

Transformation with revelation of genius loci

design approach of David Chipperfield on Neues Museum for transformation of Armamentarium



source: David Chipperfield architects (n.d.)



source: Janericloebe (2009)

The Armamentarium is a historical and well known building in Delft. During its history it has been an important building, as a central weapon warehouse for the States of Holland and West Friesland. The last user - the army museum - has left the complex last spring, leaving it currently vacant.

The central aim of the chair of RMIT is to transform existing structures to match new needs, instead of producing completely new structures. The graduation studio of RMIT regards the transformation of the Armamentarium, to make a durable use of this complex possible. After having done intensive research to the complex, my aim is to transform the Armamentarium into a wellness centre.

The current state of the complex, is emerged from many events that took place in its history. The changes to the complex over time, influenced by its context, give it its current appearance. Apart from physical remainders, the Armamentarium also captures collective and personal memories. These mental remainders are materialised by the physical remainders, which makes the place meaningful. Places that are meaningful to people, give them a foothold to life (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 5). The meaning a place has, can be described with the concept of the genius loci.

There exist a diversity of design approaches in transforming historic building. Intervening in existing buildings poses the threat of losing its character and spatial organisation: the tangible objects that captures the genius loci. A design approach which both respects and reveals the genius loci, is to my opinion thereby very important.

The reconstruction of the Neues Museum in Berlin has fascinated me since the first time I got to see it. The way in which existing with new is merged, really appeals to me. I want to explore how in the reconstruction of the Neues Museum is dealt with revelation of the genius loci. If the used methods are adequate, I want to investigate how these methods can be re-applied in the transformation of the Armamentarium. My research question is for that reason:

Is the approach of David Chipperfield in the Neues Museum an adequate approach to reveal the genius loci in the transformation design of the Armamentarium?

Theory | Concept of Genius Loci

The usage of the concept genius loci appears to be confused and uncritical, as being addressed by Jivén and Larkham (2003). Thereby I deliberately choose to follow the theory of Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980). He tried to get to a better understanding of phenomenology in architecture. With his theory of the genius loci, his aim is to investigate the psychic implications of architecture to humans, rather than to look at the practical side of architecture. Norberg-Schulz describes in his theory the existential space: the environment as a meaningful and important place for human life.

When we treat architecture analytically, we miss the concrete environmental character, that is, the very quality which is the object of man's identification, and which may give him a sense existential foothold. [...] Existential space is not a logico-mathematical term, but comprises the basic relationships between man and his environment. (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 5)

Existential space consist of 'a multitude of particular places', which form the basis for everyday experiences to occur. These places have a certain meaning for people, which is being defined with the genius loci. The perception of a space by all senses, related to the memories they bring forward, define what kind of meaning a certain place has.

The genius loci regards the psychic section of places. These places are off course constructed out of tangible objects, both artificial and natural.

[With place we mean] a totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and colour. Together these things determine an 'environmental character' which is the essence of place. (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, pp. 6-8)

Places can be analytically subdivided in a character and a space. The character is experienced as a set of particular qualities, which form the atmosphere of the particular place. Space concretizes the spatial implication of a place. It deals with the three dimensional organisation of the elements that define the space. Character helps us identifying a place, space helps us orientating a place. (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 10)

Places differ hugely. People will experience a walk through a city (crowded, no human scale, loud, artificial, smelly) completely different than a walk through the woods (open, human scale, quiet, natural, fresh odour). These places have a different meaning for people, which gives humans the existential foothold to life. This meaning depends of the memories brought forward, fed by the perceptions the particular place.

I strongly believe that a certain genius loci is never good or bad, as long as it serves an architectural purpose. For example, places can deliberately be designed uncomfortable, to intensify a certain meaning. It is the task of an architect to design the correct atmosphere for the occasion.

Architecture means to visualize the genius loci, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful place, whereby he helps man to dwell. (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 5)

Summarizing, the genius loci describes the meaning a certain place has for people. This is depended of how people can relate to it: a psychic and intangible process. The perceived places itself are composed of tangible elements, which can be subdivided in terms of space and character.

Case study | Neues museum Berlin, David Chipperfield

In the reconstruction of the Neues Museum, David Chipperfield revealed the genius loci of the place to my opinion very well. The original Neues Museum was designed by Friedrich Stüler and completed in 1859, part of a complex neoclassical buildings on the Museum Island in Berlin. After being bombed in 1943 and 1945 during the World War II, the building remained in a ruined state for decades, exposed to the elements. The central stair hall, the north wing and the corner of south-east wing were heavily damaged. Two third of the building had survived in 1997, but only one third of the original finishes were still present. At that time, David Chipperfield in collaboration with Julian Harrap were appointed to transform the ruined building back into a functional museum. After more than 10 years of construction, the Neues Museum re-opened in 2009.

The aim of the project was to reinstate the original volumes of the building, by retaining the damaged fabric as it was being found, reinforce it, but not restore it. Chipperfield did not tried to get back to a perfect original image, but rather give the history a chance to express itself, by showing traces of World War II. The 'spirit of the ruin' is being retained, as architecture critic Rowan Moore (2009) calls it. Chipperfield described his method as follows:

"We didn't want to make a copy of what was there, but want to restore it and rebuild it from the ruin, giving witness and evidence to what had happened to the building" (TEDx, 2011)

On every element of the building was very precisely determined which restoring method should be applied.

"[...], we didn't want to spoil what remained of the original material. It's our physical connections to history - not an interpretation, not a projection, but reality." (Lepik, n.d., p. 2)

Places where most of the original finish was still present, were restored. In the restoring is not tried to accomplish a perfect image of the original, traces of the restoration are left visible. Surfaces of the building where the finish had not persisted, the revealed internal brick structure of the building is deliberately shown and reinforced if necessary. By showing the history and the imperfections of the building in the restoration - instead of recreating a crisp original - the building is more interesting and historically layered.

As we expect the classical to be ruined, they seem more authentic than they would have done when pristine. (Moore, 2009)

Parts of the building that had been completely destroyed or parts that could not be saved, have been rebuilt. These part are complementary to the historic structures and must not be seen separate. They are included with the old to form a whole again. The new parts are designed in dialog with the existing: original proportions and the nature of material are generally respected. However, these part are apparent as addition to the history of building, since the finishing of the material differs and ornamentation is omitted. In an interview with Kester Rattenbury, David Chipperfield said:

Our approach was motivated by our desire to protect and repair the remains, to create a comprehensible setting and to reconnect the parts back into an architectural whole. The new

and the old reinforce each other; not in a desire for contrast, but in a search for continuity. We have created a new building from the remains of the old, not celebrating or hiding its history, but including it. (Rattenbury, 2010)

An explanatory example of Chipperfield's method, is the approach for the central staircase. This part of the building was heavily damaged: most of the plaster and wall paintings had disappeared and the stairs itself had almost gone completely. Chipperfield reinforced the walls and left the revealed brickwork visible without plaster. Surviving parts of plaster are left as reminder of the destruction. Even the cheap red brickwork, planned to be rendered in a restoration attempt in 1985, is left visible. The columns have been restored, with traces of the history left visible. The stairs itself are clearly a new addition, but done with respect to the original dimensions. They are not in contrast, but rather try to complements the whole.

Lacking most of the original ornaments, the staircase's sober monumentality sets the tone for the contemporary museum visit. It prominently features the philosophy of complimentary reconstruction, where the new structure clearly reads as a modern addition. (Barndt, 2011, p. 300)



Chipperfield's approach delivered in my opinion a great fusion of new and old. It resulted in an architecture that honestly shows the history of the building, whereby memories to the World War II are captured in the building. This design method revealed in this way the genius loci of the place, what really appeals to me.

Now the Neues Museum creates reverberations of different degrees of time. [...] The place is a composite of human and natural actions, some violent, some exquisite, some touching, some ordinary. (Moore, 2009)

Approach | Transformation of the Armamentarium

The circumstances of the Neues Museum and the Armamentarium are somewhat different. The Neues Museum had to be rebuilt from a ruined state and is transformed while maintaining the original program. The Armamentarium is currently in good technical state and is in need of transforming to guarantee a durable use. This transformation does involve a programmatic change: the former weapon warehouse, last used as army museum, will be transformed to a wellness centre. This implies that more rigorous interventions have to be made, to make the new function possible. Unless these differences, the central design approach can be applied to both projects.

Since the current state of the Armamentarium - with its historic stratification - captures collective memories, a cautious and respectful transformation approach is to my believe required. To make the Armamentarium a meaningful place, a further revelation of the genius loci is to my opinion desired. The approach of Chipperfield in the Neues Museum can help me achieve this. His ideas are very much in relation to the theory of Norberg-Schulz:

To respect the genius loci does not mean to copy old models. It means to determine the identity of the place and to interpret it in ever new ways. Only then we may talk about a living tradition which makes change meaningful by relating it to a set of locally founded parameters. (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 182)

The history of the Armamentarium should to my opinion be an integrated part of the transformation design. Specific characteristics and spatial organisations, related to the historical usage of the complex, should be respected. By showing the historic stratification of the Armamentarium, the occurrence of historical event can be revealed. This might also imply that some of the historic layers need to be partly removed, to reveal underlying layers. Newly added elements should to my believe not be juxtaposed to the existing, but should rather be an integrated part of the whole, as a continuation of the historic layers. In this way, the meaning of the place for the humans can be enhanced.

I will point out some specific design challenges, posed by the aimed design approach and in relation to the transformation of the Armamentarium into a wellness centre.

The introduction of a wellness centre in the complex, demands an entrance with more allure. An ambiguous characteristic of the complex - that did provoke my initial interest in it - is its visible presence on the tip of a peninsula, but at the same its unreachability. A design task is to improve the entrance to complex, with respect to the character being isolated. An entrance over water might be a way to reveal the genius loci, referring to the history of the complex as warehouse supplied over water.

A second important characteristic is the enclosed nature of interior spaces, with little contact with the surroundings. This characteristic does suit the wellness centre very well. A design task is to reveal this characteristic and make it more experienced. In this way In addition to this, an approach concerning the invading of day light must be determined.

Furthermore, the spatial organization of big, open spaces around the courtyards is an important characteristic to me. The changing program will imply a change in spatial needs, what poses the threat of losing the characteristic. A design challenge will be to implement the program in a way that the size and openness of the spaces is still perceivable.

At last I want to mention the focussed nature of the interior spaces. The unfinished application of simple materials - with little detailing and ornamentation - give the spaces a focussed character. To let the architecture show its history, I do not want to cover all the original surfaces. However, in the transformation to a wellness centre, several materials in their current application will not be suitable. Apart from this technical issue, the climate-shell needs to be improved to meet the comfort and sustainability demands of nowadays. A design challenge will be to meet these technical, comfort and sustainability demands, with preservation and revelation of the historical finishing.

The research for the design process, related to the posed design-challenges, will be done in the episteme of phenomenology. A large part of my research, will be a case studies research of transformation projects that have dealt abovementioned issues. This will imply a throughout understanding of the case-study - both before and after the transformation - and a recognition of the used design intervention. Since the episteme of phenomenology regards the study of perceptual experience, I will visit some case-studies, to fully experience the architecture.

Specific case studies I will research - regarding the transformation of historic buildings into a wellness centre - are the Hurlimann brewery in Zurich and Fort Beemster in Zuidoostbeemster. Other case-studies regarding the posed research questions, can be the warehouse 'de Zwijger' in Amsterdam as well as the BACO-building in Roermond.

Apart from the research of case-studies, I will do a research by design. This will imply a very careful investigation of each part of the complex, on how to use the existing the best and what interventions should to be done. The use of perspective illustrations will help me valuing the perceptual experience of the design proposal. The proposed intervention has to suit the transformation assignment and has to contribute to the revelation of genius loci of the Armamentarium.

Conclusion

The meaning a place has for humans, can be described with the concept genius loci. The genius loci is materialised in the character and spatial organisation of a place. In transformations, the threat of losing these properties is posed. The approach David Chipperfield used to transform the ruined Neues Museum back into a functional museum, delivered in my opinion a great fusion of new and old, in which the genius loci of the place is truly revealed. In the transformation of the Armamentarium into a wellness centre, a similar phenomenological approach will be used, with the aim of revelation of the genius loci.

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