reflection graduation

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relationship graduation topic/master track architecture

The Heritage and Architecture graduation studio 2016-2017 explores the possibilities of industrial heritage in the harbour of Rotterdam. This involves dealing with large scale buildings that have been abandoned due to the movement of the industrial activity from the harbour of Rotterdam to the Tweede Maasvlakte. My personal project entails a redesign for the Maassilo, a massive concrete building that was formerly used for the storage and transport of grain. Since this building is built for such a specific function, interventions to its sturdy structure are difficult. Around 70 percent of the building volume consists of concrete silos. These spaces are hardly usable, but they have a strong spatial potential if cutouts were made.

As a new program for the redesign of the Maassilo, I have chosen a similar function as the current occupancy: a night club. The night club is a very volatile function with a life span of mostly five to ten years. This is in sharp contrast to the Maassilo, a building that has existed for more than a hundred years. However, when it was still in use as a grain silo, the Maassilo was part of a very dynamic environment. The questions arises if the Maassilo could be able to provide a place where a new dynamic can have a structural place. My research question is thus as follows:

How can the multi-layered quality of the sturdy Maassilo be structurally reinvented, so that it facilitates and allowes space to the volatile nature of a night club?

methods, approach and relationship to design

The project is split up in 4 main parts (P1-P4). In the P1 phase, the building is thoroughly analysed by a group of students, in order to make a value assessment that forms the starting basis for the individual designs. Multiple methods are used to gather information about the building. As a group, we did historical literature research to place the building in its socio-historical context. We also performed field research to investigate the architectural qualities and technological issues. The building was visited several times during this phase. Finally it should be mentioned that the TU-Delft study program also initiated the theoretical background of this research. To carry out the research on the building we were introduced to the concept of value assessment and the value matrix by Marieke Kuipers, which involves an inventarisation, classification and evaluation of all the values of a certain existing building. These values are summarised in a matrix, which combines the theory of Alois Riegl in his *The modern cult of monuments* (1903), about different layers of value that can be ascribed to a building, to the theory of Steward Brand in his *How buildings learn* (1994), about multiple layers of permanence in a building. This matrix is made in order to have a clear overview of the different values of the Maassilo. In conclusion, the Maassilo is valuable mostly because all its historical values are present in the aesthetical values. The building stands as a bold physical testament of the energy that went in its construction and all the industrial activity that used to take place there.

When the value assessment was finished, a program was chosen for the Maassilo. As mentioned above, the program I chose was a night club. This is a function that has not received much attention in the field of architectural theory. Therefore, I decided to conduct interviews with two nightclub owners of two temporary clubs in Amsterdam, in order to gain a better understanding about how they deal with the question of temporary use of an existing building. An important conclusion in these interviews was that they had chosen their places for their present infrastructural and logistic qualities. Therefore, it was possible for them to use the building 'as found', resulting in a playful interpretation of the existing, with a lot of room for creative temporal use of the space.

This realisation has had a strong impact on my design. The Maassilo in its current occupancy is not used 'as found': the complete ground floor is hermetically shut to prevent sound nuisance to the surroundings, which has a strong negative impact on its relation to the city. I realised that it was very imporant to focus on the technical performance of the building. The silos were initally made to protect. They could fulfill the same purpose once more. Therefore, during the p3 phase, I made a quite thorough analysis of the sound insulating performance of the silos. Additionally, I conducted research about the way that other performative spaces (music studios, venues etc.) use sound insulation and acoustic measures. This resulted in a noise plan that was an important feature of the design.

social and scientific relevance

Since the chosen program for the sturdy Maassilo, a night club, is so volatile, it poses important questions about temporary versus permanent design decisions. Every change that is made to the sturdy structure of the Maassilo is permanent. Therefore, the spaces that are made by making cuts in the silos must become a strong basis for flexible future use. In this graduation project, it was concluded that, by focusing on infrastructural logic, and not on an aesthetically expressive infill, space is left for the users to express themselves. The relevance of this project lies therefore in the way that it deals with temporary versus permanent design decisions. For example, all the decisions about noise insulation are designed as permanent decisions. Acoustic measures however, must change over time (different users, different music styles) and are designed as temporary decisions. Another relevant conclusion is the fact that the cuts that are made permanently, retain the strong logic that is characteristic for this building. The result is an experience that challenges the user to disrupt this order. This makes the use of the building even more exciting, which is an important feature of a night club.

ethical and philosophical issues in process

In this chapter, I will eleborate on the ethical and mostly philosophical issues that I encountered in the design process. The most philosophical challenges arose in the first half of the graduation project. Therefore, I will describe the issues that arose per phase. In general, looking back on the several reports and presentations that I have made during my graduation project, it is clear that my approach to the assignment has changed quite strongly over time. Given the fact that the Maassilo is a very sturdy building that is built for a very specific function, interventions are difficult, expensive and to a great extent permanent. This entails a certain pressure on every design decision and demands a clear motivation for every (permanent) intervention.

To make it even more difficult, my personal fascination at the beginning of this project concerned a philosophical issue that is difficult to pinpoint, work with or solve. This issue is about the concept of hyperreality, posed by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard describes a world where images have completely and irreversibly merged with the physical world. In his model, the real has been by-passed through endless reproductions and the only real that is left belongs to the realm of self-referential signs. This makes "value" a concept that has lost every grounded significance in our present-day society.

If all value has evaporated from the physical world, how to approach the challenge of intervening in a building as physical as the Maassilo?

P1

My fascination with the concept of hyperreality has made my initial approach to the assignment quite problematic. As mentioned before, the project started with the group analysis, and the value assessment of the Maassilo.

Maassilo/hyperreality 13-3-2017

We identified the Maassilo as a physical record of evolving construction methods and state-of-the-art building technology of silo making. Furthermore, the building stands as an impressive physical testament to the functionalist spirit of the New Objectivity in the Netherlands. In short, the historical values are always present in the direct, physical aesthetics of the building.

However, following my interest in the hyperreal, I could not made effective use of these values. Instead, I tried to identify the main discussions between them. My idea was to value multiplicity, instead of the - in my eyes impossible - task of pinpointing meaning in order to make it quantifiable. I thought this would provide me with a method that valued the building in a more grounded and resilient way. Instead, it almost became a mission not to choose, which would prove to be unworkable in the P2 period.

P2
In the P2 phase, a fitting program is chosen and worked out to a general concept for the building. My choice fell on a nightclub: a physical program that is more concerned with the direct, physical values of a building than 'designed aesthetics'. Moreover, a nightclub can make effective use of the physical protective qualities of a silo building. The nightclub can thus be seen as a new dynamic that is brought to the static qualities of the Maassilo. This dynamic seems to show signs of the simulacrum theory of Baudrillard. After all, nightclubs are places of screens, images, consumption, fashion and rapidly changing styles, genres and trends. But these are not necesarily symptoms of hyperreality. Baudrillard argues that we are beyond the 'society of the spectacle', since the spectacle is no longer recognisable as such. Screens are no longer the issue.

When researching the nightclub function, I became interested in a recent study of AMO/OMA (2015) about the role of nightlife in countercultural movements and how architecture mirrored nightlife's evolution from the 1970s to the 2000s. In this study, OMA/AMO mentions the 'radical discos' in the seventies. These cultural labaratories, often designed by utopian groups (Superstudio, Grupo 9999, UFO), used to have a catalyst function in society. This openness and enthousiastism for experimentation in music, art and technology served as a big inspiration for my project.

As mentioned before, I had strong doubts about the direct use of the values that were found in the value assessment. This stopped me from finding clear starting points that originated in the building itself. The result was that the focus on my project shifted too much to my fascination for the function, instead of a motivated transformation of the existing building. This became clear in my P2 presentation, and resulted in a retake for this presentation. It was a disappointing moment, but nonetheless a very important one.

Videostill P2 presentation, focus on function: experimentation/art

P2 - retake

After it was decided I needed to do a retake for the P2 presentation, I was given a period of two weeks to clarify my starting points and restrictions for the transformation of the Maassilo. In order to make the assignment more workable, I set aside my doubts regarding the use of objective values, and returned to the initial value matrix that was made in the P1 phase. This shift in the approach made the project much clearer for me. It was only after passing this retake, that I realised why this shift was so important. Not only because it made the project more workable; it is also strongly relates to a particular 'placement' of the concept of hyperreality. I have described this placement in detail in my Position Paper. It involves the view of French deconstructivist philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy on the postmodern regret of the absence of meaning. In short, Baudrillard regrets a loss of meaning in the physical. Nancy shows how meaning has never actually been inherent to the physical, but is always *between* us: between people, objects and the physical world.

In this light, 'valuing' the Maassilo means that this value is not actually *in* the Maassilo, it is not an essential part of it, not inherent to it. Valuing the Maassilo means that people value the Maassilo, they give their interpretation to it. Both to its history and its current physical presence. Everything in the physical world is just that - physical. The value assessment is then a meaningful attempt to find important shared interpretations about the Maassilo. This is not to say that any interpretation of value is as important as any. Like Nancy says, meaning is shared, and this is why it is so important that the value matrix was a result of many group discussions, influenced by the specific knowledge of the teachers of cultural value, architecture and building technology. It is only now that I fully understand why Nicholas Clarke (my cultural value teacher) said at the beginning of this course that value is a shared concept. Values may change over time, while the building - the physical - remains.

P3 & P4

In the P3 and P4 period, the aim was to work with the building as a starting point. The focus of the design was mainly on the main infrastructure on building level, and the large cuts that will be made in the concrete silos. It was very useful to see how infrastructural questions like frontstage/backstage logistics, fire safety, noise insulation and circulation have had such a strong influence on the design. Moreover, I think it suits both the existing building and the function to work in such a 'functionalist' way. This is also brought forward by Laparelli of OMA (2017), when explaining the aforementioned study of AMO/OMA:

"In a way, architects are good at master planning or organizing or developing a kit of tools to make a space functional," Laparelli says. "Maybe a good strategy would be to intervene in the space when the intervention is not aesthetic. It's not about creating a design that's formal. When you think about the performative aspect of the space, then there is room to intervene: directing flow and circulation, partitions systems showing you how to exit, or very creative ways to deal with signage. Those are things that make informality work."

Brinkman & Van der Vlugt (1931)
orthogonal grid, identical cells, slender
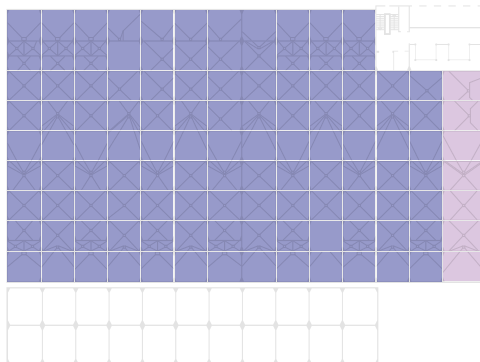
Stok (1910)
octagonal pattern, diverse cells, robust
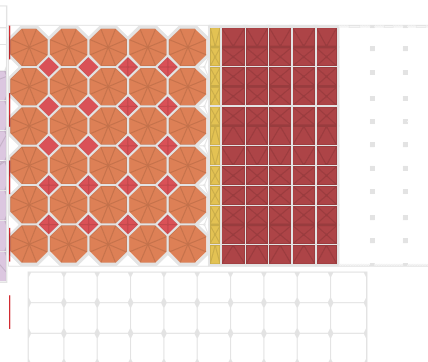
multiplicity silo typologies

P5

In the weeks that lead to the final presentation, I structured the design into several layers, according to their lifespan. This structure made it clearer which aesthetic choices I made in which layer. The permanent layers - "cuts" - and the most volatile layer - "aesthetical use" have the biggest influence on the final spatial experience, which is why the layer in between - "functional infill" has been kept to a minimum in terms of visual presence. Still, I tried to reflect on the details that belong to this phase, leading me to the conclusion that I did made some aesthetical choices in this layer. I made these choices mainly in order to dramatise that a certain function was fulfilled, that something had been added to the existing to make something work. The goal in this layer was to make literally in-formal design decisions, and therefore one might argue that these details are wrong. I don't think that these decisions were necessarily wrong, but they remain questionable. For one might also argue that these decisions aid in the narrative of intruding the Maassilo, the addition of a machines to the concrete structure. This falls in line what actually happens in the design: robots entering the silos.

sources

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