

REFLECTION GRADUATION

The Line of Dissent

Institutionalizing political publicness in the realms of consensusland

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Explore Lab 34

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01. Choice of the studio and the topic

Since coming to TU Delft more than two years ago to pursue a master's degree in Architecture, I've learned that the interdisciplinary approach to research and design is a key element to nourish successful and thought-through results. Research here not only informs the design process but is a complementary and integral part of creating architectural visions and spaces. Doing my undergraduate studies at a university where research was mainly limited to the analysis of the site and the program, I felt that the resulting design was often lacking a solid, knowledge-based foundation. Moreover, my design decisions were usually based on intuition, therefore making them vulnerable to critique due to a certain lack of justification.

This is why the faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment displayed the right choice since it allowed me to find this knowledge-based foundation for my project. Within this faculty, the Explore Lab studio under the supervision of Roel van de Pas and Elise van Dooren puts an even greater emphasis on the research aspects of the graduation projects. It allows one to actually delve into, at some points even to get lost in the complexity and vastness of a self-chosen project, not seldom with a personal relationship to that particular topic, which results in an even greater personal responsibility for the student's project.

In my case, my year-long interest in the political world and its undeniable inflections in other professional spheres like architecture resulted in the urge to research more about this reciprocity. Since quite a huge amount of

research has already been conducted about built political manifestations like the Bundestag or Downing Street, my attention fell on other representational buildings - no less powerful but due to their political status and their still young historic background rather neglected. The European Parliament is exactly this sometimes rather overlooked but very influential institution whose architectural manifestations are not yet anchored in the collective memory to the same extent as their national counterparts. In this questionable spectrum between the capacity of political representational and the influence of architecture on precisely that, I saw a research gap that I wanted to make the subject of my graduation.

02. Research methodology and relation to the design

From the beginning, I was confronted with the task of narrowing down this complex topic to a manageable scope. Since I was mostly interested in the reciprocity of the public perception of the institution's buildings and the political system it provides space for, I took a two-pronged approach with my research: On the one hand, I tried to acquire insights into the visual depiction of the parliament buildings in Strasbourg and Brussels by conducting a social media analysis resulting in a myriad of visual content which I then needed to arrange to be able to connect the dots between the public perception and the political system. The second part of the research, analysing the political

system, turned out to be an even more complex undergoing since the EU has probably one of the most complicated and bureaucratic decision-making processes in the world. By reducing these processes to the most important stages, it allowed me to afterwards map these onto the legislative spaces of the parliament buildings creating an overview of the spatial sequences of this legislative process. The result of my research confirmed the hypothesis from the beginning:

At the EU Parliament, deliberation and decision-making processes are stuck in an ever-turning hamster wheel designed to reach unanimous compromises. The architecture of what I call consensusland provides spaces exclusively designed for the purpose of reaching compromises and not offering room where discussions and conflicts can be discussed open-endedly. What is supposed to be a building for exchange and deliberation rather nourishes an atmosphere of complete consensus. Apart from the confirmation of my initial hypothesis, I learned about the modus operandi of the legislative processes in the form of spatial sequences from which I was able to conclude an architectural grammar of dissent. This grammar - a set of rules which explains the relation between the three main types of legislative spaces (procedural, informal, public) I came up with during the research – I was able to apply to my design project, where I laid a special focus on the public spheres since this is not only the core element of my design project but also a finding from the research: A lack in political publicness in the EU institutions, especially in the EU parliament building in Brussels.

Therefore, coming from a research project titled *Atlas of €unity*, I now tried to

embed this architectural grammar of dissent into a design project which aims at institutionalizing political publicness. Resulting from this, I decided to pursue the idea of an extension to the parliament building in Brussels. This citizens' assembly not only serves as a spatial addition to the existing parliament but is also considered to be an attempt to expand the current legislative process by a public element.

03. Design methodology and process

The narrow urban fabric of the EU quarter in Brussels and the heaviness and inertia of the existing parliament complex consisting of more than four single buildings asked for an intervention which, on the one hand, deals carefully and cautiously with the given situation and does not add yet another inconsiderate building block to the quarter. On the other hand, it is necessary to counter the parliament building with a visible point of contrast that stands out from the existing structure and thus also attempts to shake up the existing political system architecturally.

Therefore, I approached this design task by inverting the design process: While the research methodology was based on a two-pronged approach resulting in an architectural grammar of dissent, the design methodology was rather based on translating the found spatial sequences into a built form by designing them from the inside out. For the envisioned citizens' assembly I therefore first came up with an elaborate process of what is actually required for this novel

programme of a citizens' representation. After the single steps have been drafted, the right order and their arrangement were a crucial part in creating a consequent and convincing narrative. After the initial spatial sequences were led out, I focused mostly on the single stages of the process without trying to find a superordinate form in which these different stages could take place. The inversion of the design process helped me to concentrate on the key elements of the spatial sequences and was simultaneously in line with the spatial logics and logisitics of the legislative procedure in the EU parliament.

Just at that point, I started to think about the overarching gesture which could possibly unify the single spaces into one consecutive gesture. Since the initial design idea was to add a function to the building that would not only architecturally but also politically in its legislative process shake up the Parliament, I translated that notion into a linear structure that would quite literally perforate the Parliament building and simultaneously rearrange the legislative process in that complex.

04. Relationship between the graduation project and the broader social, professional, and scientific framework

Having a very ambivalent attitude towards the EU's legislative structure and its architectural manifestations, during the process I was attempting to transform this feeling of ambivalence into productive ideas of what could

possibly be changed in order to open up this powerful institution and calibrate its democratic system for future developments. Therefore, as an architect, I am convinced that architectural spaces in the realms of politics do have an influence on the legislative processes. While older, mostly national, political manifestations such as the Bundestag have gained their representational value through historical events, revolutions and system upheavals, the architecture of the EU can't offer this representational value simply due to the fact of its still young history and its ambiguous political status. But it becomes even more clear that the role of architecture here is therefore not only of representational function but actively works as the machine room and control centre in which legislative processes are arranged and taken out. Therefore, albeit many other factors tie into these processes, architecture provides the breeding ground for the political decision-making process.

In this regard, the role of the public interferes with these processes as well: While architecture serves as the breeding ground for the political, it acts as a gatekeeper for the public. Built structures in their very essence are space dividers, keeping people in or out of enclosed spaces. Therefore, the design seeks to introduce transition spaces which actively try to lower the thresholds of the political spaces enabling the public to gradually participate in political decision-making.

05. Challenges in the research and design process

The decision to approach the given design task from the inside out has derived from a dilemma situation I encountered during the design process: In the pursuit of coming up with a striking idea for the design which not only provides an appropriate envelope for the envisioned functions of the citizens' assembly but also fulfils the task of being a representational building, I got stuck when I had to deal with the notion of iconicity at the building. Having had in mind that the EU buildings are not anchored in the collective memory to the same extent as their national counterparts, I was seeking iconic shapes that would accomplish this task. Still, I learned quickly that iconic buildings are not being created as one but develop that status over time through events and happenings where these buildings are either the actor or the projection screen – just like the national counterparts with their loaded historicity. Therefore, iconicity is not something that can be created nor actively controlled, it is rather the sum of its cultural-historical benchmark references.

From this point on, rather than trying to find that iconic shape that would stay in people's memory, I was focusing on finding the appropriate gesture which was able to unify the single envisioned spaces.

Another challenge I had to face during the design process was to harmonise the different scales of the building parts and to link the different user groups and their movements with each other in the same way. The thresholds between the individual rooms were not allowed to become too large so that the process embedded in them could be designed to flow.