

Reflection
Skopje's retreat

Methods and Analysis
June 2020

Introduction

For the graduation studio of Methods and Analysis – Position in Practice – we had the assignment to form a question based on the social, political and/or spatial situation in the capital of North Macedonia, Skopje. The goal during this graduation process was to create a space for the inhabitants of Skopje to abstract from the conventions of daily life, as a reaction to the chaotic image of the city, caused by different types of architecture with a strong emphasis on the exterior. As a way to achieve this goal, the program of the project is a bathhouse on the north side of the river Vardar in the city centre, attached to the bridge which connects the north to the south of the city. The focus of the project laid on the interior and perception of the visitor, where space is defined with a composition of walls instead of capturing space in a closed box.

Research and design

The first semester started with analysis and research to the city of Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia. This was the start of the graduation process, but throughout the whole two semesters we connected design with research and the other way around. The first research was a way to get to know the city and context of our graduation plan. After the first 10 weeks we got the opportunity to continue on research we thought was needed to achieve the goals we set up for the design. The research during the design process can be separated in three topics: the contextual, the disciplinary and the conceptual.

The contextual

The contextual research was a deeper investigation on the research already done on the context of the city and site we decided to design on. During this research I set my goal for the design to be to create a space where inhabitant of Skopje can abstract (abstracting from meaning to consider apart from a particular case or instance) from the conventions of their everyday life, since the city has only limited space which allow people to abstract, but due to deferred maintenance these places feel neglected and don't achieve their full potential.

With research to places where people already tend to abstract from daily life I came to the research of the bathroom; one of the places in the home where people tend to abstract in a pure form – naked. This research of the bathroom brought me to the topic of the bathhouse; a public building equipped for bathing. This research in the first semester gave me my final program for the rest of the graduation during MSc4.

With the contextual research, in relation to the bathhouse, I decided to look at the way the bathing culture is implemented in the city of Skopje. This research made clear that the bathing culture has been interrupted by the devastating earthquake of 1963, which demolished the existing Turkish bathhouses (hamams) in the old bazaar of the city. These hamams were the only form of a public bathing culture present in Skopje. Besides the old hamam's there are some swimming pools situated in the city, but these are only meant for swimming sport, not as much as a bathing place meant for relaxation. Besides swimming pools, spas and sauna's are present in hotels, only for guests to visit.

With this in mind, I could really figure the bathing rituals that had been existing in the city, which were the rituals used in the hamam. Since the city of Skopje is a divided city, with different ethnic groups, I decided to look further into the bathing rituals of the other ethnic groups too, instead of only focussing on the rituals of the Hamam's (Muslim bathing culture).

This contextual research with the focus on the way the city works and the existing bathing cultures were the first steps in the design process of the bathhouse.

The conceptual

Continuing on the contextual research, the next step was the conceptual research, with the focus on the concept of bringing together different target groups and working with different scales of collectiveness to give all ethnic groups of Skopje the opportunity to make use of the program of the bathhouse. As stated before, Skopje is a divided city, with different bathing cultures and different values. The contextual research gave me insight in these differences and let me to the different kinds of collectiveness I wanted to apply: the individual perception, the selective collectiveness and the ultimate collectiveness. The conceptual research was a way to figure how to implement the collectiveness in the project, how to find a balance and still create one building instead of smaller complexes, each with its own scale of collectiveness.

The disciplinal

In the second semester we started with the design for the graduation. The research in the first semester gave me insight in what program the design should have, the research in the second semester gave me insight in how I could design this program. I started with the analysis of different kind of existing bathhouses; Zumthor's Therme Vals, Kilic Pasa Hamam in Istanbul and Kahn's Trenton Bathhouse. I took the references apart and started analysing the different elements the building is built up from, to see how these different elements were used. With this analysis it became clear that the element of the room should not be named 'the room', instead, from then on 'the room' became 'the space'. The question of: "how can I create a flowing space?" started to rise. With the reference of Mies van der Rohe's country brick house and Richard Neutra's Kaufman House this question formed into the answer closing of space in a box is not the only way to capture space. With the method of creating a composition of walls, which capture the space in between, the norm of enclosing space was broken. With the extension of these walls beyond the floor and roof slabs, a dialogue between the open building and the surrounding environment arises, adding to the conceptual research of using the different kinds of collectiveness.

Methods and Analysis and the graduation project

The aim for the studio of Methods and Analysis is to merge analysis and design in an extensive way, in order to face the challenging social, political and spatial question that dominates the contemporary city beyond the western European context. The graduation project of the bathhouse came from the spatial and social question found in the research done in the first semester. With knowledge of the history and background of the way the city of Skopje was built and became the way it is this moment, I formed the question of how I can improve this city in a social and spatial way, which is one of the questions we find constantly in the master program of AUBS. For the project to be good, we must not only think in architecture, but also in the way our architecture has an impact on the city and it's context.

The ways the design was in a constant switch between research/analysis and design. Each decision made in the design, on detail, building and urban level came from analysis to the topic of

bathhouses, atmosphere and space. This way, the analysis and design are merged to face the challenge of my self-set question to create a space for inhabitants to abstract from daily life.

Methods and approach

The first semester we worked in groups on the analysis of the context in Skopje. This first semester in my particular case was difficult. In the analysis done in groups we focussed on the art and communication in the city of Skopje. With different methods focused on the switch between 2D and 3D, we tried to capture different ways the plane had an impact on the image of the city of Skopje, where in the end we finished with a deep analysis to how the joint between planes act in the city. While this research was meaningful to get to know the city and the way the image of the city was built up, it was hard for me to translate this research into a graduation plan I wanted to work on the next semester. Because the analysis to art and communication was broad in topic I wasn't confident with to create the connection between this research and the goals I wanted to achieve. This resulted into a P2 presentation where I knew what I wanted to achieve with the graduation, but not how I wanted to achieve it. The graduation plan therefor was not clear for myself nor for the tutors, causing my to do a P2 retake.

The two weeks between the P2 and the P2 retake gave me insight in what I really wanted to do to achieve the goal I set for myself; give inhabitants of Skopje a space to abstract from the conventions of daily life. With a research more in depth to my main goal I came to the conclusion that the graduation plan should be a bathhouse. I'm glad I had these two weeks extra to give myself more clearance on what to graduate on, avoiding another semester of not being sure what to do.

In the second semester we started with the design of the graduation plan. I made a method for myself where I wanted to design from inside out, starting with water, then the bath, room, building, context. This method caused me to start with experiments of water to see what the effect of the element is on the surrounding. Even though the experiments were fun to do, it didn't give me enough results to bring me further into the design.

I found later, that with this method and experiments, I didn't look at the elements in relation to architecture, I just started to do research on water and rooms, etc. So I decided to change this method a bit; still studying the elements, but in relation to architecture. With a deep investigation to three different kind of bathhouses, I started to look at the different elements, to see how they were used in the projects, in relation to architecture. This analysis gave me a framework of how the different elements can be implemented in my own graduation project.

The method of designing from inside out caused me to start with the interior of the building. To get a feeling of how big and spacious the space had to be, the design started on the bigger scale 1:200, where the findings from the disciplinal research talked about before were translated in my own project with the composition of walls and placement of different spaces and baths. While trying to optimize this composition and looking at how the perception in the different spaces of the building where, I forgot to really zoom in to a detailed scale, which caused me to make some decisions on detailed scale in the latest state of the design process, not allowing this scale also to develop in the way the composition did. I found that since I started working on the 1:50 scale in section and plan, some connection between elements became more clear and the design started to become more complete and thought through. I think that, if I didn't get stuck wondering in the composition of the walls, floor- and roof slabs, connections made on the smaller scale would have come earlier in the design process, allowing me to develop the design further.

Project Relevance in architecture

The project has three main themes: the perception, the space and the use of precedents.

The perception:

During the research for the design, different methods were used to get to know the different elements which has an effect on atmosphere within a space. With the methods of dividing the different elements of the project, from small to big, the aspects defining atmosphere were researched in depth. The research to this atmosphere allowed me to create a framework with the different elements which have an effect on the atmosphere in a space, not only on the building scale, but on the different scales throughout the whole building. Since atmosphere takes part in every project built, the research adds to the experience of people within buildings, in this case particular, bathhouses.

The space

The theme of space adds to the investigation within architecture to the design of space without enclosing space. As Mies van der Rohe said that “the box does not exist”¹. The method used by Mies van der Rohe in his design for the Barcelona pavilion and the country brick house where he made the composition of walls to create space, instead of closing the walls of the box and capturing space in that way. In my project I took the idea of not enclosing the spaces within a box a bit further, there are no closed walls, each wall is connected with windows, doors or openings to the other walls. But since the building asks in some cases for privacy (think about toilets, changing rooms, and the self-developed ‘individual perception’ rooms), I designed a system of different kind of walls. This allowed me to continue with the design without closed corners, but still create closed of rooms in places where it was necessary.

The use of precedents

Throughout the whole graduation process, precedents were used as a way to solve problems. With analysis to different elements within these precedents, such as light, materiality, space, rooms, etc. I got a clear view on how problems I was facing could be solved. By testing the solutions in my own design I could implement certain aspects of these solutions, and adjust them in a way it worked for the bathhouse. The use of precedents made clear that we don’t have to re-invent the wheel, every problem we’re facing has been solved by architects in history, who faced the same problem, solving them using again precedents. This ongoing circle makes that the design for the bathhouse can be added to the list of existing architecture, maybe helping a future student/architect facing the same problems.

Ethical issues and dilemma’s

As said above, one of the main themes in the design is the scale of collectiveness. Since Skopje is a divided city, the bringing together of different ethnic groups can raise questions.

During the research I found that for example Muslim people are not allowed to bath with the other gender, so in the program of the bathhouse there are separate spaces for men and women, allowing

¹ Padovan, R. (2002). *Towards Universality, Le Corbusier, Mies and De Stijl*. Taylor and Francis: New York.

Muslims to use the bathhouse. This is one of the examples of habits in the bathing culture of Muslims. There is a lot of other habits and rituals, not only for Muslims, but also for a lot of other religions which they are proud of. In this idea of making the bathhouse available and fitting to all inhabitants of Skopje, I started to look into these habits and rituals to see which could be adopted, without making the bathhouse only applicable for the religion the ritual or habit was used from. I wanted to allow all people to feel comfortable in the bathhouse, without making it feel they intrude one others (religious) ritual. Therefor I made compromises in the design, allowing only parts of the elements (water, bath, room, building, context) of the bathing culture of different religions and communities and applying them in an abstract way; for example, Muslims have the habit of only using streaming water because of hygienic reasons, therefor in the separate areas for men and women there is a lot of sinks and showers to be found, but also in the collective areas, there are spaces with only streaming water.

While trying to make the bathhouse accessible for all target groups of Skopje, it should be noted that Skopje also consist of gypsies, homeless people and people who are less wealthy, people who are probably not able to pay any fee. This makes it hard to create a space for all people to use this program. Therefor I tried to implicate the context of the bathhouse with public facilities, for all people who pass by to use. One of these programs is an outdoor bath, as a way to involve all in the bathing culture.

Personal reflection

In the last year I've learned a lot on academic and personal levels. While the start of the graduation didn't go flawless, with a P2 retake as a result, I got to know myself and discovered my own ability of creating a strong base for graduation project in the two week re-take period for the P2. This hard work brought me more strength and confidence during the rest of the graduation year. I'm happy with the way the process has happened, with ups and down, but always continuing to better the project due to hard and though trough work.

Since the graduation is happening during an uncertain and unknown times, the graduation experience I expected to have at the beginning of the graduation period, changed drastically. Since we're asked to stay inside and work from home, there is not much distraction from the graduation plan, which in one way is a good thing. There are no excuses to not work on the design, all time can be spend on the designing and thinking process, bettering the project. On the other hand, this distraction-less period makes it hard to step away from the design. I had a really hard time to step away from the design and come back again with new ideas and a critical point of view. I got stuck in the design. It took me a while to get comfortable with this, to figure out how to handle this the best way.

During this time it was not possible to go back again to the site after the P3 presentation, to do more in depth research to the context and other aspects important for the design we've been working on. I was hoping to get a better picture of the site I chose to design on, since working with the limited google street view images doesn't show the full picture of the place.

After all, I'm happy with the choice of the studio Methods and Analysis. During the course I learned to combine research and design in a way I hadn't done before. Starting with the analysis, apply the findings within the design and then again test the results with analysis and research. This ongoing circle allowed me to really think about the decisions I made during the process and reconsider every step I took. I felt myself growing on a research and design level during the course.