I became more and more aware of the qualities I did and did not develop during my studies at TU Delft.

      The poetic quality of architecture that formed the core of this project, is a quality that I hardly touched nor was made aware of before. I noticed and got confronted with the fact that the artistic, poetic notion of architecture was hardly explicitly present in theory courses or design projects. The design project requested to be guided by intuition, which felt as if I had to rediscover everything I somehow 'unlearned' or had hidden during my education in Delft. It required me to become very personal, to approach this task from my own sentiments; something I actually blocked or at least did not express. For this reason, I experienced this process also as a methodological experiment. It was as if I had to reinvent my design process, constantly searching for the right means to research and express things.

      This whole process confirmed the difference between an art school and technical university and the difference between approaching architecture as an art or as science. Even more it made me conscious of what interests me in architecture; its' poetics.

[design and research – 2 (partly) simultaneous processes]

The poetic, intuitive focus of the design, as a focus that I did not explicitly deal with in any other project before, helped to understand the philosophical, literature study further. Whereas first the research informed the design, I am convinced that in the end the design process made it possible to bring the research to its' conclusions – both in a conscious and unconscious way.
In the process I experienced a difference in approach between research and design. Whereas in the research part, I aimed to structure knowledge in a rational way, the design was and needed to be highly informed by intuitive and unstructured ideas – finding the arguments later. With all the knowledge gained during the research, I constantly kept the feeling that also in my design I needed to have the arguments for certain choices straight away, finding difficulty to trust my intuition.

To be able to use the gained knowledge –the research conclusions – in the design, I noticed that the knowledge somehow needs to evolve from the subconscious into the conscious knowledge. I noticed that the research at first gave me hints of what I wanted and searched for in the design without being able to clearly formulate what it was. Despite the research conclusions, I could not translate the atmospheric ideas directly and in a structured way into a design. I first made my choices, based on a feeling that they were right; only afterwards I was able to rationalize the choices back to my research conclusions.

As Zumthor stated in the debate on Atmospheres (Amsterdam, 2014); it's all about intuition, but that does not mean that there is no need to study. Quite the opposite; you need to learn in such a way that the knowledge becomes a part of you. I must thus say that the research is of high value for the project sa a whole but I also wonder, whether I would have had less difficulty trusting my intuition when there would have been more time, in between the research and design process, for the knowledge to become part of my subconscious knowledge.

[design outcome]
The final design is the result of a broad study in different directions and has known a variety of predecessors which were totally different. The search to get to the essence of a phenomenon which is referred to as the ineffable or unexplainable showed me that there is no straightforward, rational way to the poetic. It comes directly from the feeling and there is only one way to test its quality and that is by feeling. In this way, there is a contradiction in the task of an architect; he needs to use material to evoke something totally immaterial; fusing the needs for constructive logic with the illogic of the imagination.

I think that the small amount of square meters of the actual building is counterbalanced by the idea that the deepest feelings or biggest thoughts do not need a lot of volume and that spaciousness can be created in physically small buildings. I noticed that, as a (near)architect I have the will to build, more before less – this probably also makes me defend the amount of square meters here. It took time to turn away from the idea that I needed to fill the whole plot and started the search to get to the essential.

In this – finding the large in the small - the main theme of the design is hidden; ambiguity, or twin-phenomena. This follows out of the research but also reflects a personal choice. In general, the experience of sacredness can be divided in the numinous and the mythical experience. Translated to architecture, I stated that the sublime is a way of evoking the numinous (divine or absolute) whereas ambiguity is a way of evoking the mythical (interconnectedness, without self) experience. Although literature states that this mythical experience is the ultimate sacred, I would preferably say it is the more humane. I chose to work with this since it reflects more my personal stance (I am not religious, but intensively practicing yoga which makes me influenced by eastern worldviews). But more important, I was searching for the possibility of sacredness in a context where multiple worldviews live together; which would make choosing for the absolute or sublime in my opinion contradictive to the daily reality my fascination was rooted in – but also this, reflects my way of looking at the world.

[project in wider context]
Academic - The project academically fits in a regained interest and awareness in the multisensory, atmospheric qualities of architecture. The attention for these qualities are however still offering many aspects to discover and elaborate on in methodological terms. Between the philosophical knowledge and the architectural practice, there still seems to be a large gap. Therefore, placing a research project into poetic architectural qualities in direct relation with a design project, forms an attempt to narrow this gap.

As stated, there is a regained interest on the multi-sensory aspects of places. However, often texts stop right there. I noticed and tried to accentuate that the multi-sensory impulses of a place merely form a means and not an end in itself. They activate memory, associative brain parts and our dreams, and it is in this way that places get meaning. In this project, architectural means or themes that could stimulate the
activity of these brain parts are briefly highlighted; but it forms just a starting point which I think could and should be explored much further.

Social – This projects stems from a human quest that had seem to be forgotten to an existential part of ourselves; the poetic part of life, the mystical essence of humans having a linear life in a cyclical nature and the ungraspable relationship between heaven and earth. That we have forgotten that places intended for these thoughts are of high value in our lives. Moreover, it relates to the question of religious and cultural intolerance by going to the roots of humanity and religion. In the architectural sense however, the social aspect of the research became less than I eventually expected or intended to be. This was partly because of the realization that architecture or the architect does not determine that people tolerate each other as humans. Also, it comes from the personal exploring the power of architect. This interest is in no ways less than my interest in how people actually live together in multicultural societies, but in the context of graduating as an architect, this focus seemed to offer more potential to develop my qualities as an architect. During the process I did however feel some doubts on the growing personal focus of the design project. It makes me question up to this point, whether it is not just my affection towards certain architectural means rather than affects that sub-personally evoke certain feelings in humans generally.

[project in explorelab]
Taking part in Explorelab requires the student to answer the problems (s)he personally encountered and got fascinated with. This project, based on two fascinations and translated into a specific research and design project without a theme dictated beforehand by a studio is therefore a typical Explorelab project.

  The project moreover stems from an urge to leave the university as an architect that has the ability to notice and be inspired and challenged by problems in the world around him or her. Through this project, I tested myself on the ability to not only notice but also structure, investigate and answer these problems which forms in my opinion an important second requirement for Explorelab participants.

  As stated above, the methodological approach of the studio is that the research and design method are not given as predetermined framework but have to be determined by the student as an intrinsic part of the project as a whole. The process above (see first paragraph) is way less direct than it would probably have been in a predetermined studio; where the struggle of how to research a phenomenon and to determine your phenomenon is to a larger extent framed in advance.

  Looking back I am very thankful for developing this project in Explorelab. It made the project not only a test for my architectural skills but challenged me to think as a researcher, to be on my own, to fulfil an organisational or coordinating role, and to be influenced by studio peers with totally different projects. The process worked as a mirror which worked both confronting and clarifying; since there was no prescribed method nor boundaries, the whole process showed me in a ruthless way, my way of working, communicating, thinking and designing – where tutors are there to steer and redirect but where the student has the final control.

"Life needs a membrane to contain itself. ...
The earth is alive and it has made its own membrane.
We call it; atmosphere."
- Frans Lanting