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Subway space in our Everyday Lives

Exploring the Architectural Experience of Subway Spaces under Dense Urban Cities in our Everyday Lives
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A design for a Subway Station along a humanistic and narrative approach

On Research – a work that can stand alone

The studio Explorelab is inherently a graduation studio where work is experimental. Either or also in topic, method or design. My wish was to come to a better understanding of our relationship with the world we have built and where we live our day to day lives. So, I started with the following and unspecific question: “*What lies in the seam between everyday life and built world?*”. Not a very exciting nor specific question. Perhaps rather banal. What made this research compelling, I think, was how I went looking for an answer, by participating, documenting and writing. Already at the beginning, I had the intention to make the research approachable for people on the edges or even outside the discipline. For this reason and besides a personal interest, I decided to use film as a large part of the research.

I started without little theoretical knowledge, but with walking and travelling through subway networks in Amsterdam and Copenhagen. Filming and writing about my observations as both an observer and participant. Very early on, I took strongly from some particular writers and filmmakers and decided to put my work into a narrative following 6 chapters, written by a fictional figure. The figure is first an explorer and researcher but over time transforms into just another user. This narrative created a clear structure in the research film, story and essays and allowed to introduce more complicated theories about how humans interact with their built environment over time. In sequence the chapters deal with perception of space and form, atmosphere, semiotics, rhythmic change of space, everyday production of space and the physical and temporal context of the subway space.

I hope that in the end, the research is understandable through its clear structure of 6 chapters which deal with different topics, and how it is presented. A chapter, first through film, followed by a story (which can almost be read aloud simultaneously) and finished with an essay that grounds the concrete images and fictional story through academic literature with a different disciplines and theories. In retrospect, the work offers some interesting insights into subway space. Through this subject, the work also talks about space, how it is a product of what is built and what is practiced. What makes a place lively, interesting or dull? Ultimately it questions the role of the discipline and offers a more humanistic approach to understanding architecture. To design is a magnificent practice, but to understand the world we build in is another. These topics are not new to the academic world of architecture and urbanism, but this research also offers a story of images and words from which one can draw his/her own conclusions. The research urges for learning from practice and theory and gives an example how these can be combined. Furthermore, the research shows a method that tries to bring together the academic and the everyday user, and how to make this presentable. I have not seen many architectural research projects where film was used so extensively but also so focused.

Looking back, there are a few things I might have done differently. Firstly by only studying one subway system. In this way, the research could have been more easily used for design. Which could also have meant that I studies one particular place to connect to a design. Since I was mostly studying underground spaces, to limit the diversity of parameter which can influence the experience of subway spaces, I did not find a suitable system in the Netherlands. Rotterdam was my first choice, but I was not granted permission to film from the RET. Amsterdam was a bit too small. Copenhagen was a good environment to study in but required planning ahead and a few trips. On top of that, to film in subways spaces forms had to be filled in for each day, time period and location. I was granted a bit more freedom but it did limit what I could film. It was also not allowed to film during rush hours (although one could on the edges of the time period). These periods are very important to show how such spaces can transform through human practice. Then there is of course the issue how the pandemic influenced how public transport spaces were used.

So, because I lived in Rotterdam, I decided to work on a design for an existing station which I could easily visit, but the research was located in Amsterdam but mainly Copenhagen.

From research to design – the bottleneck

I struggled a lot with the transition from research to design. Firstly, because the research became way larger than I first intended. This meant that I worked on both simultaneously. Secondly the research was about underground subway spaces as an architectural type but more about how we experience architecture in our day to day lives. Thus, the research produced ethical statements about the role and responsibilities of the architect. Because the research was positioned on the edges of the architectural discipline and others, to return to the role of the designer became very difficult, especially because I was looking for a new balance. At the time I was convinced that the more we as designers want to control what happens in space, the less lively it becomes. In a way we needed to find a way to gently guide practice in space through form and a material language.

However the chapters of the research did create some structure in making my design. Each chapter produced a different theme and tools because each chapter dealt with a different scale or a different dimension. From 1-6, geometrical properties, atmosphere, material language, facilitating daily rhythms, affordances of space and the context of the design on the urban scale and the daily sequence of the individual.

Since a location was chosen in Rotterdam where filming ended up being prohibited, it felt like I had to rush a research on the context. Next time if I wanted to do it more proper, a more extensive research of the context with film or photography would have been preferable. Also, with corona, and doing all the work solo (or without many colleagues around) I really struggled to start.

Design – A new design for Metrostation Beurs, Rotterdam (transformation)

So for the design I had solid concept and a good understanding of subway space. Additionally, through the research I decided to formulate a design assignment that was to be made within a realistic domain. This meant that the design proposal could be made in the next ten years, dealt with the existing structures and program above and below in a respectful manner. The research advocated to add to the existing situation rather than totally razing and thereby destroying the existing character and quality of the place. Positive and negative aspects and characteristics were considered on the location. Both for spaces below and above. I think the research produced a more humble approach to a place. Though it may sound controversial. I found that the platforms could not suddenly be changed. Each line of the subway system in Rotterdam had a distinct material language. Instead, I decided that the greatest improvements could be made in the transition zone, or the hall of the subway station, and the main exit which extended to the structures above ground. So, the assignment became more complex and larger than I anticipated at the start.

I think now, I had a solid framework. Yet really making the design proved more difficult than anticipated. Maybe through the research I had become more wary of the role of the designer. Too cautious and too much doubt. I really struggled to find pace. Since I had focused primarily on underground subway space, but the design assignment extended way beyond, it took me a while to get a grip on the place itself and on the interference I wanted to make. Perhaps it would have been better to only take specific points from the research or it would have made more sense if the research film was about the subway system in Rotterdam. Instead I had a complex assignment which required more serious interventions, while I tried to please my critical view upon the role of the architect by making subtle, smaller scaled interventions. In the end, what helped me find structure was the structure of the research. By making the design from the perspective of the user with the hand of the architect. Making the design as an open storyboard, with multiple narratives, directions and options. Using the subway is a sequential experience and so most people who use this space made the transition from the street to the subway. This fundamental understanding brought about a design which created a layered experience through different zones with subtle changing spatial characteristics and rhythms where different spatial practices could emerge, without the design becoming fragmented into multiple little designs.

In terms of design method, using a narrative as the base for the design, can be very useful. We can't make a design for every distinct perception, yet this method allows us to stay closer to reality. Where ones design is always encountered in a sequence. An experience will precede it and succeed it. And the building/structure itself, depending on its function and design, will be engaged through particular practices, that we may predict, and bring about unintentionally practices which can fundamentally change how the design is perceived.

Finally the design was made in an attempt to make a place more lively without hindering the main function. I wanted to make something which would be meaningful to the people who use it everyday. Not something which would look pretty in a magazine nor far from above. And I hope I succeeded.